

Stopping the Incinerator, Starting the Movement

A Response

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There were a number of inaccurate and misleading statements made in E. B. Maple's both congratulatory and critical article on the Evergreen Alliance and its May Mobilization to Save the Great Lakes in the last issue [FE #329, Summer, 1988].

Since I was out of town when this article was written and did not have the opportunity to contribute my comments and corrections, as usually happens with FE articles, I would like to do so now.

The article states that in planning the May Mobilization to Save the Great Lakes those of us connected with the FE were concerned that the weekend carry "a perspective beyond just a single issue reform." In reality, this was the concern of the majority of the group, not just those connected with the FE, and was the reason behind and the focus of the entire mobilization. In the same vein, Maple states that stopping the incinerator was the "sole concern" of many of the newer people in the Evergreen Alliance. This is simply untrue as the majority of people, old and new, have many other concerns: Central America, homelessness, militarism, nukes (specifically Fermi II), destruction of the rainforests, development projects, and numerous other political and environmental concerns.



From photography collection 'Resistance to the Detroit Incinerator, 1986-1990.' All black and white images: Millard Berry.

Revolutionary Theory

Despite the many positive comments about the Evergreen Alliance activities, these and similar statements made throughout the article expose a certain arrogance, a radical elitism that once typified many FE articles. This kind of attitude is something that all of us on the FE, including E.B. Maple, have been striving to shake off for some time now. A quote from Jacques Camatte which appeared in the same issue of the FE is appropriate here: "The mechanism of perverting rebellion...consists of outbidding on the left, where each person wants to be more left, more extreme than the person who has just been recognized as such because of a contribution to the so-called radical debate. As a result, human beings no longer have time to structure their revolt before it is contemptuously pointed out to them that it lacks foundation, truth, that there is something more revolutionary than what they propose. Rev-

olutionary theory becomes, like pleasure, something which is never achieved. One sinks into the undefined and the fleeting.”

While there clearly were political differences among the people involved, the simple radical/liberal dichotomy that Maple describes does not fully reflect the reality of the situation, and many of the details used to support this scenario are inaccurate. For example, he suggests that we had representatives from mainstream environmental groups at the Sunday conference when in reality neither the Audubon Society nor the Sierra Club wanted anything to do with the Evergreen Alliance activities. Though a few individuals connected with these groups had some sympathy with what we were trying to do, the official hierarchies of these groups tended to see us as a bunch of radicals or trouble-makers. The local Audubon chapter specifically voted not to endorse our activities. Yet the article gives the impression that “we” watered down our politics in order to get such support when none of this is true.

Maple states that the overall politics of the group reflected “the more numerous, less radical people” and that it took on the political character of a single issue reform group. Linking this statement with one made previously about conventional ideas these “others” had as to how to stop the incinerator (e.g. media, lobbying, and electoral politics) and with another incident he relates in which one older man made the suggestion that we contact “our” legislators, the reader could conclude that these were the focal activities of the group when in reality nothing could be further from the truth.

Very early on, before this group was even called the Evergreen Alliance, individuals who were interested in lawsuits and starting a recycling project broke away and worked on those projects separately. The group never acted on any of the more liberal political suggestions put forth, rather the focus of its activities has been actions and education, and an immense amount of effort has been put into both these areas. There were, however, some conventional tactics adopted by the group, one of which was to open up to the media, and a media committee was proposed and initially coordinated by E.B. Maple himself. These few people did a lot of work to get the word out about the May events and took on the unenviable task of dealing with the media when there has been and continues to be a generalized distrust of and ambivalence toward all of its forms. There was also a coordinated effort to get endorsements for the demonstration from community, environmental and political groups. Other conventional activities may arguably include the conference, the demonstration and even the blockade. (But I wonder what else we could have done, besides just put out more flyers.)

Maple states that in the many community meetings organized “no mention was ever made of an overall anti-industrial, anti-capitalist perspective.” He makes this totally false statement without having attended any of these meetings. (Articulating such a perspective to the Audubon Society was what helped it decide not to endorse the mobilization.) Maple continues in the same direction by claiming that “a fuller critique fell by the wayside,” These statements are not only misleading but dismissive of the efforts of numerous individuals who consistently put out this perspective. It was put forth in the “We Say No” tabloid, in the Call To Action, in a number of community talks, in several workshops at the conference, in an earlier talk on Central America and the environment, and in songs and poetry presented at numerous events both before and during the mobilization.

Solve the Environmental Nightmare

Whether or not people come to a fuller critique is another more interesting and more significant question. If people approach the waste crisis by acknowledging only the need to recycle resources, it should not surprise us since most are looking for a quick and easy solution to the environmental nightmare; but this doesn’t mean that a deeper critique isn’t constantly being articulated and on a number of different levels. It is obviously much simpler to put forth such ideas in a small alternative publication where it is easy to maintain a safe, sometimes superior, critical distance; it is much more problematic to make it cogent and integral to a movement focusing on actions and developing awareness about our day-to-day complicity in and dependence on the technological labyrinth.

An example of Maple’s refusal to recognize the complexity of the situation is his dismissal and misrepresentation of Paul Connet, a nationally known critic of incineration who spoke at the mobilization. Maple maintains that Connet “advocated work and everything else we’ve been denouncing for the last 13 years.” Connet certainly is a liberal, and he did advocate work because he, along with countless others, sees recycling as a better source of

jobs than incineration. This assertion is obviously based on a myriad of assumptions that we on the FE clearly reject. But Connet did not advocate “everything else” we’ve been denouncing; in fact he affirmed many things we’ve been saying—that people have to take responsibility for their own well-being, become conscious of mindless consumption, not trust experts or government and corporate bureaucrats, build communities of resistance. Maple also claims that Connet “assured us at every turn that if we would only employ proper waste disposal procedures, the current levels of production and consumption could easily be maintained...” But Connet never said such a thing, and Maple was not even present at the evening forum where he spoke at length. In fact, a central focus of Connet’s perspective is a reduction of production, and he clearly stated that nothing should be produced that can’t be safely recycled. He also insisted that “we don’t need a higher standard of living, but a deeper one.”

Likewise, Maple states that, with the exception of three speakers, all the others “accepted the contours of this society as they exist.” They clearly weren’t anarchists, but I would say that all of them are totally frustrated with the contours of this society as they exist. They don’t come to the same conclusions as the FE (and we should remember that our growing perspectives have never constituted any kind of a program) nor the same conclusions as each other. However, within an environmental context, their concern was basically the same, and this concern was the basis of our collaboration. The original idea behind the Evergreen Alliance was that people of differing points of view could find a common ground without sacrificing their views. Though some truly learned and changed, this growth should not be considered a sacrifice. We needn’t feel threatened by other voices, other perspectives, or refuse to learn from people we don’t necessarily agree with. We may have a more radical critique, but we don’t have all the answers.

One could surmise from this article that the political ideas of people in this community are static and set when in reality many people’s ideas are continuing to change and grow. Maple does state at the end of his article that this experience had a radicalizing effect on many, however, he gives a different impression throughout when he relies on the liberal/radical dichotomy to describe the makeup of the group. He equates “newer” people with liberal, conventional perspectives, and the older “radical core” with more politically sophisticated and uncompromising ideas. In actuality the politics of the group was and continues to be a dynamic mix, and this dualistic projection is inaccurate and over-simplified. There were some “newer” people who were quite radical and open to radical ideas, and a number of older community people who have supported different political projects over the years, but on their own terms, and who continue to be more conventional, liberal or apolitical. There was and is also much disagreement among individuals within the so-called “radical core,” much of it beyond the scope of radical/liberal definitions. A number of other people don’t fit into any of these categories and don’t want to.

Political Goals

Maple also inaccurately states that “we” went around speaking to churches, universities and community groups “often dressed in suits and ties.” In reality, among the scores of presentations given, one person went once in a suit and tie to an inner-city black church to talk about the incinerator and the May events. The “suit and tie statement, along with another line about us all “doing the yeoman’s work of stopping pollution,” give the false impression that men did all the talks, when in reality the majority of them were done by women. Maple also appears to think that, irregardless of the context, clothing determines one’s depth of radicality.

The article characterizes the Evergreen Alliance as “a large amorphous coalition” with “an external political goal,” “a hierarchical administration,” a “leadership structure” and a style identified with “the leftist milieu.” I, and most likely everyone who has consistently participated in these activities since the beginning, would never want to be associated with such a group. In the first place, though it certainly had the potential of expanding, it never was very large; meetings usually average from 10 to 30 people. Though some wanted it to function like a coalition, it has never worked that way. In reality it has been and continues to be a small community-based group of diverse people concerned about their neighborhood and the future of the planet. It has an external political goal, to stop the incinerator, but that’s certainly not all it has. (Also, it seems to me that the FE has several external political goals.) I would say that the majority of the people who consistently come to meetings and activities would agree that the incinerator is only one of the things that motivates them; most of them want to change the way we all live our lives,

build community, confront the society of waste, work, and consumption. Many of them acknowledge the misery of daily life, the humiliation of complicity in the mediatized, technological, militaristic society that controls us all in so many insidious ways. There is no absolute consensus as to how to oppose it (neither is there within the “radical core”), but this generalized sense of things exists.

I saw no “hierarchical administration” nor “leadership structure” that was “recognized by all of those who attended the weekly planning sessions” [my emphasis]. I did, however, see certain people (usually men, though not always) who talked too much and took on too many responsibilities, and this constituted an informal hierarchy, the kind we’ve seen in every other project this community has been involved in (including the FE). There were also people who were passive or intimidated, others who were lazy or irresponsible, and still others who took on new responsibilities and grew in very positive ways. (All of us need to examine the ways we operate with each other in all these projects, to realize that we are mutually dependent and should carry out promised tasks. Passive people must learn to take initiative; but confident, skilled, articulate people must learn to share, nurture, support and sometimes be silent.)

None of this, to my mind, is characteristic of the “leftist milieu” where hierarchy is stated and formalized as are leadership structures which are usually authoritarian, assumed and unquestioned. These groups are often based on instrumentalism, militantism, manipulation and hidden agendas. Maple sells himself, his friends and this community short with this comparison. He also contradicts this characterization early on in the article, when he states that “We were extremely anxious not to function or even be conceived of as traditional leftists trying to manipulate a reform effort around a hidden, radical agenda. On the other hand, we made no attempt to hide our radical ideas from the group and sought to insert them where we thought appropriate, but always working in such a manner so as not to dominate the setting or make others uncomfortable with our views.” And yet this characterization is still problematic because it suggests that “we” have some agreed upon radical goals or ideas that we consciously brought up at opportune or “appropriate” times. This was not the case; there is no such explicit or specific homogeneity among radicals in this community.

The fact that a large amount of the work was done by the “radical core,” who were the folks who proposed the actions to begin with, is proof of its non-leftist mode; we didn’t get others to do our work for us. Those new folks who did participate and took initiative, did so of their own accord, based on their own ideas and not because they had been recruited to someone else’s cause.

FE arrogance again returns in the context of analyzing problems with group process and personal dynamics; Maple claims that the FE, in contrast to the Evergreen Alliance, has been “trying to work on the process of decision making, struggling to overcome the hierarchies of sex, age and experience...” In the next breath, he maintains that “this process is never at issue in groups like the Evergreen Alliance.” [my emphasis] On the contrary, this process is often, if not always, at issue. People who dominated meetings were frequently told so by their friends. The problem with the same people doing most of the work was brought up constantly at meetings and in informal discussions. Facilitators were consciously rotated at meetings, and several suggestions were put forth on how to integrate others and help them learn skills. Since I am one of the FE people who has, for some years now, been sensitive to unequal relationships on the paper, why wouldn’t I, and others like me, not bring those same concerns to other projects we work on? Women in this community are highly sensitive to dominating personalities and problems with process and hierarchy. This is always, always, always at issue with us in whatever social or political gathering we’re part of.

Structure and Hierarchy

Again, the reality is that the same problems with structure and informal hierarchy which characterized some, though certainly not all, of the Evergreen Alliance activities last spring also characterize, and for a number of involved reasons, every other group activity this community has put together; this includes the FE, its contributions to the anarchist gatherings, the Duck Club, and the 1982 anti-nuke conference. Yet the important fact that Maple failed to mention is that in spite of the emergence of some of the same old problems, a number of people, and specifically a number of women (some of them radicals) who had previously been passive or intimidated, became truly empowered, energized and surprisingly articulate in ways these other projects (especially the FE) had not allowed

them to be. By recognizing this empowerment and congratulating those people who took on new responsibilities and challenging projects, an alternative publication can help to supplant hierarchy. But none of this was considered in Maple's article. Instead, misconceptions about old forms of hierarchy were reinforced, and only one local person's name was mentioned (an FE man's) and pegged as being perceived by many as "the main spokesperson" when in reality many voices were heard (many of them female) in many contexts.

We return to the total picture. Finally Maple characterizes this "anti-incinerator movement" as "pitifully inadequate to battle the totality of what we face." Who ever thought it wasn't? Of course it's inadequate, though I'm not sure why he judges it as "pitifully" so. This is precisely why people had the energy and the strong desire to go beyond the incinerator; that, apparently, was inadequate too. We must remember that putting out this alternative publication is also inadequate, maybe even "pitifully" so, to take on the totality. All of these projects are necessary, and together they're still inadequate. Yet we should recognize and encourage the positive links between these projects; for me, one grows out of the other, and they should be able to feed each other and so help build communities of opposition.

None of this is to say that Evergreen Alliance activities should be above criticism or beyond reproach. A number of mistakes were made, and lots of problems existed and continue to exist. But criticism should be made carefully and fairly and with the full consciousness that none of this exists in a vacuum, that it is part of a fabric that links individuals and projects, friends and community. We cannot make criticisms of the Evergreen Alliance without realizing that many of the same problems exist, and have existed for a number of years, on the FE and in other community projects; many of the same individuals are involved, and there is a dynamic which repeats itself. However, there is now a consciousness of the unhealthy aspects of that dynamic and a strong desire on the part of a number of people to change that negative cycle.

We obviously cannot build a healthy community if relationships of dominance, informal hierarchy, competition and macho posturing continue to hold sway over our interactions with each-other. (In truth, Maple's article itself struck me as extremely hierarchical: a mediated dismissal of the real actions of real people—his own friends and neighbors.) Awareness of these common problems was heightened as a result of our activities together last spring. However, whether or not things will fundamentally change remains to be seen.

Being Part of a Fabric

Speaking of being part of a fabric, in a wider context, many individuals in this community, the Evergreen Alliance and the FE, for that matter, are all linked in to an environmental movement which is diverse, ever-expanding, and truly amorphous at this point in time. The environmental crisis is so serious that the mainstream media cannot ignore it anymore, and even Bush has to pay lip service to it. Many of us are on new ground here, and it's apparent that the possibilities are strong that the entire movement could easily be co-opted by capitalism and/ or recuperated by the left, or by right-wing conservationists, or by some new right-left coalition. It is very likely that recycling will attempt to sell itself to capital as a way to further and enhance the deadly myths of production and progress. And yet all of this remains to be seen, and none of these scenarios is what motivated people in this community to bind together. We should all be aware of classic patterns of recuperation, but not to the point where it stops our actions or shapes our expectations of ourselves and our community. Imposing such a rubric on our relatively small and "inadequate" activities and in the process misreporting details so that they fit some predetermined mode of recuperation does much to encourage the sense of hopelessness and impotence that is so pervasive in our lives.

I don't believe that this was the conscious intention of E.B. Maple's article. I know for a fact that what he hoped people would derive from his criticisms and praise is a sense of caution about the empty promises of reformist movements, a feeling of jubilation and pride in what we had accomplished and a desire to continue the struggle, to push on further.

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