

Critique of FE

Are we losing it?

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cited in this article:

The Decline of (Anti-)Western Civilization: A Critique of Fifth Estate, by Dan Todd, 27 pages, \$1.00 from New Rage, PO Box 11492, Eugene OR 97440

This rather cunningly written essay/dialogue expands on comments made by its author in a letter to the FE (see “Critical Flab” in Letters, FE #322, Winter/Spring 1986) in which he identified what he thought to be a generalized decline in the quality and critical coherence of the paper. And though I was intrigued by the title and welcomed such a discussion, the product of this critique was disappointing. Todd had simply taken two rambling, hastily-written letters I’d sent him and retyped them with a blow-by-blow, paragraph-by-paragraph response, thus creating a straw FE and knocking it down. But an exchange of letters does not add up to a critique of our ten-year effort.

As Todd’s published letter revealed, there was very little of anything he liked in our pages. His list of grievances included our printing a letter to the disarmament movement from an activist which partially suggested our own earlier criticisms, some differences in nuance in two separate articles on Central America, our “drab and uninspiring appearance,” the wording of one headline, some cover graphics, our failure to enlist in one side of a feud going on in California, and a kind comment made about a Canadian anarchist paper in a blurb on our book page. (The typesetter edited the last two because they seemed extraneous to Todd’s major criticisms.) The published letter was one of a series he sent denouncing our “really stupid contradictions” and “lack of imagination” in format, including lectures on choice of graphics, frequency of publication, size of the paper and length of articles. There was no irony intended in his assurance that his criticism was “essentially friendly, prompted by a desire to help you go further.”

What are Todd’s criticisms? Despite having made “a number of outstanding contributions to radical theory” in the last ten years, the FE has become a staid and bloated institution. It is “self-important”; “discriminating tastes” like Todd’s “find FE increasingly unsatisfying.” Trapped in the drudgery of journalistic and technical activity producing the paper, we have surrendered theoretical coherence. The paper has become drab and boring. Dialogues with christians, articles on war and nukes have led us to a “sloppy eclecticism.” Because we have limited ourselves to “moral indignation,” we’ve lost sight of that “completely radical undercurrent” going on everywhere which movements for social change either recuperate or impede. We lack a proper “insurrectionary style” because we “oppose this civilization rather than trying to supersede it.” We are undialectical, and because we edited his letter, we must be acting in bad faith, we must have something to hide. Finally, and central to his denunciation, we offend his taste. In fact, we have been superseded (presumably by his new project, New Rage), we’re unsalvageable, we may as well fold—in fact, he hopes we do.

Todd’s critique is byzantine and filled with charges, but since, as the situationists said, boredom is counter-revolutionary, I’ll spare the reader and limit myself to his central ideas. One is that the FE legitimates fragmentary oppositions to capital (though he admits that we’ve done much to critique such movements), by writing about anti-war and anti-intervention activity. This blinds us to an underlying, “documented rebelliousness” (as he wrote elsewhere) taking place everywhere—the genuine radical undercurrent. This argument flows from a perspective

articulated by Anti-Authoritarians Anonymous (PO Box 11331, Eugene OR 97440), on which Todd had previously collaborated, and which has had material published in the FE regularly.

Following the provocative insight of the situationists, that “Fragmentary oppositions are like the teeth on cog-wheels, they mesh with each other and make the machine go round, the machine of the spectacle, the machine of power” (Vaneigem), AAA has published many flyers along these lines, including one penned by John Zerzan, observing, “It may even be that militancy over pressing issues is the last, best diversion from what lies beneath all the issues—the emptiness of daily routines.” (See their pamphlet *Adventures in Subversion*.)

It may be that anti-war movements and other oppositional movements are the last diversion from radical transformation (and that the inchoate acts of rebellion and nihilism against which AAA contrasts them signal such revolt), but then again, it may not. It may be that we have to judge such oppositional movements in their context, that they might represent part of a preparatory development leading to more radical transformation, that they may also contain important currents of subversion. One should be wary of second guessing definitively the role that oppositional movements play.

The AAA perspective has troubled me precisely because from it one could conclude that the daily acts of work avoidance, shoplifting, spontaneous riots, and drunkenness documented by John Zerzan in the FE are “completely” radical (if such a thing were possible) while other acts of indiscipline such as smashing nose-cones, cutting down Navy antennas, smuggling refugees across the border, and interfering with weapons tests are irrelevant or even recuperations. There are a million and one reasons why people do anything from skipping work to blocking a recruiting office (how about skipping work in order to block a recruiting office?), and perhaps none of them is “completely radical.” Any such act reflects not only the possibilities it suggests for genuine transformation but also its limitations. If anything, it is a lack of arrogance which prevents the FE from passing final judgment on all political oppositions except where real manipulation and reformism go on. Todd, for example, smears all pacifists and anti-war activists as “peace creeps” (a term worthy of George Will or Joseph Sobran). But this attitude fails to see the ambivalence in such social phenomena, that in movements for social change the possibility for revolution rubs shoulders with recuperation and capitalist recomposition.

The same goes for many of the spontaneous acts of indiscipline described by AAA: work avoidance, for example, is only a statistic unless we examine the context, and the decomposition and alienation so evident today only pose a series of questions by demonstrating the intolerable character of contemporary life. Perhaps such phenomena have become a permanent feature of capitalism. Or perhaps shoplifting (which according to one recent study takes place mainly among middle and upper-middle class people), and work avoidance (which most likely also occurs among cops, corporate bureaucrats and other defenders of the order), could themselves be forms of decompression which function to keep the ship afloat. Work avoidance in order to consume alienated leisure while hierarchy remains essentially intact does little to undermine the system, and maybe something to maintain it. In any case, just as the oppositionist can become tomorrow’s counter-revolutionary bureaucrat, the asocial rebel could end up an authentic radical or tomorrow’s strikebreaker, soldier or fascist, unless a conscious rejection of hierarchy is made in its present configuration and in general.

A Current of Insubordination

Todd said as much in his letter to the FE last Winter, writing that “war is the ordinary man’s most convenient escape from ordinary life” as an argument against antiwar agitation. “Only the radical transformation of ordinary life,” he said in language similar to what we’ve written for years, “can short-circuit the war machine with a current of insubordination.” But his perspective appears to allow only the anguished, isolated acts of social breakdown in this undercurrent—principled rejection of patriotism and the war machine are somehow only gestures that lead to recuperation or at best count for nothing. This is analogous to arguing that only the continuous, daily acts of sabotage and rebellion of antebellum U.S. slaves were radical, while the abolitionist movement, the Underground Railroad and bible-inspired visionaries like John Brown were recuperations. In this way Todd disparages people in the Sanctuary Movement (and the FE for recognizing their achievements despite our reservations about their perspectives), while snidely observing that to resist this empire “one issue of the *Lamponics Catalogue* (which

specializes in books on home-made weapons and paramilitary techniques) offers more practical help than twenty years of the FE.” One can only be suspicious of such militarist chain rattling which reduces a complex social process of revolt and revolution to a simplistic, technical solution.

Even though there has been some disagreement with the “breakdown thesis” raised by Zerzan, we have found it provocative and valuable to a radical discourse. But we haven’t seen it as definitive; we not only print contrasting views, but we continue to print material on antiwar struggles and oppositional movements (defense of native peoples and the land, resistance to megatechnics, anarchist and libertarian activities, etc.), including material with which we don’t always necessarily or entirely agree. This “sloppy eclecticism” receives much of Todd’s scorn, who brags (also without irony) that he is “more dangerous to the Empire [than such forms of opposition] because I read Sade and Nietzsche, as is anyone else who reads them.” Todd thinks that words count for much, which is why he counts so much on words. He pretentiously ranks people’s actions: on the one side, authentic rebels of daily life and those who read Nietzsche; on the other, all the “peace creeps” and principled opponents of the megamachine. On the one side, sporadic violence against cops; on the other, everything from liberal civil disobedience choreographed by bureaucrats to the nonviolent (and violent?) direct action by antiwar radicals. On the genuinely radical side, the massive refusal of draft registration; on the other, the “recuperated” pacifists and others who have draft-counseled and done antiwar agitation—actions which must have some relation to the draft refusal. Reality is more complex, more contradictory than he cares to imagine, despite his attempted taxonomy of revolt.

Revolutionary Coherence as Ideology

In fact, Todd’s lack of imagination and sensitivity in this regard reveals a glaring problem in his notion of radical coherence—a reification which stems from his spectacularized history of the Situationist International and its purported absolute coherence.* Todd calls the situationist experience “coherent, which is to say, they knew how to act in accordance with their theories in such a way as to practically realize them, demonstrated most notably in May-June 1968, which they predicted.” This coherence was “fully realized,” he continues, “when a few audacious members wrecked the S.I.” rather than let it become a degenerated remnant of its former greatness. This mystique misses what the situs themselves had to some degree come to realize, that it was precisely their incapacity “to act in accordance with their theories in such a way as to practically realize them” that led to their impasse in 1968 and their subsequent dissolution, and that the S.I. was already in internal disarray when it was liquidated, having suffered a theoretical crisis and resignations by and expulsions of many of its members. (See *The Veritable Split in the International*, 1972.)

Indeed, it was at least in part the S.I.’s failure to examine its demand for absolute theoretical and practical coherence which reveals the limitations of that brilliant group. Such “contempt for equivocation” led Vaneigem, for example, to argue that “‘coherence’ would always indicate in no matter what debate on a practical action to be undertaken, and after thorough discussion, the right path, univocally recognized in advance.” (emphasis in original) Any member or minority which did not share this position, as the S.I. partisans wrote in 1972, “would thus have proved that it did not possess the coherence of the S.I.” But incoherence took its revenge because the bedrock of theoretical coherence is really a shifting sand, and the S.I., for all its lucidity and daring, could not sustain itself.

To argue the absolute coherence of the S.I., even in its formal self-liquidation, is to perpetrate an ideology, a mystification which conceals the problem of the sources of the S.I.’s decomposition and collapse. It is to learn the wrong lessons from the experience of the situationists and to repeat their errors—errors which are fatal when not only their errors but their hubris is copied.

It’s not that there aren’t other errors to avoid—a liberal pluralism which treats ideas like commodities, as equally valid (and equally alienated) expressions of truth, for example, would probably reflect the inverse error. But when we began to unravel the discourse of civilization, and particularly the history of the West—progress, technology, science and critico-rationalist method—the notion of a theoretical center or vanguard was going to eventually, and inevitably, give way to ambivalence, to a sense of decentralized truth, and even to eclecticism (and all the attendant pitfalls). A critique of scientism, of the notion of historical progress, and of language and meaning that is embedded in a primitivist longing tends to undermine critical theory itself, but it also suggests that coherence no longer has a

center expressed by isolated theoreticians, but has become decentralized. Reality is not simple, monistic, not even dialectical, but kaleidoscopic. **

A Spectacularized History of the FE

Just as Todd has ideologized the history of the S.I., he has created a spectacular image of the FE's history which is equally false. The FE never claimed to pursue absolute coherence, but rather a general, yet not complete, agreement on questions. It was not an attempt to create a theoretical vanguard as much as a desire to participate in a radical discourse in which a community of rebels could express their collective, as well as their individual desire, in which one person's "coherence" has often been juxtaposed against the "coherence" of another. There have always been contradictory points of view and a recognition of our ambivalence—both in our own participation in the megamachine and the reproduction of daily life, as well as in the difficult problems raised by our opposition to technological civilization, questions which to some degree have been left open.

While we strive for a critical clarity, we recognize courage, daring and generosity in people who nurture community and resist power, even when they are motivated by religion, or have illusions about this civilization that we do not share. The refusal of this civilization and the emergence of an authentic life are necessarily greater than any theoretical explication—they are beyond theoretical word tyranny, beyond theoretical and material control, right where they belong. So we walk a knife edge of criticality and respect for diversity. If this is eclecticism, so be it; but it is worth asking what the reverse would be of such eclecticism, if not some kind of monocultural demand that everyone speak the same language.

Here is an example of the kind of problems created by refusing ambivalence and the paradoxical character of reality. One of the "stupid" contradictions that Todd perceives in the FE is described in his published letter (reprinted in his critique), that an article in the FE claimed that there was no libertarian tradition in Central America (in contrast to revolutionary Spain or Russia); yet another article had described in some depth the struggle of Guatemalan Indians to preserve their autonomous societies against civilization. He argues in his critique that "the native cultures in Central America are the authentic libertarian tradition," an ignorant generalization that does nothing to clarify either libertarian revolutionary traditions or the profound nature of indigenous animism and community. It is a simplistic reduction to call primitive and archaic communities the "libertarian tradition," since it conceals or ignores a history of political and social struggles which underlie the authoritarianism and caudillismo in Central America, and ignores the subtleties and contradictory character of the Indian communities: that they are syncretic pagan-christians, that their resistance in the last period grew out of the Christian catechist movement (to which Rigoberta Menchu, whose autobiography was reviewed in the article in question, belonged), that they presently have tactical alliances with leftist guerrillas and urban reform organizations, that the people helping the Guatemalan refugees are in large part Catholic relief and human rights organizations. Todd's sweeping statements ignore these paradoxes, but for him the Guatemalan Indians don't seem to exist as real living people who may need our aid, but as an example of something to be employed in a parlor debate. Doing concrete work to defend the Guatemalans is only sacrifice or manipulation, in his view. He, in contrast, is of more "discriminating taste." "Having resolved a question for myself," says our rugged individualist, "I want to wrestle with more difficult ones, so I want to know who can help me, not who I can help."

Solipsism and Cruelty

His attitude borders on solipsism when he argues against acting in anyone's interest but his own. "I oppose an industrial machine which is killing me," he argues against those who would defend Central American peasants from being massacred by U.S.-financed stormtroopers, "as it happens to be killing everyone else." Me, me, me. "To esteem others more highly than yourself, to ponder the fate of others you cannot help," he says, repeating the catchwords of contemporary passivity and apathy, "is the essence of comfortable decadence."

Actually, this cynical utterance has “comfortable decadence” backwards, failing to realize that through solidarity people might create spaces for their own freedom and for a genuine community, along with extending rebellion. It assumes, comfortably, that nothing we do has an effect on the situation, which, given the experience of the anti-war movement during the Vietnam war and even of the present low-level resistance to the Central American wars, is patently untrue. It also overlooks that we are a part of a fabric that includes those peasants, that just as the Guatemalan Indians in Rigoberta Menchu’s region battle the state, in part to defend trees (their relatives) from being felled for “road improvements,” we must fight to defend those Indians or we are diminished and the sources for our community, for our revolt, are dried up. In other words, there isn’t any great distinction between the anguish, humiliation and dehumanization we suffer living in this social pyramid which crushes our dreams, and the anguish and rage we experience in the face of its horrible crimes against others. (His lack of sense of proportion is obscene as well, and trivializes the level of violence in Central America by treating his own misery as comparable.) Finally, he doesn’t understand that principled anti-war and anti-imperial struggles can contribute in a qualitative way to the erosion of loyalty to the state and mass institutions and to the widening of rebellion. The anti-war movement during the Vietnam war did much to contribute to a radical vision in this society (many people were radicalized by the war) and led to much of the breakdown and the wave of wildcat strikes that occurred in the 1970s, for example.

An insurrectionary Style

Todd’s tastes, however, are too discriminating for such mundane questions. He wants stronger style, more potent and more ferocious words. He is fascinated by ferocity and cruelty, in fact, never confronting the fact that cruelty has been colonized by Hitler and Hollywood, that, as Raoul Vaneigem wrote in *The Book of Pleasures*, “cruelty is now the normal viciousness of the ordinary man.” He seeks to employ cruelty in superseding this civilization, asking, “Why not demand everything?” Apart from the possibility that the definition of “everything” varies widely (a situ techno-utopia? cadillacs for the proletariat? living in trees?) and is thus itself incoherent, there is nevertheless still an important difference between demanding “everything” and using such a formulation to spit on anyone who would demand anything less. Because we recognize this distinction, because we weigh our criticism carefully when addressing people who are taking great personal risks or putting their bodies on the line in resistance to some tentacle of the empire, we offend this aesthete’s taste. We don’t have an “insurrectionary style” ferocious enough to entertain him (as if insurrection were a matter of style).

His notion of an insurrectionary style inspired by cruelty, finally, merges with the banal; his example is lifted from the parodies of the Church of the Sub-Genius: a kingdom where “hideous games like WAR and CONQUEST” will be played “enacted on imaginary battlefields of richly textured but entirely fraudulent construction.” “What has a ‘refractory community of conscience,’” he asks, referring to a phrase I wrote in the FE in an article discussing our own anti-war agitation, “to do with this kind of life?”

Well, in a word, nothing. Those games are already being played by yuppies with toy weapons in expensive amusement parks. They’re also suggestive of the war a pro-situ fights on a polemical plane: an imaginary battlefield of baroque construction, in which victories are won in the style of scholastic debates entirely disembodied from a world in which real human beings are getting pulverized by real nihilist war-gamers—“ordinary men,” perhaps, whose weariness of boredom and love for adventure recruited them into state-financed armies.

Todd’s discussion of style and format also is worth mentioning, at the risk of seeming indelicate. For a few months we suffered his irritating lectures on format mixed with his venomous descriptions of our eclipse—all delivered, we were assured sanctimoniously, to help us “go further.” When I suggested that he had done little to help the FE except to send a few flyers and a few pot shots, he replied in his critique (rather than replying to my letter), “Excuse me: I answer to no collective,” and “I have no interest in the technical and journalistic pressures felt by the FE, since I judge it on the results of its activity.” At least he was straightforward: he looks for those who can help him, not whom he can help. Yet judging him by his own criteria, what are we to make of a text, in this age of photocopying and collage splendor, of zine craziness and creativity, typed out austere like some college term paper? In appearance, then, as much as in lucidity (not to mention generosity), this critique falls short.

Of course, it isn't that the FE doesn't have its problems, that we don't have disagreements, that we haven't made mistakes, that issues don't vary in quality and in lucidity; but so far we've managed to keep plugging away. Our achievements have been humble and haphazard, but we feel that we remain on the side of contestation against power, on the side of human solidarity and autonomy, and on the knife-edge of critical clarity tempered with a respect for the integrity and humanity of people with whom we have serious differences of perspective. As for superseding megatechnic civilization and capital, neither a newspaper nor subversive flyers comes close; but we remain open to ideas, open to visions, open to action. Maybe civilization doesn't get superseded, anyway, but trampled, like the Mayan cities, by visionaries and primitivists on their way back to wilderness.

Who knows—perhaps we have grown “soft,” since we are more tolerant of people with whom we have differences, we're careful to distinguish our enemies from our friends and potential friends. The S.I. wrote that it knew “how to treat its enemies as enemies.” (By their own reckoning, 58% of the people mentioned in their journal were insulted.) But did they know how to treat their friends as friends? In one of my letters to Todd, I quoted Nietzsche to express the changes I have gone through in the last few years: “The snake that cannot shed its skin perishes. So do the spirits who are prevented from changing their opinion; they cease to be spirit.”

This statement embodies what we have all tried to do on this project, to grow, and to endure. The FE may become more idiosyncratic and perhaps more eclectic as time goes on. I have no regrets in leaving behind the mantle of theoretical coherence that we have allegedly betrayed—it has become an ideology that stands between me and my own subjective clarity. But the FE circle still wants collaborators—visionaries, rebels, dreamers, free-thinkers and free-livers to share in this project. We want a community whom we can help and who can help us expand the circle and shatter the walls holding us in this civilization, separating us from paradise. I hope this excessively long review/response will encourage them to get in touch. As for Todd, I'll confess his polemic forced me to examine my acts and my ideas; people who read this owe it to him to check out his critique for his side of the story.

NOTES

* This notion is not even necessarily shared by those who participated in that movement. Guy Debord, for example, specifically attacked that “factitious eulogy of the S.I.” that “would try to make believe that the S.I., from the moment that it ‘exists,’ is already everything that it should be in fact (coherence, etc.-,” and stressed that “the S.I. would perpetrate a grave misconception by letting it be understood that life is totally reified outside of situationist activity.”

** If I wrote, during a controversy with the sagebrush anarchists at *The Match!*, that “Fundamental realities cannot be counted, only felt, lived,” and that rationalists of *The Match!*'s nineteenth century positivist mode “cannot experience the multiverse which is reality, this ‘hard bone,’ in Antonio Machado's words, ‘on which reason breaks its teeth,’” (see Jamake Highwater's book *The Primal Mind*), isn't it obvious that this recognition would have implications for the more sophisticated critical theory advanced by post-situationist radicals, too? (I will still send free of charge a copy of this exchange to anyone who requests it; it raises related questions and also counters some of the slanders disseminated by Chaz Bufe's recent scurrilous pamphlet, *Listen Anarchist*.) I don't want to pursue this further here since I am presently working on an article/review concerning these very themes, which I hope to complete by the next issue of the FE.

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