

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Fifth Estate Collective

1987

FE note: Due to space considerations, some of the letters on these pages may have been excerpted. We ask that letter writers make their remarks as concise as possible. We will print the addresses of letter writers who request it.

Anarchy I

Dear FE:

In general, I agree with E.B. Maple's warnings about cozying up to the Left; (See FE #325, Spring 1987); anarchism's blood-feud has always been with the Bolsheviks, even if its war has been fought against the Right. However, I get the sense of a subtext here, an attempt to "purify" anarchist ideology of all syndicalist, socialist & Left Revolutionary tendencies, to once again define who is & who is not a "real" anarchist.

The Association of Ontological Anarchy adopts a very simple-minded approach to these questions: we're so eager for manifestations of the anti-authoritarian spirit that we support every single endeavor that promises some outbreak of freedom, however evanescent & momentary.

Thus, one of our primary tactics is to collaborate with any anti-authoritarian group or individual capable of at least a modicum of wit, verve, loveliness or the expression of interesting True Desires. And, we'd take an interest in any social change that held out the promise of even a moment of victory for the Imagination, even if it were only the moment of revolt itself. Once that "moment" was betrayed, we would be the first to call for another revolt, another adventure, further stretchings & swellings of consciousness & experience.

We accept the reality of both self & other, but refuse (or wriggle out of) any attempt to limit them through definitions, dogma or ideology. I know what my utopia might be, but where's the profit in excluding others from my dream, or myself from theirs? From this perspective, we see the tactical good sense of ideas like Voltairine's "Anarchy without adjectives," or the "Panarchy" that John Zube is reviving, or P.M.'s "bolo'bolo"—systems which make room for a diversity or plurality of systems within a general context of anti-authoritarian practice.

Compared with copping a bit of Slack or acquiring some shakti, the quarrel over who is & who isn't a "real anarchist" appears the most futile & tedious of pastimes. Sometimes I wonder if all this pontificating & purging (not E.B. Maple, but others who shall be nameless) might arise from a sensation of powerlessness so debilitating that it forces the victim to turn on friends rather than enemies: to project our own fears on those who are closest to us rather than uniting to realize these desires we share in common with them—or at least make the attempt!

Therefore, the idea of Free-Networking or anti-authoritarian networking interests us more than yet another Synod on Heresies. We'd like to see a "movement" where both Green Paleolithism & Discordian Futurism could collaborate in the struggle to realize a universe in which both are possible; in which the reddest syndicalist and the bluest libertarian could work on overthrowing the State, Gawdamn it, rather than undermining each other, purging each other or issuing anathemata ex cathedra, Right, Left and Center.

Having said this I should hasten to add that the FE is a staunch pillar (or tree) of such a movement, & I would hate to see any diminution of its intelligence or blunting of its critique. I'm not talking about wishy-washy relativism or claiming that all ideas are equally interesting—& I'm certainly not calling for collaboration with any Stalinoids, may they rot in Hell.

But I must & do defend the diversity of tendencies and “tastes within anarchy as a source of strength, not weakness.

Moreover, choice of the best tactic in a given situation depends at least partly on intuition, on existential preparedness, on an ability to be not so much open-minded as open-souled. In martial arts terms, ki depends on movement with the tao, not on the rigidity of preconceived postures of attack & defense. Spontaneity, not doctrinal purity. Quality of consciousness, not dialectical rigor. To be “correct” is small consolation when one cannot live—or live with others—according to one's nature, one's “nameless wildness.” If anarchists cannot transcend divisive bickering in the name of life, then who can?

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Anarchy 2

Dear Fifth Estate,

I'd like to make a few comments on the subject of Anarchy and the Left. (See FE #325, Spring 1987)

First of all, the left is a fairly abstract term. I'd like to make it clear when I refer to the left I do not include liberals, whom I define as people wishing to reform either socially or politically within the framework of any given system. I define leftists as left statists (after all, it's left or right of what?) who wish to change the system and replace it with a different one.

Obviously most people aren't quite sure of the difference between anarchists and leftists, even when we explain that we are anti-statists and leftists are not. I think it seems to most people that some of our short-range objectives are the same—to publicise our ideas and efforts, and to attract more people to our “ranks” being the principle ones.

I'd like to be able to make a good case for the distinction between anarchists and leftists, even down to the minutest details, but unfortunately many anarchists have latent leftist tendencies. This makes it even more important to discuss the appeal of leftism, our differences, similarities and why we should or should not work with them.

The left asks relatively little of people; that is it asks people to work to change things that for the most part they have no capability of changing. Outside of that they always tackle the easiest things that people can change in their own lives (although for the most part it's others they're concerned with changing). It's all part of the illusion of working to change society.

Another part of the appeal of the left is that most people's psychology (or at least their psychological attitudes towards politics) makes them more comfortable working within authoritarian structures. In a leftist organisation, the majority are happy that they feel like they're making a contribution because they are given something to do, but are also happy that they will not have to take any real initiative. In a world where so many people are afraid of being judged critically, it's a lot safer to be a worker and to go along with something. You don't have to break out of societal behavior all together; you just have to find your place in another establishment.

I don't want to work only within the realm of what is established as politics. Oh, the left goes beyond this slightly I must admit, but still works within the limits of societal approval. (This is why they're all out to abolish racism but not to abolish marriage.) Leftists have “opinions” on a limited number of subjects. I have an opinion on just about everything that I'm aware of. I want to re-invent the whole ball of wax.

Back to the left, E.B. Maple mentions in his article that the left puts a lot of importance on recruiting people. Well, shit, so do a lot of us. Only difference is that I talk to people about my opinions and their opinions and invite people to decide if they want to participate in our activities or not. That's why if the RCP or some group tried to convert an anarchist and succeeded, I'd be more upset with the “anarchist” than the RCP. Anyway, although I hate

the RCP and other groups like it, I don't worry about them coming around trying to convert us. They'd receive vehement opposition from most of my comrades and anyone who goes off with them is doing us all a favour by splitting now and getting it over with. After all we don't need "workers of the revolution" we need creators of the revolution. After all, the revolution is not an event, it's a process.

Well, I could go on forever but people can write me if they want to hear more or just argue with me. But I can't end this letter without attempting to answer the question: "Should we work with leftists, especially on issues of common interest?"

It depends for me. Shit, I work with the syndicalists from time to time—don't agree with them on everything. Makes sense that I could work with anybody on issues we agree on, as long as they didn't pull any authoritarian tricks out of the bag.

Couldn't work with the Yippies cause of the hierarchy but can still work with individual Yippies, that is if I can stand them. Quite truthfully it depends on what's going on, I can work with anybody who's in favour of squatting for something like our May Day encampment; I don't even have to like them all. (I know I won't like the RCYBers trying to sell the *Revolutionary Worker* to homeless people and the fascist skinheads who were squatters being in the same park as me.) In this case there's strength in numbers. In other cases where numbers don't count I think that individual action or collaboration between people I am comfortable with works best for me.

The success of anarchy isn't necessarily measured by the number of its practitioners, but rather by the degree of anarchy incorporated into each person's life. That's what I feel.

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U.K. Violence

Dear Friends and Comrades:

A few remarks on your book review titled "On Revolution and Violence" (See FE Fall 1986). I'm not at all convinced that "the ragged edge of capitalist collapse" is nearer the surface here. As we sit around the glowing embers of the once mighty british empire, it seems to me that capitalism is retrenching itself.

Thatcher is of a different ilk than the old guard Tories, ready to push through state reforms which the more "conservative" balk at. Our resistance is generally isolated and fragmentary. Thatcher, and the social forces she represents, are therefore prepared to deal with sporadic rioting if this is the cost of modernising the state.

The state does have a strategy of containment. Precisely containment. During Brixton '85, a "riot zone" was mapped out by the cops. White tape was stretched across the streets at the perimeter and bored cops told motorists to avoid the area because a riot was going on. For a while the cops were contained in the police station, but they just hung out until a) they had enough reinforcements and, b) people were tired of a hard night's rioting and went home. Subsequent police operations have enabled them to pick up hosts of people and sling them in jail.

Meanwhile, the media works hard to present the "social problems" that the state wants to solve: unemployment, inner cities, (on the latter point, the New Year was welcomed by anti-cop violence in small towns rather than in the inner cities). Riots involving significant numbers of black people are given greater media coverage than others as part of the racist presentation of black people being particularly violent.

The miners' strike was the great hope of the leftists to stop Thatcher. But the basis of the movement was never more than defensive. The left had in mind a rerun of 1974 when the miners did in Heath's Tory government. But Thatcher had learnt from that little history.

The pamphlet "Rebel Violence vs. Hierarchical Violence" underlines the departure of social peace in the UK, but misinterprets its significance. The British ruling class has prided itself on maintaining a level of social peace in mainland Britain since the days of the Chartists. Ireland and other colonies are of course another matter.

The loss of colonies, and loss of influence particularly to American capital leaves the ruling class face-to-face with the "home" working class. But a century and a half of reforms have enabled the state to disrupt and fragment any real communities amongst the working class.

Such communities which do exist often revolve around capitalist institutions. This was the position of the mining communities where the pit was the focus of village life. In the inner cities, the older communities have been broken up through slum clearance and new estates. The welfare state reinforced the emergence of a dependency on the state which had previously been resisted.

So, we find ourselves in a situation where increasing confrontation with the state looks inevitable. But at the same time the state is far better prepared to deal with this confrontation. The optimism of “Rebel Violence vs. Hierarchical Violence” and the pessimism of *The Free* express two sides of manic-depression of the present anti-capitalist struggle in Britain. I feel that it will take many years for the development of a movement with the breadth and depth to deal with what capital throws up in Britain. ‘Til then, we’ve got problems.

from the embers of the empire,
Richard Essex

FE Note: Richard sent this letter along with quite a few pamphlets published by Unpopular Books, Box 15, Kingsland High Road, Dalston, London E8 2 NS, England. Titles include works by Camatte, one on gay communism as well as other interesting ones. We may be ordering several of them for our bookshop in the near future.

Praxis

Dear Fifth Estate,

I’ve been reading your back issues from June 1977 to the present. This problem of praxis seems to be central in the new world order we are about to be thrown into. But this begs the question. I think the question is “What do we libertarians, anti-authoritarians, anarchists do once the world revolution begins?” But hasn’t it already begun? Should we organize into militia units?

In the Spring 1987 issue of the *FE*, the article *Anarchy and the Left*, you say “the Parisian militants declared ‘we are not political,’ all the while carrying out the most political act of all—confronting the state.”

It seems to follow from this that we anti-authoritarians act politically at times and anti-politically at other times.

I think this problem is mostly semantical as you would probably agree. But I think that this problem should none the less be cleared up.

Yours in the 5th Estate,
David Pearson
Arlington MA

To The FE:

It seems you are just as hung up on partisan politics as the Right is; or you accuse the Left of being (See *FE* Spring 1987). Right-wingers can never unite to save the environment on which we all depend.

Anarchists, socialists, communists, libertarians, and the right-wing reactionaries all depend on these necessary environmental conditions to be maintained and we have a hell of a lot of other pressing problems which threaten our short term existence.

It seems ludicrous under these circumstances to worry about who is “buzzing around” to “recruit” whom. We all had damned well better join forces to fight the ignorance, the back-biting, and human arrogance that has brought us to the brink of extinction.

Irene Brown
Farmington MI

Art 1

Howdy Y’all:

I’d like to share a few brief thoughts about “The Case Against Art” (John Zerzan, Fall 1986 *FE*).

Although John's explorations of the symbol and the roots of that alienation have been insightful for me in the past, I found "The Case Against Art" to be over-generalized and hypocritical.

Comments like "...the artist/shaman was the first specialist. It seems likely that the ideas of surplus and commodity appeared with the shaman..." trash an enormous diversity of magical mystical relationships, and the ways many cultures are in touch with nature.

It seems to me John fails to see he is a "word shaman," casting his spell in an extremely symbolic language. Listen to the animals! Who is the shaman? Listen to the plants! Who is the shamaness/witch?

Contrasting "The Case Against Art," T. Fulano's "Beyond the Mantic Ray" dances the dance of empty art, and leaves me feeling pain, clarity, committed to change, feeling like I've been touched by another person.

Breathe

Carlton WA

Art. 2

Dear Folks:

We would like to enter into the discussion of Art (see FE Fall 1986 & Spring 1987). In general, we agree with John Zerzan on the effects of "art," but what exactly is art? In Zerzan's piece and in the cases for art, there were few, if any, clues as to what any of the writers think art is. To us, art can be a means to express something for which there are no words, as in a dream; and that could be used to describe some things done by shamans, but this is still not a definition of art.

Zerzan's descriptions of artists, shamans, and priests tend to be blurred; we fail to see how a shaman is always an artist and how shaman is so similar to priest. The shaman uses articles from nature to represent/become a vessel for the entity (spirit) called upon as a helper or merely to invoke its aid. Music and dance are used to bring the participants into the rhythm of the spirit and the spirit of the rhythm.

The symbolic articles of "art" shaped by the shaman have a medicinal and protective intent and aesthetics rarely (if ever) enter into the situation. And, since the ceremonies usually require the majority (if not all) of the members of the community, alienation isn't part of the shaman's guiding role. Obviously, there are examples where the shaman will try to exert a disproportionate amount of power through her/his ability to "control" spirit helpers, but a cohesive community will not usually tolerate such abuses.

However, in this situation we can see the beginning of the creation of a priest and a priestly caste. There is more to the distinction than semantics: for a shaman to "function" within the community, the members of that community must share a familiarity with the characteristics of the spirit guides as the shaman (or else the vision quest would be useless), while the priest relies on specialized knowledge of the spirit world. This mystification is the first phase of an alienated institution.

Also, a shaman can be of either sex, while a priest is always a man; the intention of the priest is to maintain the specialization of knowledge and to accomplish this, the power of women (who maintain the ability to be a shaman) must be destroyed. And, because a shaman's power comes from the earth, nature is made into something to be dominated, controlled, and eventually destroyed by the priest.

Caves are the womb of our mother earth and many rituals are held in these sacred places of nature; visions have taken place and will continue to take place in them. Drawings and painting on the walls of these wombs were not meant for others to admire; they are the physical manifestations of the visions of the seers, the directions to places and things, and the communication of events for which words are inadequate. They are misunderstood as "art" and as subjugations of parts of the natural world when they are, in fact, celebrations of the gifts of nature. Zerzan's ideas on cave paintings missed this interpretation by relying on textbook analyses.

George Bradford's long case for art definitely had the least to say about it. Most of the case wasn't from Bradford but was a string of other people's quotes with his comments forming the string. Zerzan punctuated his ideas with quotes (from artists, etc.) while Bradford punctuated quotes with his ideas. It seemed as though he was trying to show that art and nature are interchangeable and remarked that all tools were made with an "aesthetic sensibility;"

arrowheads, for example. Aesthetics have little to do with intentional practicality (not that we are functionalists) and the same designs of stone tools found over vast areas would tend to preclude the idea of individual taste.

Bradford states that Zerzan “fails to see what’s real about myth”; perhaps that’s true but how much does that have to do with art? And what is real about myth?

In “Journal Notes on Art,” Bradford described the Pompidou(doo) Center very accurately, but that’s not enough to make a case for art. From his remarks on the caves, it almost seemed that they were second-hand accounts, especially when we read that there was a “lack of even meager information and speculation on these places.” Such information would only serve to give the viewer a bias in the direction of the expert speculators (whether art historians or anthropologists). Individuals should respond to such experiences individually without the benefit of the opinions of learned experts (priests). The other excellent observation concerning mundane objects being guarded on pedestals was very useful, but again failed to make a case for art.

Bradford said that he’s not interested in technique nor in the preservation of “art” or museums, but from the comments he presented from his extensive tours of museums and his strong emotional appraisals of specific pieces, it seems that he was very glad that the museums were there for him to see. Maybe if he had been on the barricades in Dresden, he would have been one of the ones who didn’t want to follow Bakunin’s suggestion to empty the museums for use on the defenses.

The raw nerves of people who want to be artists seem to have been struck, or the raw nerves of people who, like E.S. in the other case for art, want to save the face of art by citing examples of trash that we cannot consider to be art; so much for saving face. For Zerzan’s article to have generated the reactions it did means that Art is an easier part of culture to defend than Language, Number, and Time; but all the counter arguments raised by the defenders of Art merely served to strengthen his points.

Zerzan’s essays have the singular distinction of moving toward a complete critique of human existence: no givens can be accepted, nothing can be taken for granted. Such is the basis of the difference between the irreverent uncontrollables and the dreary materialists and anarcho-syndicalists, or the radical anti- authoritarians versus the conservatives.

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G. Bradford responds: I think your letter manages to confuse elements of both Zerzan’s argument and mine, but since you were edited for length by the staff (I had disagreed with the editing), I’ll keep my remarks short.

First, I think we have to admit our ambivalence about art. Despite their domestication by Capital, the products of human creativity, whatever their original intent, are powerful and move us. After all, much of modern art is also a “celebration of the gifts of nature” like those primal artifacts that hold such a fascination for us.

I’m not for building and maintaining museums, as I said, but, yes, I was grateful to see much of what I saw, even the madness, as I have been grateful to find a poem by Blake or hear some Balinese music I’d never heard. Art is a record and remnant of what has been lost, and sometimes, of what can be renewed; simply because it has become colonized by Capital and therefore rendered false as well doesn’t mean that we should reject it or abolish it. That would be, as Adorno pointed out in *Minima Moralia*, “to bring about directly the barbarism that culture is reproached with furthering indirectly.”

As for reading historians, I don’t agree with you there either. We have no direct unmediated response to objects like cave paintings; everything is mediated through our experience in this society. Even your comments on caves as wombs had to have come from some reading. Becoming “cultured” by reading and experiencing art is part of how we come to understand (and critique) culture; those who deny any such interest sometimes strike me as more destructive to meaning than the art pseudos themselves.

Finally, what is true about myth? I recommend Jung, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and Frederick W. Turner, to start (more books): In *Beyond Geography*, Turner writes of myth as “that most basic expression of the human spirit,” which when destroyed, “has left pathology and death in its stead.” Myth is a product of fundamental neurological activities of symbolizing, not composed of “decorative and outmoded fictions but the instinctual and sure responses of the organism to life.”

Therefore, mythic symbolization is an organic contact with life, not a separation. (Zerzan doesn’t agree, but this was a fundamental area of our disagreement.) My Myth is not a matter of facts, as Theodore Roszak writes in *Where the Wasteland Ends*, “The meaning of myths lies in the vision of life they hold at their core. Either one re-experiences that vision, or one has missed the message—in which case the myth is bound to become an empty literal shell, a fiction, a lie; it loses its magic and becomes an idol.”

Fortunately, myth has begun to be “salvaged from the positivist and agnostic slag heap” in the last few generations, and “now begins to enjoy its proper dignity as a depth dimension of the human mind,” he concludes. And, I would add, as an organic way of connecting ourselves with the natural world.

As for quoting books, I won’t pretend that I’ve had very many original ideas. Some of my ideas are confirmed by what I read, others I discover. I try to make it all my own, with or without punctuation.

Academic

Dear Friends:

Thanks for all the latest F Es for London Greenpeace—as usual, well received.

I don’t have a lot to say just now, except two thoughts:

1. Frustration. We (in London Green-peace especially) relate so closely to your ideas, yet find at least 90% of the articles almost incomprehensible due to the academic language (style to some extent; quoting writers all the time, etc. Most of the people we hope to communicate with aren’t college-“trained.”

We’ve distributed/reprinted the Bhopal front page article (See FE Vol. 19, No. 4) and a few others, yet other ones (not the content) embarrass us. Even in my own house, my friends get frustrated trying to understand the academic language and sentence structures. (“The Original Affluent Society” article [See FE Vol. 14, No. 31 is on our toilet wall, which gives people time to work it out!)

We’ve discussed this and genuinely believe that academic language is unnecessary. We talked about the “Art” stuff, and none of us know (or really much care) who the Dadaists were (maybe we should), but feel that “art” can be best explained as our own lives—the way we cook, wear clothes, humming and tapping, language (jokes, etc.), making things and so on. This is the stuff of the debate—are these things due to our life-poverty, or are they natural desires to express our choices and irrational tastes?

So, what I’m trying to say is both the language examples and the art we use should be as commonplace as possible.

2. What to do? You say in the latest issue on page two that we all need to discover how to change things. It’s a really difficult question. Different countries have different traditions and situations. I think we should try all sensible and honest ways—regular leaf letting, creating mutual aid and resistance groups, creating communal social events and relationships, bricking places, graffiti, pickets, contacting other people “in struggle,” (strikes, etc.), shoplifting, growing vegetables...

Much love and solidarity from us in Tottenham, North London,

Dave Morris

Greenpeace (London)

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E.B. Maple responds: Greenpeace (London), which is not connected with the larger International Greenpeace, is an anarchist collective deeply involved in ecological, anti-war, animal liberation and labor struggles. We look forward to the thick packets which Dave Morris occasionally sends us containing their proliferation of literature. We are pleased that he and his friends enjoy our publication and suggest that other North Americans make contact with them.

As to his first suggestion: We've never been very sympathetic to complaints about our ability to be understood because of the language we use. For one thing, it's not that tough.

We have usually found that those who complain the most about our "style," are often uninterested in our ideas or even hostile to them, and, hence, don't want to be bothered with anything beyond the reading comprehension level of the daily papers. This obviously isn't the case with Dave and his comrades since he says they "relate closely" to our ideas and makes us wonder how they have gotten an understanding of our recurring themes other than by reading them.

Often times we find that it is not so much the person making the complaint who is having difficulty with our texts, but rather their perception that others can't. Or, it is a desire to have our ideas gain wider circulation or "relevance" and the feeling that it is our writing style that is an impediment to our increased popularity. However, this is not what we see as the root of the problem for those who want to spread anti-authoritarian ideas.

Rather, with the emergence of television as the dominant mode of mediated communication (is that too academic?), people's willingness to work at perceiving the world is rapidly diminishing with a resultant increased and generalized stupidization. Perhaps an anarchist's first weapon should be a dictionary.

Everyday language, by definition, communicates only everyday ideas. I'd like to think all of us—writers and readers—are involved in a project which tries to escape from this world, and that means we are looking at it from above, below and in its cracks. If this means hard going at times, isn't it worth it?

Thank you

FE note: The following letter was sent to the Detroit area anti-authoritarian community in appreciation of a \$100 contribution collected at a local gathering last July to commemorate the Spanish Revolution.

Dear Friends,

We have received your letter notifying us of money collected that will go to Spanish political prisoners (specifically libertarians). We will send the check to the prison in Segovia where the majority of Spanish libertarian prisoners are incarcerated together with other prisoners from left and radical revolutionary organizations.

Please send us information on the projects you are involved in in Detroit. We are also part of the International Solidarity Committee and we are interested in hearing about struggles going on in other parts of the world—no matter how far away we are.

Hoping to hear from you.

Fraternal Greetings,

Asociacio de familiars i amics dels presos politicos

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08010 Barcelona

Spain

Strike

Dear FE Folks,

I wanted to give you some idea of how the cannery strike here in Watsonville ended. (Eighteen-month-long Teamsters strike at the Watsonville, California Canning Company.) What impressed me most was the strength, courage and enduring solidarity of the strikers. Thanks to them the entire community was subjected to a political education by fire. Life here will never be the same, I hope.

Perhaps you would be interested in a few of the factors which helped the strikers maintain their militancy. First is the extended structure of the Mexican family (stretching from California down through Mexico) which helped strikers weather the financial distress of the strike. Second is the fact that it's not so easy for food processing companies to pick up and leave the area since most crops grown around here are relatively perishable and need to be processed quickly.

Ultimately it was an association of growers who bought the debt-ridden cannery whose original owners' hard-line policy toward the strikers provided its financial undoing. Lastly, but not least, is the fact that Watsonville is home to a group of professional radicals and labor organizers who coordinated much of the community support for the strikers.

Penney
Freedom, California

fifth Estate

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