

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1980

Pessimism Optimistic

Dear FE:

"Carter's Phony War Crisis" (FE #301, Feb. 26, 1980) was excellent. I'd only fault it in one respect—I feel that you're unduly optimistic in stating that, "Third World countries such as Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia...(will become) the super consumers of tomorrow." My reasons are:

- 1) Most of these countries are virtually 100% dependent on OPEC oil for their energy needs, so price increases hit them harder than the U.S.

- 2) The terms of trade have been shifting steadily against Third World countries vis a vis the industrialized countries since WW II. (See *Imperialism in the '70s* by Pierre Jalee which, though a bit dated is still valuable.) The obvious exceptions are, of course, the OPEC countries.

- 3) Even though something like 80% of new investments by U.S. multinationals are made abroad, those investments are very often in industries which are very poorly integrated into the local economy (e.g., electronics assembly) and thus benefit only a miniscule portion of the population.

- 4) There seems to be some evidence that the multinationals will move their operations from relatively industrialized Third World countries to their more underdeveloped counterparts when wage demands begin to threaten profits and/or when the local ruling elite attempts to grab a larger share of the, loot through taxation. (This process has already occurred in Puerto Rico.) The economic carnage caused by massive pullouts is too obvious to need explanation.

In summation, those Third World countries with relatively small amounts of multinational investments generally benefit very little from those investments because they're generally in either extraction industries or industries more integrated into the economies of the developed countries than the host countries. Those Third World countries which have received massive investments from multinationals suffer from the same lack of economic integration (hence their economies are oversensitive to economic fluctuations in the developed countries); they're very vulnerable to energy price hikes; and they're very vulnerable to withdrawal of investments by multinationals.

In the U.S. we can expect a continual decline in the standard of living; this will be due to an increasingly obsolescent industrial plant (and concomitant downward pressure on wages); and continued hyperinflation caused by continued budget deficits and devaluation of the money supply through massive expenditures (e.g., armaments) which produce no usable goods or services—and, of course, let's not forget ever-higher energy prices (especially if the "hard-path"—nukes and synthetics—is followed).

The situation we find ourselves in is one in which Third World nations will continue to be impoverished economic colonies of multinational corporations, the Western nations will continue to have declining wages, massive unemployment, and falling standards of living, and capital will continue to accumulate in the hands of the multinationals (witness Exxon's \$1.9 billion in profits in the first quarter) and the reactionary ruling elites of the energy exporting countries.

There's no way around it—we'd better fight back or bend over and grab our ankles.
Chuck Bufo
Boise, Idaho

S.R. Laprade replies: Your points are well taken, but all sectors of all populations everywhere cannot become impoverished or no one would remain to purchase the commodities being produced (that is, barring the world-wide collapse of capital which is not what you were referring to in your letter).

Imperialism does continue unabated but more value is being retained by the host nations than in bygone eras. For instance, GM recently signed an agreement for a joint venture with the Taiwan Machinery Manufacturing Corporation for the production of medium- and heavy-duty trucks and Ford is already operating a facility manufacturing medium-sized cars in the capital of that country. Almost all of these vehicles are for consumption in Taiwan and neighboring Third World nations.

I was not contending that those countries so long looted by imperialism are suddenly going to take on the appearance of an American suburb, but it is indisputable that while many underdeveloped nations fit the model you sketch, e.g., Tanzania, others, quoted in our article and including ones such as Mexico are beginning to support an adequately waged proletariat capable of consuming in moderate style.

History or Hydrant

People:

After finishing Zerzan's article (See FE #302, June 1, 1980, "Promise of the '80s"), the first reaction one has is, "so what?" The adroit arrangement of journalistic "facts" only begs the question, "just that?" The half-baked sociology of everyday life doesn't even bother to ask, "will desperate reactions bring about a free society?"

As with all ideology, the form of the article dominates the content. The method of presentation is borrowed from the magazine section of the average Sunday paper. Here we can find: (a) timid attempts toward a pure phenomenology. Zerzan begins and ends with the "facts," themselves presented in flawless journalistic patter. He acknowledges no prior theoretical position, bias, or preference; (b) no reference to organized revolutionary offensives, as if the only type of revolutionary activity possible is resistance, and/or individual, disorganized, and anti-social acts of despair; finally, (c) admission right from the start that he sees "no prospect for ending our captivity," enter the existential drama of alienation and tragic resistance. Even if Zerzan were to meet history at the corner of the street he wouldn't know it from a fire hydrant.

What our author does not do is to inform his reader that the present situation can only lead to barbarism or a totally free society, depending on our actions. Today, if we were to compare the looting of the workers and the environment to the effect of the defensive actions (riots, wildcats, etc.) by workers, the workers are losing on every front, more than they ever have. This is so because workers' actions are merely defensive, ad hoc, and piecemeal, while the capitalist strategy of looting is well organized and obeys a "scientific" course.

Zerzan's approach is indicative as to the reasons why there is no prospect for an end to our captivity at this point. Many leftists after rejecting both bolshevism and reformism find themselves incapable of organizing a viable "third force," revolutionary, anti-authoritarian, and directly democratic. Examined from the standpoint of the revolutionary movement since the upheaval of the '60's, this is indeed our most outstanding failure.

Gerard Winstanley,
Member of the Union of Concerned Commies

John Zerzan replies: Whew! One has the feeling that this Commie hasn't registered so much concern in some time.

But I must confess little remorse at my effort toward a clear, everyday kind of prose ("flawless journalistic patter"—how reactionary), rather than using the approved marxological doubletalk.

As for my “admission, right from the start” that I see “no prospect for ending our captivity,” I can only say that no one that I know of managed to miss the central thrust of the essay so thoroughly.

Maybe a Commie might be excused at least some of this confusion and frustration, in the face of the very depressing datum that “the workers are losing on every front more than ever.” But it may well be that it is workerism—and authority in general—that is losing ground, and that it is this which is so galling to all the organizers.

How else would he have the nerve to show envy at power’s “well-organized and ‘scientific’” approach to the class war? Longing for a return to the ‘60s, this U.C.C. Member wishes folks were more susceptible to his organizer’s mentality.

Luckily, the state is faring no better, despite his congenital illusions. The electoral con proceeds toward a zero level of participation, the military is bereft of combat commitment from its dwindling and indifferent numbers, and productivity continues to sink, recession or no, as output-per-hour takes a holiday.

It is over this kind of basic shift that organizers wring their hands, while others can exult that “the revolution is right where we want it—out of our control.”

SAT Scores Scored

Fifthestateand:

John Zerzan’s review of the record of the ascendancy of desperation is a good effort at providing a broad cultural overview of the often unseen (though over-viewed) tides of reigning normality. By-incorporating such a vast array of data into an intelligible framework, he has tilled some fertile ground for reflection, discussion and activity. My major reservation is that, sometimes, he too readily draws “obvious” conclusions from capsulization of multi-dimensional experience.

In speaking of resistance to school, he says: “The withdrawal no matter what form it takes, is obviously a major cause of the continually declining academic test scores.” He goes on to cite the fact that for the past eleven years scores on a widely used college admission test (SAT) may be characterized by a monotonically decreasing curve. John’s interpretation of this phenomenon is possibly partially true; but psychometric research has suggested that the lower test scores are a result of a major change in the composition of the population of SAT test-takers.

A series of factors, including the expansion of college classroom space, have transformed what was formerly a haven for a privileged elite, into a processor of an impoverished mass. The upsurge in high schoolers applying to college has been marked by a greater percentage of students with lower socioeconomic and ethnic status increasing their participation in this process. More of these students are taking SAT tests than ever before—and they are doing worse. The perpetuation of the repression of the unmonied and the unwhiteeyed by schooling and its standardized tests is thereby exposed.

FE’s note of caution in the introduction raised some good questions and some dumb ones. Your suggestion that score deflation might be a sign of “a population getting increasingly stupid and robot-like, fit only for TV-viewing” reflects “a bit of confusion on your part. Even if your insult to the intelligence and creativity of students is well called-for, it is foolhardy for you to think that this creeping cretinism would be accurately measured by these tests. If they measure anything, they measure how well a person assimilates and regurgitates the mono-syllabus content and form of edu-dictators.

As such, SAT scores may themselves be considered a positive form of robotomy. Perhaps this is why the Navy presently funds research which is refining tailored tests in which a computer selects and administers “appropriate” items as determined by an individual’s previous responses. Such “objective” tests reduce an individual to a captive spectator of a computer terminal TV screen who can only peck a key now and then to indicate which of the pre-determined answers is called for. Thus, the logic of passivity, which tests have always embodied, is carried a bit farther.

We need to consider how mass news sources by participating in this same logic, transvalue experience, and the knowledge which can be garnered from it. Surely, cultural transformation is happening, and we can put our fingers on it. But we also need to slide them in, to see what it is like, and feel what we feel like.

jai softguy
Columbia, MO

Fragmented Movement

Dear FE:

Your article in *Fifth Estate* #302, June 1, 1980 ("Anti-Rape March Sparks Debate on Feminism") touches on the problem of how taking the "personal as political" can sometimes trap us into fragmented movements (feminist separatism, single-issue anti-rape demos of limited scope and value mostly as a spectacle for media) that leads us back to the same power relationships we sought to abolish originally.

Public demonstrations and protests are valuable for expressing solidarity and sharing emotions with fellow participants in addition to calling attention to the issue at hand. The problem arises when the protest/demonstration becomes an end-in-itself—something to do on a Sunday afternoon (or Friday night as the case may be) that is separate from the rest of your day-to-day existence.

It is disheartening to see the number of people who can recognize isolated ills of capitalism such as sexism, racism, ageism and environmental destruction and yet fail to tie them together as inevitable products of an authoritarian-based, profit-motivated society. Yet many of today's leftists originally became politicized over single-issue protests. Whether or not issues such as rape and draft registration will lead more people toward political polarization (either to the left or right) will depend on how fast these issues can be sucked into pop (mass) culture and turned into commodity and spectacle thus pushing the population into deeper impotence and submission.

Mike Howard
Philadelphia, PA

Take Back the Slight

To the Staff of the Fifth Estate:

It was the weekend of the eleventh and twelfth murders of women in Northwest Detroit this year that I picked up your most recent issue of the Fifth Estate (FE #302, June 1, 1980). The body of the thirteenth woman was found yesterday and by the time your next issue is printed containing this letter, more women probably will have died.

I remember the cry of outrage voiced by the *Fifth Estate* when the students at Kent State were murdered. No matter whether you agreed with their exact political perspectives, these students were unfairly shot down and the shock and fear were echoed in the pages of your newspaper. Articles appeared on arming ourselves and building our own security systems.

I hear no cry of outrage in your newspaper over the lives of these women; no mention of self-protection. Instead, I read a sarcastic rhetorical attack against the women of this city—many of whom are your good friends and-sisters—who planned and carried out the "Women Take Back the Night March," May 3, 1980, in Detroit.

It is true, as you said in your article, that part of the solution is to change the conditions which create the sense of powerlessness and rage in men which causes them to violate women and children. It is also true that women need to know skills which may be able to save their lives were they to be attacked. Developing confidence in our bodies is definitely part of this. That's where self-defense training has come in for many women and that's why the students of Meijishi Karate Dojo and myself were invited to do a karate demonstration at the march.

It is unfortunate that the karate demonstration had to be shortened. We had planned to show practical self-defense for survival and free fighting as well as forms. With only five minutes-left on the program for us, we decided to perform only the katas. As some of you know, the katas are the most stylized part of our planned

presentation—the seemingly most removed from the practical—grabbing an attacker’s groin for instance. But this spiritual-aspect—this expression of a positive image of women capable of beating off male assailants, is very important for our survival. Karate skills can do something to offset the terrifying rape fear. They show us a new way of walking down the street with a body that says, “I am strong. I am ready. I am a survivor, not a victim. I deserve respect.”

As the founder of Meijishi Karate School, I have spent many years of my life studying and teaching women, children, senior citizens and men skills to prevent personal attack and strategies for dealing with attacks once they happen. It is difficult work but once in a while a woman says, “He attacked me and at first I panicked, but then I remembered what you said and I yelled and hit him in the eyes and he ran away,” and that makes it worthwhile for me. You probably have a sneering or sarcastic putdown ready to answer this. But I’m very proud of the work that I do and that other feminists are doing to change women’s self-image, behavior and lives.

You indirectly called me a karate entrepreneur and insinuated that few women could afford karate or self-defense lessons. I have never turned away a serious student for lack of money.

I am very much aware that karate skills for a few women cannot in and of itself stop the vicious attacks against us. The entire society has to be changed. But from your article and newspaper, I could find no single sensible suggestion for changing anything. (I don’t consider “Burn a Bureaucrat” an idea that most people either understand or could act on.) You need some positive suggestions:

1. Stop your own vicious verbal attacks on your sisters. There is a definite difference between honest criticism, positive discussion and the sneering, critical and distorted way you reported the Take Back the Night march.

2. Understand what it means to be supportive of women’s struggles. Listen to what we are really saying, instead of what you fear we are saying because you feel left out or that “we don’t want you.” There were many men who enjoyed the march, who felt strong and important as they supported us with childcare, wearing t-shirts, adding their presence and voices. Being supportive is something women have learned to do very well and it’s an important skill which you could cultivate. Stop putting down other men who support women’s liberation. They are really not your enemies.

3. Start using your newspaper as an active voice against sexism and racism. Make it a more powerful source of information and strength for people who want to change this society. As women, we expect your enthusiastic support in our struggle to survive in a society hostile to us. For men and women, we need positive thinking and direction for how to continue to move against sexism, racism, capitalism, classism and all oppression.

4. Understanding our fear and outrage and print self-defense articles which will contribute to our survival. Neither the Free Press nor the Detroit News have addressed the issue of how women can prevent or stop becoming victims of the Northwest strangler-murderer. When I suggested this to them, they said it would “spread panic” as if their present coverage isn’t doing exactly that.

5. Help educate men about sexism: how it hurts you and how to combat it in our lives.

J.A. Spiro

The FE replies: Several of us associated with the *Fifth Estate* have known you for years and believe that your letter is an honest attempt to bridge many of the Hard feelings that have arisen around the Take Back the Night (TBTN) march and its aftermath. However, that motivation does not save it from appearing to us as seriously distorting what we said in our article about the march, and an evasion of the serious political criticisms we raised about it.

To begin with, both the men and women of the *Fifth Estate* resent your insulting assumption that our staff is comprised solely of men who care nothing about the oppression of women and that the march article was written by hostile, fearful males. To set the record straight—the article was written jointly by several of us on the paper both men and women—with the core of the ideas coming from two women who attended the rally and came away feeling as alienated and distant from the small group of feminists assembled in Palmer Park as did the men on the staff. We’ve heard about many criticisms of our article although no one has ever confronted us directly with their remarks. As it happens, however, most of what was disliked in the article was, in fact, written by one of the women, but the rather sexist assumption continues that only a man could have penned something so “anti-woman.”

And even though the tone of your letter is conciliatory and friendly, how would you expect us to see your thinly veiled suggestion that somehow our lack of support for what we saw as a totally ineffective and counter-productive event is tied into the vicious murders and assaults being perpetrated on women in this city as being anything other than an outrageous slander? Each of the men and women who work on this project has either a mother, sister, wife, companion or friend who we all full-well realize is in constant danger in this women-hating society. To suggest we are neither cognizant nor concerned about the situation makes us wonder seriously whether or not you even thoroughly read through our article. In it we expressed a deep and vital concern about rape, but felt that TBTN had failed miserably in addressing the problem and had only succeeded in weakening the community's ability to take on the question in a unified manner.

You ask us to be "supportive," but what you may not know is that the *Fifth Estate* facilities were used extensively during preparation for the march although all of us vigorously opposed its perspective. We gave FE office keys to the organizers who used our typesetter and lay-out equipment to produce the leaflets and brochures for the event, a member of our staff shot the negative used for the t-shirt, and the office at times seemed like command-central for the march. During the period proceeding the march we continued to make our criticisms known and they were debated with the organizers on various levels of civility all the while our offices remained in use.

Following the march, and after the appearance of our article, however, suddenly most of the organizers stopped talking to us, two of our newspaper stands had their contents stolen several days in a row, someone entered the FE office with a key and destroyed a small quantity of our newspapers as was also done at the Grinning Duck social club, and one of our staff was threatened by a TBTN supporter who said, "J. Spiro is debating whether to kick your ass personally or have one of her students do it." We do not honestly believe that you initiated this threat, but the entire package of reactions amounts to the kind of-response that in the past we've only ever received from right-wing organizations.

What your letter manages to avoid is any attempt to come to grips with our criticism of feminism, separatism, your cooperation with the police and the media during the march, or the fact that a problem that affects the entire community was turned into a political disaster because of the sectarianism and muddled ideas of the march organizers. Your desire to lecture us instead does not advance the discussion of any of the concerns we mutually have, but rather, along with the other varied reactions we have received, reinforces our conception of feminists as a gang by whom all criticism is conceived of as opposition and all questions are a sign of the enemy.



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