

Technology Debate Continues

Various Authors

1981

FE—A Safe Niche?

To the Fifth Estate:

Over the past couple of years that I have been reading your paper, I have been alternately intrigued, provoked, or irritated by some of the things you folks have written. And that's as it should be. What has continued to hold my interest has been your refreshing tendency to re-examine issues that too many people in the so-called libertarian left have taken for granted. You have never hesitated to ask disturbing but necessary questions—without wishing to “resolve” them all at once.

However, I have noticed a trend in the last couple of issues that I don't care for, because it seems to point toward an ideologicalization of some of your arguments. I have always disliked the sneering tone that your diatribes occasionally assumed—devoid of either wit or seriousness. The best that a put-down (no matter how necessary) can be is cute.

To me, some of your epithets don't even reach that level. And when an expressed desire for a “debate” on such matters as technology can degenerate into an ideological pissing contest as evidenced in your last issue (See “FE & Readers Debate Technology,” FE #304, December 31, 1980) I begin to wonder whether or not you, like any ordinary leftists, aren't just trying to dig your own little niche out, pull the covers over your heads, and feel safe and secure in your “intransigent” posture and flowery rhetoric. After all, you didn't hesitate to be selective about “editing” the contributions made in good faith to your debate (sic), or indeed about skewing the whole presentation of a dissenting viewpoint to show your disdain for that viewpoint. What conventional rag wouldn't do likewise?

One last thing—I'm no prophet, but I'll predict that in a little while you'll feel pretty stupid about the encomiums you penned to Russell Means' speech (“On The Future of the Earth,” FE, #304, December 31, 1980). Do you really believe that anyone who styles himself a patriot, be it of however small a tribal entity, can point the way out to anybody? Do you believe, with Means, that “Europeanization” (a debatable notion) can only be resisted by “the traditional ways, the traditional values that our elders retain?”

In some so-called “primitive” societies, clitoridectomies are practiced on women with ghoulish “industrial” regularity. American Indian societies haven't been strangers to tyranny and suppression of internal dissent. Are you so blind that you can't see that Means is advocating a social arrangement that is holistic, yes, but also closed—harmonized, but also divorced from the corrosive negativity that casts off both old and new traditions and searches for something better.

European, Indian, Asian, African, South Seas, etc.—all cultures have something of this negativity in them. Now, more than ever, we must all in our own ways and with our own thought patterns, bring this into the light. I submit that falling over backwards to embrace the thought of a self-styled patriot who equates “revolution” with the survival of a few people (his people, of course—heard that tune before?) in a newly harmonized decimated environment and who for all his disdain for the written word isn't above getting his stuff printed in a mass-circulation monthly—is a virtual admission of exhausted energies.

Not to mention the revolting socialist-realist etching of a muscled, male “noble savage” bravely assaulting an oncoming bulldozer with his bow and arrow. What the hell kind of aesthetics are you promoting?

Chris Winks
San Francisco

Tomega Therion responds: I’m sure some one will comment that this is the first civil response we’ve penned to a criticism in a long while, but here goes: I think we did create a wrong impression of what we were seeking when we asked for “responses” on the technology questions raised in *Fifth Estate* #303, Oct. 20, 1980, “The Refusal of Technology.” Some of us wanted short comments in the form of letters, others had fuller replies in mind; as is obvious, the former view held sway. The UCC, for instance, did in good faith respond with a rather lengthy piece which we then edited to suit our copy needs. We apparently did create a mistaken notion with them and should have made ourselves clearer.

There’s long been a debate among our staff about just how much “dialogue” we actually want to take place within our pages. Personally, I feel we appear so infrequently and with a point of view so rarely articulated that I am hesitant to give up large blocks of space to points of view that we are in fundamental disagreement with. Others of us feel the paper would be enlivened by allowing more dissenting opinions to be aired.

About Means: We obviously know of the various unpleasant customs and institutions that took place within certain pre-technological societies, but so what? We have never held out the Paleolithic as a model for a revolutionary society. Rather, we have always used that epoch to illustrate that people lived differently than in state societies, that they lived generally good lives. i.e., healthy, happy, secure, and that the modern condition is not a universal one.

We also recognize that Means’ provincialism as inadequate for solving not only our problems but probably even his. However, we thought it stated excellently that this epoch of capital and the state, in fact, all civilization, has done to the planet and its people, the flaws of the article notwithstanding.

Please note within our introduction to his article we stated: “We must sift through the experiences of the millennia, find our way out of the technological labyrinth, and create a new culture which reaches into the traditional culture of our remotest past, and into our most utopian possibilities for a human community of the future.” This obviously does not constitute wholesale endorsement of his views.

The Means piece originally appeared in *Akwesasne Notes*, a native American paper and was then reprinted in *Mother Jones* magazine as well as by us.

What Do We Keep?

Dear 5th:

The technology debate seems somehow lacking. Perhaps it’s a sense of how to get there from here. It would be good if Zerzan (“The Refusal of Technology,” *FE* #303, October 20, 1980) or some other tech critiquer could specify what level of technology they do foresee being employed. Hydro-electric generation? Home simple tech like solar water heaters? Wood fires? Internal combustion engines? Houses?

A New Reader
Bill
Chicago

Do Machines Shackle?

Dear Folks at the Fifth Estate:

Mark's letter in FE #304, December 31, 1980 evoked an immediate response in me. His argument can be summed up in his own words: "Machines don't shackle me, the foreman and the ruling order he is part of does." Yes, and prisons don't imprison the prisoners, the penal system and the ruling order it is part of do. Yet, I doubt that Mark would suggest that prisoners should take over the prisons and run them as self-managed housing.

Prisons were made by the ruling order to have the effect of destroying the humanity of the incarcerated, and no anarchist or anti-authoritarian revolutionary would suggest that they are salvageable in the world we envision. Yet this same logic is not applied by many anarchists to capitalist technology.

Capitalist technology has developed in the midst of a class struggle, and inherent in this technology is the interest of the ruling order to force the people ruled into submission, the need of the ruling order to make people into machines. To suggest that this technology can be adapted for use in an anti-authoritarian world is like suggesting that prisons can be adapted for housing in an anti-authoritarian world. It is an absurd suggestion.

Prisons do imprison the prisoners and machines do shackle the workers and consumers who use them. It is inherent in the structure of each to do so. And unless the world we build is free of each, it will not be free.

For a new world,
Gypsy Demian Lawless
San Francisco

Dancehalls or ploughs?

Dear People,

Although a nomad's shoulder strap and spear doesn't fall into the same category as a nuclear reactor, the spear and shoulder strap of a Roman legionnaire does. Technology is technology, a machine is just a complicated tool. If our distant relatives wouldn't have learned to use fire or rocks and sticks as tools humanity wouldn't be faced with nuclear annihilation because humanity wouldn't have evolved. Technology is not the soul of capital, a consumer consciousness is.

If we should make it to a sane society humanity will no doubt have to go through metamorphosis first. Much present technology will have to be dismantled, it won't just go away. Other than a plough or wine press, what technology do you consider worth saving and do you wish to turn all factories into dancehalls?

John Henry
Monroe

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