

Comment from the *Fifth Estate*

...regarding Black Rose Books, Ltd. (BRB) and concerning what constitutes a libertarian project

Fifth Estate Collective

1977

Related: see Letters in this issue.

The discussion regarding Black Rose Books, Ltd. (BRB) and concerning what constitutes a libertarian project has taken two distressing and, in our opinion, unproductive directions. The first is the absolute indignation on the part of BRB supporters that we would even question “the fine work BRB has done,” and that such an inquiry, which tries to assess the nature of their activity, is on the face of it objectionable. The other is the argument that all of us are compromised by living within capitalist society, that “pure” activity is impossible without a revolution, so why are we being so self-righteous when we, like BRB, exhibit numerous contradictions to libertarian ideals?

However, to us, both of these approaches avoid the important question of what our lives are all about. Do we live for capital entirely or do we try to reclaim parts of our lives through projects that are independent of capital to every extent possible? Rather than attempting to assume a position of judgment over others, our critiques are, first and most importantly, self-critiques.

Many of them, such as the debate about organization, and now about what constitutes capitalist activity, make us realize that we are often closer to what we disdain than what makes us comfortable. But rather than ignoring these uncomfortable similarities, we think it is important to push all of the critiques to their limit to fully expose to ourselves what constitute the elements of our lives. To refuse to confront these contradictions directly leaves one in the position of unlimited self-delusion.

Part of the problem stems apparently from the inability of many of those who identify themselves as anarchists to formulate anything approaching a critical understanding of what capitalism actually is, how it functions, and what the role of each individual is in reproducing it. Capitalism is not General Motors, but a network of social relationships that involve work for wages, the production and sale of commodities, the extraction of profit and its reinvestment in an enterprise. Whether this process occurs at GM or at BRB, these are relationships through which capital is reproduced.

Perhaps we were too hasty in relegating Marx to the rubbish container on the assumption that everyone understood that wage work stands at the center of capitalist activity, where one’s creative abilities are sold to capital as a commodity and where capital gains the profits it needs to continue. The selling of “libertarian ideas for a living” is the process of having your living acts turned into things for capital.

When your creations become commodities they, like the individual, become things as well.

To the process of capital it matters not whether it is Chevrolets or libertarian books that are being marketed or whether wages are paid to GM or BRB workers. When one reads someone who signs a letter, “Yours for Anarchy,” stating, “What’s wrong with BRB earning a fair living?” (echoing the words of Henry Ford 50 years ago) and then praising BRB as a “cooperative business,” one knows that a discussion of basics is necessary before we agree we are in a common “struggle against the capitalist rules.”

But the problem of paying wages goes beyond just these considerations. Wages for full-time activists within the revolutionary movement have always been the road to careerism and conservatism. The larger an enterprise becomes, the more it becomes institutionalized and always ends up having as a priority the defense of its turf. There seems to be a certain point in the growth of projects at which what was once a fluid and dynamic undertaking becomes foredoomed to acquiring the same qualities as what it once reviled. Success is a curse within capitalism, because both individual and group activity only becomes successful on capital's terms. When you start to confuse your projects with your life within capital (wage earning, etc.) the latter always distorts the former.

Also, the larger the capital investment (and by BRB's description in last issue theirs is considerable), the more cautious one must become. In August 1975, the director of BRB asked a visiting *Fifth Estate* staff member why Black & Red bothered to print "incomprehensible" books like *The Wandering of Humanity* by Jacques Camatte. It is true that Camatte's writings are not immediately easy to understand, and if it had depended on BRB whether or not a radical work was published, Camatte's work would never have appeared in English. The reason is obvious: BRB can print books only if a large number of people are interested in purchasing them as commodities. In such a highly capitalized affair as BRB, what with wages, "rent, heat, taxes, light, and so on," profit ability becomes a major consideration in what gets printed and what does not.

Several writers have asked, do we not engage in business practices as well? Yes, and to an extent probably unknown to most readers; to such an extent that we have begun to question the very process we are involved in. The extension of the *Fifth Estate* into a mass circulation newspaper or the unlimited expansion of BRB's ever-growing list of titles, is not a qualitative step forward for the libertarian movement, but a defeat.

The nature of the domination of communication by capital is the centralization of resources in the hands of a small number of active communicators with an immense number of passive receptors eagerly taking in whatever is given out. The content of a mass circulation *Fifth Estate* or Black Rose Books would be different from that of the *Detroit News* or Random House, but the form, and the function that flows from it, remain identical with the same type of authority vested in each.

Copeland wants us to define a libertarian project... mmmmm. We do live in a capitalist society as everyone keeps reminding us and, of course, it is impossible for us to operate outside of capital altogether, but to the extent that it is possible we should try to do so rather than embracing its techniques with vigor. The concept of growth (in membership, circulation, etc.) as being synonymous with a qualitative advance for "libertarianism" so pervades the libertarian "movement" that to assert its opposite seems to many a declaration of lunacy. It is apparent to us, however, that this growth ethic (distinctly a part of our capitalist ideological heritage) is the root of exactly that monopolization tendency which robs us of the capacity to communicate as equals. What this means practically is that a project which sees as its activity not only the destruction of the existing society but also of the conceptual framework which makes that society possible (and its post-revolutionary return all too often inevitable) must directly confront the "leaders and followers" implications of its own growth.

Thus the FE, for instance, should agree never to print more than our current press run of 3000; assuming that more than that number of people are or will be interested in ideas and activities like those of the FE, the onus will then be on them to take up similar activity of their own. (While a *Fifth Estate* with circulation of 30,000 would be a disaster, 10 different papers with circulation of 3000 each would make for an incredibly vital scene.)

Black Rose could follow the lead of those projects that do small press runs and do the work themselves, again placing the onus for extension of that activity directly on those who espouse it. To have small collectives across North America involved in a variety of printing projects starting from a variety of perspectives would be a stimulus to intense political discussion and activity. To allow monopolization by a few would simply announce the recuperation of libertarian literature by capital.

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