

# On Having Nothing to Say

Fifth Estate Collective

1979

The long delay between this issue and the last one published at the end of January resulted from our being confronted by a bout of cerebral paralysis which left us feeling empty of words and ideas. We mostly articulated this feeling to one another by stating rather aimlessly that perhaps “we no longer had anything to say,” which carried with it the vague suggestion that maybe we should even close up shop.

It’s not that we were bereft of the concepts or desires that had motivated us in the past, but rather that we wanted to continue to meet the criteria we have somewhat rigorously always demanded of ourselves. We’ve always felt that if we aren’t involved in continually turning over new ground and challenging our old assumptions, maybe we should pack it in and leave the propaganda work and political glad-handing to others.

In fairness to ourselves, however, we should state that the last two issues seemed quite decent to us and met at least part of the criteria just mentioned. Hence it would be easy to see these current doldrums as just episodic, since we have published some real stinkers in the past without ever having come to the conclusion that we had run entirely out of steam. What is different at this juncture, is that we have reached a critical period; one which we are just beginning to realize has been developing for a long time.

Even while we were describing history we failed to recognize our role in the contemporary process of creating it in a period when it would have been crucial for us to have done so. The beginnings of what we are now faced with trace back to the origins of our project long before the involvement of the current staff.

## New Left Origins

For most of its existence (beginning in 1965) the *Fifth Estate* was a quintessentially New Left publication, but the period which gave rise to it was in a severe eclipse by 1974–75 as was the newspaper itself when we first began to function with it, first as the Eat the Rich Gang and then as the staff. It was evident to us at that time that we were in a period of declining political activity and disintegrating forms of rebellion which had typified the foregoing period. Yet we were bright with enthusiasm about our new project, and the host of recently discovered ideas we had just come across—such as situationism, anarchism, and council communism—animated us all the more.

We felt we were the inheritors of the ‘sixties but now armed with a much more potent formula for revolution than the statist and authoritarian muck which had been previously carried. Ultimately, we thought we were at the beginning of things, not at their end.

We were soon dispossessed of that optimism as the disintegration continued and now, almost at the ‘eighties, any continuity with that previous period has been broken. All that was “The Movement” seems now only fit subject matter for TV specials, leaving us back at ground zero suddenly truncated from our past or any tradition of rebellion.

## **Invasion of the Body Snatchers**

This appears as most striking when witnessing the travels of many of our former comrades and FE staffers who drifted out of a movement which called for world revolution and a “total assault on the culture” and into the prescribed pursuits of middle and working class America. Many of them have embraced the world of professions, business and conventional politics with such an uncanny vigor that we are led to suspect that a sort of “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” syndrome has occurred with the vital, lively bodies of our friends being inhabited by lifeless aliens leaving only a slightly recognizable outer shell.

Of course, our ultimate concern isn't so much with them as with ourselves, because it becomes harder and harder to distinguish our lives from theirs. Our ideas, we continually assert, are different, but much of our activity is almost identical—work, sports, consumption of entertainment, etc.

One of the ways we try to show that we haven't entirely bought capital's program on such a wholesale level is through projects like the Fifth Estate, but communication on any level presupposes receptors. So, perhaps the problem isn't so much with us not having anything to say as a problem of what we have to say becoming understood by an ever decreasing number of people. Most of us still continue to get excited upon hearing plans for new projects or when we are confronted with new ideas, and each new abuse by authority still makes us bristle, but previously all of that emotional energy appeared to be part of a larger dynamic that contained the desire and the possibility for a revolutionary transformation and was seen similarly by those around us.

Now we get the distinct impression that at best we are conceived of as having a slightly arcane hobby (“politics,” and weird politics at that) and at worse are thought to be quite rude and self-righteous for continuing to evoke a set of values stemming from activity already long exhausted. If, in the midst of a polite conversation that has oscillated between cooking, running and movies, one of us should happen to inject something such as you might find in the pages of the FE, everyone else sort of drifts off, hopes you will finish soon and then returns to what was under discussion previously.

No one has yet kicked us out of their house, since much of what we are saying contains recognizable buzzwords like “capitalism,” “domination,” “critique” (seemingly prima facie evidence that something important must be being said), but given the reception and lack of response, there is progressively less willingness on our part to even say those things. By this silence, we find ourselves, too, becoming agents of recuperation: conformists.

Lest this all be seen as just us crying the blues about not being recognized as hot-shot politicians any longer, some exploration of what is happening on the contemporary scene to all of us should be attempted.

## **Capital and Domestication**

Even in our marxist and leftist days we knew something hideous and inhuman was afoot in a society dominated by capital. Since entering a stage in our thinking when those theories of domination began to stretch ever backwards to encompass the entire breadth of what we call civilization, we have become even more aware of what has been done to the species since emerging from the jungles and the savannas into history. All the while stating that the configurations of domination have become increasingly pernicious and have accelerated tremendously within the epoch of capital, we, again, have stood (or so we thought) ahistorically aside, possessed of the foolish assumption that those who look thoughtfully at the processes of society (and who note them down in a systematic manner) are somehow themselves exempt from the results which affect everyone else.

A good case in point is when we first came across the reinvigorated marxist concept of the “real domination of capital.” Its appeal to us lay, of course, in its seeming validity although many have been critical of it because of its apparent “pessimism”—if capital dominates all institutions, modes of thought, the culture, it would follow that no resistance, let alone destruction of capital's domination, appears possible. Well, that's what it would mean, we smugly said, contending that our small project kept us at least partially out of the path of the Juggernaut we were describing. And to some extent projects and personal resistance and collective activity do keep you out from under the wheels, but not for long if those activities are diminishing rather than expanding and linking up with the activity of others. Without specific forms of resistance, and (even more importantly) a community of resistance,

we are left awash in the same currents which are sweeping over everyone else whether there is an awareness of what is happening or not.

## **Culture of Capital**

And what has been happening is the total collapse of the social infrastructure \* of rebellion which had been created during the 'sixties (flawed as it may have been), leaving all of us as individuals to face the staggering cultural might of the administrative state. Without structures of resistance in which to organize collective projects and our own lives as rebels, capital steps in to organize our energy around wage work and other activity ordained by official society.

Again, with all of its serious (and perhaps fatal flaws, the culture and politics of the 'sixties were an attempt to back away from institutionalized boredom and official amorality and to pose lives based on a code of high morality, face-to-face interaction and self-activity.

Its collapse, however, provided the breathing space needed for a society under sharp attack. Capital quickly recuperated what the defeated forces had advocated and transformed an increasingly unworkable mode of rule into a new variant of domination accompanied by a culture vaguely shaped on the radical forms it imitated. (Women, blacks and youth were taken into the middle levels of political rule, the concerns of ecology, equal rights, and peace are enunciated by those in power, rock and roll and casual dress become the accepted fashion, etc.)

These transmogrified values and ideals in their congealed and matured form now appear as independent of their radical origins and present themselves in the popular media as clichés about the "Me Generation" in which victory has been achieved and nothing remains but to enjoy life through consumerism. Still, this banalization represents more than what appears on the surface; they are the popular expressions of fundamentally different ways in which we live our lives, and conceive of ourselves and the world which we inhabit. A quick look at the period just preceding that decade of activism and transition should serve to make the point.

The matrix of values that appeared to be at the heart of the American century at its apex (1945–1960)—nationalism, rabid anti-communism, the family, pride of job, neighborhood and ethnic loyalty, etc.—suddenly came under attack, and with the onslaught of the sixties, disappeared just as suddenly as determinant concepts, and were easily replaced in the popular imagination with new and more "modern" ones.

What becomes ever more clear is that the rule of capital continues through its material mode of production and is capable of erecting codes of domination into a cultural and political superstructure dependent upon the needs of a given epoch. The entrenched and on-going processes of the circulation of capital continue whether or not there is a specific class of men in control in the form of a bourgeoisie, whether an authoritarian family exists or not (Reich notwithstanding) or whether the society cloaks its activities in the mystifications of democracy, fascism or state communism.

## **Bourgeois Revolutions**

The social process developing today is in a large part the final (or perhaps more cautiously, the current) phase of the bourgeois revolutions that began 300 years ago and are still in a dynamic form today regardless of what ignorant leftists say. Concomitant with the establishment of the rule of capital, these revolutions brought about the political and ethical demand for the eradication of privilege. Beginning with an assault on the hereditary power of the aristocracy, the battle lines within capital have always been toward a leveling of society—to end the domination of one class over another, one race over the other, and within our personal lives, the domination of men over women and the destruction of the authority of the patriarchal family.

None of these are sham battles; all of the foregoing were genuine struggles (and are; the battles for those reforms not being yet won). Each victory, however, whether it is decent wages for a section of the working class, or jobs for some blacks and women, has always meant an extension and affirmation of a society that is resilient

enough to understand viscerally, even if its reigning lieutenants always don't, that if people come knocking hard enough, they have to be let in.

And once inside, it's not so much that they get "bought off" in the popular sense, but they suffer from the same malaise that all of those that have been inside all along suffer from—social vertigo; if you look up or down you get dizzy, so best to embrace what is.

Eventually, all forms of domination operational on the terrain of capital become subject to demands for equality and eventually the culture of domination begins to bend at its most odious points, but only when a particular institution can be relinquished due to antiquation or replacement. For instance, the code concerns itself naught with who administers, a capitalist class or socialist bureaucrats, blacks or whites, men or women, as long as its administration is assured. Or, the work ethic—long thought to be a linchpin of our society, but now a cultural lag hanging on from an era when sacrifice to the job was necessary for the period of the early accumulation of capital in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century—has been replaced by an ethic of consumption which doesn't care whether you love or hate your job, whether you buy new homes and cars or backpacks and dope paraphernalia, just as long as you keep buying.

## **Consumption and Passivity**

And buy we do, all of us, if for no other reason than to attempt to compensate for the lack of generalized gratification and the collapsing state of our personal lives. Consumption and passive reception of spectacles have become the signature of our era to the point where even the popular culture reflects the wide-spread alienation and contemporary anguish. But the current gush of pop approaches to the malaise fails to comprehend what the total process is bringing about.

What we are faced with at this time is the final shattering of all forms of human association that at once precisely defined us as human beings for eons (a collective and reciprocal sociability) and at the same time gave us sustenance outside of official society. All the statistics of social disintegration—high divorce rate, destruction of traditional communities, frequent moving, the average of persons in a living unit slipping below two, increasing social rootlessness, the seeming universal disaster of achieving gratifying personal relationships—eventually lead to the creation of the monad—the individual unit of society, reduced from tribe to clan to extended family to nuclear family to the lone human: easily manageable, completely domesticated to capital, who experiences a world of things only through mediated activity, e.g. wage work and the consumption of commodities, spectacles and entertainment.

The smiling, well-dressed and coifed face from the disco or condominium is the face of the future, who only thinks and acts in terms that are programmed into him/her. After the final fragmentation of what formerly was interconnected human activity comes, in Adorno's words, the totally administered society. Without humans linked together through ancient forms of association, capital and the administrative state move in to fill in the gaps. It raises children, cares for the blind and infirm, counsels the anxious, cures the sick, protects the harassed, puts out fires and picks up garbage, and so totally takes command of the processes of life that were once organized informally that if the individual were asked for alternative possibilities, most likely none would be forthcoming as everything has or will become a question of complex administering. No one will love being administered, but without extensive patterns and traditions of self-activity/self-help, there will be no other choices. (No one will even have memory of anything different.)

In the United States the process of the new domination seems complete—vestiges of the nuclear family, religion, patriotism, ethnicity and the like remain, and from time to time raise their forces in valiant but doomed rearguard actions, but all of these domains of privilege and irrationality no longer serve the function they once did. With the pervasiveness of television capable of instilling instant values in people, the family and religion seem hopelessly inflexible, irrelevant and condemned by all that is "modern." The patriotic love of country or one's ethnic group seems at best sentimental in a period when U.S. multinational corporations owe their allegiance nowhere and have larger GNPs than many nations. So all of it is dumped by the wayside like last year's platform shoes. But gone with them are the last remaining private moments and transcendental properties these institutions embraced, albeit in the most flawed of forms. In fact, it was for these very qualities that they could command such

allegiance over so long a period no matter how grotesque they appear from the outside. The desire for blood and tribal connections, a longing to be immersed in something larger than one's own life, seems almost at the level of instincts. All of it, even the ugly forms, have been disposed of.

This new mode of rule—a soft authoritarianism (no cops needed except for the flip-outs)—leaves people with no intense, internal belief structure, just an imposed, external, cool one, passively absorbed from capital and its culture.

Still, this is not to say that all is tranquil in Flatland. It's difficult to believe that people have been so robotized that they still don't possess a volatileness born of the desire for belief in something meaningful and that is one's own; for a life of intensity; for something that interconnects one human with another. And there are malfunctions among the manipulated.

On the level of personal disintegration, statistics of mental illness, skyrocketing tranquilizer usage, alcoholism, drug addiction, etc., announce in dramatic fashion a socially and individually immiserated population. Also, spasmodic minority uprisings, youth revolts, wildcat strikes and random violence suggest all is not well for the totally administered society.

Yet all of these "aberrations" will remain at the level of personalized disorders or collective tantrums easily brought back under control—unless a self-conscious conception of both what the revolt is against and what we have for a personal and collective vision of our future emerges. Without these expressions which, above all, carry a confidence in ourselves we confront the massive culture of domination with empty hands.

## Language of Resistance

To even think about creating a social infrastructure of rebellion, a language of resistance has to be maintained and nurtured. Total control of the language is a primary goal of all ruling apparatuses as social power ultimately is the ability to define the social code and have the administrative control to make it act accordingly. Without us taking a hold of the language to make meaningful examinations of the current state of human affairs and a firm (although generalized; no programs please) vision, we will soon see an erosion of human communication to the point where we will suffer a total inability to be understood.

As it is, the destruction of language is progressing at a rapid rate along the lines of an odd variant of Newspeak. In Orwell's 1984, language was purposely being reduced by the Party to continually eliminate words and phrases from speech with the end of eventually eradicating proscribed concepts from human intelligence. Almost the reverse process is at work within this culture, so that all language is permissible and produced at such a torrent that a banalization and equalization takes place making words totally lacking in any emotive force.

Orwell's frightening image of the Thought Police watching everyone through ubiquitous TV monitors has been reversed now to where everyone willingly watches the Thought Police on TV and remains just as compliant as desired by 1984's Party. As the prime source of values for the dominant code (having replaced mass education) television allows and, in fact, encourages an appearance of immense diversity but actually reduces all language and concepts to equals—entertainment to be passively consumed (what did the SLA do in the Nielsen ratings?).

It's difficult not to end abruptly as all of the foregoing has been so inadequate and incomplete, but a larger, extensive investigation properly occupies many pages not possible here. Suffice it to say we are faced with a real, not simply theoretical, question of our survival as humans in the face of the destruction of the individual as an historical subject. Unless some dramatic undertaking reverses this, there is no reason to think that this process will not include the last holdouts as well. Nothing, at this moment, announces itself as a way to regain our humanity, but if we truly have "nothing to say," we are as lost as those we have so vividly described. If we have only, momentarily lost our voice, we had better find it.

## **Note**

\* The admittedly stiff and academic term “social infrastructure” should in no way be construed as a desire for any formal organization of “revolutionaries.” It is used here as a synonym for community which has been a buzzword for so long as to almost have become devoid of its intended meaning. A radical infrastructure would/could include an informal network of people involved in projects, self-activity, living arrangements, etc. occupying a definable geographical space and whose inhabitants subscribe to values and activity which place them in opposition to this society.

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