

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1984

Escapes Clutches

Dear Fifth Estate:

As one about to escape the clutches of the US Army (an equal opportunity oppressor) I want to thank you for your paper and its role in keeping me sane/insane. Keep it up, even if you have the misfortune to become the next *New Republic* (yecchh...)

Strange resistance,

Bret Davis

Washington DC

FE Note: The above reference to the barely liberal *New Republic* magazine is in response to a note in our April 1984 Newsletter discussing our renewal form letters, which a reader told us, "With form letters like this, you'll be the new *New Republic* in no time." While we apologize for the form letter, it remains a little compromise we make to keep this Beast of an operation operating.

Hit All Media

Fellow Mammals,

Enjoyed the debris strewn thru the [FE #316] Spring, 1984 issue..., welcome to Daily Barbarian, the gorilla adds some long needed sex-appeal to a sometimes parochial atmosphere...Zerzan's defenders might consider the difference between "visionary" and "intellectual exhibitionist" before they jump on every polysyllabic bandwagon that rumbles through your pages...your graphics are showing infiltrations of summer...The "1984" article shows how, if necessary, a typewriter can be turned into a weapon for self-defense.

I cannot understand why the "TURN IT OFF" article got such prominence given its incompleteness. If you had been talking of the entire MASS MEDIA...film, music scene, magazines, etc. (I know you will get around to it) then it would have been more substantial. After all, we are left still with the thought, implied thru omission, that the other forms have more to offer. Personally, I am more than a little nauseated at the near deification of rock stars, film directors and actors; even journalists (the more insipid of the lot!) have the aura of having been installed at Mt. Olympus because they had their name stuck over the banal litany of mass consciousness.

How often do we hear it said that so and so "made the cover of *N.Y. Times*," or "made the Network News" like it's the authentic stamp, validating their existence...and say, can you tell me that foraging in a smoke-grey bar or ballroom, where your own voice is trampled by "State of the Art" electronic behemoth amps...the very sirens of the industrial age...is more of a life experience than watching King Kong, or whatever, on the T.V. then I'd say you got wires sticking out your head!

And these idiotic film aficionados who evidently never walk the nighted streets, talk to strangers, or even see the dead bodies stacked in their bathtubs...can sit for hours in the afterglow of some campus public room marveling at THE DIRECTOR'S particular sensitivity, his "new approach," his uncanny method of making something absolutely boring appear fraught with hidden meaning. I know you know, and you know I know you know, that this whole phony charade of modern culture from top to bottom—inside and out and especially (!) the more refined, or raw (as the case may be) ALTERNATIVES which never fail to look over their shoulders to see if the critics are watching, or if, perhaps, their doomed and reprehensible names might yet appear in the morning paper.

The one thing I especially like about T.V., however (though this is not a defense of it), is that it is more honest and dispenses with the pretenses that adorn the less earthly aficionados of culture.

However, until the day when we get back to Human Sacrifices, beheadings, conflagrations and other more advanced forms of public media, I still go for my private musings; the sound of storms, gunshots in the night, cars careening and smashing...long walks down railroad tracks or preferably in the woods AT NIGHT. In the quietness. We make and support culture; no wonder we are so stupid.

In praise of Inanimate Objects,

No-Name

Ambassador to the Animal Kingdom Somewhere

Surely MI

FE Note: A more in-depth article on the mass media was announced for this issue, but for space considerations and problems with the text, has been held for Fall 1984.

The Miffed Estate

Oh Dear, Fifth Estate:

Oh, dear! What is a mother to do?

Now, for equal time you must do a cover of a bony hand squeezed in the pages of a book (see "Turn It Off," FE #316, Spring, 1984). Don't you yet realize that \$pliteracy (and its mass press) is the real brainwash that forced us out of the peaceful matriarchies?

\$pliteracy forced us into their mendustrial and malelite manstitutions—yeech!!...and then they blame it on TV. TV is our only hope especially when \$pliterate men rose control...it's already slipping.

Rather than write a long, boring critique of your anti-TV tirade, I just say, go back to all your put-down articles, including the gerrymandered joke book sobstory 4 Arguments for the Elimination of TV (there's more than 400 for the elimination of books)...go back to any article critical of TV and substitute the word "book" for "TV."

Stop looking at these endless messages and analyze the media. See that the world has been on a steep decline since \$pliteracy was invented in Mesopotamia about 2,000 BC. But the Good Book epidemic is nearly over; 2000 AD I give it, so relax your way to revolution. TV is turning the \$pliterate hierarchies on their gerontocracies.

The eliterate sea that swamped us in print (& mindless ads, consumerism, passive, silent as libraries, anti-social as scholars, abced-minded as professors) is subsiding...so let it go. It splits us into have & have nots, it made us spectator and specks and is UNREFORMABLE. Who needed THAT!

You're just mad that the masses can know as much as you, and gain the power you got when you invented \$pliteracy and bought printing presses. It's nearly over—the poor left-brains that brought you bookkeeping, the Bobble, the Caran, Meinchumpf, der Read Book (yea, even manarchy and the miffed Estate [& this letter]) and all that phoneytic \$pliteracy criticism. Ouch!

I won't matronize you, but really, what is a mother to do?...

Lots of Love,

Epee du Bois

Ann Arbor MI

Out of Fluid

Greetings!

Thanks for the FEs. We haven't had much business and don't have any money for you but we are doing our best to store them and hope you will see our friends send subscriptions in.

What a long, windy piece against computers! It almost seemed as if it was written by a computer!

After having to write out over 200 times my return address on the cover of my newsletter because I ran out of fluid for the ditto—if we are going to do something let's do our best.

Machines are not the evil in 'this world. People are.

Again thanks. Keep the good work flowing.

Riverrat

Mountain View, MO

FE Reply: Yes, and guns don't kill people, people do.

TV People Problem

To the FE:

It is not a point of contention that most of what TV has to offer is violence, spectator sports, sexism, right-wing propaganda, greedy commercialism, and mindless repetitive advertising that pushes people to buy things they can't afford and most often would be better off without.

Whatever all that is wrong with TV programming is a reflection of people's attitudes. TV addiction is just a symptom of societal structure disintegration.

This is not remedied by removing the familiar square box from one's home, however. The problem with television is people. People who are too apathetic to push for excellence in presentations. People who yield to faceless programmers the selections of what is to be viewed. People who are too uninformed and careless to take control back from the huge corporations who use the media (not just TV) to advance their own self-serving ideas which are mostly counter-indicated for our collective well-being. Rather than questioning and challenging corporate/ governmental authority, people accept being manipulated with virtually no resistance.

Who says spectator sports have to remain the number one offering with gaps filled in by evangelical leeches who are only too willing to shear the sheep once more before turning them over to the state? Where is it chiseled in stone that the tube should ooze laugh-tracked sitcoms, soaps, and wall-to-wall commercials with some macho violence wedged in for good measure?

To say that problems of apathy, addiction, and lack of priorities will be solved by removing that ominous picture box is begging the issue. Just like in the case of finding a cancer "cure," we must go to the cause of the problem to cure the patient. Masking the symptoms is not the answer. Removing a television from our lives does nothing to solve society's problems.

Real radicals change what is wrong. They don't drop out and let others be damaged. We are too interdependent in the nuclear age to form and cling to little elitist groups. It is essential for our survival to massively educate and alert a sleeping public of the imminent dangers myopic leaders and their owners pose.

The planet is too threatened, and time is too short to do it in the style of Paul Revere. We need 21st century technology to reach the masses quickly and to initiate a bold new approach to conflict solving.

People have to be taught to be environmentally responsible. If television can have such a detrimental effect on society, then, conversely, it can be changed to benefit society. The masses can be motivated to change the course of this terminally ill planet only through a medium that reaches almost everyone.

What really needs to be addressed from childhood-on is our collective value system. What comes out of "the box" is a mere reflection of this. People are so bored by, or frightened of, their own thoughts. They haven't been taught how to express themselves and how to relate; therefore, they choose passivity.

TV is not the only intrusion condemning us to passivity. Whether or not we allow ourselves to become "addicted" to anything, including TV, depends on the individual's training and influences received.

Telecommunications is an essential part of modern society and its future. How we use it is what is important, not that it exists. Just because food is pesticide laden, denatured, additive “enriched,” etc., we don’t give up eating!

Consequently, please don’t swear off TV; change the programming and watch only that which is beneficial. It’s no benefit to smugly congratulate oneself for having escaped the “idiot box” only to find oneself surrounded and threatened by armies of idiots the box helped to create.

Irene Brown

Farmington

E. B. Maple replies: This letter seems more like an affirmation of my arguments than its refutation: I state that TV has become a necessity and Irene compares it to food. I say that the social act of viewing creates massification and social fragmentation and Irene poses “21st century technology to reach the masses” as a solution! It’s clear I didn’t convince her.

Yet why does it seem so extreme to say TV is irreformable and to call for a cessation of viewing? Great numbers of people are also heavily addicted to the other major institutions of the modern world’s galaxy of domination such as the state and capitalism, but we don’t hesitate to call for their elimination no matter how utopian it may sound.

We argue strenuously that struggles to reform governments or to make capitalism more “humane” or “democratic” are doomed to failure and my suggestion about television was similar: the flaw is inherent in its fundamental form and does not rest either upon its content or on who controls it

It is mass society utilizing centralized communication to shatter communities and fragment individuals which leaves a “sleeping public” dependent upon far away elites for their values and information. It is a pipe dream to think that power would relinquish its tenacious hold on any of its major institutions of rule, but even if it were to be so, how different would the new set of affairs be as proposed by Irene? Wouldn’t there just be a new crop of “faceless programmers (determining) the selection of what is to be viewed?” And wouldn’t the passivity that we all agree is the problem continue as before?

Irene correctly sees the desperation of our situation as we drift (or plunge) toward war, ecological collapse and social disintegration and she wants something done fast and effective. Obviously, something as small and infrequent as the Fifth Estate cannot compete with the constant barrage of lies from the daily media.

This may be the case, but a strategy based on altering the content of television has about as much success as those who work within the Democratic Party in hopes of bringing about social change.

We are in the uncomfortable position of having to start from the very beginning right when time seems to be running out on 8,000 years of human folly. Something such as the publication of a small neighborhood, school or shop newsletter based around radical ideas may not appear to be much in the face of the crisis, but it begins a first act of autonomy.

Television tells us that nothing is possible outside of its definitions and what it sanctifies. We can prove that wrong, first by refusing to watch, and second by beginning to act on our own.

Necessary Atheism

Dear FE:

Your Spring ’84 issue is perhaps the best yet. The inclusion of the Daily Barbarian is a great idea. I especially appreciated the essay on zoos, something I’ve been disturbed over for a long time. Peter Singer’s book *Animal Liberation* reveals a grim truth about our relationships with our fellow creatures. Also, John Berger’s *About Looking* has an essay on zoos.

Further to Tomega Therion’s reply to Bill McCormick on religion [Letters, FE #316, Spring, 1984]—all religion is a stinking rotten corpse which cannot be resuscitated. Nor can it be divested of its putrid content.

Surely it’s obvious that anyone proclaiming to be acting on behalf of some supernatural deity or other cannot presume to confront the authority of the state when they are themselves the prisoner of the delusion of an even higher authority.

We must again reaffirm the necessity of atheism in any genuine attempt to free ourselves from the crippling restraints of this civilization.

No bosses (up there or down here).
M. Spira
Gibbons, BC

Meat As Murder

Hello Fifth Estate:

The radical movement in the U.S. and throughout the world needs a drastic internal cleaning. Most radicals and anarchists still live according to some institutional garbage: namely, that they need to eat the corpses of murdered animals in order to be healthy. This is absolute nonsense. The cultures of the world having the greatest longevity and the best health, the Hunzas and the people of Villacambama, are vegetarian. Radicals who eat meat (or dairy) are dupes of institutional propaganda put out by the AMA, the meat industry, and established religions. The AMA, of course, knows that vegetarianism is more healthy but as usual they're more interested in getting along with the people who pay them money than they are in asserting the truth.

Meat is murder. And if you impose a nazi state upon other animals, as you do when you eat meat, you aren't a true radical. If the radicals of the world purged themselves of nazism towards other animals, then they, we, would create a movement which is indomitable, because any kind of oppressive attitude creates a mentality, and if we oppress animals, we'll find it impossible not to oppress other humans.

Felice Rizzo
Farmington Hills

Mean-Spirited Rag

Fifth Estate Staff:

You recently sent me a (computer-generated?) form letter asking me to renew my subscription. Sorry, but no. There are too many negative aspects to your paper for me to continue to support you financially. Specifically: 1) the petty and spiteful tone of many of your articles, particularly vicious personal attacks issued by writers hiding behind pseudonyms; 2) the turgid quality of the writing in many of your longer articles—John Zerzan's impenetrable, sociological jargon, for instance; 3) the utter hopelessness of your perspective—the “best” you've been able to come up with is a blanket rejection of technology, a rejection you preach but don't practice.

The lead article in the Spring 1984 issue exemplifies what's wrong with the *Fifth Estate*. It's worth noting that the title “Turn It Off!” is a direct order from you to your readers. It's also worth noting that the assertion you chose to highlight on the front page, “The very existence of a set within one's home expresses an acquiescence to power; mere possession gives evidence of the owner's willingness to submit,” seems designed to do nothing so much as to impress TV-owning readers with their alleged “submissiveness” and to shame them into getting rid of their sets.

Congratulations, you've come up with a winning formula: issuing commands and inducing people to follow them through guilt. It's not an original technique (the catholic church has used it for centuries), but it sure as hell works—if your aim is to manipulate and order around others.

Resubscribe? No. For me to continue to support you would be as useless as for you to continue to publish your mean-spirited rag.

Chaz Bufe
San Francisco

FE responds: Normally we would welcome an opportunity to fully discuss topics raised by the above letter such as where our perspective leads (we didn't realize that we were expected to “come up with” anything), and what sort of authority is inherent in our medium—the subject of an article to be published on the mass media as a whole. However, these questions seem a diversion from what is left unsaid in the present case.

Chaz Bufe had been a long-time FE subscriber and had renewed yearly, but things began to fall apart after he penned a harsh review of Fredy Perlman's critique of civilization, *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*, in the

Winter 1983/84 issue of *The Match!* (Box 3488, Tucson AZ 85722). In his review he refers to Perlman as a “run-of-the-mill bullshit artist,” “the Rod McKuen of New Age Nihilism,” and characterizes the result of the author’s years of research as “idiotic,” a “piece of tripe,” and “disgusting”—not exactly comradely criticism.

Angered by both Bufe’s dismal lack of comprehension and his “petty and spiteful tone” (to use his words), George Bradford from the FE staff, and an N.R. Kist wrote and sent to *The Match!* substantive (and venomous) replies. These replies may be characterized as “mean-spirited”; such is often the nature of polemical writings. But if Chaz doesn’t like vindictive articles, why did he start this feud by writing one in the first place? His attack on the FE strikes us as dishonest and a misdirected act of revenge against the individuals who responded to his nasty review.

In answer to a few informational points brought up by Bufe: none of our letters are computer-generated, and some of the names appearing in our pages are genuine, some pseudonyms. One’s actual name can only be of interest to one’s personal friends...and the police—so most of us avoid them. As for our turgid prose, we aren’t happy with it either, but like Pop-eye said, “I yam what I yam.” We’ll read your turgid prose if you’ll read ours.

Bradford’s and Kist’s replies were both submitted to *The Match!* as far as we know, but as of this writing we do not know if they will be printed. They are both available from the FE for 54 cents postage, or free upon request with book orders from our book service.

A final thought by an FE staff member: Does Chaz feel similarly about orders such as, “Don’t Vote” or “Smash the State?”

Lizard temps?

Dear Fifth Estate:

A question: Where does the technology debate within the FE lead? It seems to have become repetitive. I don’t at all mind reading things I disagree with (as I sit here in a lab with computer terminals and gas-liquid chromatography set-up) but I do mind reading the same articles over and over in variant form: Perhaps you might care for a manuscript on lizard temperature physiology? (Only kidding, honest.)

Carry on,

Shawn

Albuquerque NM

Note: The above letter came penned on a sub renewal form which included a donation to the FE. FE responds:

True, some articles are quite long, but most readers who are patient and concerned enough about the issues discussed somehow manage to finish them. It seems to me that people are fast becoming dependent on short, “efficient” forms of communication, qualities promoted by slick publications, computers, and TV. Although we want to exchange ideas, we are not willing to expend a lot of energy “Packaging” our ideas.

The issues we are discussing in these pages are complex, and often the articles reflect a learning and discovery process that we are going through, so it is hard to write concise articles. The ideas do not lend themselves, either, to translation into simple, common sense notions of the modern world. So we tend to cover many aspects from different, though related, approaches. Sometimes it sounds like we are repeating ourselves, and sometimes we are. Yet so much of it still seems to remain unsaid!

We really wouldn’t be too interested in the manuscript you mention, but we are definitely interested in communicating with lizards. Maybe that will help us to understand where this process of discovery, refusal, and affirmation leads us. Until then, we would be interested in hearing from readers and contributors on this question. Or would we be repeating ourselves once more if we opened this important dialogue?

Ten Theses

Dear FE:

Since you announced in your Spring issue that you would deal with Christianity in the Summer issue, I decided to submit my “10 Theses” for publication.

I used to be a christian and originally came to anarchic views via Tolstoy and the radical anabaptists. However, there is a hidden vanguardist, authoritarian streak in christian anarchism since it is based on living self-sacrificially to win people over, or “we have the truth and are the saviors of all others.”

Although I have thought a lot about its repressiveness since ceasing being a christian, I find arguments against christianity less important than the presentation of an alternative concept of spirituality. I make such an attempt in my “10 Theses” (I hope both with humor and a bit of vision). Most of what I’ve been writing in the past three years has been related to the development of a kind of materialist spirituality, a pan-erotic, animistic worldview, and tying this in with an anarchic anti-political perspective. I would be especially interested in having personal correspondence with anyone interested in these ideas. Have fun and take care.

Ten Theses Toward the End of the Flesh-Spirit Dichotomy, or: Radical Spirituality Is Radical Sensuality Or It Is Nothing

1. The religious concept of spirituality tells us that spirituality is the denial of the flesh.
2. A spirited being is a “wild” one, one who is full of passion and acts on it. A dispirited being is one who is empty, who has no energy to go on living, whose fires of passion have been quenched. Thus, spirit is obviously the totality of the passions and their energies.
3. Passions have their basis in the desires of the flesh.
4. The denial of the flesh is the denial of the passions, and hence the denial of the spirit.
5. The religious call to deny the flesh must always become a call to deny the entire self, a call to make oneself not-into a spiritual being, but into nothing. It is a call for self-annihilation.
6. God is said to be absolute spirit and yet to be totally without flesh. This is impossible. If god is absolute spirit, god must be absolute passion. If god is absolute passion, god must be absolute flesh. If god is without flesh, god is without passion. If god is without passion, god is without spirit and so is nothing.
7. Since most religions are adamant about god’s fleshlessness, I must conclude that god is nothing.
8. The attempt to be godly is the attempt to be nothing.
9. Being nothing is the way of the dispirited.
10. Spirit is flesh actively pursuing the desires. To be spiritual, or as I prefer to put it, spirited, is to be fully and unrestrainedly passionate, sensual, fleshy, erotic. The eternal life of such sensuality is the fullness it gives to each moment, for it makes each moment the “deep, deep eternity” for which our passions call.

David De Vries
San Francisco CA

FE staff note: People interested in contacting David can do so through the FE.

Language

Dear FE:

Before I get on to the more negative stuff, I want to say how much I appreciate the Fifth Estate. We have nothing so speculative in Britain, and it fills a gap which is crying out to be filled here.

Now for the “crit.” John Zerzan’s article on language, like his previous article on time, expressed a longing for fulfillment beyond all contradiction which is unfulfillable. Thought-provoking and insightful though it was, it resolved itself in the end into nothing if not the longing for Nirvana, the good old Freudian death-wish, the return to the womb.

To be sure, language is separation, the source of the split in the primordial oneness of “humanity” with “nature.” (The very terms “humanity” and “nature” already express the split.) I disagree with John when he says our humanity preceded language, which appears to him to have evolved to meet purely utilitarian needs. Language, in fact, brought our humanity into being, it brought us into being as a social species expanding beyond the restrictive confines of the primate horde. It is rooted, I believe, in spontaneous play and gregariousness, and not, as many Marxists contend, in work, which would have needed a previously existing language to determine its aims, and

have them communicated. Its origins are aimless celebration; let's not forget that. It emerges from the animal in an animal way, only to cut us off from the animal, and sever a unity which can never be healed. Our primal separation and alienation from nature can, because of this, never be repudiated.

What we can do, however, is recover the freedom (the time, space, energy, etc.) for a rapprochement with "nature" or "the Other," the freedom to respond to it positively and creatively, not negatively and destructively which is the course our present civilization has adopted. Free play and spontaneous gregariousness provide the conditions for this rapprochement, whereas work which hasn't been assimilated to free play and spontaneous gregariousness, does not. Once we've sorted this out, the question then becomes how do we create the conditions for extending the former, and assimilating the latter to it? How do we expand into the new epoch—which would constitute a break as startling for us as the break which freed us from the primate horde? Looking back to the restrictive kinship structures of our forebears (from which we should be glad to be free) does not seem to help us very much.

I think we are into a completely different ball-game now; and calls for a return for a hunter-gatherer style of existence (which is what I presume you are calling for) and your rejection of certain alternative technologies a la Bookchin seem woefully inadequate as a response to it.

Why did the hunter-gatherer way of life come to an end? There is a school of thought which asserts that such things as over-hunting, demographic pressure and the retreat of the ice caps 13,000 years ago destroyed the paleolithic megafauna, thus precipitating the collapse of the hunter-gatherer way of life and the development of agriculture.

If so, it must also have exacerbated the tensions which were latent within the kinship system—which separated men from women and the uninitiated young males—thus creating the divisions which were to evolve into castes, hierarchies, states and classes. Bookchin is right, in my opinion, to say that the violation of organic society was latent within organic society itself. But what triggered this violation, and brought these latent tensions to a head but the collapse of the ecosystem in which organic society was embedded?

We cannot recreate this way of life because we cannot recreate the ecosystem which supported it. And this is why I think Bookchin is so important. What strategy, then, to adopt to halt the present headlong rush of the world to catastrophe? Bookchin has suggested a transitional form of revolutionary organization which evokes the Parisian sections of 1793–4; popular assemblies rather than workers' councils and committees.

I think he is right. The French Revolution was the last great preindustrial revolution. We now exist in a post-industrial society with a declining industrial proletariat. As the 1981 riots in Brixton and Toxteth revealed, new possibilities are beginning to open up again for revolutionary forms of action and organization which are suitable for heterogeneous communities as well as homogeneous classes. We cannot spurn Bookchin's ideas as readily as the FE seems to wish to.

Apart from this, I think the FE raises questions which no other paper appears to want to raise, questions which are vitally important to the emergence of a new revolutionary perspective which must, I believe, find its inspiration far beyond marxism and the traditional forms of anarchism.

Richard Livermore
Edinburgh, Scotland

John Zerzan responds: I find it very doubtful that a "collapse of the ecosystem" closed out hunter-gatherer life, tending to see the move to agriculture as a product of separations reaching a decisive or critical stage. Going back down the trail of emerging alienation therefore seems to me fruitful.

Domination certainly existed before agriculture; chiefs, exchange of women, even human sacrifice are a few, gross examples from some tribal societies. In the Upper Paleolithic (c. 30,000 years ago), art and number appeared. Time and language most likely predated them as carriers of deformed existence. To see the content of authenticity before these estranging presences developed (predicated on the division of labor) may be difficult but is not a false imagining, I believe.

The whole content of the essay on language (and a related one in progress on number, perhaps to appear in the next FE) proposes that distancing and symbolization—in short, language—do not mark an improvement over some supposed 'Primate horde' life, are not at all rooted in play or celebration, but constitute the formalized leaving-taking of a sensuous and intelligent intimacy with the natural world.

Richard's assertion to the contrary, and his judgement that it is wholly impossible and even undesirable to recreate a world like that of pre-alienation and prehistory, merely echo the dominant wisdom that changing a few details of our imprisonment comprises the true project of liberation. It is thus unsurprising that he, after Bookchin, insists that our deepest desires are unfulfillable; the political, and every other trivialization of life, is based on this dictum.

fifth Estate

Various Authors
Letters to the Fifth Estate
1984

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/317-summer-1984/letters-to-the-fifth-estate>
Fifth Estate #317, Summer 1984

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)