

# Fredy Perlman: An appreciation

George Bradford (David Watson)

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It is with great sorrow that we announce the passing of our friend and comrade, Fredy Perlman, who died while undergoing heart surgery in Detroit on July 26, 1985.

Fredy Perlman escaped Czechoslovakia as a very young child just before the nazi takeover, thus barely avoiding, in his words, that “rationally planned extermination of human beings, the central experience of so many people in an age of highly developed science and productive forces...” His life experiences and his ideas were framed within that context—the life-crushing machinery and the varieties of human response.

In his view, the problem of freedom is always present: one might learn from the pogroms to resist or flee Power, or be brutalized enough to become a pogromist oneself—a possibility which he poignantly explored in the above-cited essay, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom” [FE #310, Fall 1982]. But since nothing is determined, the possibility of a life-affirming response is always at hand.

A great part of his theoretical and practical struggle was an investigation of this process of alienation and fragmentation by which human beings surrender their autonomy and participate in their own suppression. In essays such as *The Reproduction of Daily Life* and his book on C. Wright Mills, *The Incoherence of the Intellectual*, he wrestled with this problem. In his own life as well he resisted fragmentation and “rationalized incoherence,” writing emphatically in the book on Mills, “What is involved is a location of oneself and a definition of reality which makes coherent action possible.” Just as much for factory workers, clerks and students as for intellectuals, it was necessary “to get to the root of what is happening and what might be done about it.”

Radical means “at the root,” and such was the radical perspective of Fredy Perlman. As in theory, so in one’s practical activity, one’s life. The problem was to exercise one’s freedom appropriately to become a “masterless” human being, to overcome the split between thought and action. “The first step away from social schizophrenia,” he wrote, “is to unite one’s split self, or at least to define the conditions for one’s own coherence.”

The seriousness with which he confronted this problem led Fredy to many important decisions, notably the decision to leave the United States in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis, the decision to abandon his university teaching job at the end of the 1960s, and to create, with his wife Lorraine and others, Black and Red and the Detroit Printing Co-op.

Fredy was often an animating influence in our circle because he was courageous enough, masterless enough, to follow his instincts. He was not afraid to recognize the consequences of his discoveries. In the 1970s he moved beyond marxist theory and anarchist historiography, beyond technology, beyond modernity, to a rediscovery of the primitive and of primitive human community, and to the understanding that capital is not the inevitable outcome of some “material” historical development, but a monstrous aberration. Nevertheless, still central to his concerns was the problem of freedom—why people choose to remain passive participants in their own alienation, why they continue to reproduce the conditions of their own misery. In 1969 he described the power of Capital as residing in the daily activities of living people, and the result of this power: “Men who were much but had little,” he wrote in *The Reproduction of Daily Life*; “now have much but are little.”

By the early 1980s he had taken up the question of just how much people once were and how much they had lost in his *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* In this feverishly written book he portrayed the original dissolution of ecstatic human communities and the emergence of a repressive leviathan—"a cadaverous beast excreted by a human community," "an Earthwrecker," "a carcass of a worm...its body consisting of numerous segments, its skin pimpled with spears and wheels and other technological implements." The complicity of people in the theft of their living energies is described not so much theoretically but in vivid, concrete images: "the entire carcass...brought to artificial life by the motions of the human beings trapped inside."

For Fredy this was not some historical puzzle, but our own dilemma. Leviathan, he emphasized, "is not exotic. It is our world." And the question remained: "Why do people do it? This is the great mystery of civilized life." What had begun as a burden, he offered, has become "like a heavy armor or an ugly mask," more and more difficult to remove, fused to the individual, "emptying its victim of life, of ecstasy. The empty space is filled with springs and wheels, with dead things, with Leviathan's substance."

But the same energy which helped Fredy to describe the horrors of civilization made it possible for him to summon up the forces of life and expectations of hope. It had become clear to us all that the "harsh material conditions" before civilization had not been as harsh as we are told, and that the phrase "men who were much but had little" described a life in which "material conditions" were secondary or irrelevant to a kind of possession, "not possession of things but possession of Being," as he wrote in *Against His-story*. Fredy's ideas were becoming more subtle, just as his voice was becoming more poetic.

The rediscovery of the primitive signaled a return to nature—to our own nature—and a new (for us) direction for freedom. He wrote, "The state of nature is a community of freedoms"—a garden of earthly delights "filled with dances, games and feasts." This was no less than the affirmation of paradise on earth—both in the remote (and suppressed) past and as a dormant, yet an imminent, promise. It is obvious that such provocative declarations would elicit a negative response from the present world, the same scorn, we should remember, that was shown towards witches, pagan dancers, and native communities as they were put to the torch. Rationalism, the brutalized metaphysics of slaves whose insides are filled with springs and wheels, cannot bear the possibility of paradise. "They apply the word 'wild' to the free," Fredy wrote. "But it is another public secret that the tame, the domesticated, occasionally become wild but are never free so long as they remain in their pens."

The imminent capacity to become wild, to transgress the limitations of our pens, allows for hope. "I take it for granted that resistance is the natural response to dehumanization," he observed, "and, therefore, does not have to be explained or justified." And the potential is immediate, a presence within all of us, since people "never become altogether empty shells. A glimmer of life remains..."

Fredy went from brilliant theoretician to singer, from political activist to intuitive rebel. His desire was what it had always been, but he was approaching those archaic rhythms which are now forgotten but which beat deeply in us all. Something was coming to fruition, like the sense of craftsmanship that went into his creations, but it had grown in him for many years, from the beginning. His play, "Plunder," written in 1962, makes this clear. In that morality play on imperialism, a young Indian, Nathuram, approaches his artisan friend Krishna, who is making bowls, and asks him scornfully, "Still making bowls and dreaming of Bhagavad Gita! When will you get married, Krishna?"

"I am married," replies Krishna, "and you are a beggar. I am married to Earth. Each bowl is made of earth-substance. I take the substance in my hands, give it roundness, my imagination peoples it, and I have a world—a roomful of worlds. How can you say I am not married? Earth is my bride; with her I conceive worlds, ages of men, of animals, of loves, adventures and deaths. Here, look into this bowl, Nathuram: do you see the fierce armies facing each other, and in the center Arjuna, struggling with his soul—should he fight, or shouldn't he? And on this one, Nathuram, is India herself, rising like a sick man, shaking the plague from her body."

"Can you cure my brother's sickness by telling him to shake it off?" asks Nathuram. "Teach me, Krishna, teach me to feed my brother's family by showing them there is food on it. If the soul of India is sick, can the sickness be shaken off on bowls?"

"Nowhere else, Nathuram. I cure India's sickness with bowls. You could cure India with cloth."

India is the world, and Fredy fulfilled his curative role with stories, essays, plays, music, and by his participation in many anti-craic and communitarian projects. Our community, being far greater than the sum of the individuals

who make it up, is much diminished by his untimely passing. But cloth remains to be spun. Two days before his death, he was working on a Black & Red project, mailing out a book of poetry. He would, and we should, expect no less of those of us who survive him.

This appreciation of Fredy's work is appropriate for the *Fifth Estate* to the degree in which this publication is a forum of radical social thought. As an accurate expression of the feelings of our community, it says next to nothing about our friend, about his physical presence among us, his preposterous jokes and pointed stories, the sound of his voice, his handshake and his unique way of greeting people, and so many other aspects of his life. This is what is difficult, impossible for us to write, but we have all sensed as we hold his books and discuss his ideas, that somehow they stand on their own, and we've still lost our friend.

Someone expressed a similar feeling at his memorial, that whenever Fredy and Lorraine had visited him and his companion in the distant city where they lived, there was always the feeling, at the conclusion of the visit, that not enough had been packed in, that there was still so much more to say to one another. He had that same feeling after Fredy's death. Another friend added that he had suppressed the urge to embrace Fredy and tell him he loved him the day before the surgery, since it would have sounded too pessimistic, like a farewell. Now he said it for all of us.

"There is no death," an old Indian once said, "only a change of worlds." We remember a stone that Marilyn and Lorraine brought to him on that last trip to the shores of Lake Huron, a stone with mysterious markings. Were they the bodies of the ancestors, or a message meant for him? We remember passing the stone from hand to hand there in their dining room, feeling its energy. Fredy couldn't cross over, couldn't traverse the dunes to the Lakeshore; his heart was already failing him. So this message-stone made its crossing to him: a gift, a small mirror of paradise, a shard of Dream Time. We think long and hard upon this stone and we can feel him. Now he has crossed over, and rests in a garden conversing with stone spirits.

And we carry him with us through all our days, like a small and lustrous stone.

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- Works by and about Fredy Perlman in *Fifth Estate*
- Works by Fredy Perlman on The Anarchist Library

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Fifth Estate #321, Indian Summer, 1985

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