

Letters

Various Authors

Correcting Yippies!

The following is in response to an item which appeared in the Fall 1983 *Fifth Estate* which listed the Columbia (Mo.) Anarchist League as one of the sponsors of a Yippie! coordinated demonstration to be held at the 1984 Republican convention.

Fifth Estate:

For the record, the Columbia Anarchist League has nothing to do with “Freeze Reagan/Bush.” I told the NYC Yippies that we did not want to endorse it because it was a move in a reformist direction away from the nobody for president idea. However, I told him it would be okay with us if they put the Columbia Nobody for President Committee as an endorsee (since we could make our point this way).

The endorsement by CAL thus appeared against our express wishes. YIP has used our name without permission in the past; it’s no wonder their credibility is so low.

Badguy

Columbia Anarchist League
Columbia, MO

Visionary Works

To the Fifth Estate:

A response to the responses to John Zerzan’s “Beginning of Time; End of Time,” (see FE Summer 1983).

In two recent essays, John Zerzan has taken up subjects that all of us are so in-meshed in that we have great difficulty thinking imaginatively and speculatively about them. It’s very hard to imagine living in a world where time of one sort or another is not an ever present factor.

In his critique of John’s time article George Bradford (see FE Fall 1983) hints that in such a world we would be captives of our ignorance of history, enslaved by a dominant technology. In my view, both Bradford and Bob Brubaker (whose response appeared with John’s in the Summer 1983 issue) missed the point of the time article partly because of how it was written. Though it is disguised as social science, with quotes and footnotes, “Beginning of Time” is a visionary work.

Conjecture about the origins of time—or of language, as in John’s most recent essay—are necessarily speculative, and it strikes me as futile to dicker over questions that can never receive a factual answer. The time essay and language article (which appears in this issue; FE note) go beyond argument and speculation into the terrain of the visionary.

Visionary works are hard to deal with. It’s impossible to “confirm” or “deny” what is basically a subjective perception, noted down for others to share. This way of thinking and writing is not immune to criticism—in fact it is

most often roundly rejected. And for good reason! None of us likes to step outside categories we've known about, counted on, and used since we were small children, and imagine that we and the world could be different—a world without time or language as we know them.

Yet there are aspects of our world that embody these alternatives—the wordless bond of lover to lover or parent to child, the aimless enjoyment of a gorgeous day, the situations—we all experience them—where time stops and words fail. These seem somehow, to me, to be more at the core of our humanness than most of the fancier, more complicated accouterments of our collective civilizing accomplishments.

Alice Carnes
Eugene, Oregon

No Rigid Rules

Dear Friends:

Having just read Sam Wagar's letter in the *Fifth Estate*, Summer 1983, I can't help but agree; there's nothing wrong with "the family" provided the members are prepared to allow each other autonomy. Particularly, if children are given the space to be themselves they generally become strong enough individuals to be able to afford to transcend that individuality on behalf of the needs of others, without feeling any discomfort themselves.

Any group of transcendent individuals with shared interests can become a family. I'm not so sure about Sam Wagar's return to tribalism though, it depends on precisely what is meant by the term. No rigid, externally imposed system of rules "for the common good," please.

Thanks for a great paper. Long live rigid flexibility,
Stephen M. Hallworth
Summer Hill, Australia

Vandenberg Action

Fifth Estate:

From June 10 to 18, a small group of demonstrators engaged in a protracted game of hide and seek (with jail sentences for the losers) which nearly aborted the first MX missile test. Pressed by the impending space shuttle extravaganza, the Air Force made its go-ahead decision in the final minutes of its possible "launch window." This decision was in violation of A.F. safety and security regulations, as a protester remained exposed within 300 yards of the launch pad at detonation. Needless to say, he wasn't arrested.

Eighteen others, arrested over the previous week, faced the capricious incongruities of U.S. "justice." Six demonstrators received one and two month federal sentences. Guilty pleas to first and second offenses received community services assignments from a second magistrate. Bob Landry, arrested three times on the base, is serving a 15-day sentence in the Lompoc County jail. Six others have pled not guilty and are awaiting their court appearance in Los Angeles.

Much to the embarrassment of base security, there was a continuous flow of demonstrators onto and away from the launch site for nine days. An area of sharp coastal ridges, sand dunes and swamp, Vandenberg AFB was a magnificent setting for this action. All of the demonstrators who entered the back country expressed a sense of the land being with them. There were no serious injuries and repeated humorous encounters, especially with the base police who seemed to have some aversion to getting their boots muddy.

Approximately thirty protesters entered the exclusionary area during the occupation. The Air Force claimed to the press that all arrests were taking place at the front gate.

One protester (or anti-tester) mingled with technicians at the launch site arousing no suspicion until he announced his identity. Meanwhile, base p.r. men placated impatient reporters with stories of computer malfunctions and complaints about the weather. Three of the occupiers claim responsibility for this delay as well, having performed a ritual the night before to interfere with the computer's data access.

While the MX did get launched, the Vandenberg action was a tremendous learning experience. It was an excellent test for the affinity group basis of organization. Organization was very smooth except for some occasional duplication of effort and some struggle with integrating unallied demonstrators. It was exciting to see how quickly we could mobilize for an essentially unplanned action.

There was a certain conflict of interest that had to be resolved with the Livermore Action Group which was mobilizing at the same time. While at times it appeared that the Vandenberg action would not possibly get sufficient support, the more mass-oriented Livermore action absorbed the often divisive energy of centrist oriented activists. Because of the intimacy that was possible in our smaller group, individuals tended to gravitate to roles that they could fulfill best, and most participants were aware of what most of the others were doing. There was also a decidedly special quality about practicing civil disobedience that isn't completely symbolic. The greatest feeling came from invading enemy territory and finding that, in many ways, it was more our own.

Peter Laughingwolf
Santa Rosa CA

Tech Examined

FE note: See responses by Bob Brubaker, "Primitives and Production," and George Bradford, "A System of Domination—Technology," FE #315, Winter 1984.

Dear FE:

I just finished reading the Summer Issue of your paper. I want to say I am very impressed with the direction it has taken over the years, although I often find myself in total disagreement with your conclusions. Among other contributions your journal has made to the revolutionary movement, I am most impressed with the way that your search for the revolution of daily life has led to a reexamination of the values of what, for lack of a better term, people call "primitive societies." I don't feel comfortable with the term primitive, although I am aware that it can connote something beautiful; sometimes Levi-Strauss calls them exotic societies, but not everyone would understand that term and I wouldn't be surprised if Levi-Strauss met with ill approval in F.E. circles. I understand them as societies which exist at the periphery of the "modern world" (advanced capitalism) both in terms of geography and history as well as socioeconomically. The Western intellectual tradition has remained astonishingly ignorant of these societies and only now is beginning to scratch the surface of understanding. The type of discourse which I find in F.E. as well as *Akwesasne Notes* are rare attempts to perceive the so-called "primitive world" in its own terms.

Leaving all this aside, I am responding to the invitation of E.B. Maple to continue the debate about the questions raised by Ron Hayley's letter. I feel the letter articulates many of the same arguments I and hopefully other readers have with your anti-technology orientation. I would like to add the probably well-worn argument that a technology is only a tool. For me a spear is as much a technology as a computer, and oddly enough I am probably more suited for a spear than a computer. I am aware that the advent of capitalism has ushered in a whole new type of technology which we could call purely capitalist technology and which is for the most part pernicious technology. I can't understand how Maple can say that industrial capitalism is the basis for technology; must I prove the existence of tools or even complicated machinery before the advent of capitalism? I don't think that's called for. Brubaker offers the F.E. definition of technology as roughly a system of domination which reorders life to the machine process. Although this is an interesting theoretical device, none of the dictionaries available to me seem to share your definition. The dictionaries, like me, only seem to find the machine not the system of domination. To find the system of domination one has to look elsewhere; Fredy Perlman taught me to look to commodity fetishism. It is silly to reduce the whole argument to semantics but as we can't agree on a definition we are forced to argue over the same things again and again. I totally agree that to allow social life to be dominated and reordered by the machine process is antithetical to everything that is human; but come on kids, don't you think Hayley feels the same way? A more proper response would have been to acknowledge that you had differing definitions and ask him to clarify his.

As far as Maple's contention that technology is the basis for industrial capitalism I again would have to disagree. Technology was only the vehicle by which capitalism enlarged its material base. The basis of capitalism is the sale of labor. Capitalism made the transition from its purely mercantile form (Florence, Venice) to its manufacturing form through the sale of labor. Before the advent of industrial capitalism and the development of a purely capitalist technology the bourgeoisie was already vying for political power (England, France), was already initiating enclosures, marketing slaves and colonizing the globe. Without expanding its technical base capitalism could not have come to dominate the material community and direction of society; this is the reason why England came to dominate and Florence, Venice, Spain, and Portugal declined. It is the social relations not the productive forces (technology) which activated the process; without the material wealth of the accumulated labor power and the interest generated by competition of those capitalists already engaged in manufacture, the machines would have remained idle blueprints in the inventor's study, like Da Vinci's "flying machines."

Maple is "aghast," or something less, at Hayley using a quote from Marx, "entirely unsupported" and only for its "authority" in the "anti-authoritarian milieu." I find this hard to take; I have been reading F.E. for over five years and in that time I've seen Marx and his concepts referred to many more times than I've got fingers and toes. More often than not the reference was "entirely unsupported." The categories of reification, value, accumulation, over-production, alienated labor, commodity fetishism, etc. abound in your journal. Are you going to hide where these concepts originate? The myriad of social thinkers examined in your journal whose works are primarily elaborations of Marx's original project are boundless. The Camattes, Adornos, Marcuses, Situationists, Barrots. As far as the "unsupported" character of the quote—the Zerzan article in the same issue is nothing but a series of "unsupported" quotes from every species of crack-pot; I mean Spengler, why not Marx?

An example of the back-handed way in which F.E. borrows from Marx and the Marxists while flaunting an anti-Marxist posture is the front page article "World Wide Crises." It starts out condemning Marxists of the ICC stripe as whistling in the dark for seeing capitalism collapsing of its own weight. The article nowhere confronts this position. The attempt to obfuscate the issue with the crack "The workers are starving, the revolution will be here soon" does not in any way either reflect what the ICC has said about the crisis or the revolution. The ICC has never said that the breakdown of capitalism automatically leads to revolution. The article then goes on to say that since WW1 we have entered the cycle of crises, war and reconstruction. This is precisely the position of the ICC; now I know that the ICC doesn't have a monopoly on this theory and that it was developed by the German and Italian ultra-left but who can deny that the ICC has done more to formulate these positions than any other contemporary English language publication? I can concede that it is possible, but not likely, that the author of your crises article arrived at this position independently of the ICC. We know that certain strains of the author's thought are independent if only because of the fatuous conclusions arrived at, e.g. the idea that the shift of industry from the Northeast to the south connotes a shift of affluence. I can't believe this made it into print. There are sixth graders who understand the attraction of the "Sun-belt" is lower wages. Why not call capitalist expansion in Singapore or Taiwan a shift in affluence? Most of all, the attitude that capitalism can fend off its crises by armaments production clearly shows how little the author understands either the crisis or what revolutionaries like the ICC and Mattick have said about it. Instead of referring to the objections of Seymour Melman that armaments production is dysfunctional because it is not labor intensive and generates less profit the author would do better to understand why the revolutionary Paul Mattick maintains that it is dysfunctional:

"We can ignore Mandel's reflections on whether the arms sector, as the third department of his reproduction schema, has a higher or lower composition of capital and of the positive or negative influence of this on the average rate of profit, For in reality the arms industry does not represent a particular sector but exists within capitalist production in general...Mandel imagines that production, just because it is carried on in capitalism, must be capitalist production and the production of surplus value. It is certainly true that the arms industry makes profits and accumulates capital and appears in no way different from other businesses. But its profits and new investments derive not from commodity circulation but from state expenditures, which are drawn from a part of the realized value and surplus value of other capitals. This is not obvious, since a large part of weapons production is financed by loans rather than directly by taxation, so that the burden of private capital is spread over a long period

of time. Capital gives the government credit, which can indeed enlarge production but can yield no additional surplus value, since the goods of the arms industry must be paid for out of the surplus value of the creditors.”

—P. Mattick, *Economic Crises and Crisis Theory*, pp. 213–15.

Capitalism moves toward armaments production not because it offers a new outlet for surplus value extraction but because all outlets of extraction (of enough surplus value) are exhausted, because the breakdown is here. War is not itself a profitable enterprise but a destruction of profitable enterprise in both exchange value and material terms. It is a kind of potlatch where the participants gamble extermination for a piece of the reconstruction. Ironically the real potlatch at the periphery of “civilization” is the stopgap mechanism to avert mutual extermination. This view of the relation of crises to war was formulated by the German and Italian ultra-left and groups which derive from these traditions share this approach with various differences.

Back to Maple’s disdain for unsupported quotes from Marx. I suggest the only way to be rid of them is for F.E. to change its format to a more traditional one, like *Freedom* or *Black Flag*. Since these journals refrain from dabbling in Marxist categories and analysis they are disabused of readers wanting to offer unsupported quotes from Marx. Of course if you accept the trajectory of these journals you will be plagued with thousands of equally unsupported quotes from Kropotkin, Bakunin and other pure anarchist thinkers. Social theory is not an empirical science and there is no support for an argument in it beyond the reasoning of those engaged. I could understand how Hayley employed the quote and how it corresponded to his argument on scarcity and technology. I suspect you too could find its place in his argument if you wanted to; then you would be forced to say you simply disagree.

As far as F.E.’s decision to harangue Hayley it doesn’t even stop there; Brubaker isn’t quite sure whether he is arguing with Bookchin or Hayley, or maybe he is arguing with the straw dog that he has transformed Hayley into in his own mind. I have no respect for Bookchin and his brand of modernist tomfoolery; I’m not surprised he could find something positive in the Greek polis. I am also aware of the role of corvee in the formation of “civilization,” that is the transition from tribal to class society did not take place without violent ruptures. Given all this Brubaker hardly addressed Hayley’s point that class society has its roots in tribal society. The division of labor pre-dates the advent of fully developed classes. It would be difficult to find a society which does not have a division of labor between the sexes. A great many tribal societies are not adverse to making slaves of their defeated enemies or of exchanging women as an economic norm.

I understand the interjection of the concept of division of labor is a product of post-technological thought’s attempt to understand societies which do not define themselves in those terms. What we are looking for here is not the self-definition of tribal society but the dynamics which led to the development of class society. This is why I believe it justifiable to momentarily define aspects of their culture in the terms of class society. The recent article by F. Perlman dealing with the formation of civilization in Sumer is I feel a valid attempt to examine this development from a historical materialist perspective. We all need to expand our understanding of this process. I agree with Brubaker that the lesson of the hunting and gathering communities is a source of revolutionary inspiration and that the most important thing is to see how they worked out. I also am aware that humans did not come forth from Eden, but rather from the turmoil of brutally changing environments which introduced various species to drought, exterminating blizzards, floods, and famine while our ancestors were indistinguishable from any other tree shrew. The museums are full of creatures whose presence there testifies that life before class society was no joy ride either. For me the great lesson of hunting and gathering societies is not that they were free from the realm of necessity (which they rarely were) but that they organized truly human communities (in spite of their shortcomings). If we accept the notion of common ancestry (which is supported by genetic logic) then we know that no society extant at the time of “civilized” record keeping allows us insight into the primeval conditions of humans. The formation of distinct ethnic groups can only be the product of geographic endogamous isolation. This isolation we can only speculate upon. The logical explanation could be that environmental conditions became too strained for the whole of the original human population. The mysteries of the primordial human condition are as unknown to contemporary hunters and gatherers as they are to the “civilized” specialist in anthropology. No amount of research of the conditions of the “primitives” will reveal anything about the primordial community. The so-called “primitive

societies” are products of environmental and technological revolutions that make the last four thousand years of “civilization” a drop in the bucket. The repressive characteristics of society may have augmented or diminished a thousand fold in those unknown times. The end result is a myriad of societies, some more repressive in some ways, some less. In actuality hunting and gathering societies differ from each other as much as ours does from them. Of course to the “civilized” they all look alike and are closer to the primordial past, perhaps his own past, but this is only ethnocentrism with a human face. It is no accident that the “civilized” in their earliest records see themselves as a distinct tribal stock and justify their subjugation along tribal lines. The contradictions in tribal society are not the contradictions of the primordial society (which are unknown). The advent of distinct ethnic groups competing over territory pre-dates civilization and class society. It was one amongst many other factors leading toward the formation of class society.

Jeffrey Vega
Chicago, Illinois

The above letter was edited for space considerations; the second half which does not appear here deals with aspects of electrified music discussed in previous issues, and may be printed in the future. Responses to some of the questions raised appear below and on the facing page. More of its themes may be addressed in upcoming issues. For the earlier discussions to which the writers refer, see the Summer and Fall 1983 issues of the FE.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/315-winter-1984/letters>
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