

Comments on Revolutionary Violence

1. Responses to “New York, New York”; 2. On Terrorism & Authoritarianism

Various Authors

1977

1. Responses to “New York, New York”

Dear F.E.:

It would be very interesting to know more about the character of the N.Y. looting but it is not clear to me that we can tell anything from the figures which the Zerzans passed on to us from the San Francisco Chronicle in your August issue [see “New York, New York: The blackout of 1977” by John Zerzan, Paula Zerzan, Fifth Estate # 285, August, 1977].

The fact that relatively few food stores were looted was used by the Brooklyn district attorney and some of the bourgeois press as proof that participants weren’t in immediate need. How ridiculous! Obviously, expensive items were gone after first (along with sporting goods by the younger looters); I don’t know what this selection does prove about need, but I wouldn’t offer it as evidence to assert that “there has been a progressive decay in recent times of...enforced virtues,” as the Zerzans do.

Also, the methods of arrest were not described in anything I read, but I do know the police were almost completely immobilized for quite some time, even being forced, by stoning, to withdraw from one Brooklyn shopping area. Perhaps those arrested were not representative of all those participating—the regularly employed might have been captured in larger numbers than others. One way or another we don’t know much about the people involved unless we know the history and nature of their employment. I don’t think we can be sure the looting was nearly as universal as the Zerzans claimed without much more information.

While I believe the above cautionary remarks to be worth making, I also want to comment on the Zerzans’ last paragraph, which I quote for those who weren’t as struck by it as I was:

“The left—all of it—has spoken only of the high unemployment, the police brutality; has spoken of the people of New York only as objects, and pathetic ones at that! The gleaming achievements of the unmediated/unideologized have all pigs scared shitless.”

Since it is too ludicrous to think that the Zerzans are morally offended, as they seem to be in the above, by people being spoken of as objects, their obvious indignation must have been caused by the insipid observations of the left, to which I will return.

It is the nature of the capitalist project to objectify human relations. To speak of any citizens, especially a mass of citizens, of any advanced capitalist country as objects (pathetic ones at that) is not, in itself, wrong. To speak of people as unmediated/unideologized is notably wrong. We are dealing with people, in this case, whose television sets are on almost constantly; much of what they looted was taken for later sale. Those involved may be somewhat—only somewhat—unaculturated, but they have extremely strong connections, predominantly unconscious ones, to society at large. As do we all.

The struggle to become other than objects, to become unideologized, is the revolutionary project. In a period when the network of social relations that is capitalism is so ingrained in all sections of society, to think that this can be accomplished in anything but a conscious way, as the Zerzans plainly do (it is apparent in much of their other writing as well), is infantile—the expression of a strong wish to not see things as they actually are. The Zerzans' attitude seems to me to contradict the spirit of your comments on page 3 of the same issue (regarding Black Rose Books—FE).

As for the left, it is revealing but by no means surprising nor cause for indignation that the left, in order to legitimate the actions of the looters, needs to excuse these actions as arising from injustices. In this way the left shows itself to be the most equalitarian wing of capitalist politics. If the left could see itself as an object of capitalist development then it would cease being the left.

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P.S. Unless it is against your policy you may list my full address in case any of your readers might wish to reply to me.

Dear F.E.:

How tempting to picture the New York Blackout in glowing colors as a carnival of the oppressed—see people taking back their own lives, yes, destroying the implements of capitalism, dancing in the ruins while cops stand by helpless! Wow, sounds like a revolution or California dreaming. For, while this scene is not a total mirage—for sure the pleasure, excitement, spontaneity and honest rebellion really happened—it is not total. Too much is left out.

It is not just the circumstances of a happening like the New York Blackout but the wonderful optimism of the Zerzans' interpretation of it in August's F.E., for example, which begs a lot of questions; not the least of which is probably the one asked in the wake of any upheaval to determine how far the ripples went: what happened afterwards and why is everything just the same as before.

Of course it isn't though, there are a lot of people in prison, a few people dead, many damaged. Far from standing by idly, the guardians of the law or whatever you want to call it struck back viciously against the desecrators of sacred property, clubbed, beat and crowded into filthy airless cells after giant sweeps of "affected areas" close on 4,000 people, many with head lesions as typical injuries; with no bedding, little water, backed up toilets; where junkies cold-turkied, diabetics went into coma, women hemorrhaged, people freaked out from heat prostration and at least one person is known to have died in jail. Rumor also has it that the morgue at one City hospital (no electricity there either) was pretty full that night. [...]

But no, there is nothing surprising, nothing new to be learned from this familiar horror story—and it isn't the point either. The reaction of the "authorities" in New York to the looting, is, after all, not nearly as reliable an indication of the present state of capitalism as is the Neutron Bomb which would have quickly if messily destroyed the superfluous, troublesome people and left the sacred monoliths and their tacky contents safe and standing.

The point is to ask to what extent can we gain enough control of our own minds that we can tear ourselves away from the mutilating conditioning of the state so that any kind of rebellion makes sense? In this context, still dwelling on the New York Blackout, two questions in particular among so many, seem burning: one involving violence, and what violence might mean, the other, the degree to which we participate in capitalism, or to be more precise, against the Blackout, consumer fetishism.

Because the desirable view of the looting, the positive view, is so heady—the defeat of capital, the unmediated satisfaction of desires and needs—doesn't mean there's no truth in it. For after all there was no looting [...] property is theft; capitalism stinks; we should all take what we need, what we desire, yes, yes! Of course it's true, it's also superficial, one-sided and romantic, this view, it leaves a lot out. The problems, like what we desire and even more what we need, have been pre-selected for us by the greater need of the State and its minions to enslave and enthrall us with objects of mind-control, the products of cryptofascist advertising campaigns, petrochemical garbage, products of the degradation and torture of the once-natural world and of other human beings.

Yes, yes even so we must take what we need. But why 100 pairs of it? Can we find nothing better to satisfy our famished desires but junk food and junk products of endless conveyer belts? And why were so many people back the

next day selling it all back on the streets (at bargain prices) to the same people over and over again? Unfortunately it is very difficult to be sure what we “really” need and although we ought to be sharing it all out, sharing anything is actually extremely difficult. For the virtues of passive consumer capitalism go very deep indeed and it takes more than burning the store to rid ourselves of them. It takes more than “looting” to rid ourselves of the weird and contradictory sense of value which money, as symbol and reality, has imposed.

It takes, maybe, a revolution. [...] Tell me, what is and when is a revolution? What comes to mind is this paraphrase of a pro-Situ text which puts it that 10 days of revolutionary violence will get rid of 1,000 years of conditioning. And there we have it, paraphrase or not, irrelevant or not, the germ, or virus of a hope, simple and fervent, simple-minded also, inherent in a past and currently “correct line” (of F.E. and elsewhere) that violence—and this word, too, has to be defined—is not just an integral part of revolt but is necessarily a liberating manifestation of spontaneous rebellion.

The problem is that violence is also a product of those thousand years of conditioning. Such an attitude toward violence is above all evidence of the continued proliferation of stereotyped male values. In our sexual conditioning within the patriarchal and capitalistic modes—which turned women into subject and property whose function it was to reproduce more property—also lie the roots of our attitudes towards violence.

Just as women are taught to be passive, yielding, accepting and unquestioning of authority (which, like the gods which symbolize it, is always male), men are trained to be aggressive and unyielding in its service. Authority is power, the state, god in heaven, strength, determination, might, will and always right. In order to break out of the cage of law, the mythic hero must do it through strength, determination and force and take what he wants. Mythically the female rebel, being evil, was destroyed, women were part of the goods of the world to be taken. Rape in other words goes right along with the macho romanticism of male rebellion.

There are no statistics on the numbers of rapes committed during the Blackout and they’d of course be misleading in any case, but it was a “great night for rape” and a lot of men said it. Most of the women we know—all those who didn’t live with men—stayed home, for reasons which we haven’t really needed to discuss. Old time libertarians were wont to defend rape as spontaneous acts of passion, somehow liberating men, rather as some Russian populists heralded pogroms as signs of insurgency among the peasants. Rape is more often excused as a product of frustration, pent-up force, all in all given the stamp of approval by white male intellectuals for violence by the oppressed, violence as liberation, or let them do our dirty work for us—just another kind of patriarchal control. For the Leninoids, the Industrial Working Class will make them the revolution, for the crypto-Situationists and anarchists the lumpen proletariat will. All will explode in a multi-colored dream of vengeance.

In this technocratic civilization violence of that type takes on another shade of romanticism, begins to look truly absurd against the shadow of nuclear power, against capitalism’s rape of the natural world. Destructive violence has become the property and domain of the few who control the computers which control, for example, the neutron bomb.

A problem with violence has always been that it’s easier to deal only with the aspect of direct physical destruction and forget the destruction achieved so much more surely in other ways. This is why perhaps, pacifists, by generally refusing to deal with the annihilating factors of coercion and authoritarian domination, tend to reinforce those passive qualities which make for the acceptance of power relationships and hierarchy. Physical violence itself sets up its own hierarchy of power in which resistance, passive or active, perpetuates the use of force. Looking around the world, violent resistance may appear almost inevitable as a means, may be forced on us—hardly a matter to be celebrated.

Violence implies a kind of annihilation, whether physical or psychic, partial or complete. All over the world one group is constantly annihilating another; death and destruction on the streets, in the institutions of capitalism, on T.V. and in our individual lives constantly stripped of content and meaning. It’s no wonder we dream of violence as a means of getting rid of our oppressors. Our dreams echo the forms we know already, we construct bombs in our minds which release to self-destruction.

And isn’t this release of frustrated energy built into the capitalist system? The weekend bash, freedom after the proscribed hours at a stupid, disgusting job, “freedom” meaning spending money quickly, getting high, spectator sports which end in brawls, the old sociably acceptable night out with the boys then come home and beat up the wife, rape, it’s normal; natural, it’s culturally reinforced. [...]

The incendiary in the head has to be released. Many of us are angry—women particularly are familiar with a peculiar kind of explosive anger which feeds on itself, is self-directed. Riots and big spontaneous celebrations give the opportunity of release outside the capitalist mode to large numbers of people including many whose destructive viruses will be spontaneously directed against other individuals. We need to stop compensating for what sometimes seems like the inevitability of violence by romanticizing it. If our forms of resistance continually incorporate the values we have been force-fed, macho aggression for men, passive frustration for women, hunger for the artifacts of capitalism for all, we'll recreate the state endlessly in ourselves and in each other.

The Lower Depths

New York

Dear F.E.:

Hey, folks, what's with yer preoccupation with this violence trip? It's turning into a staunch ideology: the correct line for true, to-the-root Revolutionaries to mouth.

I have no experience with the Clamshell Alliance. The committee-meeting bickering sounds like the same shit i listen to when the kids are arguing over the rules for their game of "Capture the Flag." (See "Did Pacifists Block Militant Action?" by Rudy Perkins, FE #285, August 1977.)

When i first read of the push for nonviolent demonstrations protesting nuclear power i was interested—wow, i thought, I'll be able to express my views en masse with my friends and we can take the kids! No hassle with baby-sitters and their exorbitant fees, no worry of being caged for days in a jail cell while the baby cries mournfully in a foster home.

Rudy, by narrowly defining "direct action" as cutting fences and getting the milk kicked out of my soft tits by steel-plated cops, you exclude me and thousands of other people who would prefer that the immediate consequence of demonstrating our knowledge would be being quietly dragged off to spend a couple of hours in jail, rather than being killed, maimed, and/or imprisoned.

Dug the Zerkans' article on the New York black-out riots. Sounded like a great party, tho i wouldn't have been able to attend. It's difficult to get a baby-sitter on such notice. Does that make me counter-revolutionary? Would i be More Revolutionary if i permanently farmed out my tiny children so i would be free to participate in such spontaneous events?

Dug the photo of the Italian with the gun and black leather gloves. Very sexy. (See centerfold in FE #285, August 1977) Send him over to spend the night, if he ain't also into whips and rubber hoses.

My point is that yer romantic and catch-all attachment to violent expression of rage is stupid, limiting and dangerous. One out of every three women filing for divorce in Calif. reports repeated beatings by her husband (on her divorce forms). Should she have shot her husband instead of left him? Twenty percent of all policemen killed in the line of duty in the U.S. are shot by irate husbands when they respond to battered wives' calls for help. Are the cop-killing wife-beaters part of the forces of liberation? Over 2,000 American children are beaten to death each year by their parents. Can we arm the infants?

Yer articles concerning violent confrontation with repressive forces need to be balanced by articles concerning the creation of communities in which we can begin to grow and express love, as in the communes of the Anticrats you barely mentioned (see centerfold August 1977 FE).

For starts, you could print Emma Goldman's *The Tragedy of Women's Emancipation*. Or do y'all feel that the orgasmic passion for nurturance should be restricted to the *Mother Earth News* set?

Yours without baby-sitters or bruises,

Amelia Jones

L.A. area, Calif.

2. On Terrorism & Authoritarianism

Dear Fifth Estate:

I am writing this in response to the article "On Terrorism and Authoritarianism" in the August issue of the Fifth Estate [FE #285, August, 1977].

First of all, I want to comment on the title, and in so doing criticize the blithe acceptance with which so many revolutionaries have been allowing themselves to be labeled “terrorists.” This is a word which is deliberately being used by the establishment media as one of their many ways, some subtle and some not so subtle, of negatively influencing public opinion about revolutionary violence.

The word in itself is totally inaccurate. I mean, what is so fucking terrifying about an empty government building getting a couple of walls blown out, or an isolated utility being bombed? Many everyday things in this society are much more terrifying than that. Most jobs, for instance, or driving through rush hour traffic, or the neutron bomb. The use of this simple, but effective device of labeling is so obvious, here on the West Coast at least, as to be really ridiculous.

Besides being inaccurate, the term instantly calls up in the mind and emotions of the average reader things like the New York airport massacre, airliners disintegrating in midair, and exploding restaurants and bars and movie theatres, etc. And that’s exactly why the word is used.

Let’s get it right: The governments and corporations are the terrorists. The revolutionaries are the ones who are working to end the terror. There is more terror caused to the public by the routine workings of one large corporation or government agency, than by all the so-called “terrorists” this country has ever produced.

Essentially I agree with the article in its main contention that the groups presently practicing revolutionary violence in this country tend to promote, intentionally or unintentionally, an authoritarian mentality among the people who sympathize with or support their actions. And I want to add, from my own experience in being associated with such a group, that the actions also, I believe, definitely tend to create the same mentality in the members themselves (i.e. “guerrilla elitism”).

[...] I don’t want to comment on the SLA, mainly because I still haven’t had the opportunity to read the “Last SLA Papers,” nor on Durruti since I haven’t yet read the history of their actions. I will confine myself to the New World Liberation Front (NWLF) and the Emiliano Zapata Unit (EZU), both centered in the San Francisco Bay area. Unfortunately, the NWLF has gone just about completely crackers over the last year and a half, resulting mostly from a rapid changeover in its membership in the early part of 1976. [...] As a revolutionary who has witnessed their evolution toward fascism over the past year or so, and as an associate of the EZU (which is what I’m doing time for), I obviously will have a hard time remaining objective, but I will try.

The pre-craziness NWLF (1973–75) worked much like the early Weather people. Their communiques were mainly educational, in the sense of pointing out facts about the targets’ specific functions in capitalist oppression, etc., and agitational, exhorting people to resistance and action, etc. The overtly authoritarian statements, such as forming a “central command,” dictating life-styles, etc., started only after the presumed change in membership.

However, the authoritarian way that people related to the NWLF was already quite in evidence, to me (as I look back on it). In fact, along with the Weather Underground Organization (WUO), it was the most important influence on me, on the EZU people I knew of, and also on the New Dawn Party (the above-ground M-L group I was a member of). There was a tendency on the part of virtually everyone of us to give undue weight to statements and actions of the NWLF, and WUO, simply because they were well-known underground groups. [...] The authoritarian mystique, which is the main concern of the “Terrorism and Authoritarianism” article, was definitely there: the tendency toward acceptance of their leadership, not through rational evaluation, but because of something else.

What is the something else? These are some of the things I have found in my analysis of my own reactions, and I feel sure they were present in most of us. I therefore assume that many of the same things can be found in most movement people who relate positively to such organizations.

1. The article states, “The SLA members considered themselves, and have been considered by many to be brave heroes sacrificing the possibilities of more comfortable lives for the good, the education and the salvation of ‘the people.’” The writer sees this as a mistake and a problem, but I believe that “brave heroes” is to quite a degree a valid evaluation: certainly it takes a certain amount of courage (intentional disregard of fear) to accomplish most kinds of revolutionary violence, or for that matter, certain kinds of “legal” revolutionary work as well. It takes sacrifice of material and emotional comforts to devote yourself to either “legal” or “illegal” subversive activity. I don’t think any of us think of it in such dramatic and absolute terms as “brave hero,” but are aware that we are giving up more comfortable and less dangerous pursuits in order to be part of a sustained attack on the capitalist state. Of course,

the paradox is, that this relative danger and discomfort is the only thing that a revolutionary can feel comfortable with.

Maybe here is part of the mystique: the outside people sympathetic to the cause see only the “brave heroism,” which to the totally convinced and committed revolutionary seems nothing more than common sense.

2. Probably the separation between the movement people outside, and those doing the actions, is another reason that people endow them with “authority.” “If they are doing something so apparently hard and dangerous, just like in a real revolution, and it’s on T.V. and in the papers, then they must be special and know what they’re doing.” The best cure for that is to do it yourself, just as it is the best cure for the mystique surrounding anything...Usually there is nothing that will take away the glamour and mystique of the urban guerrilla faster than to become one...Of course, when I say people should be encouraged to take the step from spectator to actor, I don’t mean that it should be done lightly. One must be aware of the possible (very possible) consequences. And they should start slow and should use extreme caution and security measures at every step of the way, and do whatever they have to do to acquire whatever technical knowledge is necessary.

One must be especially careful about endangering (or appearing to endanger) innocent people, and about security (names, fingerprints, phones, cars, addresses, etc.)—two things which often seem simple to the beginner, but aren’t.

And when I say “going from spectator to actor,” I don’t mean necessarily forming an underground group. I agree with the article that the best place for revolutionary actions is at your own place of material and/or subjective oppression. The more people who take this step, singularly, in pairs, with a small circle of friends, or by the thousands, the better. It’s not a matter of enlisting, or hoping to get recruited, or waiting for instructions from Central Command. It is a matter of doing it yourself.

3. I believe we all have a real need for revolutionary information (books, newspapers, pamphlets, etc.), and for discussion, new ideas, different viewpoints, inspiration, a feeling of solidarity and assurance that we’re not going it alone. We need to know what’s going on all over the country—what’s working and what’s failing; who needs help and who needs criticism...

The collective I am associated with outside is beginning a newsletter which we hope to make into a newspaper (Strong Arm Prisoners Collective, mailing address soon to be announced). We hope to see this decentralization (of libertarian newspapers)—this proliferation—continue, and definitely intend to do our part by giving a very high priority to making a good libertarian newspaper. Another of the advantages of having a lot of papers instead of just one or two big ones, is that the government would have a much harder time dealing with them if they decide to risk waging a full-scale battle against press freedom...

So remember folks, keep your cop clean, let a thousand flowers bloom, and when in California, drop by and visit our modern facilities, if you can find them. And if you don’t like our news, go out and make some of your own.

Laurance Kisinger
Folsom Prison
Represa, Calif.

Staff Note: The preceding letter was edited at points indicated (...) for space considerations. We hope we have left the author’s views intact.

Dear Comrades:

This letter is in reply to the article “On Terrorism and Authoritarianism” by Muswell Hillbilly, which appeared in the August FE. Hillbilly advocates a bourgeois pacifist, and if heeded, a defeatist viewpoint. He refers to revolutionary violence as “terrorism,” which is the same thing the state capitalist press derogatorily calls it, and true to his petty bourgeois class orientation, he parrots their foul line. He tries to lump the SLA and Durruti together and call it all “terrorism,” mindless violence. This is absurd and politically irresponsible, for they both must be viewed in their respective set of social circumstances.

The guerrilla actions of Durruti, Ascaso, and his comrades were not begun in a vacuum (in Spain), but were the direct result of a situation of extreme repression. The employing class had hired “pistoleros” (or enforcers) to whip the workers back into line. Virtually every major working class leader and activist was being shot and killed

by these hit men. Durruti was fully aware that he was next, as well as recognizing his political responsibilities in the situation. So he and other comrades resorted to revolutionary direct action and armed self-defense. Were they wrong for doing so?

Hillbilly says yes, he feels they should have waited “until the people were ready.” But what many persons with his viewpoint don’t understand is that mass armed struggle cannot always be waged immediately.

You have to crawl before you can walk. An armed infrastructure should be built now to deal with today’s repression. An Armed struggle is just one aspect of the total revolutionary struggle. Our objective is social revolution, and, yes, Hillbilly, you can get there from here.

Hillbilly tells a blatant and vicious lie when he claims Durruti was in favor of the CNT-FAI joining the Republican government; he argued vehemently against it and was in favor of the continuation of the social revolution and workers’ self-management leading to libertarian communism. So it is a deliberate slander when Hillbilly claims Durruti publicly urged obedience to the Republican government and work discipline, and participated in the jailing and murder of anyone, even fellow anarchists, who refused to follow the CNT-FAI collaborationist policy. Hillbilly should be made to prove this, because Durruti was against this and it is a matter of record. “Sell-out” indeed!

As for the SLA: its personnel and much of its political outlook came from the prison movement, especially the influence of George Jackson and Martin Sostre. The prison movement has always advocated armed struggle or armed self-defense, and if any of you have ever spent any time in state slavery, you know why. Here state repression is not merely theoretical, but very real and very deadly! But prisoners are basically defenseless, and if they protest too hard they stand a good chance of being slaughtered, as at Attica. The SLA made many mistakes, but one of them was not because they employed revolutionary violence.

Sure, their personal views and political understanding may have been naive and lacking, but whatever mistakes they made were honest ones. You may disagree with their actions and the whole idea of armed resistance but to say they are collaborators with the State is criminal. (By the way the Marxist-Leninists accused the SLA of being police agents).

The SLA was not an anarchist group, and never professed to be. Whatever grandiose claims they made or erroneous actions took, must be viewed in the light of their orientation, which was Marxist primarily, with some feminist influence. I cannot excuse the SLA for their acts, and would not even if I could. I respect them more than I respect an armchair theorizer like Muswell Hillbilly. His attacks on Durruti, Bakunin, and other revolutionaries are based on cowardice and pacifism. He believes in a “peaceful transition to anarchism.”

Lest anyone think I have a fixation with military methods, let me hasten to add that I am in favor of anarcho-syndicalist methods and am a member of the IWW, but then I am not so naive to think that the capitalists will just give up their property peacefully as a result of a General Strike, as most anarcho-syndicalists do.

The USA has the largest prison population in the world; there are spies and police agents all over the place; U.S. government-initiated political assassination of left political activists is a fact of American life; the courts are full of cases of frame-ups and railroadings of political activists; the police have become a paramilitary fascist organization and are killing people-all over the place, brazenly raiding homes and offices, violating civil rights, etc., yet Hillbilly says we should ignore this, it’s not important and certainly not worth a fight. And on top of everything else, the fool does not even know what type of society he wants, or how to get it.

He’s against any form of revolutionary organization actually, not just vanguardist, because he doesn’t want to struggle. He’s a simple “rhetorician” and critic, as well as a buffoon. He’s scared to implement any of his sterile theories, especially to risk his miserable life. His defeatist and slanderous view are dangerous if heeded.

In Solidarity,

Lorenzo Komboa Erwin

Atlanta Federal Prison

Atlanta, Georgia

fifth Estate

Various Authors

Comments on Revolutionary Violence

1. Responses to “New York, New York”; 2. On Terrorism & Authoritarianism

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