

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1988

Dear E.B. Maple:

As a writer who is often criticized for being too difficult, academic or stylistic, I was immensely heartened by your response to London Greenpeace's letter (see FE #326, Summer 1987) taking you all to task for those sins. I'd like to add a few points.

In England, "style" has certain class connotations; style is withheld from the underclass deliberately, & reserved for the literati who are almost without exception middle-to-upper-class. Therefore, among radicals (from the "plain"-speaking Quakers on) a distrust has arisen, a disgust for elegance (whether in the science-sense of "accurate & inspired" or in the aesthetic sense of "useless" beauty).

I see the Greenpeace objection to your style as emanating from a radical tradition which also produced Puritanism...& in fact, is still producing puritanism. In amurrica the lines are not so clearly drawn, & I feel that you may have missed the unspoken class-ist criticism leveled at you by the London comrades.

You might have added that it behooves radicals to refuse impoverished language foisted off onto the "poor" by the "powerful," to seize back all eloquence & beautiful speech from those who have attempted its monopoly. You might have said, first, that "academic" language is often necessary to discuss certain specific & difficult things without endless rewording & dilution with "commonplace" ideas.

Then you could have added that commonplace language is, after all, generally debased with the cheap alloy of popular sentiment, that it is "loaded" with mind-numbing signals, that it is most often used to keep "common" people from thinking with any precision or with any direct emotional power.

In fact, "common" people frequently invent closed languages of great potency, directness & grace, in which "even" the uneducated can express themselves with the potency of old-time bards; I'm thinking here, for instance, of the argot of black jazz musicians in the '20s: a difficult, even arcane language, highly intellectual, but impeccably proletarian! Beauty of language, i.e., "style," cannot be escaped if one is to communicate anything directly with "mere" words; only poetry (in the broadest sense of the term) can convey precise meanings with something of the force of a kiss or a punch in the snoot.

By contrast, commonplace language can convey only "common" ideas—by which I mean ideas that have already & long since been betrayed into moronic sleepiness, ideas which might once have been full of life but are now reduced to shells—full of banal stuffing, pre-digested pap, officialese, Newspeak, jargon, packaged emotions...ideas which smell like rotten television. I can scarcely believe anarchy will be served by making it "commonplace"—that is, boring—rather than unique, explosive, sexy, saturated with light.

The notion that art or culture fit for the "masses" should be bovine, monosyllabic, gray, pietistic, blahblah...this is a marxist idea, not an anarchist idea. I admit NO "common" denominator, I will not talk down to anyone, I must say exactly what I mean in as few words as possible (like a victim tied to the stake & signaling thru the flames, as Artaud said) because otherwise what is the point of writing at all?

Proletcult is for no one (except possibly the devotee of prolet-camp); the real audience for Socialist Realism lives only in a statistic, not at any real address.

“Only as a band of armed poets can we overcome the fascism of everyday life” (Patio Table). It’s not a question of caring about “dada” or any other gawdforsaken DEAD Art movement; but I hate to see people preening themselves on their anti-intellectualism, as if mere ignorance were a sign of divine favor or political correctitude.

If Greenpeace (London) has brains they should be ravished with joy to use them, not withered with quakerish embarrassment. Language in the mouth of an insurrectionist could be stronger than music, a way to BREATHE; the tongue of the “commonplace” will never transcend mere prose, & it will stifle us.

wa salaam,
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E.B. Responds: I appreciate your remarks; all I have to add is the following proviso contained in the introduction to Mary Daly’s powerful book, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*: “Warning: This book contains Big Words...for it is written for big, strong women, out of respect for strength. Moreover, I’ve made some of them up. Therefore, it may be a stumbling block...to those who choose downward mobility of the mind and therefore hate Big Words...”

Nothing to Lose

FE Note: As we note on our subscription blanks, an extra dollar pays for half of a prisoner’s subscription. Prisons succinctly embody the state’s ultimate dictum: obey or suffer the consequences. Below is a letter from one recipient of an FE prisoner subscription.

Fifth Estate:

I am a prisoner at Washington State Penitentiary. My sentence here is life, and then I owe Oregon 25 years.

I was born an anarchist. And now I really have nothing to lose.

At the moment I’m in the hole, for splashing urine into the face of Correctional Officer J. Like it’s my fault he doesn’t like organic after shave.

Anyway, please put me on your mailing list. And because I get along above average with other convicts here, I can share the FE and can spread what you want spread. You already spread what I want spread, but please spread some this way, OK?

Phil Scalice 278901
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No Emancipation

To the Fifth Estate:

This is to notify our beloved compatriots that the process of time finds the Anarchist Association of the Americas and its publication, *Emancipation*, in a condition of non-existence. The organization is disbanded and the Washington DC mailbox has been closed.

We wish to express our thanks to all the fine sisters and brothers of anarchism who have worked with us in our nine years of existence. It has been the best of times and we have no regrets.

As individuals we are not out of the action. You will be seeing us again in other connections. Thanks for the memories.

B, for the late, great Emancipation Collective

Race & Crime

Dear FE:

Your article, "Race, Class and Crime in the U.S." (FE #326, Summer, 1987), reminded me of other recent attacks, and raised a few questions for me. The case that rests most heavily on my mind is one in Howard Beach, where white youths chased blacks passing through the neighborhood with baseball bats onto a parkway where one was killed by a car.

It happened near my neighborhood and is an example of the violence that goes on all the time around here. I listened to the interviews done in the neighborhood, interviews that astonished many in our city. The denials were abundant; there was no racism there. We found out that people felt that blacks could walk safely in white areas, but not vice-versa. If blacks were in white neighborhoods, they were up to no good, and people, in general, were scared.

After the Howard Beach incident, I walked down Jamaica Ave., where there are often no non-blacks. The area was policed by several hundred white cops who told me that it was too dangerous to walk around, to go home. Within the next two weeks there were many cases of retaliation by blacks, three of which I was present at. In one circumstance, I was able to talk to people about the senselessness of these attacks, but found that the anger just ran too deep.

As a person who advocates the appropriation and expropriation of property, I see two clear problems: the large, expensive stores and the rich people have made it difficult to steal from them, and burglary becomes easiest done in a confrontational manner which often includes violence. The targets for theft then become those who can't buy security.

The biggest argument that people have against anarchy is that without a state, and its protectors, there will be crime; the sick people won't go away. The people who say that when you eliminate poverty and economic classes, crime will go away, aren't thinking. We'll also need to eliminate sexism, racism, and most importantly, the self-hatred that's the result of mediocre lives.

As far as protection for me, every time I was in danger, I had to find ways of protecting myself. The anarchist idea of forming groups to protect people was proposed to me although practically people don't want to do it. And more than protecting the victims, how are we going to help the criminals in the here and now? I'd appreciate any ideas that can actually be tried and will share them with other people I know.

Laure

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Race & Crime 2

Dear Fifth Estate Crew:

I devoured your Summer 1987 issue and found most of it palatable except for the "Race, Class & Crime in the U.S." article. The tone of it seemed defensive, white and middle-class, perhaps that of one who has consciously chosen to forego the privileges of race and class to live among his or her black brothers and sisters.

I hold strongly to the view that the "personal is political" and based upon the statements that the author has been robbed upon occasion lends some credence to his/her statement that Goetz' not guilty verdict was seen "as victory and not, at best, simply vindication (of) the right of self-defense." This takes the view by implication that Goetz was justified in his assault and that perhaps an attitude reflecting some sort of correct line for anarchists towards the youths since after all they are "terrifying young hoodlums."

Even though the attitude is encapsulated in a liberal social history lesson of "the valiant efforts of black people to live a life of dignity...in America," what prevails is that this is one of the "haves" who has "seethed with hatred for those who had violated my home." Perhaps correct line is too strong a wording, but as one who has lived for the past five years in the mixed race neighborhoods of San Francisco, and has been active in the formation of Rock Against Racism with black friends, I find the "fear for my life" and expression of rage to be more representative of

someone who wishes these hoodlums would get theirs, perhaps they could all be lined up and shot as some of my more conservative relatives say.

In an area suffering from a total breakdown of institutions such as in Detroit, the outlaw approach is what is to be expected from youth whom the system has no need to integrate into its apparatus. Brutal humans are responding to a brutal and desperate situation in a logical and, under the circumstances, perfectly normal manner and to quote Leni Brenner about the poor habits of the poor is pure condescension.

The poor have developed many ingenious ways to survive that a rereading of the Autobiography of Malcolm X or even Hobsbawm's Primitive Rebels might remind the author, This sad replay of the fears of the propertied at the actions of the savages who are certainly restless and wishing that they "emerge as revolutionaries committed to the destruction of the system" is redundant in the extreme. They are already participating in the destruction of the system.

It may be uncomfortable for the persons who may be innocent bystanders in this process, or wish that these "hoodlums" would get jobs and become alienated and read exotic French authors in bad English translation and then participate in the civilized revolution implied in the article. These tough youths, who form the backbone of the criminal class and the military, are the ones who are mostly likely to rebel.

My own suggestions have to do with the necessary legwork and people contact with these young hoodlums where they can be reached. The creation of multicultural centers via an updated and more successful Rock Against Racism with people dedicated to making it work could help. Time out has to be made for people to step out of roles into reality and the paranoia machine must not be fed for that is exactly what they want.

In the Bible, the Hebrews had marks on their doors so that when the plagues descended upon the Egyptians, they would be spared. In the present day we have no marks on our doors, these black avenging angels have no way of knowing who you are unless you act in a manner that speaks for itself.

Gary Rumor
Huntington CT

E.B. Maple responds: Your last comment reminds me of a cartoon I once saw where a white couple is being held at gunpoint by a young black and while the man fumbles through his wallet, the woman is saying, "John, he doesn't want to see your NAACP card; he wants your money!"

These "angels" may be what a vile society like this deserves for its history of racism and its class structure, but you are naive in the extreme to think their "justice" can be avoided by the wearing of a Rock Against Racism pin or other acts of grace. While instances of Robin Hood exploits exist, they are the vast exception and, in reality, all, including the similarly situated poor, are fair game for those who react to the deprivations of capitalist society with rage and crime.

You have so totally mis-read what I had intended to convey in my article that I have to say that either my writing skill or your reading comprehension ability is a severe problem. I said very specifically that the wave of violence and crime experienced by the inner cities was directly caused by the nature of a pitiless class system magnified by racism, and that the deterioration of life in general for blacks was producing only what should be expected under such conditions.

As people with relative privilege, which is both coveted and resented, neither you nor I should be surprised when we are the targets of crime. However, you are to be nominated for sainthood if you let this social realization rise above your emotions in a situation where a 77-year-old widow you know or you are the victim.

It is ridiculous that I should have to state that I have no sympathy for a robot like Goetz when I used him as the prototype of those who benefit from a heavily disproportionate income distribution and who want to do so without having to pay its social costs, i.e., crime and social dislocation. To state that black and other poor youth are reacting to a "brutal and desperate situation" says nothing more than what I had already said, but you seem to be willing to use it as an excuse—exactly what I refused to

do. Your poetic, but thoroughly unrealistic description of them as “avenging angels” seems more of a condescension than Brenner’s remark, whose point you also missed (he was saying the same thing as you).

I think your elegant little phrase to describe these violent “angels” would meet with more than a little resistance from those in a community like Detroit plagued by crack houses, rip-offs, assaults, rapes and the shootings of hundreds of teenagers. White rooting sections for black crime always leave a bad taste in my mouth since it rarely is they who have to suffer the consequences of the “avenging” acts.

It has been fashionable over the last decade or so among certain anarchists and ultra-left theorists to see crime, vandalism and riots as containing the seeds of revolt given their obvious quality of transgressing society’s rules (presented most coherently by the chroniclers of the extensive English riots of the ‘80s, Os Cangaceiros in France, and John Zerzan in the United States *). While certainly it is all activity at variance with the model of a smooth running system, it seems a mistake to see individual crimes of the type which are rampant in the U.S. as having the same character as the mass confrontations with official authority such as have occurred in England.

Individual criminal acts can be romanticized, but authentic acts of rebellion should transcend the limits of capitalist strictures. Most crime in the States exists only as an innovative way to participate in the circulation of capital, that is, outside the “normal” manner of wage work for those to whom it is systematically denied. For instance, stolen goods may provide cash for drugs, commodities which imitate the styles of the bourgeoisie or even food, but the act of theft does not contradict the nature of an act compatible with capitalist relations.

To remain only as an outlaw, to not be consciously involved in the revolutionary deconstruction of capital means that eventually those outside the law will be ignored (letting the inner cities rot even more while other areas flourish), be absorbed if the economy takes an upswing (ha!), or be crushed by an expanded police/military apparatus. Often, too, a rage against society based only on feelings of hatred and envy give rise to what animated the shock troops of Hitler’s brownshirts—rebels, but shallow ones who wound up as cannon fodder for capital’s war against its real threats.

Crime and violence are immediate problems in all big cities, but they serve in many ways to obscure the foundations of violence this society rests upon. The war of all against all begins at the top where competition reigns as the supreme anonymous and heartless forces of the market have left them superfluous to capital.

You say my call for the poor to emerge as revolutionaries is empty and you pose rock and roll clubs as an alternative. I’d say neither will have an impact until the futile striving for entry into commodity society is relinquished by those who must realize they will be permanently denied.

What else is there for them (and for that matter, us) to do other than begin a revolutionary assault on this worthless society and the construction of a new one?

*See *Rebel Violence v. Hierarchical Violence*, see *Like A Summer with a Thousand Julys* from BM Combustion Wall/ 3XX England; Os Cangaceiros, Les Jardins de Provence, 3 rue Dancourt, 75018 Paris, France; John Zerzan in assorted past issues of this newspaper, e.g., “The Promise of the ‘80s,” FE, June 1980.

** See *A Day Mournful and Overcast* by an “Uncontrollable,” available from our bookservice, \$1 plus postage.

Unreal East

Dear Friends,

From Poland I am sending you greetings of the season and all good wishes for your health and happiness in the coming year!

In August somebody sent me *Fifth Estate* no. 2. Thanks!!! It is very interesting to read your periodical. Sometimes appear articles about east block, communistic regimes, etc. I am glad of it.

Well, for me anarchy is wonderful affair; but to put it into practice is very, very difficult here. "No master, no cops, no bosses, no states, no borders..." still it all seems unreal in the East. "Perestroika" and "glasnost" are only slogans, appearances.

Love and Anarchy

Marek B. Pinczyce,

Poland



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