Bhopal and the Prospects for Anarchy

letters

Various Authors

1985

Dear Fifth Estate,

I thought that the article on Bhopal in your Winter 1985 issue [FE #319, Winter, 1985] was quite good and, since nothing on the event appeared in *Strike!*, I'm glad that you too are "filling some gaps quite nicely." The only problems I have with the article come in the final section where you tack on your standard anti-technology pro-primitive spiel. In doing so you delineate a problematic that goes straight to the heart of your politics.

You ask the rhetorical question: "What happens when there is no village to go to?" Well, wake up and smell the coffee, boys and girls, as your article so amply demonstrated—it's already long gone.

Capitalism, which you prefer to call "civilization," will bequeath to us a world full of "Love Canals," nuclear reactors and nuclear waste "disposal" sites. We're going to have to deal with that. We're going to have to find a way to stop leakages from Love Canal. We're going to have to find a way to safely de-commission those reactors and we're going to have to figure out how the hell we're going to store nuclear waste for 10,000 years.

If we utilize all the technological expertise we have there's a chance we might be able to contain this god-awful mess or at the very least minimize the leakage. Technology, whether you like it or not, offers us a slim chance. Face it folks: it's the only one we've got. I can tell you one thing for sure your post-revolutionary ideal of a gatherer-hunter society would be living on borrowed time and precious little of that.

Maybe there's a remote chance that a few thousand dirt-scratching primitives could eke out a miserable existence on the margins of the zones of devastation around the deserted nuclear power stations and dump sites, but I doubt it. As you said: "Bhopal is everywhere."

You might not believe this but I find this situation just as horrific as you do.

I'd like to see you address this issue directly in your pages. I'd like you to tell us how you think your re-born primitive societies could possibly come into being without the certain agonizing deaths of literally billions of human beings.

I'm not asking for "all" the answers. I'm not demanding that you produce "instant solutions." I just want to know if you've given any thought to these questions at all.

I read recently that some US government department is giving serious thought to the creation of "myths and rituals" that will warn people to stay away from dump sites, nuclear and otherwise, for the 10,000 years it will require for their neutralization. This sounds right up your alley. I've got news for them and you—it's not going to do any good. It doesn't matter if we stay away or not. The poison is going to come looking for us.

Technically Yours
Lazarus Jones
Toronto, Canada

P. Solis responds: I guess I could answer by simply quoting the numerous articles which have appeared in past Fifth Estates, for example: "Langdon Winner, his Autonomous Technology, put it this way: 'One can seek the high

levels of productivity that modern technological systems bring. One can also seek the founding of a communal life in which the division of labor, social hierarchy, and political domination are eradicated. But can one in any realistic terms have both? I am convinced that the answer to this is a firm no.'

"Of course, we are meant to believe that we would all die if technology were dismantled. We are so steeped in it that the simple idea of growing our own food is not what springs to mind but rather the artificial problem of how to 'coordinate' its 'production.—(J. Zerzan, reply to letters, June 1982 FE)

"If we accept the premises, we are stuck with the conclusions...Indeed, the catastrophes that technology has perpetrated are so immense and far-reaching that perhaps only technological means can even begin to deal with them. What is to be done with chemical and nuclear wastes? Here the technicians smile and say 'You need us.' But their 'solutions' not only legitimize and tend to prolong the original causes of the disaster, but tend to aggravate it even further. Now we are faced with the innovation of chemical waste dumps to solve the problem of toxic wastes, which is already proving to lead to other difficulties. But we need technology, they argue, we've got to put this stuff somewhere! And not to join in the chorus is to seek 'easy answers.'" (T. Fulano, "Reply to the Defenders of Technology," November 1981 FE)

"The myth of technology separate from its 'use' reflects the same misunderstanding inherent in the concept of 'socializing' the 'means of production.' This is as if these means were simply the instruments, the factories, the supertankers, computer networks, and mass agrosystems, and not that universe of means: the daily activities of the people who participate in these systems, and as if these means did not require the inevitable characterological internalization of these means in human beings. As Lewis Mumford warned in *The Pentagon of Power*, such denatured beings tend to become so conditioned so as to be incapable of imagining any alternatives. Even where they recognize the malfunctions and dangers in the technological system, they 'see no way of overcoming them except by a further extension of automation and cybernation...It is the system itself that once set up, gives orders.' This 'self-inflicted impotence' is 'the other side of "total control."'

"Technology—systematized, 'rationalized' mass technics—is more than the sum of its parts,' this totality undermines human independence, community and freedom, creating mass men who are creatures of the universal apparatus..." (Bradford, Winter '84 FE)

I think that the above quotes (a selection among many) demonstrate that we are more than "filling gaps" for your publication. I think our perspectives and yours are fundamentally at odds. Let me say that we probably get two or three letters like yours every year. I find them disquieting; each time, they reveal how absolutely the discourse of authority dominates the social terrain, how completely the "dictatorship of what is" rules people's minds. After all of the material we have published, and the recommendations that people read the writers that have influenced us, someone can still write in thoughtlessly reproducing all the ideological platitudes of the megamachine—that tools and technology are identical, that mass technics is neutral and can be "self-managed" democratically, that we advocate a hunter-gatherer existence as a post-revolutionary society—and voila, the old can of worms is reopened and we are accused of advocating the deaths of millions of people who have been suddenly cut off from technology's "iron lung" of survival. "How, suddenly, do we get tarred for what capitalism threatens...?" wrote E. B. Maple almost three years ago in a reply to another pro-technology anarchist, in the same FE response from which Zerzan is quoted above. How indeed? With a sleight-of-hand, all of what we have argued and discussed is ignored and we are forced to return to point A, as if none of this ground had been covered already! I expect to get such letters from new readers, but not from a writer of another libertarian publication which has enjoyed a subscription exchange for years.

We should talk about what gets "tacked on" to articles on technological catastrophes—not our primitivist conclusions, but the standard leftist fare that always comes at the end of articles which report the horrors of this civilization, that "of course it is not technology which is the problem, under self-managed cooperatives, blah, blah, blah," which we have on numerous occasions compared with corporate advertisements singing the same old jingle. This is because most anarchists and leftists understand neither technology nor capital, nor the nature of the modern state. We have already pointed out the folly of anarchist fetishism of the state apparatus, for example, in the summer 1981 FE in an article on anarchism and technology: "the state is only one structural element...in a totality which is the bureaucratic-technological megamachine." To defend technology and oppose "the state" is absurd; they are part of a unitary whole. But as your letter shows, technology, like domination, is its own best defense; re-

place your use of the word "high tech" with "the state" and the necessity of the state in finding a solution to the present crisis, and you will see the exact arguments employed by idiots against anarchy.

Your sleight-of-hand, furthermore, reduces a social-cultural problem to a technological one, and then expects us to find a way out! "We're going to have to find a way," you write, to store nuclear wastes for 10,000 years. Well, you wake up and smell the coffee, pal: no one, not even the technocrats you defend, has any solution to this problem. I honestly don't know if there is any. But all the corporations and technocrats provide is words, platitudes (which sound just like yours) about the need for high tech (and obviously, all of the coordination, wage labor, technical hierarchy and police that it requires). This seems to be a problem not for us "dirt-scratching primitives" but for self-proclaimed technocrats (you called yourself as much in your rather unfriendly cover letter), so I'd like to see you address these questions: how do you propose to save us from 10,000 years of plutonium waste contamination from the hydra-headed Bhopal bequeathed to us by the wonders of technology?

Your cynical reference to "dirt scratching primitives" (a modernist, pro-tech equivalent to the colonialist reference to "niggers," "wogs" and "savages") "eking out a miserable existence" not only misrepresents our primitivism as a call for a hunter gatherer life, but repeats all of the stupidities of modern civilization when it justifies the extermination of ancient and primitive modes of life and vision—the cultural heritage of the human race. Your "anti-Luddism" is an insult to primal, traditional and land-based peoples everywhere, who did not need your technology, your science, your politics, or your nineteenth century anarchist ideology to live what were full, ecstatic, visionary, free and healthy lives.

In any case, we do not raise the question of a primitivist critique of modern civilization as a call for a hunter gatherer existence, as you should well know. We've said so dozens of times. For example, Zerzan wrote in the above-mentioned reply that the discovery by recent anthropologists that Stone Age cultures are "the original affluent society" doesn't mean "that a foraging way of life is an exact formula promoted to end the profound alienation of humanity from itself and nature. Eschewing blueprints, the FE has mainly tried to show that the myths of progress have concealed much about our origins, and has also tried to see through to the nature of the technology that now envelops us."

What we are doing when we call for a "return to the village" (and this village still exists—under much duress—in many contexts), is to create a new discourse, a new frame of reference. We are beginning by talking, by attacking the fundamental ideological supports of this civilization, while realizing in the course of this learning process that we are rediscovering a vision which primal people—our ancestors—had all along. What you do is simply repeat what is, so you add nothing to this discourse, you do not even help us to see some of the real problems in our discourse, you serve up this world on an anarchist platter. No thank you! I'd rather take my chances with the primitive at its most unrelenting perspective of refusal of this world.

You wonder if we've given any thought to the insurmountability of technology and its collapse. You don't even read what we write in our paper before you repeat the catechism. Well, I'd like to ask you if you have bothered to read any of the large numbers of books on the subject that we have recommended? If so, how can you repeat the same old tired shit that technocrats and politicians employ to justify this insane world?

You ask what we want, how we propose to end this madness. I'll make a few suggestions, and I know that as soon as I start we'll part ways. We'd like to see a moratorium on industrialization starting right now—a mass strike for the abolition of industrial civilization. Stop the plastics, the steel, the cars, the chemicals, the paint, the logging, the construction of dams and roads, the mining, the exploration of new territories, the computerization. Let's all get in the streets and start discussing what needs to be done, in an anarchic, liberatory way. Let's reforest and refarm the cities themselves—no more building projects, giant hospitals, no more road repair.. Stop the exponential growth of information, pull the plug on the communications system. Obviously, we'll need to decide in these assemblies what is absolutely essential for the time being. But we have a vision of a nontechnological world—let us make that foremost. Let's talk to Hopi elders and others about what to do. Let's stop watching TV. Let's begin dismantling the noxious structures—let's deconstruct the technological world. Let's stop reducing our desires to a technological discourse with technological solutions; that is the discourse of modern capital. "That social system, that culture" we wrote in "Notes on 'Soft Tech'" in FE #312, Spring 1983, "must be abolished by free communities. Whether or not such communities decide, say, to turn into windmills the automobiles left behind by this civilization, is ultimately a secondary, local and technical problem. But until we can abolish the power of technology over our lives—a power

characterized by a complex division of labor and wage work, mass distribution, and planning by experts, we will remain its captives, and finally, its victims."

Once again, if you had done a little reading, you would have found in Lewis Mumford's conclusions to his *Pentagon of Power* the following words: "Those who are unable to accept William James' perception that the human person has always been the 'starting point of new effects' and that the most solid-seeming structures and institutions must collapse as soon as the formative ideas that have brought them into existence begin to dissolve, are the real prophets of doom. On the terms imposed by technocratic society, there is no hope for mankind except by 'going with' its plans for accelerated technological progress; even though man's vital organs will all be cannibalized in order to prolong the megamachine's meaningless existence. But for those of us who have thrown off the myth of the machine, the next move is ours: for the gates of the technocratic prison will open automatically, despite their rusty ancient hinges, as soon as we choose to walk out."

A postscript: This discussion amply demonstrates what we have been saying for quite some time: anarchy has left most anarchists, with their vapid recitations of rationalist-technicist ideology, far behind. For another example of this phenomenon, I recommend people read the mostly unpublished exchange between G. Bradford, Chaz Bufe, and Fred Woodworth of *The Match!,* which, like *Strike!* (these two publications should get together, they'd have a great name at least), defends science and technology as the latest word in anarchist critique. This exchange—mostly a discussion of science, technology, rationalism and primal society—has become too labyrinthine to print here. But a photocopied packet will be sent to anyone on request.

Anarcho-Radio

Dear Fifth Estate:

George Bradford's comments about anarchist pirate radio were completely wrong (see FE #318, Fall 1984).

Firstly, radio is not "the latest technological fad among anarchists." Spanish anarchists operated stations in the late 'thirties.

Secondly, it is not true that people will tune out more communitarian radio stations to watch "disco-mojo with lasers." Radio Libertaire in Paris and Sheffield Peace Radio in England, among others, have reached significant numbers of listeners.

Thirdly, the *Fifth Estate* relies so heavily on slick layout that it is in no position to criticize others for "packaging their messages." Your own message is completely subordinated to the modern techniques of newspaper design. Looks to me like you use a high-tech photo-typesetter controlled by microcomputers. Hypocrites.

Fourthly, the audience does not have to bear the cost of a pirate station, but we do have to underwrite the costs of newspapers. A radio signal goes out almost instantly, whereas newspapers are often delayed or lost in the mails. It's easy for the authorities to keep track of who is on a newspaper's mailing list, but they have no way of knowing who is listening to anarchist radio stations.

Finally, most anarchist newspapers seem to have been established to "preach to the converted," a strange way to consume paper pulp. Anarchist radio is a public outreach project, an attempt to spread a little sanity around. Anarchist radio stations will thrive and proliferate from now on, in spite of the efforts of authoritarians and technophobes to hinder us.

Rick
Tangerine Radio
Kau Kesert, Hawaii

George Bradford responds: The FE is not produced with computers, but mechanically on old equipment we inherited from a new left collective which went under in the mid-1970s. Some of the photographic work is done by friends or outside companies. It is ultimately printed on a big technological apparatus (a web press in operation is an incredible sight) at a commercial printer.

Our outdated, 17 year-old mechanical typesetter is like an old, old car, and has brought laughter to the few repairmen who good-naturedly helped us to nurse it along these last few years. When it has seen its last, there are those among us who are inclined to accept "the inevitable" and go on to the next model, but as for me, I'm not so

sure. Some of the remarks raised above by George Monk about retrieving old machinery seem more attractive to me. Two years down the line you may find me cutting out my print blocks on potatoes, for all I know. Or I'll be gritting my teeth and using more modern (but by then hand-me-down) equipment, because it is all I could get my hands on at the time. But none of that will invalidate in any way my observations on the nature of the media and mass society.

I still have doubts and questions about this activity; people with a liberatory vision who fail to remain critical of their own activities soon become militants, and militants end up organizers with an instrumental program to create another form of the ant-hill we now live in. I'm not interested in that any more than I am in computerized projects or high tech. How about you—don't you ever have doubts about the contradictions in your project? As for the charge that we preach only "to the converted," your letter and Lazarus Jones'—two anarchists—are testament to the contrary.

E.B. Maple responds: I don't expect we will receive many polite responses if we make even inadvertent snide remarks but I think the discussion regarding media could have been advanced slightly if you had given us more information and less name calling. For instance, what were the experiences of the Spanish anarchists? And, what are your direct experiences in your radio project? Are you actually on the air and if so, have you been able to sustain regular transmission, have you been subjected to any repression, etc.?

I don't understand who picks up the tab for radio stations if the audience doesn't. Who pays, not advertisers, I hope? Also, a radio station like Radio Libertaire, having a fixed transmitter and studio, needs considerable funds to keep it going; haven't you ever seen their fund-raising appeals? Also, when the French government moved against the anarchist broadcasting facility last year, they were able to successfully stop its broadcasting briefly by physically sabotaging its equipment since the police knew right where they were and how the station was most vulnerable. As it is, they function only with the grudging sufferance of the state.