

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1985

Crude Argument

Dear Fifth Estate:

Generally, the Fifth Estate is great. Articles are principled, well reasoned, sometimes poetic. But the review of Noam Chomsky's book by Pat Flanagan (see Chomsky, *Freedom & Truth*, FE #320, Spring 1985) ended with Flanagan's advocacy of "intolerance of the intolerant," or more specifically, intolerance of what someone judges intolerant.

I fail to see how this is but the crudest argument for censorship. And Chomsky is criticised for advocating free speech for everyone? Why is the Fifth Estate wasting its time and space printing articles that have such shit?

Anyway, keep up the (generally) good work.

Love and rage,

Crystal

Santa Cruz CA

Chomsky Responds

To The Fifth Estate:

Thanks very much for sending me copies of the *Fifth Estate*, which I read with great interest and appreciation. I'm really glad to know about the journal. About the Middle East issue (see FE #310, Fall 1982)—which was really excellent—you might be interested in a more recent book of mine, *The Fateful Triangle* (South End press, Boston), which covers the "Peace for Galilee" operation among other things.

About Pat Flanagan's review (see Spring 1985 FE), I had seen it—we're good friends, though we disagree about many things, including the content of the review. His two main criticisms are, in my view, untenable. As for the "apologetic" character of our refusal to take a position on the unknowable—namely, the scale of killings in Cambodia—that is simply nonsense in my view.

Our two volume work concerned US policy and ideology. On Cambodia, we reviewed just about every opinion there was, and compared the evidence available with the conclusions drawn from it—exactly our topic. We tentatively suggested that the estimates by US intelligence were probably the most accurate—as has proven to be the case, now that the facts are pretty much in—but refused to be more definite than that, adding, at the end, that it may be that the most extreme-condemnations are correct (despite the fact that they were pure fabrications), but as a simple matter of logic, that would not effect our conclusions on the propaganda system. If our refusal to take a stand on matters that could not be known is "apologetic," then so is Pat's: he also gives no estimate, even today, when the facts are pretty clear. This is all nonsense in my view.

On the Faurisson matter, his own conclusion is simply horrendous. He states that Faurisson's right to freedom of speech should be denied—meaning, denied by state violence, though he is careful not to be clear about the meaning of his words. The context was a Stalinist-style “falsification of history” trial, in which the French courts established the right of the state to determine official truth and to punish deviation from it. I find this scandalous; Pat finds it just great.

As for his argument that this is such an extreme case that we must overcome libertarian principles, simply consider the consequences. Faurisson is regarded almost universally as a crank. Surely, he doesn't control the media or scholarship, and his opponents (virtually everyone) have ample opportunity to refute him. His significance is about as low as one can imagine. If even he must be silenced, then what do we conclude about people who say dangerous and destructive things and who really have power?

For example, Zionists must surely be silenced by his standard, and of course virtually the entire profession of journalism and scholarship, with its apologetics for US atrocities. Naturally, all of these people are far more dangerous than Faurisson.

Pat doesn't draw this conclusion, but this is a whopping failure of elementary logic. That, of course, is the path that one is led down as soon as one begins to adopt Stalinist principles about the right of the state to determine official truth and punish deviation from it. Again, all of this is scandalous. Pat and I have corresponded about this, and frankly, I do not understand why he does not see it—or why you should publish such things, though that is your right of course.

Noam Chomsky
Cambridge MA

Ana Coluthon responds: The most obvious answer to why we printed Pat's review of Chomsky is that to have not done so would be intolerant of those intolerant of intolerance.

More seriously though, we just don't have the same absolutist position toward civil liberties that Crystal and Noam have. Given our limited resources, our support is restricted to our friends, comrades and co-thinkers. If a nazi gets busted out of a university, tough shit; if an anti-authoritarian is under attack, full support.

We certainly don't advocate state repression against anyone, but when those who defend it and whose political project is based on its extension fall victim to its heavy hand, our only response is to laugh at the irony of it all.

Title Jarring

To the Fifth Estate,

It was a pleasure to read the latest *Fifth Estate*. Haven't seen a copy in years. F. Perlman's comments on Mythology of the White Proletariat in a footnote don't really need any reply, although it was good of you to offer. (See FE #319, Winter 1985, “The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism.”) Perlman's criticism was only inaccurate in the sense that we view society differently, not that it was unfair in any way.

While the cover article on the Bhopal disaster was good, the title headline was jarring. Had just been complaining to friends about the liberal-mushy-b.s. style of humanitarianism that's been popular lately. What ticked me off was the Michael Jackson-Lionel Ritche lyrics to the Ethiopia Aid record, “We Are The World.” You know, where all the millionaire pop singers warble: “We are saving our own lives.”

No, they aren't saving their lives (which are in no danger). They are promoting their p.r. image. So when I looked at the headline: “We All Live in Bhopal,” it stirred my concern for accuracy. “We” do not all live in Bhopal, just as “We” are not all starving in Ethiopia. Your article makes this clear, by the way, and is quite accurate.

Also, a caption to a graphic with F. Perlman's article in the 5th says that Jomo Kenyatta was “the leader of the Mau-Mau”. Jomo Kenyatta was not the leader of the armed rebellion, and the term “Mau Mau,” although widely used, is a nonsense term, coined by British police that literally has no meaning. That is, it isn't a Kikuyu word at all.

It's as if you captioned a picture of the Detroit Riots: “Activity by followers of Roy Innis, leader of the Niggers.” If you see the point. The Kenyan rebels named themselves the “Kenya Land & Freedom Armies”. Mau Mau is so widely used because the victors write the history, as the Indians can tell us.

Take Care...

J.S.
Chicago

FE reply: The caption in question was written by the Fifth Estate staff and not by the author of the article. Thank you for the clarification; it is not an error we would want to go uncorrected.

Act First

Dear FE,

Re the Sojourners Pledge of Resistance, I'm glad to hear more about planned resistance to an invasion (I first heard about it during Frances Moore Lappe's appearance on PBS's "Late Night America" last fall), but nonetheless I wish that radicals would take the initiative and act before such an invasion.

Unfortunately, only all-out carnage is an adequate catalyst for some folks. And, if Chomsky's theory is right and the Reagan regime decides to kill the revolution and its ideals through slow economic strangulation, rather than invasion, the radical community is left with no adequate response.

In solidarity 'n good cheer,
Julia Morrigan
Peterborough, Ontario

Ortega's Trip

To the FE.

A comment in your "Nicaragua and Reagan's Big Lie" (see FE #320, Spring 1985) bothered me. It seemed to carry on and perpetuate that lie by saying "By the way, Ortega certainly needs some advice on public relations: couldn't he have made a phone call to Gorbachev?"

Why shouldn't Nicaraguans be able to travel to Russia anytime they wish? The Ghandis from India do—at least there is no Washington backlash. It wasn't Ortega's first trip (the third this year, I think), nor his last. Should it matter?

By implication, what is happening is that Nicaraguan leaders are committing stupid acts which will force "us" to invade them (a paraphrase of one state department spokesperson's comment).

Ortega could go anywhere and it would be the same bullshit. The same domineering control of individual's actions by a state.

One thing about Nicaragua that has been frightening to me is witnessing a change evidenced in the past year's Barricada's. Subtle changes and some not so subtle have been taking place—and I think that another revolution is becoming ossified. The Sandinistas seemed to become attached to an already existing revolutionary impetus. Their programs often mimic those which were created during that radical moment by committees and neighborhoods—but are inflexible, bureaucratic—miniature spectacles. These seem to be slowly taking over.

George Monk
Yellow Springs, Ohio

Gotta MOVE

Dear Friends,
Please renew my subscription.

I have a compost pit, and some junk in my yard. My neighbor's dog sometimes barks late at night, also they have a loud stereo. We hope the cops don't burn down our neighborhood.

When they told you the robots would work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, did they tell you the robot installers are expected to work those hours also?

Keep the faith,

Dave
Ypsilanti

Abortion Can Be Beaten

To Billy Mick and the FE Collective (copy to each):

I read the short article in FE #320, Spring 1985 about your dispute (see Bits of the World section). I have some thoughts to share with you on this.

My libertarian side says I should be pro-choice, that whatever my personal feelings on abortion are, I should not allow myself or anyone else to force others to behave the way I or they aspire to behave. On the other hand, my gut feeling is that abortion is wrong, that these are human beings being murdered, and that it should stop.

This is a false dilemma though, since the real issue is not choosing between freedom and defense of the defenseless, but what is it that moves women to choose abortion. Abortion exists because people feel they cannot care for or provide for children in a satisfactory way under the present conditions of society. I think most women who choose abortion do so because they feel they can't have the baby for financial, social, or personal reasons. But why can't they? Because having children in our society is a real ordeal if you are alone, poor, without the support of friends and family, competing in the wage-slave labor market, etc. If we can free people from want and slavery, if having a child can be joy instead of anxiety, who will choose not to have children?

Some people may (this is a can of worms I choose not to open), but most will keep their children I think. I wanted very much to keep a child once, but my partner and I realized it was simply not realistic for many reasons, all of them connected with the issue of providing for the child and surviving ourselves. I wanted that child, and I blame capitalism and the state for forcing us to make such a terrible decision. It was more complicated than just being unemployed, but it's a long story.

Can we really ask mothers to hand their children over to the rich? Can we condemn poor, single mothers to living hell? I think not. On the other hand, do we want to see parents have so much power over their children that they can decide whether or not a child will live? Like the Viking men who would unilaterally decide to leave "undesirable" babies out in the snow? Can we be so sure that a fetus is only tissue and has no rights? If it is a question of a fetus not being a sentient being, why not allow "abortion" until the age of six months after birth? These are very difficult questions for me.

I think my position on this is that as anarchists we should take a pro-choice stance on abortion, at the same time explaining to people that women often choose abortion for social reasons, not just personal ones. There is tremendous pressure not to have children because our economic and social relations produce a situation of false scarcity. Anarchism can stop this pressure and then women can really make a free choice.

I have faith that not many will choose abortion when they are sure they can feed, clothe, educate, and provide medical care for their children, and be free from social abuse and stress. Let's stop squabbling among ourselves and work to take this pressure off these women. I know to Billy it must sound as if I'm saying "Let's tolerate this murder of innocents until some utopian future," but if we force our ideas on people we may as well call ourselves the "We Know What is Best for You/Big Brother Party," seize control, and force everyone to be good.

You can put your faith in your own superior wisdom and in dictatorship, or put your faith in the goodness of people. Abortion can be beaten without taking away people's freedom, without terrorizing trapped and already frightened women. Let's go after the people who keep this mad system functioning and not its victims (and each other).

I hope this helped,
A Comrade

E.B. Maple responds: Much of what you say regarding the reason some women choose abortion seems accurate, but your contention that those who do are responsible for "human beings being murdered" confounds my sense of biology and constitutes a slanderous insult to those women who have chosen to terminate their pregnancies. A fetus, being a dependent part of the pregnant female, has never been recognized in any regard as having a full

human character until its recent emergence as a political issue raised by the Catholic-centered section of the New Right.

Our item in Bits of the World was not so much about abortion as about those within the anarchist milieu who have been sucked into making common cause with this basically anti-woman movement. To even evoke the “term “allow” in regard to abortion suggests either the desire to have the State forbid the practice through repressive laws, or worse, the use of force and harassment against those who hold a different view of biology and morality.

A further disturbing note is that the so-called Libertarian Socialists, Box 1751, San Francisco CA 94101, who sent us the anti-abortion material which began this dispute, have taken responsibility for producing the SRAF Newsletter, an occasionally appearing, non-edited, anarchist zine. In what appears to be a gross violation of the trust the SRAF production group assumes, these Socialists have turned the non-sectarian publication into their personal, anti-abortion newsletter. The FE recently received a mailing under the SRAF return address exhorting other anarchists to join the anti-abortion movement as well as a number of preposterous contentions about options to abortion.

We have written them a letter of protest regarding their misuse of SRAF's name and we urge others to do similarly.

For Tolerance

Dear FE,

Enjoyed your exchange with Lazarus Jones in the latest FE, which is passing strange because I think I'm on his side. I think the debate on technology is one of the things that keeps me reading the FE, because you're not afraid to defend your point of view and at the same time not afraid to look at others.

Maybe I can throw in my own 2 cents worth on the problem of waste disposal. Neither the technocrats nor the back-to-nature types (let's take these as convenient labels and not necessarily the best ones) know what to do about it. Maybe the answer is for both to tolerate the other, thus giving us more chances at a solution?

There are problems to work out at the boundaries of tech and nature enclaves, but with respect for one another, perhaps both systems can coexist? Isn't tolerance for one another one of the cornerstones of anarchy?

Mike Gunderloy

Medford, MA

Saying No To War

To the Fifth Estate,

I'm writing in praise of George Bradford's article "Looking Back on the Vietnam War, History and Forgetting." [Web archive note: This article first appeared in FE #320, Spring 1985. With an added Introduction by Richard Drinnon it was reprinted in FE #346, Summer, 1995.]

I was moved and now maybe moved enough to involve myself more in stopping the U.S. and my generation from complicity in turning Central America into another Vietnam (if it's not already: CIA, military advisors, military aid and draft registration here at home, which directly affect me, being draft age). It's scary to realize how little knowledge and understanding of the Vietnam war I have, and even more frightening to realize I have somewhat more than a lot of people my age. The section I was most affected by was section 8, America's Next Vietnam. I feel guilt, shame and rage (even though I'm not directly at fault, though we all are by remaining complacent) for what's being done to the people of Central America and their cultures and for what's been done by our society, in all our other Vietnams (North America, Micronesia, Philippines, etc.).

And worse yet, if George Bradford feels he hasn't done enough, then where does that leave me? I realize now we can't waste time; we have to get over our feelings of futility, and, in Bradford's Words, "rally our spirits once more to blockade the beast, to stop its murderous career."

On the 25th of May (Memorial Day weekend), I received my fourth letter from the selective service threatening to prosecute me for failure to register for the draft. As a small act of resistance, my own personal blockade, I'm sticking to my decision and saying no.

George Bradford's brother

Mundane

To the Fifth Estate:

I was very impressed with your article on the Vietnam war in the Spring 1985 FE. A moving assessment and profound indictment of America's genocidal war. Best of all, it further elucidated the FE perspective—America at war with the Wilderness and its "savage" inhabitants.

Having said this, I'd like to make one small criticism. In your effort to expose the utter murderous insanity of that war, I believe you neglected the "rational," calculating, economic side of America's involvement. The U.S. didn't become involved only because Americans have a penchant for extermination—any more than the settlers killed Indians just for the sake of killing them (although that undoubtedly was a significant motivation).

One cannot separate the extermination of the Indians from the stealing of their lands—both were desired by the settlers. Likewise, one cannot ignore the economic imperialist underpinnings of the Vietnam War. That this imperialism is itself irrational—a kind of sublimation of aggressive urges whose goal is deeply insane, destructive—this is an indisputable point. But I think you've inadvertently reduced imperialism to its most visible effects, its "excesses"—ignoring its day-to-day operations, the more "mundane" exploitation undertaken by corporations in the Third World, etc.

You end your article with the image of new wars, new holocausts being undertaken. Doesn't that image, true as it is, neglect the less spectacular—"merely" exploitative, rather than genocidal acts of imperialism? One of the weaknesses of the "peace" movement has been its blindness to this exploitation. In its Campaign against "war," it accepts a dubious "peace" that leaves the causes of war intact.

Also, your biotech center-section was superb. Your introduction was ingenious: it tied together Baudrillard and biotechnical developments in an illuminating way.

What seemed in Baudrillard to be almost metaphoric analogy—media as a sort of genetic code, DNA as a model of "cyberneticized social exchange," "uniting the world under the aegis of a single principle"—is revealed as more than a principle. The engineered molecule, the engineered seed—simulation incorporated into the genetic material of nature and the human species—this is truly the end—the end of all referents, the end of "nature" as a substance separate or separable from society. Of course, before the complete triumph of simulation will come the end of all life on earth. The revenge of inorganic nature, I suppose we could say.

By the way, MacSheoin's articles really illuminate what we mean by the word "technology"—not an aggregate of machines, but the "totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency... in every field of human activity" (Ellul), and the convergence of these methods in an all-encompassing way of life based on the loss of human agency. A project of total control, culminating in biological engineering and the absolute and irreversible mutation of the human species into technological instruments.

Bob B.

Numazu, Japan

1986 Celebrations

Dear friends of anarchy:

May 1986 marks the 100th anniversary of the Haymarket Affair. May Day draws its significance from the brutal suppression of the workers' movement culminating in the [state] murder of five Chicago anarchists. It is part of our history.- Haymarket was the perfect example of state and capital recognizing Anarchism as a serious threat to their power. It is a day for revolutionaries to remember because although our numbers may be small now, as we

grow stronger, another Captain Bonfield will appear and once again we will be threatened with courts, prison and death.

1986 is also the 50th anniversary of the Spanish Revolution. The 50th anniversary of Haymarket drew thousands here to Chicago including comrades from Spain.

Recent months have seen several liberal and soft-core commie groups announce their intentions of perverting and distorting the true meaning of these events. It is the purpose of "The People Yes" and other such assholes to portray Spies, Parsons and Lingg as social democrats, reformers and merely unionists and advocates of free speech, not REVOLUTIONARIES.

To the end of remembering our history and bringing together as many comrades as possible, to meet, conspire, swap stories, exchange propaganda and ideas, as well as disrupt the liberal bullshit, we propose the following: a worldwide gathering of anarchists in Chicago, April 28-May 4, 1986.

In order to bring about this event we propose the following course of action: organization and announcement of a May Day '86 Preparation Conference in Chicago, Thanksgiving Weekend 1985. We hope and suggest that your group endorses and participates in both these events. We are further suggesting the building of both events by getting as many Anarchist groups as possible to participate in and endorse these events.

We now have a total of 11 supporting groups. A sure 20 but maybe as many as 50 are now talking of coming next May... We are fairly sure that comrades from Italy and England are coming to Chicago. For anarchy and revolution,

Chicago Anarchists
Impossible Books
Box 102, 1200 Fullerton
Chicago IL 60614

Divide & Conquer

Dear Fifth Estate,

Hurrah for your pieces on biotechnology! That genetic engineering stuff has had me terrified ever since the research first began in the mid-seventies. I'm glad to see that there is at least one voice out there which will not be silenced by the accusation of "Luddite"! It takes great courage to be an iconoclast in a society which worships technology. Even the most militant anti-nuclear activists are afraid to confront the obvious dangers of biotechnology in the hands of the corporate capitalists.

But I wonder how you respond to radical feminists like Marge Piercy (*Woman on the Edge of Time*) and Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex*) who see test-tube babies as an important key to woman's liberation? I have deep misgivings about this concept but since I am not a woman, I do not feel qualified to pass judgment. Is there a woman who can address this issue?

For my own part, I find the recent trend toward motherhood-glorification in the feminist movement somewhat disturbing. I recognize the vital importance of the work that has been done to reclaim reproduction from the medical industry through the revitalization of midwifery, natural childbirth and birth control. But in an overpopulated world, it is clear that breeding should be the activity of the few, not the many. I constantly urge my friends who seem to be in danger of settling into domestic squalor: make revolution, not babies!

I also attended the 1980 Black Hills Survival Gathering which was the topic of your next letter. The writer rails against the atmosphere which prevailed there. I must admit that the compulsory "good vibes" of the New Age crowd there did get pretty obnoxious, as did the walkie-talkies and patrols of the Indian security force.

But my uncompromising criticism did not keep the Gathering from being a seminal influence in the growth of my political consciousness. As a temporary and highly diverse experiment in cooperative living, a certain degree of friction was inevitable. The forbidden status of drugs and nudity are understandable when one recalls that the Lakota people who organized the Gathering are forging a delicate alliance with local conservative ranchers in the struggle to save the Black Hills from destruction. It's a question of respect, not authority.

Do we North American radicals realize how spoiled we are; sitting around in coffee-houses, attacking each other in lofty, sanctimonious diatribes as we drink Brazilian and Salvadoran blood.

No, do not silence your criticism or compromise your skepticism. But neither allow it to play into the hands of the Enemy's tactic of divide-and-conquer.

Bill Weinberg
New York, NY

Ruby Lips replies: The two books, written by "radical feminists," to which you refer in your letter, were written over ten years ago, and I am not familiar with the current thoughts of either Marge Piercy or Shulamith Firestone. I will, however, quote from a review in FE #305, March 18, 1981 of *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*, in which their books are mentioned:

"Somehow pregnancy and child rearing does not sit well with a growing number of feminists who appear to view motherhood as barely even an option these days preferring instead a futuristic view which bases their 'liberation' on a technology which will allow them to do away with motherhood altogether.

"This new age of Techno-Feminism, in which we will all be re-programmed, like computers to fit the needs of a society which worships the machine above all else, is best exemplified in Shulamith Firestone's book *The Dialectics of Sex: The Case for a Feminist Revolution* (1961). In her book, Firestone says about pregnancy: 'It is barbaric...the temporary deformation of the body for the sake of the species...it isn't good for you...it is not fun.' (page 198-99)

"Firestone also sees the necessity of a 'feminist revolution' based on advanced technology and 'cybernetic socialism.' The future she proposes will include the development of artificial reproduction and 'the eventual elimination of childhood, aging, and even death' with a final culmination in the achievement of 'universal consciousness.' Her view of progress brings to mind a '50's science fiction movie in which humanity had finally evolved into nothing more than a small group of very large heads containing the knowledge of the centuries, the need for their bodies having long fallen by the wayside. One thing they maintained, though, was 'complete control.'

"Modern technology is currently perverting our land, water and air; its application to the restructuring of human biological functions can only result in a grotesque parody of our species.

"Rather than redesigning ourselves as if we were machines to fit the needs of an increasingly inhuman environment, we should be demanding the affirmation of our humanity in every way possible. We may otherwise find ourselves programmed slowly out of existence."

fifth Estate

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