

Letters to the *Fifth Estate*

Various Authors

1990

Readers may note that the Ron Cobb cartoons we publish each issue often have copyright (ugh!) dates on them of up to twenty years ago. Beyond being a testimony to the wit and creativeness of the cartoonist, the drawings aptly illustrate that neither the hypocrisy nor the oppressiveness of the State has changed much in the intervening twenty years. The cartoon below appeared in the *Fifth Estate* in 1969.

An Abstraction

Dear Fifth Estate Folk:

I have just re-read “Countering the Mystique of the Proletariat” (FE Summer 1989), the text by Gerard from *Interrogations*.

I think it shows quite well the lack in the traditional class-centered concept of revolution, but what it offers in its stead is equally lacking.

Replacing our “humanity” for our class as the basis for revolution is merely to replace one abstract conception for another. “Humanity” was the basis for the bourgeois revolutions, so to demand to be recognized as “human” is only to demand that bourgeois society live up to its own goals.

“Humanity” is just another abstraction used to homogenize us and to reproduce the monoculture. So to be a “human being” is to be a thing! What capitalist society—what civilization itself—must try to suppress, what stands as its one indomitable enemy, is the unique individual, the free, wild being who won’t fit into any of society’s categories—including that of “humanity.”

It is not as “human beings” that we will abolish Capital—and civilization in general—but by repudiating all categorizations. The rebellion will be the endeavor of unique individuals—this is the only way that it can be free of the trappings of domestication.



A rising new cause of severe brain damage: Narcotics officers.

When each of us dares to rise up as unique wild beings,
free of all social roles, only then will civilization fall.

For Wild Freedom,
Feral Faun
Eugene, Oregon

Gerard, author of "Mystification of the Proletariat" responds: By using the phrase, "The rebellion will be an endeavor of human beings," I was trying to say that the only way proletarians will succeed in abolishing the conditions of life which make objects of human beings is by refusing to continue presenting themselves as wage workers demanding pay increases, as unemployed people asking for work—and even as part of a Class which has the goal of appropriating the current means of production (since these means of production, along with wage labor, are an integral part of the system which Capital uses to dispossess proletarians of their lives).

This formulation about humans making the revolution hoped to convey that the change in consciousness can come only from refusing the captive life which is mutilated by money and wage labor—namely the life dominated by one's work or unemployment. The conception of Wealth as the accumulation of objects furnished by contemporary means of production will also have to be rejected.

Money, wage labor, mass production and consumption all keep human beings from establishing real links between themselves and with nature.

Having clarified this point, I willingly acknowledge that my formulation is unsatisfactory because it has echoes of radical humanism, an outlook which holds that human beings ought to live without masters so that humanity can better dominate life. I believe that this humanism has to be abandoned; it puts human beings at the center of life and reduces life's various manifestations to a world of objects to appropriate and exploit.

FE Note: The translation of the article entitled "Countering the Mystique of the Proletariat" which appeared in the Summer 1989 *Fifth Estate* misrepresented the author's thought in the final paragraph on page 6. Gerard has clarified and somewhat expanded this facet of his argument with the fans of the Proletariat. Here he ridicules the conception That anything in the proletarian condition could serve as a model for liberation and that even worker-managed industries would not alleviate the oppressive nature of our society.

The notion of proletarian emancipation also has its roots in the nineteenth century. This expression might be understood to mean the abolition of wage labor, but it cannot possibly mean the abolition of the proletariat, because behind the word “emancipation” lies the notion that the proletarian condition contains liberating potentialities for humanity and the concept assumes the existence of an obstacle (the bourgeoisie) which blocks the realization of these potentialities.

In this schematic conception, the ruling class appropriates Surplus Value in the form of Profits and prevents those who operate the Productive Forces (the Proletariat) from appropriating these Forces for themselves and from benefiting from the wealth produced by the development of Science and Industry. The development of Science and Industry is itself presumed to be hampered by the dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie (which is, by definition, a class divided into rival factions arising from economic competition and the pursuit of profit).

But reality gives the lie to this entire Productivist mystique. Neither the valorization of Capital nor the frenzy for Profit have offered the slightest hindrance to the development of Science and Industry. Far from conflicting, Capital, Science and Industry have always collaborated to provide the all-pervasive mechanism for the appropriation and manipulation of Life whose name is Civilization. Reality has also shown that the proletarian condition is not at all the experience of fellowship or of solidarity against Capital but, rather, reduces human beings to function as living commodities competing with other commodities and conditions them to be disciplined and submissive.

Prisoner Thanks

FE Note: Recently our paper has been swamped with requests from prisoners responding to our offer for free subscriptions. The number is, in fact, so great that it is straining our resources a bit. All of our subscription and renewal forms give the opportunity for FE readers to donate an extra dollar to help cover a prisoner’s sub. The value of this program can be seen in the following letter.

Dearest Fifth Estate:

Thanks so much for the three issues of your wonderful magazine. You can’t believe how good it is to be

able to read material of this nature in jail. Mostly, the only other alternative is the mainstream newspapers, and that gets pretty sickening after a while.

Time's going pretty quickly now, and I'm looking forward to getting out next year. Hopefully, I'll be able to make it to an anarchist gathering. I've never been to one and I think it would be interesting.

Bill
Fresno, CA

Cringing

Dear Friends:

I am cringing at what I'm reading in your Summer 1989 issue, p. 7 (see "Without Borders: 1989 Anarchist Gathering"). You are reinforcing some of the more unfortunate attitudes current in the anarchist milieu.

One, you are complaining that the RSL and others desire to create another national anarchist organization. With this point, you are right. This structure would be unneeded and a waste of energy.

But your main point is that the problem is organization itself. I do not think that is a problem. The problem lies in that anarchists today don't know how to be effective. You state that organization is only for those "who feel insecure...", etc. How sublime; dismissed through pop psychology.

Anyway, I am not sure what you are worried about. The prevailing attitude among anarchists seems to be that if anything is required or demanded beyond what an individual is voluntarily willing to do, then that is asking too much.

Often the FE has called for anarchism to present a challenge to capital: I've liked hearing that call. To mount a challenge, however, requires thinking, debating, strategy, a knowledge of historical precedents and coordination; in a word, organization.

Chicago anarchists in the 1880s were highly organized with papers, clubs, events, and defense committees. The Spanish revolution was the result in part of seventy years of education and organization. When conditions were opportune, they were able to put into effect an almost totally reorganized society in a very short time.

Today, we view organization with disdain, an attitude you are happy to sustain, but it is surreal I wish one of the large gatherings would be devoted to the question of organizing. To think anarchists can

substantially challenge capital without knowing how to be effective is a myth.

Jack Daw
Jersey City, NJ

Not Clever

Dear 5th:

Your "Return of the Son of Deep Ecology" (FE #331, Spring 1989) was an outstanding issue. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so I slept. Certainly, though, if folks are going to carry on these geognostical jeremiads they should get one thing straight: the depilated primates were not installed on this planet by a god, gods or Walt Disney—that they, and what they do, are a product of nature. Until all the activities of D.P.s are seen as natural, arguments about ecology won't be any more clever than "Harry and the Hendersons." If D.P.s begin to see 'themselves as part of the earth, rather than superior to it, they might not try so hard to destroy it and themselves.

So please renew my subscription. I can't wait to see how many acres of trees will come down before Earth First!'s midden-tropy and George "Brief" Bradford come to a conclusion. And use the extra money to send a subscription to prisoner Alan David Franklin in Ann Arbor. As far as we can tell in Seattle he is being held incommunicado.

Gus Hellthaler
Seattle, WA

FE Note: Readers interested in exploring further the question of environmental politics, ethics and philosophy (or perhaps overcoming insomnia) can obtain the special Spring 1989 issue for \$1.00 through the FE Bookservice.

Tribal Dance

To the FE:

Regarding the ongoing "religion debate" (see FE Summer 1989), since reading *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!* by Fredy Perlman, and becoming involved in the radical environmental movement; I have begun to see the need for a different approach to the liberation of consciousness.

Coming from a rationalist, humanist background, I never had much use for religion. The "logic" of theory



seemed a suitable way to approach the universe, and as an anarchist and critical thinker, “self theory” was the basic to which I adhered.

However, as I have begun to see and feel that the human condition of alienation is based on the primary alienation of humans from the rest of the living world, I have become very interested in cultural forms that appear to bring humans into a more integrated relationship with the earth. Most of these forms are to be found among the non-civilized examples of human culture—the tribal and the primitive.

This past summer at the Earth First! Rendezvous in New Mexico, I took on the project of organizing a tribal dance to be performed on the solstice. I arrived with costume materials and some ideas about the story we should tell. At the start of the workshop, I distributed these ideas, worked out on paper. Of course, most of the participants had other ideas, so we started to discuss the story line of the dance.

We weren't getting very far very fast, until someone (brilliantly) suggested we get up and start moving. After loosening up a bit, we all gathered into a clump and became bubbling, slurping primordial ooze. From that point on, the dance evolved and became a story of evolution that would help us explain the source and resolution of human alienation.

From the ooze, the dancers broke out into the four directions, becoming earth, air, fire and water. The elements in turn formed people, animals and plants. Life in the garden was portrayed; animals danced, trees swayed and people danced in their communal circle. After a time, a few of the people in the circle began moving in a funny aggressive and mechanical way.

Suddenly, they left the circle and ran off to a corner to plot. The Shitheads were born. Now there were four groups of beings in the world; animals, plants, humans and Shitheads. The Shitheads started taking human slaves and slaughtering animals and trees. The slaves were made to wear pieces of yellow cardboard painted with gears and machine parts. As zombies marching in unison, they became a fearsome earth-gobbling machine.

Finally, when all but the last human was enslaved, and all but the last plant and animal were dead, the children rushed in with cardboard monkeywrenches and resurrected everyone and there was a giant celebration dance drawing everyone in to dance to the drums that would last all night.

We worked this dance out over three days and it was tremendous fun. Of course things didn't go exactly right during the performance. We forgot some of our cues, and the kids got so excited they jumped the gun, rushing in with the monkeywrenches before everyone was dead. But I think everyone got the idea and enjoyed the big dance at the end, even while choking on all the dust we kicked up.

The next day I stopped in at the "Anarchy and Deep Ecology: Beyond Rhetoric" workshop. People were saying the usual things that I had mostly heard before. Then a woman who was a dancer (who had just arrived and hence missed the Tribal Dance) said something about a state of mind she had when her feet touched the ground and danced, naked on the earth, and how that felt a lot like theory to her.

Working out theory with our feet is something that a lot of us do, in dance, in the woods and on the streets. Theory, however, doesn't seem to be exactly the right word for it. Spirituality comes to mind, and though I'm not entirely satisfied with that word either, it does seem to describe better an activity that involves body and emotion as well as intellect.

Though primitive ritual is interesting and instructive, uncritically adopting the ways of our less alienated ancestors is not the answer. We need to recognize our own "self-spirituality." Then we can celebrate as well as cerebrate.

Kelpie Willsin
Chico, CA

No Challenge

To Fifth Estate,

To some who attended and to some who declined, it was clear that "Without Borders" would be an ironic choice of themes; the Convention as unintended parody of a Democratic Party get-together, perhaps, content-wise, on the order of a progressive church group outing. Preceded by a *Newsletter* that printed none of the letters it solicited concerning the nature or purpose of the gathering, the left-liberal melange in San Francisco proved even more unfocused and incoherent than its three predecessors.

The current issue of *The Fifth Estate* fits in all too well with the convention it uncritically boosted. One front-page article paraded symbolic protest against the intended Detroit incinerator as the very height of resistance; alas, it is obviously more liberal, pacifist nothing-

ness, with no hint of a real challenge to this world of ritual and lies.

The same for the other front-page piece, a non-critique of the annual Nevada test site piety-for-the-media. Ditto, for the eulogy of Abbie Hoffman, which could easily have been written by his radical pal, Amy Carter.

There was a time when the FE had something to say. Now, it seems to want nothing so much as to go along, to fit into a milieu, which, if the A Con is any indication, is in pretty miserable shape.

John Zerzan
410 Adams
Eugene, OR 97402

Typesetter responds: John Zerzan is vague as to whether or not he actually attended the San Francisco anarchist gathering, but the fact is, he didn't, and he appears to have no substantive criticisms of it apart from the organizers' failure to print his letter in their newsletter. Nor, by the way, was he anywhere near the protest against the Detroit incinerator last June.

Certainly, the people arrested blockading gates and dragging barricades across the road to impede operations at that facility have no need to justify their actions to Zerzan, who dismisses them, sight unseen, from more than two thousand miles away. We live in the shadow of this incinerator, and do the best we can to alert people about it and to stop it.

But given that we were a mere 500 that day, and not 5,000, or 20,000, what exactly does he propose we do beyond more or less symbolic protest? Maybe the cops are more passive in Eugene than they are in Detroit, but we happen to think we did the best we could under the circumstances. (And few that were there would agree that demo was "pacifist nothingness." It was, by most accounts, spirited, rowdy, even a bit reckless—particularly from the point of view of the many people who brought their children to it.)

We'll move beyond the symbolic when the relations of forces are a bit more equalized, we promise, but until that time, are flyers, theoretical essays, and denunciations in letters columns more concrete than other symbolic acts? Zerzan's potshots at other articles, such as the explicit critique of the Nevada test site demo, are of the same fabric as the rest of his ill-tempered remarks.

Finally, Zerzan claims that the FE has nothing to say. This was not his view, at least publicly, just a few issues

back when we devoted several pages to one of his essays. Curious, isn't it?

Santa Cruz

Dear Fifth Estate:

Anarchist activity is alive and well in Santa Cruz, Calif. We have a very large group participating in anti-nuke activity—Stop First Strike—Santa Cruz and the Lockheed Action Collective.

Lots of us were involved in the San Francisco (A) Gathering, pro-choice actions, animal liberation actions, a demo at United Technologies Corp. (UTC) and others. Also, on Friday, October 13th, Santa Cruz had its very first anarchist community coffeehouse which raised about \$260 for the UTC action.

Some of the food served there was from the first harvest of the Anarchist Plot (a guerrilla garden; organic, of course). We also have an anarchist library which will probably be the recipient of the donations from the next coffeehouse.

Eric G.

Santa Cruz CA

Compost

To Free-Agent provocateur John Zerzan:

Speak of razing the crops! (See Zerzan's "Agriculture: Essence of Civilization," FE Summer 1988 and his response to Bob Brubaker's criticism, FE Winter 1988).

So, it's not the cream, but the crematorium? Perhaps extreme times demand extreme solutions to liberate diversity from production, although I'm not sold on the final solution to the technology problem that began with the routinizing of the senses in agriculture.

That doesn't indicate, however, that I found your fascinating soiling of civilization's roots far afield. But first I'll delineate a few minor criticisms and then propose some fertile ground for further inquiry.

My first problem is with a confusion of the concepts time and history. Initially you claim that historical-time is an imposition on social reality (of course, to ignore that this imposition is a product of social reality itself, although not intrinsic to it, seems to me to perpetuate the semantic alienation you seek to weed out), and then assert that the "dimension time or history is a function of repression."

I understand the repression of libidinal spontaneity of the senses to serve the religious domestication of the agricultural calendar, but what is the essential difference between history and time, and how do your formulations fit into the Einsteinian space-time continuum?

Moreover, I also take issue with your assumption that domestication of plants and animals “defies” natural selection. As I see it, to posit that human control perverts the evolutionary process is to select humanity out of nature, for nothing can truly defy natural selection unless you are employing it in the limited sense of interfering with natural diversity of species.

So much for the critical. In relation to your integration of the consumption-commodity production arising as a religious rite hypothesis, are you familiar with Terrence McKenna’s investigations into the role of hallucinogenic mushrooms in the evolution of human consciousness and culture? McKenna conceives of an exopheromonic hallucinogen-mediated symbiotic relationship between the mushroom and omnivorous hunter-gatherer tribes discovering the fungus in sacred (incipiently) cow shit: the communing human would be endowed with increased visual acuity for hunting, “shamanic ecstasy” and even such symbolic control systems as language while the mushroom expands its niche thanks to cattle domestication.

Of course, he takes the Jungian position that the vision of God was later internalized as the separate ego function. Perhaps agriculture arose with institutional religion as a means of shamanic monopolization of the ecstatic experience for the efficient subduing of a ritualized and labor-divided community of super egos. As Freud realized, civilization is a guild of guilt. Apparently, the chemicals through which many ’60’s rebels sought to escape the imposition of repression by capital’s calendar may have been responsible for our harvest of history in the first place!

“Wild or tame, weeds or crops speak of that duality that cripples the soul of our being (but isn’t the idea of a soul and a being dualistic? —T.T.) ushering in, relatively quickly, war, despotism and impoverishment over the great length of that earlier oneness with nature,” says Zerzan. Is it not ironic that so-called humanist historians such as the late Jacob Bronowski lay the blame for warfare at the feet of violent hunter-gatherer nomads who envied the well planned surplus food supply of their civilized species brethren?

Is this part of the productivist cover-up compost? I think it's enough to muse over the fact that battlefields are soon fertile farm lands.

Reaper comes for the sows,
Tutor Turtle
PO Box 642
Davis, CA 95617-0642

Agricultural Origins

Dear Fifth Estaters,

I enjoyed Bob Brubaker's review of John Zerzan's essay regarding agriculture as well as Zerzan's response (FE, Winter 1989). However, neither has accounted for a peculiar anomaly: the temporal parallelism observable in the development of plant domestication.

The widely separated (highland-lowland eco-zones in Peru, Middle America, the Near East, and the Far East) yet synchronous development of plant domestication immediately followed the major climate change during the final glacial phase of the last Pleistocene glaciation some 11,000 years ago.

Ecological changes during the last portion of the Pleistocene had serious implication for hunters and gatherers. I suggest that agriculture should be regarded as an innovation providing a solution to the problems of adaptation in the new environment.

Several common ecological changes can be recognized across all the affected areas. The extinction of the mammalian "megafauna" is well documented. Sea level declined markedly during the last glacial phase. There is a correlation between major extinctions and declining sea level throughout geologic time. Temperatures fell dramatically and the climate became considerably drier.

Grasses, a minor element a millennium earlier, became abundant in shifting and expanding eco-zones. There was a corresponding decrease in herbaceous and shrubby -vegetation. Annual grasses exploded in abundance to become the major element in mixed communities.

Most ecosystems feature perennial polycultures. Perennials produce annual forms in ecosystems where the water dries up in the substrates during the dry season. Perennials live year-round and produce small seeds. In contrast, annuals perish each year, leaving only large seeds (due to storage needs) to carry on the

species in the next favorable period. Annuals are the backbone of agriculture.

How can we determine the implications of these ecological changes on humans? Modern ethnographic studies of contemporary societies of hunters and gatherers may provide an answer. These studies indicate, in contrast to the old view, that hunters and gatherers meet their subsistence needs with only a modest work effort and that they have a large amount of leisure time.

They follow a seasonal pattern of movement, occupying a series of different camps during the course of a year. Hunters and gatherers have small population sizes (between 15 and 30 people) and low population densities (seldom reaching the level of one person per square kilometer). In unstable environments, hunters and gatherers maintain a wide “niche breadth.”

Temporal irregularities in favorite resources can be accommodated by shifting to other resources. The Pleistocene stasis was defined by this system of ecological homeostasis.

I believe the ecological changes at the end of the Pleistocene would have substantially reduced the “niche breadth” of hunters and gatherers. People living in these ecosystems would now depend on a vastly reduced and markedly seasonal resource base vulnerable to drought in an already water-limited situation.

The harvesting of high yielding annuals, now the major element in the ecosystem, would appear to have been an appropriate adaptation. Storage of the harvested seeds would provide stability in resource availability throughout the year. Storage systems are present among all early practitioners of plant domestication.

According to Paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, “Homo Sapiens arose at least 50,000 years ago, and we have not a shred of evidence for any genetic improvement since then.” All anatomically modern humans lived as hunters and gatherers for at least 40,000 years until in synchronicity some began to practice agriculture in several widely separated regions of the world. This process followed the only end-of-glacial ecological change during the entire span of our modern existence.

In a 900-page book entitled *Origins of Agriculture* editor Charles Reed observes:

“Some stimulus and/or stress in some populations of anatomically modern man during the first end-of-stadial period of environmental change experienced

by that population resulted in the cultural shift from dependence on hunting/gathering to at least a partial dependence on gardening or other kinds of agriculture.”

Human cultural evolution during the post-Pleistocene period has been remarkable. An important feature of this evolution has been the larger and more complex integration of human societies. The shift from agriculturally based centralized chiefdoms to city-states and nation-states has been accompanied by more elaborate hierarchical political and social systems.

Such systems are inherently oppressive. The variables involved in this process are still open to debate. However, it is now clear that large settlements cannot occur in a hunter-gatherer context. Convincingly, not a single example of urban formation among hunters and gatherers has been recorded. Complex societies require a food-producing system (i.e., agriculture).

The deeply felt western belief in the inherent progress of cultural evolution may be incorrect. It seems to me that a new kind of culture could be built up that could combine elements from our hunter-gatherer past, for example, direct democracy and ecological balance, with the most sensible elements from today’s wisdom.

The misanthropic musings of the radical ecology movement seem sadly mistaken. Only openness, curiosity, and initiative will lead to the discovery of our true history—and possibly a basis for redressing it.

Peter Larson Jr.
Carlsbad, CA

Anti-democratic

Dear FE Collective:

In asking for a renewal to your journal, you also ask about “opinions” of the newspaper. I’m not an anarchist, but I read the FE because of its green/anti-capitalist thrust.

Two irritants for me are the dominance of George Bradford, and FE editors immediately replying to any critical letters with which they disagree. No one person has all the wisdom (apart from the turgidity of Bradford’s writings) and I like to think of the FE as a collective endeavor, not a one person band.

The FE should do everything to encourage reader participation. Replying straight away to critical letters, in my view, discourages such participation and conveys that “we always have the last word” impression. When the general FE readership has had a chance to write in, then there is nothing wrong with collective members also giving their opinion as well. The present situation is anti-democratic.

For the Earth,
David Orton
Salt Springs, Nova Scotia

Ana Coluthon responds: If ever a letter begged not to be answered I suppose this is it, but...maybe a comment or two. Firstly, thanks to David for doing what few readers take the opportunity to do: tell us what they think about the paper.

Answering letters may inhibit the participation of readers in discussions initiated by writers, but we do so because we feel passionate about the debates which dot our pages. Time magazines and the daily papers rarely answer critics and certainly they are no model for a “democratic” press. To be honest, it appears as though your disagreements with what Bradford writes is at the root of your criticism and perhaps confronting his ideas would be a better way to proceed.

Our paper is run collectively, and writing long articles does not give any person more power in our overall process. (Nor does it imply a monopoly on wisdom, a claim none of us has ever made.) Editing, typesetting, layout, proofreading, etc., are indispensable functions, that sometimes go unrecognized by a reader seeing only the name at the bottom of an article.

fifth Estate

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