

Letters to the *Fifth Estate*

Various Authors

White Rule

Dear Fifth Estate,

Without wanting to get involved in your mag too much, there is one criticism that I feel more important than whatever else I might want to say about it. It's where you say "South Africa is bound to fall in the next few years." (See FE Indian Summer, 1985, "South Africa: Reform or Revolution.")

While it's one thing to say that S.A. will never again be "normal" (peaceful) under a white regime, the imminent demise of white rule is a hypothesis to be explored, not a foregone conclusion.

Chris Shutes
Berkeley, CA

Three Poisons

Dear FE Comrades,

I wish to add my congratulations on staying around for twenty years, ten of them as an explicitly libertarian publication. I continue to take comradely exception with your views on the Middle East; as one who has lived and worked in that part of the world, it is my view that the "three poisons" of that region are imperialism, nationalism and religious superstition.

As these "three poisons" seem to afflict virtually all parties involved in the area, and pretty much to an equal degree, I find your uneven emphasis somewhat distressing.

Nevertheless, "Zionism and Jewish Ideals" by Patrick Flanagan makes a number of worthy points. (See FE Winter/Spring 1986) There will be no satisfactory solution to the problems of the Middle East until the various peoples of that area, Jews, Muslims, Christians, Kurds, Arabs, Turks and other parties kick out the superpowers, cast aside flags and superstitions, and embrace as the human beings they all are. But who in the region even calls for such an approach? Alas, very few, too few.

Spider Rainbow
Atlanta, GA

African Hunger

Dear FE:

Widespread hunger and starvation continue to be a major facet of daily life in Ethiopia, but they are not due to drought alone. Ethiopia is presently at war both within its borders (with the Tigrian and Oromo peoples) and with the neighboring countries of Somalia and Eritrea. The Somalia conflict has been a territorial dispute since the

1940s but for the past twenty-four years the Ethiopian regimes have attempted to suppress and colonize Eritrea and Ethiopia is now attempting to starve the Eritrean people into submission in order to acquire their land. The Ethiopian government spends a tremendous share of its national budget to maintain its aggressive military regime and to continue these wars, and feels that the welfare of thousands of starving people is secondary to the expansion of its military efforts. Thus these wars heavily contribute to the famine conditions.

Another important fact which should be recognized is the Ethiopian regime's misuse of food aid and supplies. Other than "target specific" organizations (Eritrean Relief Association, the Relief Society of Tigray), most of the U.S. aid to Ethiopia is dispersed directly through the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission of the Ethiopian government, where it is both sold in open markets and used to bolster the military regime itself. The government also uses donated aid to coerce hungry peasants into joining its military forces, to pay government agents and to feed the army—well-documented facts not usually presented by the U.S. media. Because of these diversions and abuses, both famine and war-related deaths have escalated since U.S. food aid began to arrive. U.S. aid is a direct causative factor in the intensification of famine conditions and the escalation of war in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa in general.

Drought is a major problem in Ethiopia and Eritrea. If the people were free to work their land, however, without fear of the destruction of their homes, their crops and their lives by the Ethiopian regime, the impact of the drought would be much less severe. The problems of repression and "resettlement" generated by the Ethiopian government have been thoroughly documented by the Paris-based Doctors Without Borders and by the staff of Adulis, a publication of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front. The International Food and Allied Workers Association further condemns the Ethiopian famine as a "political crime," a fact that should now be apparent.

All individuals and organizations concerned with assisting famine victims are urged to be careful that their efforts not be abused. Your decision to contribute should be done so consciously—the lives of millions of people are at stake.

Lois Sabo, David M. Taylor
Columbia MO

Nothing Ironical

Dear FE:

Here are some further thoughts on free speech, neo-Nazis, etc., from another "absolutist" civil libertarian. (See FE Summer 1985.)

When Ana Coluthon and company respond to state suppression of ultra-right views by "laughing at the irony of it all," I get cold shivers. Whatever happened to analyzing state use of power?

Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that the state wishes to augment its power by defining what is historical truth and what is not, and is casting about for an opportunity; it is hard to imagine a more motherhood-and-apple-pie issue than opposition to the neo-Nazi doctrine that the Holocaust never happened.

Everyone but the ultra-right can be expected to respond with loud approval to state harassment, and only the most fervent libertarians will protest. (Certainly, this has been the case here in Canada, where left and right joined in screaming for state vengeance against neo-Nazi propagandists Jim Keegstra and Ernst Zundel.) It's always safe to go after unpopular nut cases, and because they are nutty, nobody is likely to see this as the thin end of the wedge of state omniscience.

The Canadian public reserved its strongest hatred for Jim Keegstra, a high school teacher from small-town Manitoba who used his classes to preach about the "international Jewish conspiracy" and the "Holocaust myth." The outrage stems from his perceived betrayal of the hallowed authority entrusted to him as teacher of the young. No one, to my knowledge, has observed that in fact Keegstra had fulfilled the role of history teacher par excellence by revising history. After all, history and current affairs teachers across Canada erase the embarrassing (or enlightening) episodes of our history every day: the genocide against Canada's native people, the 1837 Rebellion (read: Revolution), the Winnipeg General Strike, etc. (not to mention recent events such as Canada's enthusiastic support of the destruction of Vietnam). This sort of revision goes unremarked.

There is a noble tradition of historical revisionism in Canada's schools; what is remarkable about Keegstra (who by all accounts was a sympathetic and hardworking teacher) is that he just happened to revise events contrary to the interest of the state.

It is also irksome to find, among those who genuinely wish to discourage anti-semitism, a total lack of imagination about means or tactics. Even those groups committed to communitarian values—anarchists, socialists, feminists—believe that your only options vis-a-vis the Keegstras of the world are either to sic The State on them, or to let them continue to preach hate to a captive audience (in this case, schoolchildren). Could the heart of the problem possibly be that the audience is captive, that teaching is an authoritarian institution? (This is, I hope, a fairly elementary observation.)

If this is the case, a communitarian response to Keegstra would involve recognizing that he is exploiting an already abusive situation, and therefore to work towards creating a libertarian learning environment in which students learn through their own exploration, accepting nothing on faith. Of course, doing that requires more effort than taking one individual to court. One is revolutionary; the other is not.

There is nothing ironical or funny about state suppression of freedom of speech, whether it is used against the right wing or not. Remember that the state never allows its power to diminish, but always acts to strengthen itself; and it can only do that by taking rights away from others. Repression invariably serves a political purpose.

As a result of the Keegstra/Zundel convictions, the Canadian state has convinced hundreds of thousands of its people that it is caring, anti-racist, and humanitarian. Now that's terrifying.

Julia Morrigan
Peterborough, Ontario

Ana Coluthon responds: I agree with your letter, but I'm not sure what you think would have been a more appropriate response from me, other than finding it ironic that those who adore and covet the power of the state get ground up' by it I certainly don't support state attacks on anyone, not even fascist scum, but also I can't imagine anti-authoritarians joining their defense committee. I have only a limited amount of energy which I try to save for support of those who want to abolish the state, not extend it.

A Waiting Critique

Dear Fifth Estate:

Refusing the notion that dominated life is a given of the human condition involves our wonder at when and in what form it began, the better to conceive of redeeming it.

Life in pre-history has been radically re-examined by anthropology since the 1960s, and the FE has been aided in its critique of technology by this revision (which sees Paleolithic life as definitely not characterized by scarcity or brutalization).

But so many questions remain, most of which have not yet even been formulated clearly. Is the complete abolition of the division of labor necessary to dissolve alienation? What might this look like? I have mused about an unestranged existence prior to and in opposition to the categories of time, language and number, but this is perhaps only a crude start, at best. (See FE, Vol. 18, no. 2, Vol. 19, no. 1 and Vol. 20, no. 2.)

Is cyclic time OK but linear time alienated? Spoken language authentic but the invention of writing the opening to the madness? How about magic and religion—were shamans fine but only priests oppressive? What of art? Or is symbolic activity itself the Fall from grace?

Christian Lenhardt observed that "domination is not only a permanent experiential catastrophe for those subject to it; it is also a catastrophe for consciousness: a blank spot." And yet aren't at least the potential elements of its origination there for our scrutiny?

I think there are others who hunger for more than what we already know. There seems to be a critique waiting for its necessary and immeasurable enrichment.

John Zerzan

Eugene, OR

Take Power Back

To The Fifth Estate:

Congratulations on reaching your 20th year. I hope you and all of us are still around in another 20.

I think out of all the anarchist papers I've seen in the past few years, you come closest to expressing the feeling of simple "this makes sense" anarchy which first made me decide that if I believed in anything politically it was anarchy.

At that time I was 17-years old and reading Kropotkin in the public library in Springfield, Mo., a good five years before I ever saw an anarchy symbol, which are now everywhere even in Olympia. There are definitely a lot of idiots around spouting anarchy this and anarchy that these days but somehow I think the real basic idea and feel of what anarchy is about is beginning to get through to a lot more people in Amerika than ever before.

For me personally, anarchy is "spiritual." A lot of people can't hack that word, and I can understand why, given the extent it is abused in our culture. I think intuitive, non-rational, or even irrational express what I mean by spiritual just as well. What it means is that we can't figure everything out, there are mysteries we'll never know, and some forces that are larger than we are. Such as the earth, which we are only part of. I think the only hope we have for this world to survive is to learn some humility; humility as individuals and as a species. Humility equals respect for ourselves, respect for all other living beings, respect for all of life. Respect is shown through responsibility for all of our actions, for their effects on other people and on all of life.

Every hierarchy, every institution, every system of authority somehow takes responsibility away from us, takes respect away from us, steals our power to use for itself. But it is still up to us to take our power back. The real power is with us, and with the natural world around us.

Anarchy, Peace & Ecology,
Pete Murney
Olympia, Washington

Whither Layabouts

To The Fifth Estate:

What brings us out on a winter night to hear music? On March 1st, we waited outside Alvin's Twilight Bar to get inside and join a crush of anonymous bodies in a crowded, smokey room. Young women clutching the Layabouts' "No Masters" album (See FE last issue for review) stood on the sidewalk with panic in their eyes: if only they had come sooner they would now be inside experiencing the euphoria and excitement provided by the music and listeners.

Have the words of the Layabouts songs penetrated—ever so slightly—the consciousness of these fans? Did they really come to ask the "stars" for their autographs? Apparently they did. Autograph seeking is accepted behavior in a world where pleasure is generally experienced vicariously. The drab isolation of an individual's life makes a Saturday night at Alvin's—even if it's just a "B" movie, or a put-down of a "B" movie—seem exhilarating.

Were the bodies inside really "anonymous"? Many of them knew each other. This gathering may be as close to a community as we can find. At Alvin's on Saturday night, we are a community of listeners. The volume of the music—live or recorded—keeps us from talking to each other. A conversation, an exchange of ideas, is out of the question.

This may be our community, but the only collective project I observed was the one carried out by the band members. (The activity of the bartenders and managers falls in the category of wage labor—the kind we're all familiar with.)

Of course, there are some rewards for the dancers. Dancing at Alvin's can relieve tensions, frustrations and chills induced from our everyday routine, but this activity does not give one a sense of renewal, a sense of comfort and

energy within one's body. Rather, my experience on the dancefloor confirms Walter Benjamin's observation that "The need to offer oneself to the effects of shock comes from man's adaptation to the dangers that surround him."

If the lyrics and critical perspective of Layabouts songs are a gourmet salad bar providing variety and nutrition, the form expressing their insights is a drab Dairy Queen. "The inhuman din of a factory floor" is Francis Pagnon's characterization of modern mass music. Harmonic and rhythmic innovation is rare. Creativity centers on special effects and—in the Layabouts' case—on the lyrics. The volume of the "art form" excludes all non-mechanical participation.

The musician-workers operate their machines. Through the speaker end of the machines voices don't sound like voices, guitars don't resemble in the least their archaic namesakes. Of course, drums are drums, even without high-tech amplification. Amplified, they evoke a deafening industrial shop. At work and at play we encounter the relentless, inflexible rhythm of machines.

The hypnotic results of these machine-inspired rhythms are hardly liberating. "Johannesburg" has the beat of Big Brother. It intimidates. The song's words may contradict the message of the rhythm but if one can't hear the words, the totalitarian message is not undermined. Even with the words, the liberating intent is belied by the inexorable rhythm. Though we applaud and respect them, the Layabouts offer us thoughtful content in a mindless form.

Although they are not always easy to carry out, the band's admonitions deserve our serious consideration. The songs' words debunk conventional responses and respected institutions and they challenge us to change our ways. A model for non-institutional activity is provided by the band itself; their large following in Detroit will be interested in the directions they take in the future.

Bess Carloff

Dearborn

Ralph Franklin, bassist for the Layabouts replies: I, too, have many problems with electronic/amplified music and share with you many of your questions as to the relationship between The Layabouts and the people who come to hear us, and how that relationship is determined, to a large part, by the all-encompassing volume of the music. Unfortunately though, the tone of your letter only acts to limit any real discussion of the matter.

The size of the crowd on March 1 and the ensuing line outside was as startling to the band members as they were to anyone else, and for us, have brought back to the forefront the lingering question of the direction of our group. The same question we asked ourselves when we first got together has now led to recent personnel changes, that will at the very least change the band dramatically or perhaps even determine the Layabouts' future to be that of history. Your remarks never attempt to take into account the complexities of the individuals within the band or those of the people who come to see, hear and dance with us.

You pose yourself as the objective observer with the power to see through the nagging contradictions of the spectacle. Your view of the "young women were there no men?] clutching the "No Masters' album...with panic in their eyes" is on the one hand valid—why are we willing to line-up for just about anything in this society?—yet so incredibly cynical and degrading on the other.

Is that all there was to it, mindless voidoids waiting to see the "stars?" And, if so, what was your reason for waiting in line? Were you the only conscious one there or just a voyeur along for the ride? Could it be that there was something more to your and the others' presence who came to Alvin's on that cold winter night?

As for community, there was quite an outpouring of community there that night. A community of people who were much more than listeners and wage-laborers, and who had much more in common with each other than just some anonymous bumping in the night. Certainly, there were those who came to just purchase entertainment, that's obvious, but there was also a large community of people who have been interweaving their projects (newspapers, politics, poetry, music, dance, theater, etc.), and their personal lives with each other for years, if not decades.

For them, it was a time to meet and to share in another project. A time to discuss, yes, even within the “inhuman din of the factory floor,” with themselves and the Layabouts, the dangerous contradictions of “rock” music, to discuss the same questions that you pose, but perhaps in a more positive—“What can we do about it” manner.

(I’d like to point out that although rock-n-roll does by the nature of its volume dominate the scene, it doesn’t necessarily cut off conversation any more than folk or jazz music. Many ideas have been exchanged in the backs of bars and clubs. Ultimately though, if someone wants in-depth conversation, one shouldn’t go where there is a performance of any type.)

Just quickly, the rhythms that make up “Johannesburg” are hardly “machine inspired.” In fact, it’s just the opposite! The rhythm is a traditional South African one entitled “Sha Sha Calor” and is much older than machines. Only the words are from the Layabouts, while the repetitious “hypnotic results” are based in a myth world and not our modern industrial civilization.

If the rhythms of “Johannesburg” are the “best of Big Brother” and a “mindless form,” then where do we go from here? If what you say is true, then we are left with the disturbing possibility that it isn’t just the industrial clamor of rock-n-roll that is inherently flawed, but even the rhythms of a life that is more in harmony with its surroundings...perhaps all music is flawed?!

Finally, I want to ask what you think the Layabouts should do? I personally don’t believe that the band is responsible for the lives of those who come to our performances (When they go home, do they play video games or consider revolution?) or that the form of our music is responsible for turning peoples’ brains into soft ice cream.

We do our part and have fun at doing it and are not “worker-musicians” who “operate their machines.” We are humans who try to share our fun and share in the fun of those who move with the music. Admittedly, a bar is not the most fitting place for fun, but since the demise of such community clubs as Easy Space, The Freezer Theatre, The Grinning Duck Club and The Un-Cooperative, we’ve found ourselves with fewer options, something that has also led to tensions within the band.

I’m not asking the above question in a snide manner, but in an attempt to bridge the gulf between the audience, who see the band as unapproachable, and the band who feel likewise about the audience. Only when we’re playing does there seem to be a link. Next time we play, please stop and say hello.

Note from the typesetter: Some of the individuals in the Layabouts are longtime active members of the radical community based in the Cass Corridor where many of us live, and have participated in myriad projects such as publications, antimilitarist activities, self-managed clubs, libertarian picnics, theater and more. As a group the band has been a locus for radical rebellion and nonconformism, having done many benefits (in community spaces and commercial bars) for radical projects, but also tending to draw a more aware, explicitly anti-authoritarian crowd familiar with their ideas and the subversive lyrics to their songs. Nonetheless, as Ralph concedes, this does not automatically refute the validity of some of Bess’ assertions. The scene at the bar that night, for example, was very disturbing, and had that very quality of anonymity and entertainment consumption associated with rock and roll bars that the Layabouts have tried very hard to overcome. It was an uncomfortable crush scene where many of our friends were unable to get in because of the crowd, where vice squad cops patrolled the interior and one FE staff member was thrown out of the bar.

The exchange raises the problem of the commoditization of culture by which even a group committed to convivial forms of communication is integrated into the spectacle, in spite of their desire to oppose it. Rock bands engender fans no matter what their message is; certain forms imposed by the culture

industry predominate. At that point no one not privy to personal contact with the group can take into account the complexities present in the individual motives of the musicians: the group is reduced to its spectacular image and consumed. The Layabouts make a strong effort to combat this process, but I think that given the tendency of r&r rebellion to be recuperated by culture production (institutions such as publicity and stardom, entertainment clubs, and perhaps the high tech instrumentation), it may be a never-ending battle.

All forms of media are flawed (including publishing projects like the FE), and the more mass appeal they develop the more alienating they become. But Bess should know by now that r&r scenes are at best places for dancing and mingling, not talk. If one wants such discussions, and more importantly, to participate in radical projects, it is necessary to make contact with those with whom there is a basis for affinity and collaboration and to begin a dialogue with that end in mind.

The Layabouts are still selling their record album, the proceeds going to food programs in the Cass Corridor, for \$7 plus \$1.50 postage c/o the DAILY BARBARIAN, P.O. Box 02455 Detroit MI 48202.

Dear Friends,

An experience I had yesterday has raised some questions in my mind, questions which are hardly original, but I thought I'd relate this experience to you anyway.

Yesterday's activity was a demo at the IRS building to express opposition to tax dollars going to aid the contras, then followed by a nonviolent blockade of the various entrances to the building. It was a pretty standard affair: a couple of short speeches by "progressive" city council members expressing opposition to US policy in Central America (and the bombing of Libya, speeches which related these acts only insofar as they were the acts of a crazy individual, Reagan) well-behaved demonstrators applauding vigorously, then a march to the IRS office, where some 30 people sat down for awhile and were then willingly arrested (only one even went limp) by also willing police. It was a smooth action, very much like others that not uncommonly occur here in Santa Cruz, and one that received the desired media attention. Everyone seemed pretty pleased by the whole affair.

Except me; the frustration and anger I felt during the demonstration gave way to depression and despair as I left. To be sure, I was glad that 150 to 200 people turned out that rainy day, and hope that, perhaps, this time the empire will not so easily be able to expand its genocidal, earth-hating activity. And I was moved by the feelings of camaraderie and communalism I witnessed, and know how powerful that feeling can be, having been arrested myself in a similar situation.

But I had a strong sense of *deja vu*. This was a protest I'd seen too many times before. Everyone played his or her part, acted out his or her assigned role, all the rules were agreed upon.

The activity of non-violence, which should be but one method of contestation, has become fetishized, converted into the only form of protest. With this has come the pressure, even the moral stance, not to do anything else, anything out of line with what the organizers have decided. Protesters reminded each other to keep moving, to keep the sidewalk clear. I've noticed a tendency to glorify those who oppose American hegemony: I heard a lot of "Viva Nicaragua!" shouts. The whole thing was an event, something outside the protesters' experience of the ordinary, something separate from their everyday lives, and specifically, it was a media event: it would not have been "successful" if the media had ignored it, had not made it into an image of opposition to be presented later to passive viewers.

It seems to me that the fact of being arrested, and being therefore formally in violation of the law, does not invalidate the observation that nonviolent CD had become an accepted, even institutionalized form of resistance which tacitly accepts the law and logic of this society, insofar as it fails to address the issues of power and the nature of technological-industrial society. Forms of contestation, I think, cannot be allowed to remain static, to harden into the "only" way; the terrain of struggle must be constantly expanded, and grounded in everyday life, in our subjective experiences of the world, if they are to be effective.

Perhaps none of this really matters, since the point of the action was a symbolic protest? I don't think so; precisely because it was symbolic, and because any symbol can be appropriated by Power, this is important. I also think that, say, bricking windows can be pretty symbolic.

American capital needs its empire, and I cannot see U.S. intervention in Central America or anywhere else as an epiphenomenon. The logic of imperialism, of colonization, of appropriation, is at the very heart of Leviathan, and let's not forget that U.S. civilization is really the culmination of the whole of the anti-natural, Death-cultural tradition that is better known as Western Civilization. As Stanley Diamond says in *In Search of the Primitive*, "Civilization originates in conquest abroad and repression at home." So, while I am glad that yesterday's protest took place, the feeling that I got from people that aid to the contras is as far as the problem goes upset me.

I suppose that I am asking, what does it mean to have a vision of a decentralized, communitarian society that lives in harmony with the earth? And pointing to the need for us to clearly define our relationship to such liberal/left coalitions as yesterday's. In mass gatherings we need to maintain our identities (for lack of a better word) as anti-authoritarians (generic catch-all—like you said in your last issue, I would not call myself an anarchist, though I desire anarchy, and shudder at the idea of anarchism), while offering the support we can and maintaining our own activities. As for symbolic protests like yesterday's, while I may be present, I don't foresee myself getting arrested—at least not for the planned arrests!

Mitchell Houston
Santa Cruz CA

fifth Estate

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/323-summer-1986/letters-to-the-fifth-estate>
Fifth Estate #323, Summer, 1986

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