

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1986

Natural Abortions

To "A Comrade" c/o The FE:

I am fed up with the "murder of the innocents" argument re: abortion. (See Letters, FE #321, Indian Summer 1985).

Nature murders the "innocents," i.e. fertilized cell clusters, by the billions each and every month. These natural abortions are flushed down the toilet without fanfare by sexually active women whose bodies nature finds not prepared to carry the cells to term.

Is this a tragedy? Let's not be ridiculous. Cell clusters are not babies. They may have the potential to become babies in a receptive body that wishes to bring this event about, but they do not have rights that are equal or superior to those of their hostess.

Penelope Gumon
Philadelphia

TV Downstairs

Dear FE:

Just got a copy of your Indian Summer issue and was impressed as usual.

The photo on page 3 (of the government agent sneaking a tv into a setless house) was especially on target. I retired to my room tonight to read because one of my roommates brought a tv downstairs to watch a baseball game.

Now I won't have to deal with it unless I need to leave my room—to go to the outhouse. Keep up the good work.

Love & ducks,
Boog Highberger
Lawrence KS

Refuse to See

Dear FE Friends,

Despite the many valuable points made by Richard Grow in his letter, he never really faces my criticisms of the authoritarian aspects of the Black Hills Gathering in 1980. (See last two issues) In fact his apologetics for censorship, the restriction of communication and organization, and the power trips of the "security" people there is exactly the

kind of uncritical fawning (over the untarnishable image that native americans have for certain segments of the radical community) that nauseated me at the Black Hills Gathering.

I am quite willing to show respect for native elders—or for young native americans for that matter. But respect for customs, rituals, etc. is not the question here. The question is why so many of us tolerate overtly authoritarian practices while trying to ignore their existence or even apologizing for them. The romanticization and idealization of native struggles is certainly not justification for such lapses. If the manipulative and authoritarian practices of those who organized the Black Hills Gathering had been used by white liberals, or socialists, New Ageists, feminists, anarchists, etc., there would have been widespread criticism by any anti-authoritarians present—what is so different about native americans?

Why are they off-limits to criticism? Are they so superior that they can engage in authoritarian practices without being themselves authoritarian? Or are those who refuse to see the authoritarianism only fooling themselves?

In case you have any doubts, I have no desire to put down native americans in any way, any more than I would want to criticize any european-american ethnic groups. In fact I have a great respect for their cultures and their resistance—neither of which I wish to belittle in the slightest. It's just that, like the cheerleading for the Sandinistas in Nicaragua by certain self-proclaimed “anti-authoritarians,” the uncritical affirmation of everything done by native americans stinks of ideological blindness and the willful cultivation of self-delusion—neither of which will help us get anywhere worthwhile in the long run.

Keep up the excellent work—and never let down your critical guard (in the FE that is!)

Enjoy life—smash reality!

Lev Chernyi

Columbia, MO

Religious Garbage

To the FE:

The latest FE is excellent. I enjoyed all of it. I'm reading F. Perlman's *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*.

I like it very much. Also, I know most FE readers are perhaps (I am) tired of the spiritual debate. As an atheist person, I say fuck all that religious garbage.

I could be wrong somewhat but I think spirituality is a grand cause of mental decay and perhaps insanity. Surely most religious people have their heads up their asses most of the time, and I can't help but blame many of them for the present state of modern society. This does not mean I am intolerant of them, but I suppose I really would be if it came down to it.

For anarchy,

Steve S.

Pacific, MO

Seduced by Computers

Dear People at the FE,

What is required now is not a leap “forward” in consciousness, nor any motion based on the idea that humans have to evolve into any higher consciousness. The point is that this so called new or higher form of consciousness is already within us. We did have it once, and we lost it (the Fall?). The greatest danger is that we'll be seduced by new, non-human forms of consciousness (computer technology), and be led off towards a disastrous end.

The other thing I want to mention is concerning slogans. Why do you say that “Our desire for the defeat of U.S. policies in Central America often leaves us dependent on leftist slogans?” And you say you'd prefer to have good libertarian slogans instead. I think slogans are pretty useless really (and I exclude a thing like “We all live in Bhopal,” which is much more powerful for being what it is—a statement). Besides, slogans have such a dangerous history and we can't possibly compete with the greatest and most successful of them:

“Ein volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer!”...“All Power to the Soviets!”...“Arbeit Macht Frei”...“Your Country Needs You!”...“Death to America”...“Death to the Shah”...“War is peace (from 1984)”...“Down with Lin Pao”...Victory to the PLO ... to the IRA ...to the NLF...”

The power of language, in the form of a slogan, is something I agree with John Zerzan about, when he said in that article about language that it is inherently oppressive, because it reduces reality and experience to a tiny fraction of what it is. It is fixed and frozen in one form and then used to make peoples’ thoughts and actions uniform and controllable.

Language works in this way in the case of slogans anyway. Also, slogans are used deliberately to mobilize people; they are usually negative, political (about conflict and power situations), often opportunistic (designed to take over leadership of popular movements, making them anti-this or that and not positive); they are rarely prophetic or optimistic (exceptions like “We shall overcome”). They’re totally mindless and fascistic when chanted by crowds of people. In short, I don’t like them.

Down with slogans!

Best wishes to you all,

David Lonergan

Alexandria, Australia

Origins of Alienation

To the Numberless Readers of FE,

Ironically, despite John Zerzan’s attempts to blame time, language, and now number for the development of our current state of intense and intensifying alienation, I can’t help but see his underlying attitude towards these integral modes of abstraction as rather too Manichean itself—and in fact, as another symptom of our perilously alienated position.

The attempt to locate the origins of alienation in certain well-defined places is both an appealing, yet dangerous project. It is appealing because the megamachine of which we have tended to become mere expendable accessory parts is obviously anchored more securely in some areas of our lives than in others, and it only makes sense to track down these areas so that they may be more thoroughly isolated in order to attempt to sever the grip that the megamachine’s talons have on us. But it is dangerous if we lose sight of the totalistic nature of our alienation, and its permeation of every aspect, factor and moment of our lives to some degree.

If we concentrate only on its most dense concentrations it is very easy to fall victim to the trap of constructing an overly abstract and dualistic resistance—a resistance which confuses the most overt “symptoms” of our predicament with the underlying disease which gives them birth. Such a resistance will almost inevitably multiply our despair because the resulting vision of what needs to be changed becomes so overwhelmingly immense, and the entire blocks of experience which it is implied must be amputated become nearly inconceivable.

Like the haunting and depressing vision of 2001: A Space Odyssey, in which our sterile, life-denying culture is portrayed as resulting in total from the first violent use of a tool; like the thinkers who despair of ever effectively confronting alienation because the separation and division involved in the very act of thinking is for them the origin of alienation; or like those even more profoundly pessimistic philosophers who see the origin of alienation in the first “defiant” organization of “dead” matter into primitive, living cells; John gives the impression that all is hopeless, though in his case I think this is not so much because of what he says, as of how he says it.

Ultimately, I think it is not the process and practice of these modes of abstraction that have created our alienation. Rather it is a fundamental vulnerability within the abstracting modes of our experience to which we have increasingly fallen victim that has undermined and deformed our ability to abstract without continually losing ourselves in the process.

The abstractions of time, language, and number are all examples of potential weaknesses in the structure of our experience which have lent themselves to their colonization by alienation, just as our upright, bipedal posture has created an inescapable potential weakness in the structure of our anatomy, lending it to an endemic prevalence of

back injuries and back pain. Thus we need not condemn the practice of abstraction out of hand for our alienation, just as we—don't usually condemn our propensity to stand on our own two feet for our aching backs.

Despite my misgivings about John's underlying attitude though, I have no wish to subtract anything from the brilliance of his compact synopses of the "natural" histories of these modes of abstraction. His studies may be derivative, yet the originality of his syntheses of historical, anthropological and philosophical material is unquestionable. As John says, "It may well be that this inquiry is essential to save us..."

Certainty we cannot calculate the damage that has been done to our lives by the subservience of number to alienation, to the detriment of its potential for a more erotic and playful arithmetic of desire. Need I add more?

Don't forget to smash reality!

Jason Macquinn

Columbia MO

Labor As A Norm

Dear Fifth Estate folks:

I read through FE #319, Winter 1985 cover to cover. While there was much I found interesting and even stimulating, I still found myself disturbed and a bit brought down. The two long articles ("We All Live in Bhopal" and "The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism") both have rather depressing, near-despairing tones, though the former makes a slight tip of the hat at the end to the possibility of a different way of being.

Near-despair has been the dominant tone of the Fifth Estate for a while and it made me wonder why. I'm no Pollyanna; I'm quite aware of the destructive power of civilization, but I wonder if you might not overestimate its power due to the situation you choose to live in.

In the first part of Detroit Seen, you speak of the megamachine's reproduction of itself and the apparent heightened resistance to it. Yet, further on in the same column, you state rather 'nonchalantly that your own participation in this reproduction is your reason for being unable to publish as often as you were considering.

As far as I'm concerned, it would be better that indolence (active rejection of the work ethic) be the reason for infrequent publication than your acceptance of wage labor as a norm in your lives! You criticize San Francisco anarchists for not adhering to "libertarian principles," yet if you allow wage slavery to keep you from doing something you'd rather do, how is that any better?

You can't claim that survival requires it as I know plenty of people who survive quite well without accepting long-term wage slavery. True, we are still somewhat dependent on the system we seek to destroy, but at least we aren't wasting most of our time reproducing the megamachine.

Did you ever think your despairing outlook may be partially due to the way you've chosen to live? Having jobs, living in the belly of one of the major centers of industrial society can't help but squelch imagination and vision, can't help but lead those who hate civilization to despair or at least come close. You want to find a spiritual basis for opposing civilization, but how can you find that basis in the midst of factories, skyscrapers and cement when the spirit you seek is that of trees, wild animals, rivers and rocks?

Feral Ranter

Newport, Oregon

George Bradford responds: Your argument—more like an accusation—is based on a false premise: that the dominant tone of the FE is despair. We don't agree. In the issue you cited we wrote that in spite of the irrefutable power of the megamachine over us and in our own lives, "our capacity to maintain our ideals, our dreams and our resistance seems heightened." This, in Detroit—admittedly, a city which can be very hard to live in, though none of us are to be found at the end of the spectrum where survival is truly the hardest. Detroit, actually, is no different than any other modern, industrial (and especially declining, "postindustrial") town. It is grim, looted and burned out in places by the slumlords, bankers, and their victims. The city is polluted, noisy, and choked with cars (though, interestingly, Detroit's economic decline has ironically lessened some of these aspects of industrialism—in some places there are huge expanses of fields where once stood buildings, and wildflowers and birds are reinhabiting the areas around abandoned factories). To survive in Detroit one generally needs a car and a job. Add long; hard

winters and its share of grey days, and you've got the makings for despair. Yet, like all people in all places, we have deep family and community roots here, which even leaving could not sever. And a long time in this place has taught us to appreciate certain places—along the river, or nearby lakes, for example, and even some neighborhoods—in a way that may be hard to explain to an outsider. In any event, to go to the woods and leave this behind, when our perspective is a global one—how would that change anything for us? Aren't the trees in the remotest forests dying from acid rain, aren't the exploiters and the landgrabbers, the stripminers and loggers infesting even the most sacred places of this hinged continent? How do we stop contemplating that? Despair can reach anywhere, along with the megamachine itself.

As for work—while many staff members work at part-time jobs, aren't the details of all our lives secondary, and repetitive? Aren't we all basically in the same, listing boat? Whether we are working or not at any given time, we are all the victims of work and the society of work.

This isn't despair, but a fact of existence within capital. As even you concede, everyone, including you, is bound to this repressive world. Why do you presume that we aren't living as free as possible for us within the present circumstances, just like you? Or can you honestly claim to be living fully your desires?

Of course, we don't discount a move to the country; we have discussed it, and would welcome some practical suggestions and proposals. Nevertheless, we would never give up completely on the cities. Not only are many of our loved ones here, it may be in the urban centers where the revulsion is most acutely felt, and where the real exodus from the machine could begin. Besides, ruins can make fabulous playgrounds.

A final word on despair. If, to paraphrase Marcuse, the expression of nihilism can actually be a genuinely humane response to a monstrous world, so also can despair represent a protest and condemnation of intolerable conditions of life, and suggest the possibility for hope. So where despair is expressed herein, no explanations or apologies are forthcoming.

A Giant Step

Hello FE:

I'd like to respond to Tomas MacSheoin's article on biotechnology which appeared in FE #320, Spring 1985.

To begin, we must remember that "genetic engineering" has been around, albeit in a simpler form—the ordinary cross pollination done to develop our domesticated plants—since at least the origin of agriculture. It has been said, for instance, that the native people living in the Andes Mountains had, over the course of centuries, selectively bred over a hundred potato varieties (including most all colors). And this prodigious effort was not all that exceptional.

Throughout the world a constant, enormous, and meticulous experimentation has been carried on by nearly all indigenous peoples (and without the impetus of capital).

Today, we have tremendously benefited from their gradual, centuries -long process of discarding the inferior strains of wheat, etc., for we now have a relatively few outstanding varieties that we accept as "standard."

However, if, as it's being asserted, all the more mundane field methods will be supplanted by laboratory research where the desirable cells will be directly constructed, who could see this as anything but a giant step forward in research methodology?

While not particularly familiar with the research done on animals or vegetables, I'm quite acquainted with the work being done with nut and fruit trees. What they look for is not just their productivity; instead, they seek varieties which also exhibit high quality taste, disease resistance, desirable growth habits, hardiness to winter cold, and, hopefully in the future, even a measure of resistance to insects—all qualities that anybody would endeavor to develop, not just lackeys bending their wills to capital.

And the claim that we're going to get shy of diversity certainly doesn't hold up to reality in regard to the apple.

True, at the turn of this century there were many varieties that can no longer be found today. But we may get an idea of what these forgotten types were really like by looking in a classic turn-of-the-century book: *The Apples of New York*, Volumes I and II by Beach.

Along with photographs and detailed descriptions of quality, this veritable encyclopedia gives us a clear insight into why many of these old varieties disappeared, because those that have were nearly always the ones which did show themselves prone to disease, of inferior quality, or lacking in productivity. The old ones that were genuinely outstanding lasted.

It is, instead, a lack of motivation on the part of the grower to supply varieties that have no public demand, especially when he's selling the standard ones without trouble.

And here is the culminating point of this discussion: If we ever lose diversity, or have "life" taken control of by the agri-corporations, we won't have them to blame. It will be us.

If it happens it will be an astounding analogue to what happened to the small farm in the United States. For as Wendell Berry so aptly explains in his book *The Unsettling of America, Culture and Agriculture*, it was not a true necessity to be big that forced the small farm into what is now near extinction. The small farmer, operating without the large acreage and heavy machinery that came into vogue, only began to think one thing: he was missing out on the big profits that the government experts and everyone else told him were possible.

So rather than sticking by practices that had worked for him for so long, he became disheartened and abandoned a whole way of life to move to the city and become a wage slave. He allowed himself to be duped into thinking that money was the only measure of value. He found out otherwise, and if we permit ourselves to neglect our own instincts by relying on authority and money to dictate our tastes for us, we will also.

Jerry Bishop

Detroit

FE Responds: Frankly, the idea of a "giant step forward in research methodology" fills us with dread. As for comparing modern biotechnology with ancient horticulture and animal husbandry, that is similar to comparing a handmade spear to the Star Wars missile system.

In the case of the apple, look at Siegfried Giedion's treatment of it in his *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948), in which one gets the distinct feeling that the disappearance of many varieties was not any inevitable progress by which better varieties survived "weaker" ones as your letter suggests; nor can all of this be blamed solely on capitalist greed or consumer apathy. And farmers didn't simply decide to fold; they were forced off the land by technology and capital, summed up in former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz's comment, "Get big or get out—

As Giedion observes, "Mechanization forever altered the structure of the farmer...The narrow circle of home production is broken as soon as mechanization sets in. In its place enters dependence on the ups and downs of world trade." And, we might add, on the inertia of technology and the calamities it causes. We do, of course, agree completely with the spirit of your concluding sentence.

Critical Flab

Dear Fifth Estate folks:

Your preoccupation with imminent nuclear holocaust is reducing the quality of the paper; perhaps it was your indulgence with Christian pacifists several issues back that contributed to an unmistakable critical flabbiness.

Your latest issue includes an "Open Letter" to the "disarmament movement" which suggests it may be "tempting to downplay such issues as racism and economic exploitation (my emphasis). Yet they have much more to do with daily life in our communities (sic) " I can't believe you'd print this crap with a straight face after years of publishing analyses partially inspired by the situationists. Since you quote the S.I. elsewhere in the same issue, I suggest you consult their opinions on anarchist incoherence.

For example, Lynne Clive reviews a Guatemalan Indian woman's account of her people's struggle to preserve their indigenous, autonomous societies, and then someone else assures us that "no authentic radical libertarian tradition " exists in Central America. [See "Rigoberta Menchu: Native Guatemala Defends the Earth," FE #321, Indian Summer, 1985.]

Even your appearance has turned drab and uninspiring recently. Nietzsche used to appear on your cover, but last time it was a forlorn idealist with the words "No More War" displayed. This time your lead story had a title, "Reform or Revolution," that was tired seventy years ago when Rosa Luxembourg used it.

You describe yourself so earnestly as a “refractory community of conscience” opposing war in Central America along with a “handful” of other such communities. Aside from the polls which show a majority of Americans opposing U.S. intervention there, you’re overlooking what one disillusioned ex-Marine observed: war is the ordinary man’s most convenient escape from ordinary life. Only the radical transformation of ordinary life can short-circuit the war machine with a current of insubordination.

If there are only a “handful” (which I doubt) of us subverting the empire, all the more reason to sharpen the edge of our scorn, insist on exactness in our critical judgments, and satisfy tastes formed by disdain for the banal mediocrity of the Information Age. We need a great destructive effort that will succeed in corroding everything which prevents our living as masters without slaves.

Thank you for your words of farewell to Fredy Perlman. The picture of him on the last train to Paris in May, will resonate in my mind. Thanks for sharing your personal loss in such a moving way with those of us who knew Fredy only through his writings or correspondence.

For materialism that matters, for intoxicating spirituality,

George Will Seymour Slack

Eugene OR

Lynne Clive responds: You obviously expect a kind of editorial consistency and coherence which run counter to our entire project. There is much difference of opinion among all of us who work on and contribute to the paper. It’s a project that insists on a certain amount of flexibility and makes a certain amount of contradiction inevitable. The marvel for all of us is that we manage to get the paper out in spite of these differences.

Being “partially inspired by the situationists” does not demand a unanimous adherence to a situationist critique. We have no such bible. Situationist “coherence,” which was never fully realized even by the Situationists, is a legacy of their marxism, suggestive of a “party line.” Its scientific approach to reality is Western and rationalist because it denies ambivalence.

You speak of our preoccupation with nuclear disaster not only as if it were invalid, but also as if it were a recent phenomenon; yet we’ve written extensively on this theme since 1978–79. What took you so long to write? We’ve discussed various aspects of the nuclear issue and have maintained a critical stance on the anti-nuke movement while insisting on the connection between war and our daily participation in the megamachine. But we certainly are not afraid of discussing these issues with people who call themselves Christian anarchists or pacifists, people who share some of our concerns and have often confronted the state and the war industry in very courageous ways: This seems to offend some ideological creed you pay homage to.

You see a contradiction in two articles on Central America, but you take statements out of context and make some dangerous leaps. I wouldn’t use the words “radical” or “libertarian” to describe native Quiche village life or even their collaboration with the guerrilla movement. These are terms of western political discourse. Indigenous cultures cannot be scrutinized in the same way we analyze political movements. The two articles have totally different points of reference, but again, even if they contradict each-other, they reflect the varied interests and opinions of individuals.

You find our concern with the wars in Central America disquieting for two reasons: first of all, because the polls evidence a generalized resistance to intervention, and secondly, because we supposedly do not recognize that war can be used as an “escape” from every day misery. As for polls and statistics, it’s obviously very easy in the presence of pollsters to say no to war. This hardly translates into concrete and active opposition to the war machine, particularly given your comment which is one reason we engage in antiwar actions.

Even your contention that we overlook the phenomenon of war as an escape from ordinary and banal existence suggests that you’ve been reading the paper very selectively. George Bradford very clearly elaborated on the connection between war and daily life in “War Without End: A Response on The Freeze,” FE #310, Fall, 1982): “The lesson to be learned from the Falklands/Malvinas war is that a war is fought to divert a crisis in the legitimacy of the rule of capital and its institutions...Without the emergence of a conscious resistance to war linked to a resistance to capitalist institutions, the rage and the disaffection we see everywhere today will be channeled into support for military adventure, as it was in Argentina and Britain...A massive opposition must emerge, but in order to really stop war, it must move past the realm of politics and go to where the “first strike” has already taken place, in the

war-zone of everyday life, in the factories, offices, schools, in the unemployment lines and welfare lines, where that society which makes war and which thrives on war is reproduced by its victims.”

As far as our appearance is concerned, what is drab and uninspiring to you is often quite the opposite for someone else. We don’t all always like a certain cover—technical limitations, deadlines, last minute details, and physical exhaustion often force us into settling for certain graphics or headlines. Such is the nature of working within the confines of the media, even the “alternative” media, and this is where the contradictions often seem overwhelming for us. It is usually the entire collective process of working on the paper which we find rewarding, and the end product rarely, if ever, can convey the significance of that process.

You say that “We need a great destructive effort that will succeed in corroding everything which prevents our living as masters without slaves.” I agree with the message, but I don’t like your emphasis. I somehow connect this statement with your unfailing reverence for “criticism” and “critical thinking”. I see this civilization corroding itself daily and at every turn. I see a great destructive element within its own horrible body. We do need our own destructive (for lack of a better word) effort to combat leviathan, but we could also do with a little building up of our own, a little encouragement, some revelry, some dance, some of what Fredy Perlman called “nurturing contact” that “stimulates dreams.”

fifth Estate

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