

Anarchy in the Age of Reagan

Two Views for Our Friends in Italy

Fifth Estate Collective

John Zerzan

The two essays printed here were written in response to a questionnaire sent out by the Italian anarchist magazine, *Rivista anarchica*, investigating the present situation for North American anarchist and libertarian groups and publications. *Rivista anarchica*, a monthly publication, is publishing a special issue on "Anarchism in America," and asked each group to describe its point of view and activities, and to respond to the following two questions: 1) In the "Reagan era," what do you see as the important areas of social conflict in North America from an anarchist perspective? and 2) In your opinion, what are the most relevant differences between the radical movements of the 60s and the radical movements of the '80s? Each question was to take about 20 to 30 lines. We've never been famous for brevity, so we did our best to talk about our concerns in the space allotted. The other response is from Anti-Authoritarians Anonymous (P.O. Box 11331, Eugene OR 97440), long-time collaborators of the FE whose articles have frequently appeared in these pages. We thought that the responses to *Rivista anarchica* would be appropriate for our 20th Anniversary issue as an indication of where we're at and what we're thinking.

from the *Fifth Estate*

Renew the Earthly Paradise

The evolution of the FE has been characterized by a willingness to re-examine all the assumptions of radical criticism, which has led it away from its earlier libertarian communist perspective toward a more critical analysis of the technological structure of civilization, and toward a criticism of the trajectory of western civilization combined with a reappraisal of the indigenous world and the character of primitive or original communities. In this sense we are primitivists, recognizing, along with American critical anthropologist Stanley Diamond, that "Our idea of primitive society as existing in a state of dynamic equilibrium and as expressive of human and natural rhythms is a logical projection of civilized societies and is in opposition to civilization's actual state. But it also coincides with the real historical condition of primitive societies. The longing for a primitive mode of existence is no mere fantasy or sentimental whim; it is consonant with fundamental human needs, the fulfillment of which (although in different form) is a precondition for our survival."

We are not anarchists per se, NO pro-anarchy, which is for us a living, integral experience, incommensurate with Power and refusing all ideology.

Where Power commands, anarchy remains a latent potentiality, with sporadic manifestations of freedom and revolt. Our work on the FE as a project explores possibilities for our own participation in this movement, but also works to rediscover the primitive roots of anarchy as well as to document its present expression. Simultaneously, we examine the evolution of Power in our midst in order to suggest new terrains for contestations, and critique in order to undermine the present tyranny of the modern totalitarian discourse—that hyperreality which destroys

human meaning, and hence solidarity, by simulating it with technology. Underlying all struggles for freedom is this central necessity: to regain a truly human discourse grounded in autonomous, intersubjective mutuality and closely associated with the natural world.

On the Present Situation

The “Reagan era consensus”—actually a propaganda campaign of the U.S. ruling class to recoup its lost ground in the face of stunning defeats and setbacks in Indochina, Iran and Central America, and the deteriorating conditions of its economic-technical infrastructure—already shows signs of fray and fracture.

Capital is attempting to regain its hegemony in three domains: first of all in the re-legitimation of the imperial “frontier wars.” The history of the U.S. empire is the history of such bloody conquests, which have opened up new areas of exploitation while diverting revolt in the established imperial centers. While patriotic war hysteria has to some degree been successfully manufactured and mobilized by the Big Lie apparatus, real support for military adventures is much thinner than the mass media suggest—which has so far kept the U.S. invasion of Central America from becoming an all-out war. Over a half-million military-registration evaders and resisters, along with scattered but significant anti-war actions throughout the U.S. against nuclear and Central American policy evidence a burgeoning disloyalty to the aims of the Empire.

The second domain is that of individual freedom, particularly sexual freedom. An entire constellation of pseudo-traditional values is being touted by a sophisticated propaganda machine to suppress women’s freedom, nonconformism and open sexual expression. This program is combined with a white racist “americanism” which not only burns books and bombs abortion clinics, but is linked to Reaganite moves to push back the minimal gains made by racial minorities in the 1960s. As conditions have worsened in society, some gains have been made by the right, but many people are not willing to swallow this reactionary program—instead, its assault on freedom is another source of rage against authority.

The third domain is the highly publicized “high tech revolution.” Advertised by every wing of capital—from the entrepreneurial and militarist right to the social-democratic re-industrialization planners to the cybernetic technocrats of the left (including even “anti-authoritarians” and anarcho-syndicalists)—as the source of global salvation, this strategy is no more than a reorganization to salvage a crumbling global capital. It parallels, in fact, the original development of the computer, which arrived “just in time,” as its advocates always claim—in time to save and stabilize that “pentagon of power,” in Lewis Mumford’s words, the technological-military-administrative megamachine, or statified industrial capitalist system, which emerged from the holocaust of World War II.

This high tech promise is being increasingly revealed as the nightmare it actually is—a series of technological catastrophes a la Bhopal, a deepening control over the worker, and a further degradation of labor and of nature. It is increasingly seen as a toxic assault on the possibilities of freedom and human community. A visceral loathing for technology and for work is pervasive, though it remains seething below the surface of social life. The boredom and madness can be seen in frenetic acts of violence and despair, but there is also an emerging synthesis of post-modern anarchy and the primitive (in the sense of original), Earth-based ecstatic vision. Civilization is being seen for what it is: shackles, a pillory, a gallows—slavery at home and conquest abroad. It is no accident that the modern critique of the technological megamachine coincides in its conclusions with the prophecies of the native American shamans and dreamers. People are today less willing to bear the burden of civilization, to wear its barbed armor—they see it as intolerable, and are yearning for the land. The Indians say that this world is doomed, and they are right: the land is beckoning, reclaiming us. Not patriotism to the Empire, not work-commodity culture, not the mediatized simulation of human meaning, not any of it will stand in the way of freedom. A new discourse is just beginning to be born—a discourse which will eventually become a song, a song which will put an end to History, so that earthly Paradise can be renewed.

from Anti-Authoritarians Anonymous

Present Day Banalities

When contestation publicly re-emerged in the '60s, after virtually a half-century of dormancy, its militancy often betrayed a very underdeveloped sense of vision. Since World War I and subsequent depression and wars, hot and cold, this explicit renewal of the negative found itself on a new terrain, and the spirit of revolt only scratched the surface before being diffused by a variety of factors.

From the end of that decade a significant deepening in the erosion of the dominant values and orientation has taken place, escaping the notice of those who forget that political struggles are predicated on more inchoate (even spontaneous!) social developments. Hence, a few words are in order regarding that which should be taken for granted as the minimum intelligence for any understanding of the 1980s. To those whose comprehension of the "Reagan Era" is limited to lamenting the demise of the '60s, an apology for disturbing their slumber.

By way of introduction, two sets of contrasts. In November 1965 a power failure darkened New York City, but the law-abiding restraint of its citizens was evident and widely praised by authority; internalized repression seemed to be wholly intact. When a similar blackout occurred there in 1977, however, "the party began from the minute the lights went out," as one participant described it. Massive and inter-racial looting commenced, even to the point of the setting up of distribution centers of free goods, and the only reported violence was suffered by those few police foolhardy enough to try to restore "order."

When John F. Kennedy was shot in 1963, the immediate reaction of many was shock and tears. Upon Reagan's shooting in 1981, when it wasn't known whether he would survive, the laughter of children became the topic of scores of journalistic commentary.

Even anecdotally, then, the superficiality of the notion of a real ascendancy of Reaganism is immediately suggested. The efforts to introduce prayer and a biblical anti-evolution doctrine into the schools and to do away with abortion and environmental protection are, of course, in their failure, one measure of that, as is the November '85 Roper poll which found that only 4% respect Jerry "Moral Majority" Falwell.

When the tendency is toward a deeper and deeper disillusionment with the American Dream, a picture of America that was invented in Hollywood half a century ago cannot be successfully promoted and will only emphasize the extent of disaffection by its effort. The slightly more modern angle of the Right's propaganda is the re-invention and elevation of the acquisitive, middle-class careerist, the Yuppie, whose cultural dominance has been loudly trumpeted. But already the articles detailing the "dissatisfaction, anxiety, and physical problems ("Life of a Yuppie Takes a Psychic Toll," U. S. News & World Report, April 29, 1985) of the upwardly-mobile are deflating his tiresome success image.

Vast Non-Compliance

Likewise, the once-touted return of martial spirit under Reagan has largely been exposed. Most important in this context was the vast non-compliance of young men in the early '80's to the instituting of pre-draft registration requirements. The failure of the military to attract enlistees is seen in the enormous recruiting campaigns currently needed and in articles like "Honeymoon Over for Volunteer Armed Forces?" (*U.S. News & World Report*, June 10, 1985.).

A crucial parallel involves the world of work, where the use of polygraph or "lie-detector" tests by employers has now passed the one million per year mark. A 1984 survey of merchants by American Hardware Mutual Insurance found that "80% of store owners think their employees are more likely to steal than ten years ago." Ward Howell International, a national employment agency, disclosed that false resumes and misrepresentation of job qualifications in general, based on their 1985 study, is very widespread and on the rise.

Meanwhile, fast food chains are reportedly recruiting older workers at retirement homes because they can't find enough teenagers to fill shifts—despite the fact that 17.7% of U.S. teens are out of work. Along with these data are reports that drug use in the workplace has never been more prevalent, and a November 1985 announcement by the Labor Department of the largest single year increase in work-related injuries and illnesses since such figures began to be reported in 1973; the 11.7% jump resumes an earlier trend and can be reasonably linked to refusal of work as a major factor.

The vitality of the revolt against work syndrome is seen in the steadily growing popularity of participative management systems, which recognize that the "workers themselves must be the real source of discipline," as a July-

August 1985 Harvard Business Review offering put it. The industrial relations literature is full of evidence that capital requires the voluntary participation of employees for its stability, if not survival. The unions, of course, provide the most important agency for this cooperation; the “landmark” 1984 contract between the United Auto Workers and General Motors-Toyota, for example, increased “access to plant decision-making” (*Christian Science Monitor*, June 27, 1985), and was also the first time a UAW dues increase was negotiated with the boss rather than voted by union delegates, which infuriated auto workers.

From a social control perspective, the judgment that the management of information will be more efficient than what prevails in a non-computerized economy establishes the foundation of the Information Society. But the Scientific Management movement of the ‘80s, a neo-Taylorist monitoring of typists, phone operators and all the rest by computers, is providing no easy road to a satisfactory productivity. The overwhelming response is one of anger, as humans resist fitting into the new, rationalized future, and Silicon Valley, its new mecca, offers less a picture of gleaming success than one of pollution and lay-offs.

The possibility that the impoverishment of daily life might even render work relatively satisfying, due to the vacuum of substance elsewhere, is rendered unlikely by technology’s progressive degradation of work. There is no area of authenticity, no place to hide, and no one can miss this commonplace. The bumper-sticker, “The worst day fishing is better than the best day working,” remains true, as does the also popular “Different day, same bullshit.”

Eroding Allegiance To Work and Pay

Anguished commentaries about declining civic virtue are not confined to such data as the steadily decreasing percentage of registered voters who vote, or to miscreants on the job, but also draw their content from a most irresponsible consumer culture. One favorite in this vein deals with increasing shoplifting, including the stories of the complete non-involvement of shoppers presented with very visible incidences of stealing. The near-universal placement of electronic alarms on store exits testifies to the extent of the phenomenon, as high tech vies with eroding allegiance to the work-and-pay rules.

The present record level of the prison population, the growing state lottery mania, and the unchecked growth of the “underground economy” all testify to the shift in values. Concerning the latter subject, figures from the Internal Revenue Service show that tax cheating now costs the government over \$100 billion a year as compared to less than \$20 billion at the end of the ‘60s.

A deeper, visceral disaffection can be detected among the young, in terms of remarkable behavior patterns. *Psychology Today*’s January 1985 cover story asked, “Why Are Middle-Class Children Setting Their Worlds on Fire?” The alienation registered by wide-spread child arson is also evident in two November 1985 Gallup polls which showed that 12% of teenage girls suffer symptoms of anorexia nervosa (self-starvation) or bulimia (binge-and-purge syndrome), a much bigger figure than had been previously estimated. In June 1985 national Center for Disease Control statistics were released that demonstrated a jump of 50% in the suicide rate of young men aged 15 to 24 from 1970 to 1980.

A September 1984 Gallup poll had found that only 23% of U.S. teenagers do not drink, the lowest figure recorded to date by pollsters, and *Family Circle* and the Parents’ Resource Institute for Drug Education reported in September 1985 that their four year study indicated a spread of drinking and drug abuse into the grammar schools.

During the same week of 1985, Bishop James Malone, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, declared that new emphasis on teaching sexual morality is “urgently needed,” and U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett urged conservative activists to join him in a fight to restore a “coherent moral vision” to America’s public schools.

Reality offers little or nothing to support the idea that even during the high noon of Reaganism has there been any renewal of faith in the promise of American life; quite the contrary, the increased enrollment in college business courses notwithstanding. The idealist illusions of the ‘60s are mainly dead, and the failed counter-revolution of the Right is equally irrelevant. If the future is unclear, it at least seems obvious that a corrosive skepticism has dissolved much of the old foundation for repression and lies.

One could reply that this negation has only left us even more miserable; look at the growing levels of emotional disability, as reported not only by the National Institute of Mental Health but by a glance at the covers of the su-

permarket tabloids, with their continuing attention to depression, loneliness and stress or the great numbers of TV commercials devoted to pain relievers, alcohol treatment centers and the like.

There is even a refusal of literacy taking place, with about 30 million illiterate Americans, and some have discussed this in terms of an intentional aversion to the whole of modern life. Horkheimer's later pessimism could be cited to echo current references to entropy and despair, "the feeling," as he put it, "that nothing further can be expected, at least nothing that depends on oneself."

And yet the psychologists seem to agree that we all have much rage inside, and there is, arguably, less than ever for authority to rely on for our continued suppression. A senescent order seems to have no cards left to play, beyond more technology; nothing in the ideological pocket, nothing up its sleeve. As Guy DeBord wrote in the late '70s, "it no longer promises anything. It no longer says: 'What appears is good, what is good appears.' It simply says 'It is so.'"

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