

L'affaire Black Rose Books

Letter exchange

Various Authors

1977

To the Reader:

In the last issue of the *Fifth Estate* [#283, June 1977], a letter appeared signed by a Joe Doaks criticizing Black Rose Books of Montreal. Doaks charged that a recent BRB publication, *Durruti: The People Armed*, by Abel Paz and translated by Nancy MacDonald, omitted a key section without informing the reader, failed to give the book's printing history (thus making it appear as though it were a BRB original), that it was overpriced, poorly produced (typesetting and proofreading) and that BRB had a history of appropriating titles from other publishers and putting BRB covers on them. Doaks further said that he and others planned to put out another edition at a third the BRB cost and ended by stating that "Durruti would have shot those (BRB) fuckers."

We ran the letter because we had heard similar complaints from people around the country and in Canada and thought that a worthwhile discussion could come out of this all. It appears as though we were correct.

Upon publication of our June edition we immediately sent a copy First Class to BRB advising them of the Doaks letter and inviting them to respond. On June 27 we received a three page single-spaced 8 1/2 x 14 mimeographed response from BRB with a cover letter stating in part that "We enclosed our reply to this slanderous letter of Mr. Doaks which we insist that (sic) it be published in full or not at all."

At a staff meeting we decided that such a letter far exceeded our limit on letters (this would have taken up at least one-and-a-half pages of the paper), that it was excessive to answer nine inches of copy with such a long piece, and that ultimatums are always arrogant, so we decided to write BRB and ask them to write an abbreviated response which, when published, would be acknowledged as such by us, with a further note that the complete version was available from BRB. This letter was sent first class on June 28th; at the time of our publishing we have heard nothing more from BRB.

However, what we did receive was a spate of letters from friends and business associates of BRB (all of whom were also mailed BRB's mimeographed response) urging us to do everything from "be more courteous and eager to learn" to "apologize" for our "reprehensible" behavior. All urged us (some demanded) to print BRB's letter in full.

Not wanting to run the BRB response at its current length or to edit without permission, and hearing nothing from BRB, yet feeling that this debate suggested a significant discussion continuing from earlier ones regarding organization and the nature of revolutionary activity, we are reproducing their mimeographed letter as we received it, reduced to our space limitation. (See "Letter from Black Rose Books" in this issue.)

The Black Rose Books Response

Let us summarize the BRB letter for those without magnifying glasses. It states that the fourth section of the book was deleted by the translator since by "contractual agreement" the author and translator had the final say on

the contents and the translator provided the final manuscript. BRB only discovered the omission to their “embarrassment,” when the author pointed it out to them after publication. BRB plans to include the missing section in any future editions if Paz so desires.

BRB states that it is perfectly plain that the book is not an original title “as the book states it was translated from French and lists the book’s French title.”

BRB says that the \$5.95 price is such because of higher printing costs in Canada due in part to American economic exploitation and that a substantial percentage of the cover price (15%) goes to the author and translator in the form of royalties, and even more to bookstores in the form of standard discounts (40%).

From the remainder BRB must pay all of its expenses. They state that in some cases, such as that of Voline’s *Unknown Revolution*, BRB actually sells it cheaper than an unnamed “American publisher.” They also detail their selling practices, which include free books to prisoners and direct sales to individuals at the same rate as to retailers (60% of cover price).

BRB says they tried their best to eliminate typographical errors (four separate proofreadings), but their printer does not speak English and cannot give a final check before printing. They also state that U.S. books sold by BRB are higher than their cover price because of high import duties and the costs of hiring a Customs Broker.

BRB says its “whole rationale is to get these books a large circulation” and that they “concentrate heavily on distribution and promotion” which also costs money, and they say they are “good at it.”

They state that Doaks “is lying when he states that the Lucy Parsons and Makhnovists books” have BRB covers on them; they have only BRB stickers on the original covers so the books can easily be reordered, BRB says that the copyright they put on their books is to protect them against “hungry bourgeois publishers” and that they would never prevent comrades from reproducing what they have published. They state that their copyright “is common currency among Canadian publishers.”

Finally BRB criticizes Doaks for wanting to reproduce the book *Durruti* at a lower price because he does not have the agreement of the author, translator and BRB people and that he will be “standing on other people.” They also say that Doaks will “exploit his own labor during the physical reproduction of the book” if he doesn’t pay himself a wage.

BRB Letters: Pro

To The Fifth Estate:

I must protest your conduct with respect to the insulting diatribe of a certain “Joe Doaks” impugning the integrity of the comrades of Black Rose Books publishing collective which you saw fit to print in your June 1977 issue. You printed this vicious and slanderous attack without comment and without the slightest attempt to ascertain the validity of the allegations or inviting comment from BRB.

Your conduct is all the more reprehensible in view of the fact that BRB, a non-profit, cooperative, publishes, and in cooperation with similar collectives, circulates valuable libertarian works which commercial publishers, interested solely in making money, refuse to handle. A glance at its catalogue will show that BRB is the major publisher and distributor of literature in North America with excellent connections in other countries.

You have, by now, probably received a detailed refutation exposing the malicious falsehoods and establishing the facts. I, and many other comrades, feel that you are in all fairness morally obliged to publish this letter and BRB’s reply in full.

Sam Dolgoff
New York City

Staff Reply: In the second paragraph of your letter, you appear to be urging that we censor criticisms of libertarians, a don’t rock the boat philosophy. One of the reasons for our publishing the Fifth Estate is to make available new ideas, views and criticisms of libertarian thinking and activity. There are many letters and articles that are written criticizing us; are we not to publish those? Are We not to publish criticisms of other libertarians just because they call themselves libertarians? Are we to be censors, only letting people see the libertarian movement the way you want them to see it?

To the Fifth Estate:

I have just received and read carefully copies of Mr. Doaks letter and the reply from Black Rose Books signed by Jean Nataf. Little needs to be added to the explanation since its credibility is there for any honest reader to evaluate.

However, I have a very personal stake in this debate since I have the honor of being West Coast distributor for Black Rose Books. In that capacity I demand that it be recorded that in all transactions financial, distribution and personal, there has been the very highest degree of integrity on the part of everyone associated with Black Rose Books.

To cast any slurs on them is to direct them at myself as well and this I will not tolerate.

Claire Culhane
Black Rose Books
N. Burnaby BC
Canada

Dear People:

I have been a reader of the *Fifth Estate* for the past year and have found it a valuable source of sophisticated analysis of current events and of controversy over libertarian revolutionary strategy; and the lay-out and graphics are frequently attractive and imaginative. I appreciate the work of the *Fifth Estate* staff—anarchists and libertarian socialists need competently produced organs for communication and education.

These functions, it seems to me, are only damaged by the hostile tone and irresponsible attitude of letters like that of “Joe Doaks” in the last issue. All of us who buy and/or distribute libertarian literature share common problems and concerns about costs, quality, and the contradictions inherent in functioning within a capitalist framework. It’s appropriate that we discuss these problems in the pages of the *Fifth Estate* and elsewhere, but in a way that seeks clarification rather than complaining and condemning.

Nobody’s policies should be exempt from questioning and criticism, but considering a) the U.S. political-economic and cultural imperialism to which Canadians are subjected and b) the greater weight of libertarian social tendencies in such organizations as the CNTU and the Montreal Citizens Movement compared with anything we have yet accomplished in the U.S. and c) the very serious new period in U.S.-Canadian relations that has opened up with the victory of the Parti Quebecois—considering all these, I think we ought especially to show an attitude of respect, sympathy, and eagerness to learn when in dialogue with our Canadian and Quebecois comrades.

I hope you will print BRB’s full reply to the “Joe Doaks” letter. For the present, perhaps an apology is in order and might help make this an unfortunate incident that serves to stimulate more constructive exchanges henceforth.

Bob Irwin
Philadelphia

Staff reply: Your desire to have us join you as a clique for thoroughly discredited petty bourgeois nationalisms hasn’t the slightest bit of interest for us. Your obeisance to a group simply because they reside within different borders is sickening. What specifically do you think we can learn from someone just because they happen to be black or Canadian or Vietnamese? This is pure third-worldist Maoism absolutely inconsistent with the internationalist principles of libertarianism. We learn from people’s struggles as human beings, not because of skin color or nationality.

To The FE:

As friends of both the FE and BRB, we feel we must comment on the “Joe Doaks” letter appearing in your June issue. We have received a copy of the letter sent to you in reply by BRB. As this answers the specific charges made by Doaks, we will not go into details here, other than to suggest that leftists are often very conscious of imperialism in glamorous, 3rd-World settings, but when it’s under their noses...

No mention was made by Doaks of having contacted BRB directly, so we assume that he didn’t check his facts before passing sentence of death. But if Doaks didn’t, FE should have, before printing such an attack.

BRB is a valuable force in the North American left. The recent formation of the Iberian Solidarity Committee, their worldwide prison work (including donations of books), and numerous activities, have established their credentials beyond any doubt.

Further, as a struggling publishing collective we have been made very aware of both the freedoms and the limitations imposed by our specific situation, on our mode of operation. An occasional “price-chopping” pirate using

“found” materials can operate in a much “freer” way than can a full-time publishing concern that is subject to various rigidly enforced legal restrictions (and BRB’s political work means they are closely watched for violations) and whose workers depend on it for their livelihood.

In capitalist society there can be no pure acts. The production of books for mass distribution implies certain compromises somewhere along the line, either by the producers or by those that rip them off. Joe Doaks thinks that by letting other people make those compromises he has escaped all compromise. If he can afford the luxury of donating his time and effort towards a \$2 edition, he is given that chance only through the work of others who couldn’t. This is the contradiction of voluntarism/cooperativism within capitalist society.

We urge you to print their reply in full.

Mutualist Books Collective

Rochester NY

Dear Friends:

The purpose of this letter is to make a plea for a reasonable degree of solidarity and tolerance among people who claim to be anarchists, or enemies of domination in all its forms. The letter by Joe Doaks in this month’s *Fifth Estate* reveals an authoritarian mentality and fanatical self-righteousness which remind me very much of the rantings of Leninist sectarians, but seem entirely incompatible with the spirit of libertarian mutual criticism.

Of course, Black Rose makes mistakes, like most of us, but this is no reason to ignore their impressive efforts, or to resort to insane denunciations, even if it does make you sound like a real macho revolutionary. No, Durruti would not have “shot those fuckers,” but he would have tried to teach Joe something about comradeship and the difficulties of the long, hard struggle for social transformation.

For Mutual Aid,

John Clark

New Orleans

BRB Letters: Con

Dear Gang:

I must second and applaud Joe Doaks’ expose of Libertarian Capitalism in Chic Academic Tuxedos. Of course, I’m speaking of the illustrious Black Rose Books people.

A small enterprise using non-union shops for years, not out of a consciousness of “Unions Against Workers,” but to keep the prices of production down and the prices of profits up. The systematic gouging of authors, workers and readers alike is a story in itself.

But a look at comparative prices in their catalog against B&R/Free Life/Freedom Books/Solidarity originals, you will see that the prices range from 30 to 50% higher. Reproductions of the above people’s works as well as “original Black Rose” material is usually of a slim look and higher price compared, to say, a Volume of material from B&R.

Let’s look at the simple price differences in Voline’s *The Unknown Revolution or History of the Makhnovist Movement*. The differences are: BRB: \$5.35 and \$4.50 against B&R: \$4.00 and \$2.50.

Need we say more about these hip profiteers? Yes! They must be confronted by individuals and organizations. Newspapers, study circles and bookstores must ask them why. But, of course, the replies may not be what you had in mind.

So I would say action such as that taken by Joe Doaks and his comrades is exemplary. Fuck Black Rose’s copyright. No one has the right to copyright information, let alone anarchist, communist agitprop. An outrage!

The reproduction of their books is an excellent action and so is an open and widespread boycott for them to drop prices. I mean, that’s their level of politics, so they should understand it very well—in the wallet.

And as a last note: what can you say about a libertarian publication with such illustrious funders and thus “associate editors” as a Stalinist like Prof. A. Madiros. Up yours, Black Rose.

Salud,

Eugene Plawiuk

Lethbridge, Alberta

Canada

To the Fifth Estate:

A commercial book publisher need not sound crazy or hysterical since it is not a “freak”; it is a normal, everyday business like a drug or soap firm; its aim is to place its commodities on the shelves of supermarkets alongside razor blades and tooth pastes; it needs a Copyright to establish itself as absolute proprietor and sole legal source of its commodity. In order to establish its monopoly over a specific market, it must eliminate the character of gift or direct communication which clings to books created in different circumstances and transform them into merchandise. In its view, any activity which is not business activity is pernicious, activity being legitimate only if it is set in motion by Capital, by profits or wages.

Some of us create books in different circumstances. If business is “normal,” we’re “freaks.” We try to eliminate commodity relations from our activity; we typeset, print and bind our own projects; we send our publications free to anyone who asks for them, sending bills only to institutions or businesses. Our aim is to communicate and exchange publications with other anti-commercial groups and individuals. We object to the “idea patent” because we don’t think ideas can be anyone’s private property, and we certainly don’t think ideas can “belong” to a capitalist (or State Publisher) who paid a sum of money to a writer. We consider every idea-monopoly (in the form of a State Publishing House or of a consortium of “private businesses”) to be the shortest road to universal censorship and intellectual stagnation.

We know that if Capital isn’t destroyed, book monopolies will sell everything of ours that they’re able to market, and they’ll try to wipe out all memory of our activity as activity which was not undertaken for a profit or a wage. But while we’re still alive we object to the recuperation of our activity by Capital** and we ask others whose activity is being turned against them to solidarize themselves with our protest.

TN, SN, FP, LP for Black & Red

* For example: Rubin’s *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value* is listed in the 1977 Black Rose catalogue as Black Rose Books No. D13—and readers of the catalogue are told that “This is the first and only English edition” (!?) As if Black and Red hadn’t published this book in 1972! As if, not being a “real,” i.e. capitalist publishing house, Black & Red never existed! (This mystifies us since several years ago Black Rose Books asked B & R to print 500 copies of Rubin’s book for them at cut-rate prices and we, in our naivete, agreed and even delivered the books personally!)

Another example: Voline’s *Unknown Revolution* is listed in the BRB catalogue as “Black Rose Books No. E29” (Hardcover \$16.95, paperback \$5.95. Ours is \$4, but the BRB letter pretends we don’t exist by referring to a New York publisher who reprinted our edition as “the American publisher.” The “Black Rose Book” is an exact photocopy of ours, with an important omission; the following statement does not appear behind the title page:

“The people who took part in the publication of the present work are neither publishers who invested capital in order to profit from the sale of a commodity on the book market, nor wage workers who produced a commodity in order to be paid for their time. Black & Red/Solidarity, May 1974.”

FE Staff Note: By way of contrast, on the back of the title page of the BRB edition of Ida Mett’s *The Kronstadt Uprising*, originally published cheaply and modestly by London Solidarity, the following statements appear: “Copyright 1971, Black Rose Books, Our Generation Press, No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher, except for brief passages quoted by a reviewer in a newspaper or magazine.”

Camarades du Fifth Estate:

Nous avons lu avec intérêt la lettre de Joe Doaks sur l’activité de Black Rose Books; récemment il y avait un cas identique de récupération ici. Il s’agit d’un éditeur qui s’occupe de ré-éditer un texte originellement nubile sans copyright; un des auteurs du texte a écrit une lettre en la signant du nom de l’éditeur. Quelques extraits de cette lettre suivent ci-dessous:

“Voici d’étranges rumeurs qui sont capables d’intoxiquer les gens: puisqu’on se moque de moi, on se peut bien moquer d’un autre. Oui! Sans demander l’autorisation à personne, j’ai pris, seul, (l’initiative de ré-éditer la brochure intitulée: “De la misère en milieu étudiant...” publiée, voici dix ans, par les situationnistes.

“D’aucuns se demandent naïvement: ‘Pourquoi reprendre commercialement un texte qui a eu le rare mérite de se diffuser par lui-même, dans divers pays et dans diverses langues, qui a trouvé tant de lecteurs sans la moind-

dre publicité, qui à occasions quelques dégâts dans l'Université, et qui n'a financièrement jamais rien rapporté à personne, jusqu'à ce jour?" Je réponds: 'Justement! Pourquoi pas?'

"Ce texte, anonyme et libre de tout copyright, me semble être à la disposition de n'importe qui. Quel mal y a-t-il à ce que je sois ce n'importe qui?"

"De fait, depuis l'effondrement de l'Empire romain d'Occident, il ne s'est pas trouvé un seul éditeur qui ait rendu, en si peu de temps, autant de services la cause révolutionnaire, que moi. Des misérables, qui n'ont réussi ni dans le monde des affaires ni dans les affaires de la révolution, me reprochent aujourd'hui—moi qui n'ai jamais connu de frontières entre la bonne cause et la bonne soupe—de m'enrichir aux dépens de cette cause. Feint-on d'ignorer que j'ai souvent risqué mon argent pour diffuser les idées dangereuses? Pourquoi les idées dangereuses ne courraient-elles pas parfois le risque de me rapporter un peu d'argent?"

"L'éditeur."

Comment From the Fifth Estate Collective

It is apparent that much more has been unveiled by the publication of Doak's letter than simply the question of BRB's business policies. For us, what has emerged is the far more profound question of what "libertarianism" really is. More specifically, how do explicitly anti-capitalist theoretical principles bear on the daily activities of those who, in print, espouse them?

Let us first define our relationship to Black Rose Books: As Ammunition Books, a project of the *Fifth Estate*, we buy libertarian literature from BRB wholesale and then sell it retail to raise money for financing the newspaper, which operates at a loss. Like their West Coast business associate, we have always had transactions with BRB that were and are friendly, prompt and even generous when we fell behind with our bills. However, we also buy libertarian literature from Random House, Harper & Row and Dover, and they are also friendly, prompt and even generous when we fall behind with our bills.

To illustrate our point further: We buy books authored by Sam Dolgoff from Random House, which pays royalties to the author; the book is produced entirely by wage labor, salaries are paid to Random House employees and profits from sales are reinvested into the enterprise. We also buy books authored by Sam Dolgoff from BRB and the identical set of definitions, as we are assured in their letter, apply there (though, of course, no dividends are distributed to stockholders of BRB).

Our relationship to both firms is simple: They send us books, we send them money. This relationship is not sufficient for us to view either publisher as "comrades". But more than this, we fail to see anything in BRB's activity which significantly marks it as in any sense a libertarian project, a project outside of capital, or one even attempting to operate outside of capital. The fact that books with a libertarian content are sold does not change the form of the commercial enterprise, just as anarchists becoming professors and ministers of state does not change those activities of "Nataf," in fact, makes a logical and coherent defense of a capitalist enterprise, in terms which would make any good capitalist beam. Throughout his letter we are confronted not with the concerns of a "libertarian" eager to enhance the communication of "libertarian" ideas, but with the concerns of a conscientious shopkeeper eager to see that everybody gets paid for their labor. The very idea that anybody involved in the production of *Durruti: The People Armed* might have entered into that activity without the prospect of being paid for it seems beyond the realm of his comprehension, since it seems that to him any activity which could potentially bring in wages and doesn't is "exploitation" (as singularly capitalist a conception as we could imagine). Thus he is up in arms (though not for himself, of course) over the lost potential income for Paz and MacDonald implied in the selling of a book which does not include in its selling price provision for royalties. It hurts him even more to know that this potential income will go to no one, because by cost-cutting, poor Doaks will now be exploiting himself by freely giving his energies to "getting these books a large circulation."

As for the copyright—a copyright is quite simply an announcement of private property and it is absolutely unprincipled for anyone claiming to be a libertarian to assert such a right. (Of course it's "common currency" among Canadian publishing houses! Who would expect it to be otherwise?! And BRB see no reason whatsoever to distinguish themselves from every other publishing house in this respect. Nor do we.) For ourselves, we have utterly no respect for copyrights and will reproduce anything with or without permission and hope others do similarly.

It is apparent, despite their own claims and the other heated defenses of the "service" they perform for the "movement", that "getting these books a large circulation" is BRB's whole rationale only so long as the books have

their and only their imprimatur. Otherwise, why are they not singing the praises of Doaks et al whose only promise is to make one of **

As far as we are concerned, these are the preoccupations of the salespeople of libertarian ideology, of those who have made an occupation (admittedly a not terribly lucrative one materially) of marketing ideas and assuming the mantle of libertarian luminary that goes with it. We at the FE know many people who write, print and disseminate libertarian ideas and who attempt, to the extent that they are able, to live out those ideas in their daily lives. None of those we might call comrades, however, make a living out of so doing.

What's at issue here, however, is not just BRB, but a lot of what passes for libertarianism in North America today. We hardly consider ourselves "pure" or "exemplary" in our activities at the *Fifth Estate*, but we do question the "libertarianism" of a project which differs so little from its openly capitalist counterparts. More than this, we question the "movement" at large which seems willing to mount a systematic critique of everything outside of it, but reacts with abject horror when "one of our own" is subjected to this same critique. If it is sufficient to establish its "libertarian credentials" for an enterprise to publish libertarian literature while reproducing every other aspect of capitalist production relations then we want no part of "libertarianism" or its "credentials" or those who recognize them.

But it is not libertarianism we wish to ditch, nor those comrades with whom we share the libertarian project. Nor did we particularly wish to single out Black Rose Books for special condemnation; that was done for us. It's simply that we would like to get to a point of basic honesty about ourselves and our activities. We are living in a period where the acts so many of us admire and desire—armed insurrection, mass participation in a social revolution—are not the order of the day, and none of our activities are in the slightest bit comparable to them. In waiting for such a period, meanwhile, we should at least agree not to fool ourselves or one another.

fifth Estate

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