

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1985

“Old & Sterile?”

Dear People:

I was really glad to see the extensive coverage given to the Big Mountain struggles in FE #317, Summer 1984. The graphics were great, too. More regular updates on indigenous struggles in N. America, the Amazon, Australia and elsewhere would be greatly appreciated.

The direct action anti-war movement, with its external and internal struggles, seems to be overflowing into the anarchist circles now. The War Chest tours over the summer represented, I think, a real breakthrough, along with actions like Rock Island (see FE #317, Summer, 1984).

If this development is to continue, and not get caught in old, sterile anarchist/ communist debates over centralization and so on, the gratuitous, knee-jerk attacks on the RCP and others (such as the one in your article by Blueberry [see FE #319, Winter 1985]) is going to have to be transcended.

Rich Hutchinson

Chicago

Blueberry responds: I am confused by your characterization of anarchist/communist debates as being old and sterile. The result of these “old, sterile” debates is the acknowledgment that there will continue to be definite differences in the respective theories.

How can anyone think of coordinating anarchists with communists (to say nothing of liberals and social-democrats) for specific projects when these differences are not addressed? Feelings of opposition to the status quo are insufficient reason for cooperation—analysis and hopefully goals will be developed. If goals are not shared, there is no reason to think about unity of purpose.

As for your accusation directed at me, I want to know how a critique of specific actions becomes a “gratuitous and knee-jerk attack.” Is it by the tone of disgust that is implicit in my rejection of manipulation by the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP)? Or, perhaps through the fact that I dare to criticize part of some nebulous “movement” with which I would need to maintain silence for the sake of unity?

Too many anarchists in the past have kept quiet about manipulation and have refused to criticize “comrades,” with disastrous results: suppression (and extinction) of anarchists at the hands of Bolsheviks and Stalinists in Russia, and Republicans and Communists in Spain, to mention the most outrageous examples.

Historically, as soon as authoritarians of the Left feel that their power has been sufficiently consolidated after a revolution, they no longer have any use for others who share(d) their contempt for the previous Establishment. Red fascism emerges, and the first to go are, of course, the anarchists.

I have learned my lesson from history, and I will therefore not hesitate to criticize strongly any and all people who call for unity in the face of a “common enemy”; such “unity” is a thin mask for authoritarian organizing and manipulation.

When comrades accuse me of being divisive, I smile; I do not imagine the divisions that historically exist (and continue) between anarchists and communists (and others), nor did I create these rifts. By pointing out the serious differences that endure between social theories, I am reminding people involved in “the movement” that ideological questions need to be raised and addressed if any common ground is to be reached (personally, I doubt if any agreements besides an opposition to the status quo can be reached—and I doubt if an analysis of the status quo can even be made by such diverse groups).

Being labeled “too critical,” “divisive” and “uncomradely” has never frightened me into submission: I refuse to be silent.

Black Hills Report

Dear FE Friends:

To respond indirectly to Ana Coluthon’s question in the Letters column of FE #319, Winter 1985 concerning contact with the natives of the Big Mountain area, I’d like to describe another situation at the Black Hills Survival Gathering of a few summers back in South Dakota. Those who attended that gathering (and who didn’t leave their critical faculties at the gate) will know that Liz Scott’s letter of caution concerning the potential for authoritarianism within native american struggles is well-founded.

I had misgivings about the Black Hills gathering from the start due to the rather authoritarian-sounding invitations which included various warnings concerning things which were forbidden, like possession of drugs, alcohol, and (horror of horrors) unapproved literature. Once I arrived I found the actual situation worse than I expected. While the outdoors encampment and setting for the gathering had plenty of potential for a relaxed and open exchange of information, development of new contacts, and a celebration of common perspectives, this was undermined by the high profile maintained by the Indian “security” force.

Swaggering around with the walkie-talkie symbols of their “warrior” status squawking constantly, these men insisted on acting out some of the more petty and obnoxious attitudes one expects to find among rank and file cops. They appeared to take a certain delight in enforcing “The Rules” in a rather rude manner, while at the same time flaunting their ability to ignore them themselves. The combination of the ubiquitous presence of these proto-cops, along with the ominous shadow of the ever-present “security tower” overlooking the site gave me the eerie feeling of being in a primitive concentration camp.

Despite this, I tried my best to ignore the discomfort I felt concerning the “security” arrangements and enter into the spirit of the gathering. Unfortunately, the organization of the gathering events, and the attitudes of most of the people with whom I tried to talk proved just as disconcerting as the “security.” I soon learned that only one basic approved ideological line was permitted any public access and exposure. Microphone access was limited to only pre-approved speakers. Only approved literature was allowed to be openly distributed, and even this was subject to arbitrary suppression as I found out when a “security” gang came to (if necessary, forcibly) stop the distribution of the newspaper and literature of some minor Marxist-Leninist sect while I was talking with them.

No unapproved self-organization of the people present was encouraged, or even allowed. All requests for booth, tent, or tarp space had to be approved by the “security” center. And there was little access to any means of public communication to organize anything anyway.

What was most dispiriting to me, however, was the common general attitude that I found among the people from around the country who attended. There was a combination of awe at being the guests of REAL “Indians” (it was a sign of status to be able to say that you were camped near the “Indian encampment”), and a general lack of any critical sensibilities concerning the organization of the gathering or the role of the “security” apparatus, along with a typically “New Ageist,” positivist mentality overall. You know what I mean, the attitude of superficial cheerfulness that expresses in its empty, but exquisitely “Nice” form people’s willful suppression of their own negativity.

I tried talking with people and handing out my own (unapproved) literature to those who I thought would be most open to it, only to find that even a longtime friend of mine asked if the literature had been approved before gingerly accepting it. A few people took copies and surreptitiously hid them before quickly moving on (promising

to read them later). Others refused to be a party to the unapproved distribution of literature, and I soon decided that it might be prudent to abandon it before I was “turned in.”

By the second day of my stay at the gathering, my only thoughts were of escape from the overwhelming sense of confinement I felt, ironically, out in the rolling hills under the bright blue sky. The oppressive atmosphere and all the seemingly cheerful zombies running around expressing their adulation for native american culture combined to make me feel almost physically ill with alienation from the whole spectacle. To use a nightmare image, it was like being caught, the only conscious person in the middle of a mass television studio audience who are so easily manipulated that they are completely unaware they are actually being confined in a concentration camp.

Okay, maybe it wasn't all as bad as I'm making it sound. It probably wasn't for other people there who had a more fortunate set of experiences to build their impressions around. But, it definitely wasn't an example of “The traditional Native peoples (holding) the key to the reversal of the destructive processes of Western Civilization” either.

As far as I can see there is no useful point in cultivating an exaggerated respect for “traditional” cultures—a new set of illusions is not what we need. It does no one any good whatsoever to silence our own criticism. We undoubtedly have much to learn from what little is left of genuinely traditional cultures, but native americans also have many things to learn from us. They need to learn to see themselves through our eyes, just as we are attempting to see ourselves through theirs.

Together, our perspectives have a potentially much greater power than either does alone. A balance of acceptance and criticism is necessary. We must each develop our capacities to experience both the wonder of openness and receptiveness, and the negativity of criticism and refusal. Anything less is a capitulation to the forces which maintain our current civilized state.

Lev Chernyi
Colombia, Mo

FE Note: BIA-encultured Indians with walkie-talkies are obviously not the “traditional cultures” we speak of, but a product of centuries of assault by European civilization. You must realize that this is not what we have an “exaggerated respect” for, but rather the same traditions which must have motivated you to attend the gathering in the first place.

Web Archive note: See reply in “Black Hills,” FE #321, Indian Summer, 1985.

Expanded Sexuality

Dear Fifth Estate:

E.B. Maple blames pornography for “sexual misery,” “rage against women,” and “self-hatred” (see Letters, FE #319, Winter 1985) when the real culprit responsible for these atrocities is RELIGION!

For thousands of years the preachers of religious myth have imbued us with guilt, shame, fear and loathing over virtually all sexual matters. Along with this psychological terrorism, physical mutilation—male and female circumcision, castration of choir boys, etc.—have been used as weapons in the war against the enjoyment of life.

This along with the biblical teaching that women are merely the property of men has led to the rampant misogyny and sexism we see in the world today. Porn, at worst, is a symptom of a religiously diseased society; at best, it could be considered a rebellion against the hideous prudishness of the established order.

I don't believe the fact that pornography is a \$7 billion a year industry is really part of the issue here. After all, virtually everything in this country is a billion dollar industry. And, “fantastic images of exaggerated standards” permeate nearly all aspects of life in America.

I also detect in you a haughty, condescending attitude when you speak of “humiliation” and lack of “dignity” in nude models. Who are you to make that judgment? I personally see nothing offensive or humiliating in the display of genitalia. And why no comment on the male models pictured in these magazines?

I sense a touch of the old double standard at work here. Anti-porn anarchists, while ostensibly feminists and free thinkers, are actually basing their conclusions on the same old prudish, sexist standards set by the religious fundamentalists. And, who gives a fuck about “dignity” anyway? What are we, Republicans?

The Hustler pool table gang-rape pictorial you mentioned is a perfect illustration of how controlled our thinking is concerning porn. Amid frantic cries of “subjugation” and “domination,” the facts are these: many women have a rape fantasy—which is not to say they actually want to be raped. The women who read Hustler don’t see pictorials like this as rape, per se, but as “having a bunch of good looking guys at once;” and if you find that repugnant, E.B., then you have the attitude problem, not the women.

Of course, the rabid feminists can see only horror and degradation in pornography. I feel they are merely seeking a scapegoat for their insecurities caused, for the most part, by the religious brainwashing mentioned earlier...

Thank you for hearing me out.

Al Medwin

Farmingdale NJ

P. Solis responds: With few exceptions, the FE has not bothered to deal with the nature of pornography as separate from other aspects of the mass produced culture of this society. We have never called porn a prime cause of violence against women or sexual misery; nor do we see it as an opposition to such misery. It is apparent that as it has become more pervasive, we haven’t seen the gradual evolution of a more healthy sexuality in society, but rather an increase in sexual misery, alienation, violence and rape.

The question of porn cannot be taken separately from the problem of the mass media as a whole; churned out by conglomerates and small-time entrepreneurs, it is produced as a commodity or it is employed to sell others. Though it is not the original source of sexual misery, it does nothing to enhance sexual fulfillment. On the contrary, most mass produced porn is not only a manifestation of the alienation, violence and despair which characterize the whole society, it also aggravates despair by pandering to the pseudo-culture of fashion and to the commoditized banalization of woman and sexual relations. By capitalizing on a phony sexual liberation in a world which only has boredom, frustration and despair to offer (in which even the orgasm is left unfulfilled), it fuels the rage which permeates life today, directing it not towards the pimps who administer the media but against the human domain it has objectified: sexual love, tenderness, and woman’s autonomy.

Porn is to sexual love what junk food is to sustenance, so it is no accident that both occur in the same society—machine-like, depersonalized, atomized, indifferent to genuine passion and nuance, destructive of authentic communication. As the staff of life is reduced to generic fuel, love is reduced to an aerobic exercise or contest with strangers.

Porn destroys diversity and subtlety, shriveling a dynamic human interplay to a degraded code of banal formulas; thus it works in the same manner as pulp fiction, Hollywood and television. The glut of violence and sex produced by the media engenders not only the “impossible sexuality” referred to by E.B. Maple in the last FE (the spectacularized sexuality of the media), but more importantly, an impoverished sexuality. A unique experience between human beings is diminished to a voyeuristic isolation.

The very glut of porn undermines the sexuality it claims to promote. While erotica may have once titillated because it played along that spiny zone of what was suppressed as tabu (the semi-clad model suggesting for the imagination a possible transgression of the repressive code), now the absurd acrobatics of the nude models only inspire a bored yawn. From repression to a surfeit posing as “freedom”: the result is an anaesthetized stupor, a numbness which can only be escaped by increasing the “dosage- in an unending spiral of frustration—before it may have enhanced things; now one cannot get aroused without it. With frustration, rage; and why not? When all limits (but the real ones) are surpassed in the pursuit of kicks, and the world remains the same dead place of work and empty leisure, only nihilism remains.

Pornography is a sham, with parallels with television and video games. The abstract “right” to play video games and have access to unlimited numbers of television programs obscures the underlying reality, a reality discussed by semiotician Umberto Eco in an article on “neotelevision” written in 1983. “One can buy electronic games,” he writes, “make them appear on the TV and the whole family can play at destroying Darth Vader’s space fleet. But when—given that one has so many things to see already, including taped material?

“In any case the galactic battle is no longer played in the bar between a coffee and a telephone call, but all day until you get spasms (because you know you only stop because someone is breathing down your neck, but at home you can carry on forever), and this will have the following effects: it will teach children to have optimal reflexes so that they will be able to fly a supersonic fighter. It will get both adults and infants used to the idea that to make

ten space-ships disintegrate is in fact nothing special—a missile war will be reduced to a human scale. Because, I don't know whether you've tried it, but after playing for a couple of hours at night in a restless half-waking and half-sleeping state, you see flashing lights and the trails of tracer projectiles. The retina and the brain are pulped. It's like when a camera has flashed in your eyes. For a long time you see a dark spot in front of you. It's the beginning of the end."

What will the "freedom" offered by a commoditized erotica teach us? Isn't that "dark spot" we see after masochistically contemplating the glistening vulva of the spectacle in the vulva of the sexual spectacle still another signal of demise, a scar left not by joy but by despair?

Rave Notices

FE Note: Just so it doesn't seem, as some have suggested, that we are in a constant polemic with our readers, we thought we would reprint a few of the many remarks that often accompany sub renewals, book orders and letters.

JW, Seattle: "My mailbox is often full of 'useful' publications, but yours is the only one that I feel really excited to see."

JP, Toronto: "Just writing to extend greetings and congrats on an excellent last issue (in particular the article 'The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism')."

GH, Montreal: "I'm glad you took it upon yourselves to extrapolate from the awful Bhopal massacre. Nobody else was pointing out the obvious extreme anti-industrialist lessons served by this incident."

MB, Nashville: "The article 'The Appeal of Nationalism' was excellent; four stars."

JS, Fair Haven: "I continue to find you provocative and important. I like the stuff on spirituality too, both the skepticism and the longing."

Witch Revival

Dear Fifth Estate Comrades:

The article on nationalism is yummy—no startling new insights but a useful summary. The more I learn about pre-national peoples the more pleased I am that there are still a few folks left who aren't smothered under the nation-state. And why national-liberation struggles end up very rapidly dominated by red fascists. The simple truth unfortunately, that nationalism, and progress are horrible things based on hatred and exploitation, regardless of the professed ideology of the particular nation or progressive group, is much less seductive than continuing business as usual inside our heads.

The context of humanity, and each individual human, as animal in a world of other animals, a particular expression of the great creative forces of nature no different in essence from the snails or trees, which is the animist/immanentist context of nature peoples, is the revolutionary context. It's a spiritually based outlook in an anti-spiritual world order, for those inside the monster, but possible to capture even in the cities.

Of course, one often leaves the city soon after, as I've done.

Dragonfly is hosting an event you might be interested in—"Gathering for Life on Earth" (*FE note:* see "Bits of the World" [this issue, *FE* #320, Spring, 1985] for information). It's not a purely anarchist event, though we're all anarchist inclined here."

For the past year and a half I've been involved in the Witch-craft revival. There seem to be growing numbers of people trying to combine Earth-centered spirituality and radical political critiques, scattered here and there in small groups or as individuals.

Excluding the native nations, a coherent vision of the connection between these two has been very slow developing. The bulk of Witches and Pagans are totally bought in to the system and some are actively hostile to the politicians. So, this gathering will be a place to discuss our similarities and develop co-operation in both spiritual and political activities. As far as I know, it's the first gathering for both women and men, gays and straights, and Pagan radicals of all traditions, in North America.

Sam Wagar
Dragonfly Farm
Lake St. Peter, Ont.

FE In A Bind

Dear FE:

I keep on hoping to get a chance to sit down and write something on technology but nothing, except some basic statements, seems to come. Anyway, here's what I've come up with so far.

1. Today's technology, in every manifestation, is oppressive.
2. The solution is not "going back" to a prior level of technology since at no time in the past has technology not been oppressive.
3. At the same time, progress in a single step toward a new world cannot be made using the technology at hand. (I find it very confusing to believe that you can "win" a revolution using guns purchased or stolen from the reaction.)
4. Nor will the new world show any evidence of the present technology—mutually exclusive by definition.
5. Technology as a way, a pattern of thinking, for dealing with the world, must be fundamentally changed.
6. Changes can begin to be made using the technology of today and the past in creative ways—i.e., using those forms of technology which show or permit to grow those patterns which will be the foundation of a new world—community, sharing, etc.

Aspects of previous technologies are very appealing. I've worked using a circa 1830s iron hand printing press (an Albion), which operates much like the wooden presses of 100 years before. It is very possible for a group of people to work together—talk, sing, and play in the rhythm of the effort—something impossible with the newspaper and other presses of today. But working in the old patterns is not non-oppressive; it's that things are different.

I do not believe that technology has ever been anything but a system of domination. At the same time technology is constantly in flux and it seems to discard less perfect systems of control for more perfect ones within the social context. It may be possible these discarded or out-of context technologies can be less oppressive to the user. The reverse is also true—they may become more oppressive.

What brings this to mind is thoughts of your own publication's production and pleas for aid in the form of supplies in the past several issues of the official Sandinista newspaper, Barricade. It seems they cannot print without importing everything—sponges, plates, phototypesetting paper, film, lithographer's type, and so forth. In the midst of preparations for invasion by the U.S., they have already let themselves be invaded in a most insidious manner. They are totally unable to exist without the U.S. system and such companies as Union Carbide, Gulf & Western 3M, etc., who manufacture their supplies.

You, yourselves, are caught in a similar bind—using IBM equipment and so forth. It is a contrast to our village's newspaper, which is produced using late 19th Century technology—linotype for typesetting. (I've seen machines go for \$50, which is a sight less than a modern typesetting set-up and uses a recycling system so materials cost isn't a constant drain.) The press is an old flat bed, used from the 1830s on, and does a very creditable job. It can be either handcranked or motor driven. The paper is usually fed by hand. The size is similar to a broadsheet. Photographs and artwork can be reproduced using photoengraving processes which you can do if you can produce negatives.

All in all it is a self-contained system operated with volunteers and paid labor with little cash outlay for materials besides paper, ink and cuts. Besides being self-contained it is also controlled more directly by the producers.

I'm not exactly suggesting a change in production for you, but instead showing, I think, an instance where technology can be fiddled with and perhaps give greater freedom. At the same time it is good to be aware of the effects of that technology on its society; the print shop of the turn of the century was not a happy and healthy place to work in by any means. Chemical poisoning hazards are also something to be aware of...

Your TV statements seem self-evident—yet people seem unwilling to do without. The same for meat. My response to meat-eating parallels E.B. Maple's. (See the Letters section in the Fall 1984 FE.) I quit eating meat not for health or similar reasons but because of the attitudes surrounding wholesale slaughter and its neatly packaged result in the grocery. Have you ever heard a truck full of hogs heading for the slaughterhouse?

To go beyond TV, and give up reading—books especially, newspapers would be easier—is hard for me to consider, but certainly the language I imbibe every day is as deadly to my “soul” as any TV or radio program.

I’d be interested in something by you on the automobile. Coming from Motor City it would be an interesting contrast. I’ve felt for some time that by sitting behind the driver’s wheel you accept a terribly false impression that you are in control. Of technology, life, time, everything. I never felt I was in control, so I don’t drive. An interesting benefit is the loss of another ID to carry. I’ve gotten around for years on my library card ok.

Cheers,

George Monk

Yellow Springs, Ohio

CLARIFICATION

Fred Woodworth, editor of *The Match*, P.O. Box 3488, Tucson AZ, wrote recently to inform us that he was not the author of a letter which appeared in our last issue signed “Tall King Az Hole.” We are sorry if this created any confusion.



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