

# Environmentalism and Revolution

## A Challenge to the *Fifth Estate* and Responses

Bert Wirkes-Butuar (Peter Werbe)

Mary Wildwood

Lewis Cannon

1990

### Dear Friends at the Fifth Estate:

I was a bit disappointed with the Summer 1990 FE. Since when have the FE staff and paper become boosters for sacrificial reformist protest politics? There seems to be wholehearted support for “Redwood Summer,” anti-nuke civil disobedience and rather unanarchistic (not even particularly “militant”) anti-incinerator protests to politicians.

And, while the remainder of the issue was good reading (Goldman, FBI repression of the Black Panthers, reviews, etc.) it was only that—“good reading”—and not the sharp, original provocative writing I usually hope to see. (I’m treating the Earth Day Special Edition as separate since it was done earlier. I found it exceptionally good and much more in tune with what the FE has been in the past.)

The Redwood Summer cover story [“Bombing won’t stop Redwood Summer,” FE #334, Summer, 1990] refers to the summer’s actions as the “environmental equivalent of the 1964 voter registration campaign in Mississippi.” Since when do anti-industrial anarchists support either voting or environmentalism or reproductions of ‘60s liberal reform? Not mentioned in the article was the fact that much of the “theory” of the actions rested on a ballot initiative that would “protect” the redwoods if it was passed in the November elections.

To quote your “Festival of the Oppressed” article in the Earth Day supplement [“Earth Day? We Want a Festival of the Oppressed!,” FE #334, Summer, 1990], “If the last 20 years have demonstrated anything, it is the failure of environmentalism to halt the process of the planet-wide destruction. Yet the Earth Day [and Redwood Summer] revival is predicated on the same failed strategy and the same reformism.” I realize that the main slant of the article was about the bombing of the organizers, death threats and the like. Still, one can support the victims of state or corporate violence without necessarily being entirely uncritical of the same people’s ideology or tactics.

The anti-nuke cult propaganda (lead article inside front cover—a fairly prominent position) I found particularly offensive. (Note: I’ve been there too. I’ve done endless anti-nuke demos, testified at “public hearings,” written letters, blockaded nuke waste trucks coming into my home state, protested at the gates of the Nevada Test Site, hung banners at the urban corporate headquarters of uranium mining companies, participated in blockades of uranium mines and hiked 40 miles into Ground Zero at the Test Site to “stop” a nuclear test!) Just the notion that the “vitality” of “the movement” is indicated by 37,000 arrests in the 1980s in North America is enough to make me puke! Vitality?! Perhaps if sacrifice and a trail of corpses is to indicate vitality, you should report on the “vitality” of Christianity! Wouldn’t an authentic vitality be indicated by results like shutdown nuke plants or weapons being dismantled?

Even the Left Greens of Germany and other reformists have articulated a critique of the relationship between state power and the nuke-mining-power-weapons waste complex, saying that a garrison state has the inevitable result of nuclearism. Wouldn't, then, a vital "anti-nuke movement" actually be a vital anti-state and anti-capital movement (or perhaps more accurately, a pro-community, pro-nature, pro-desire, pro-liberation movement)? In fact, elements of this are now being seen. For instance, at this April's big Test Site action (a regular social event), possibly a majority of the participants were more concerned with the ritual, dancing, joking, fun, drumming, socializing, shared meals and the like on our side of the Test Site fence—in short, the community aspects and not the sacrificial, ideological, political ones. (When I was there in '85 and '87 it was very much the opposite.) Yet this is seen by many in "the movement" as being irrelevant to "the cause" (which it is!), and a distraction from the correct politics (which it is!).

At any rate, it is not the community aspects, but the arrest scorecard which is indicated as a sign of "vitality." If FE disagrees with that, why print it uncritically if it all.

Lastly, the incinerator protests ["Yikes! We Shut It Down! Detroit Burner Closes Temporarily," FE #334, Summer, 1990]. I'm not concerned with whether or not it is "appropriate for anarchist types to participate in officially sanctioned political events." I am concerned with the slogans used to describe this participation. On Page 6 you say "the commission voted 6 — 5 to shut the incinerator down." Then in the next paragraph you say "We Shut It Down!" Who shut it down? Politicians shut it down. And politicians reopened it and politicians built and profited from it in the first place. If you really believe that you shut it down, you're being fooled in a big way. Aren't those temporary, partial non-victories the same ones they always "give" out just to encourage our further participation? Isn't that whole sham so utterly transparent?

And then the article goes on to say that not being stupid, you were ready and went out for an immediate protest and vigil. Yippee! Didja get on tee vee? Maybe get quoted in the Capitalist Plunder daily paper even? Sorry for the sarcasm, but c'mon! Protest politics, single-issue-ism, appeals to authority through mass media and the whole left-over new left '60s show and dance—hasn't this long ago been seen as wholly inadequate? Especially by the FE? To quote the special issue again: "An entirely new kind of politics [or anti-politics as I'd suggests], a far more profound response is needed...Such a response would have to move rapidly beyond environmentalism, beyond even radical environmentalism (to the degree that the latter has only employed "radical" tactics to further environmental reforms)." Just what would that response look like? The above quoted article suggests a general strike, a moratorium on production, a reduction of mechanical movement. It suggests that we cogs in the megamachine become living subjects, ignore the TV...

And to quote G.B. ["An Exemplary Life: A Memoir of Fredy Perlman (review)," FE #334, Summer, 1990] in the article on Fredy Perlman: "Fredy was exemplary, nevertheless, because his personal trajectory was representative of a time when rebels had to re-examine their forms of revolt and their lives as they found them being conquered and colonized by the very forces they had originally set out to oppose. Thus, his politics matured into a deepening refusal..."

Is it so difficult to imagine a general strike? To articulate and develop actions to realize a deepening refusal? To create situations, exemplary actions, that could inspire a movement of immense proportions that just may be able to begin reducing mechanical movement, creating community, dismantling hierarchic and exploitive social and human-earth relationships? Instead of chanting (assuming one must chant) "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle," (even if "revolt" is tacked on at the end) how about "revolt, rebel, resist," or "renew, remake, reclaim" or even "revel, recreate, relax..."

Is not now a time more than ever for rebels to re-examine our forms of revolt?

Can our forms of revolt center around something besides what one does with popcans after they're empty?

Do take this personally—I do. As I've indicated, I've been the activist route and it's all too familiar. But I'm tired of "acting" in someone else's play and have no use for "-isms." I want to change the world (yes, I am grandiose!) and the way I live in it. Acting out isms is no longer a way that I see as useful. The change in my perspective came about two-fold. First hundreds of actions, demos, protests and the like, around numerous "Issues," got consistently and absolutely nowhere—despite the slogans or the banners of my contemporaries claiming that black is white, sacrifice is empowerment,  $2 + 2 = 5$  and "we shut it down!"

It was with this perspective that I found the anti-authoritarian milieu and especially FE and those who write for it and are quoted in it as well as the writers who have themselves influenced outlooks held by the FE. It was there/here that I was exposed to ideas that had a coherence activist ideology lacked; they made sense. For myself I began to re-evaluate my actions and the world around me. I began the process of “re-visioning” and imagining that something much more was possible.

And now, precisely when I’ve made a final break—theoretically and practically—with the whole activist milieu, those who have been an inspiration in the past seem (please correct me if I’m way off) to be taking a step backwards to much of what I and so many others have just renounced. Perhaps I’m imputing more to you all than is really there. But this latest FE seems to be continuing a trend.

I can understand that the immediacy of the incinerator may compel you to do anything in an attempt to stop it. I have no problem with that, per se. It’s just that I would never report such things under the slogans of liberation, but under the heading of survivalism. Let me tell you: the watershed I now live on has been declared the most devastated in the state. Only a few decades ago it was a lush ancient forest. Now the river is a brown, silty torrent after each rain and there are hundreds of square miles with hardly a tree in sight! Acid rain and smog from cities 80 miles on either side of us here is slowly killing off the remaining trees... Let me tell you about immediacy! The state will soon sell off the trees along the East border of our farm; the North border was clearcut last year by a timber multinational. Let me tell you about immediacy! We’ll probably plead to the state forestry politicians to change the planned cut to at least a “selective cut”—anything to avoid having to view another clearcut. But we won’t call this revolt; we’ll call it survival and it will only strengthen our commitment to revolutionary transformation.

Did you win a “victory,” even if temporary, by having the in-sin-erator shut down? OK, then, where did the garbage go? Was it stockpiled somewhere, so that when the burner was re-lit an extra volume had to be shoved through, resulting in even worse emissions perhaps? Or was it dumped in an overflowing landfill somewhere, further polluting someone’s ground water? In participating in state’s and capital’s political shams, did anyone re-discover themselves as “living subjects”? If authentic elements of revolt did exist there, what are they?

During the ‘70s, much of the “timber” (capital’s word for forest) in the nearby National Forest was held up from cutting by court injunctions pending the outcome of RARE II (the Federal Government’s evaluation of its land for suitable “wilderness” designation). This was considered by environmentalists—from Earth First! types to the Audubon Club—to be a great victory. But the logs had to come out to keep the mills functioning; capital must expand or die.

Our watershed was exempt from the court rulings and so in a matter of eight years it was stripped bare. Some victory! Now, the recent decision to protect the spotted owl—and therefore a sizeable chunk of the remaining old-growth forest habitat—will mean much intensified liquidation of everything that isn’t “protected.”

Reforms always reinforce the system, divert genuine rebellion and merely shift problems to someone else’s back yard. Wouldn’t real change look like workers occupying and shutting down the incinerator? Log export ships stuck without crews in the docks due to a general strike? The factories occupied and either transformed into something useful (like dance halls) or razed? Let’s not fool ourselves by calling major defeats minor victories. Let’s go all out for the major victories.

I think the project of the anti-authoritarian milieu at this moment should be to put two decades of theory into practice, to make our actions consistent with the slogans that have been on the banners and newspaper pages for so long. Despair, with its obverse, hope, is an infantile disorder. Leave that to the christians!

Let’s imaginatively and creatively evaluate the circumstances around us, look for the weak points, create situations that are exemplary and can be communicated and spread. Was revolution a “possibility” in April of 1968 in Paris? Or, in China in April of 1989? How about the U.S. next month?

I think the truly radical project in the redwoods lies within the timber-dependent communities and may yet be realized in spite of Redwood Summer-vacation. Certainly, there are situations all over that lend themselves to exemplary action and subversion. Let’s put our heads together and find out just what can be realized, just what is (im)possible.

J.B.

Concrete, Wash.

## 1. 'No Clear Dividing Line'

*Mary Wildwood responds*

I do take your criticisms of my article about the incinerator protests personally, in the best sense of the word, and not just because I wrote it. And so I will respond personally.

It's frustrating to me that you didn't perceive any of the sense of humor or irony with which I wrote the story. I'm wondering if it was at all apparent to other distant readers. But how can you read, "We were in the newspapers! We were on TV!" seriously? It was my hope to ease some of the real tensions we experienced among ourselves throughout the sequence of events with some lightheartedness. And, by way of a little hyperbole, I was trying to give an honest, if incomplete, idea of the emotional and psychological dynamics that affected some of us, especially me, through trying to communicate with a board of mostly paid mouthpieces in an officially sanctioned sham. So, embedded in my words there was some criticism of ourselves. Some of us did get a little geeked, imagining we could influence in some non-synchronous dimension, more than we actually did, and specifically that final vote. But I was really just kidding around with that bit about us believing we were starting a "revolution of rising expectations" that would lead to the downfall of western civilization.

I shouldn't have to explain all this. It's starting to dawn on me I did a lousy job of reporting; I don't want the efforts of my friends misrepresented due to a failure in my writing. I neglected to mention actions inspired by a conscious awareness of the cooptive grid of bureaucracy and media we were dealing within, such as when a friend intercepted an in-progress TV interview with a state official by physically blocking him from the camera and reporters, setting off a confrontation and debate between other protesters and the camera crew, or when another friend shouted down the three major local TV stations' live coverage of the final vote. I didn't mention evidence of the personal impact our presentations actually did have on individuals on the commission (as questionable as that accomplishment may be) when, for instance, after the vote to shut down the incinerator, we found one commissioner backstage in tears because hers was the tie-breaking vote and she had, as it became obvious later, disobeyed orders. Perhaps I didn't emphasize enough the importance, as I see it, of our testimony's point-by-point exposure of the lies by the city, its paid "experts" and the State Department of Natural Resources, revealing as it did, the whole "public hearing" process as an obvious sham to all those present.

You and I do have some real differences though (you and I, I mean; I'm not speaking for the FE). I believe in the importance of local opposition when it takes place in myriad and multifarious forms. Certainly "participating in state and capital's sham" is not the choicest form, but there are times when it is appropriate within a critical consciousness of their limitations, along with actions of creative opposition outside of the system.

I don't recall anyone in the pages of the FE or talking among ourselves seriously referring to the more banal strategies of the incinerator fight "under the slogans of liberation." Though in this ecocidal civilization there is no clear dividing line between struggles of "survival" and "liberation," I can honestly say that those of us who have been opposing the incinerator for nearly five years do see it first as one of survival. For me it certainly is. I grew up here; my mother, father, sister and brothers, and their families and my much loved friends live here. But the fight has been waged consistently within the context and consciousness of opposition to production, consumerism, waste and the overall suicidal, ecocidal capitalist culture, with their connections drawn in tabloids, flyers, banners, theatre, conferences, speeches, etc. and yes, even into microphones (though rarely beyond them, into the airwaves).

Simply because I, along with others in my community decide to make use of a reformist avenue does not mean we are/I am suddenly advocating reform. The problem is not resolved as to whether in this case we did the "right thing" by participating in the public hearings, nor can we measure just how meaningful that participation was; but are you saying that the FE shouldn't report about those conditions amid the ongoing techno-industrial assault, when we feel compelled to resort to less than purely "revolutionary" tactics, due to the "immediacy" of a particular situation?

True, workers occupying and shutting down the plant and turning it into a dance hall would be real change; and maybe that's a plausible idea where you live. But this is Detroit, after all, and yes, that fact does make a difference. Ze'ev Chafets, (author of a recently published book about Detroit) is not the first person to call it a "third world city." The legacy of deep-seated racism here, and its generations of abuse and exploitation, compounded by urban blight, its poverty, addiction and alienation, has spawned a profound and unprecedented level of rage and disem-

powerment (for lack of a better word) that is truly terrifying. The focal power structure (only recently showing signs of age), with intimate ties to corporate industry, is so entrenched and so blatantly corrupt, it has had virtual free reign to bully and ride roughshod over remaining inner-city neighborhoods. Under these conditions, despite door to door leafleting, presentations at blockclubs, schools, churches, etc., with efforts to expose the incinerator as an instance of environmental racism, to most blacks here in this 80% black city, our white faces still speak through the white mask of oppression. Blues for Mr. Charlie.

Perhaps the '67 riot, revolt, whatever, fit the situationist mode of revolt you seem to advocate exclusively. But everyone in the streets here knows that since then things have only gotten unimaginably worse, indeed due in part to the same processes of the machine of reform against which you argue. Twelfth Street, long ago bulldozed and renamed Rosa Parks Boulevard, is now an amnesiac pavement of some scattered housing projects and a strip mall.

Our opposition to the incinerator has never been "single issue" and has naturally led us into collaborations against other environmental assaults. So, nobody here is silly enough not to have long ago questioned "where the garbage goes," burned or not. It gets dumped in a landfill in a distant suburb called Sumpter Township, located on a floodplain, when it is not burned. And when it is burned, what does not poison the ecosphere through air emissions, gets dumped in the same landfill in the form of more easily leached, highly concentrated toxic ash. We have formed an alliance with the Sumpter Township people and protest with them both forms of dumping. The "Not In My Backyard" syndrome can become a revolutionary movement when an alliance of communities acts on the awareness that they share the whole earth as their backyard.

Maybe through your own experience you would agree with me that the very learning process involved in opposing ecological assaults has a compelling potential to bring on a radical transformation in consciousness even, or perhaps especially, beginning from a merely single issue or "survivalist" perspective. When the struggle for survival of one's self and one's community implicates and indicts the interlocking interests of capital and production on which the larger society depends, any adherence to its psychotic rationale begins to fall away, and real living values emerge. Once allied with living nature, people come to recognise themselves in it, identify its diseases with their own, relearn its diverse and intricate processes of healing, renewal, and reinvigoration. I have seen it happening in different ways among others we have worked with, and among ourselves, throughout this protracted incinerator struggle, heightening our awareness of ourselves in interaction with one another, our differences, influencing the ways we make decisions, the ways we talk to each other, the ways we listen to one another. It has been disturbing, and it's also been fun. I don't feel sacrificed at all. I am worried, but very much alive.

It's fine to be grandiose, but I really don't believe I will "change the world." But I do participate in the intricate process of its change, which involves a lot of different people engaged in many different forms of resistance and re-creation, that share a consciousness of what the world has become through His-story and a revision of what it can be. I hope, and there's nothing wrong with that either.

—Mary Wildwood

## **2. 'Such Campaigns are an Important Battleground'**

*Lewis Cannon responds:*

J.B. has quoted my article ("Earth Day? We Want a Festival of the Oppressed!") to argue against practical activities in which I played a role, in fact a significant role; perhaps my remarks may help to clarify both my writings and actions. His criticisms are representative of a kind that recur regularly in the anarchist/anti-authoritarian milieu; while they're sincere and high-minded (in his case at least), their error stems from a dogmatic understanding, in my view, of our project.

For example, J.B. interprets my call for a "new kind of politics" beyond leftism and environmentalism as a repudiation of activities such as Redwood Summer. I couldn't disagree more; I think that campaigns like Redwood Summer are important battlegrounds where the fermentation process leading to anti-industrial revolt is taking place.

The attempt to create links with local communities and workers, while not automatically revolutionary, was certainly a necessary leap beyond the old “human needs vs. nature” paradigm of most (including purportedly “radical”) environmentalists. And it was being organized by people within Earth First! (among others) that were closest to us in ecological politics. These were our allies, and we had no compunction about giving them support, raising funds and encouraging people from our area to go.

There were other concerns which I shouldn't have to mention: the seriousness of the repression and violence, and 'the lateness of the hour for the Northwest coast ecosystem. As has been said, one can debate a question only as long as there is something left to debate; when the trees are gone, the debate will be finished. Now, I don't remember the referendum connection looming large in Redwood Summer literature. Even if it had, given the bombings, we would have covered it, though undoubtedly with warnings about voting.

But speaking here only for myself, I would still have given material but critical support. In fact, I do this all the time, giving support to ecological struggles, native land rights struggles, community anti-toxics campaigns, and freedom of expression and human rights battles, even though they are often formulated in terms that do not challenge the nature of the megamachine.

Particularly given our limited numbers, I don't believe that the anti-authoritarian ideal can override ecological responsibility or defense of communities or basic human rights struggles where the possibility of revolution is not immediately present. The key is to not fail to make a revolution when the possibility arises, but this happens on its terms and in its own time, it can't be made to happen. Meanwhile, grave political and ethical questions present themselves.

if anarchists in the U.S. had turned their backs on the civil rights struggle in the 1950s and 1960s because it was not explicitly anti-authoritarian, they would have failed in fundamental human terms. Fortunately, they did not, and one can read in anarchist newsletters of the time such statements as, -Their struggle is our struggle.”

Anarchists supported the civil rights struggle and some participated directly in it, first of all because it was their responsibility as human beings to lend mutual aid, to create communities, to take a stand; secondly because it is in the process of mutual aid and struggle that an egalitarian discourse can even begin to occur, where the possibility of revolutionary transformation can be raised. Revolutionary theory does not negate such contexts in an analytical framework, but rather integrates them and takes them to a new level, in a holistic, dialectical sense.

This has also been our intent vis-a-vis the anti-nuclear movement, in which we have participated critically since the 1970s. It's unfortunate that J.B. poses the anti-nuclear arrests (which suggest the larger protests in which they occurred) simply as sacrifice, and implies that his own activities were a waste of time. He should be careful; that formulation sounds like something I've heard from people who have burned out. Certainly, many christian types participate in civil disobedience out of guilt and sacrifice, but I know others (including christians) who have gotten arrested with a sense of play, a recklessness, almost in a game of will. I admire those people. My getting arrested in a civil resistance blockade at the Detroit Incinerator in 1988 was easily one of the most fulfilling and fun things I ever did, and the long trial that followed turned out to be a very effective means for a small number of people to alert and educate the community—a gamble we took and which paid off.

In my experience, the connections that link the state, the military, the corporations and, in fact, the totality seem to be quite often recognized among anti-nuclear activists. The anti-test gatherings in Nevada have played a significant role in extending that understanding, both because of and in spite of the liberal illusions of many organizers and participants. The community aspect described by J.B. has also grown and radicalized the protests, though one shouldn't glamorize it—it hasn't actually stopped nukes or tests either.

But the community would not have come about without the protests, the early preparation. Many complementary and contradictory elements coexist within these protests, as J.B.'s own letter indicates, and as an article by Sunfrog, a Detroiter who also participated in the test site demos, points out. (See “Mass Action at Gates of War Machine,” FE #332, Summer 1989.) Contradictions get played out in the process; thus not only do the protests have an inherent value in condemning the nuclear war machine, but they are a context for growing awareness and rebellion, for revolutionary ferment.

The radical, anti-authoritarian camps have gotten larger every year, as far as I can tell. But if they gather only for the community, then why not go somewhere more pleasant than a nuclear testing ground? Because there is, once again, a dialectical relation between community and resistance, between-play and organizational work, between

the motives and understanding of the people who started the process and the motives and understanding of the people who were drawn to it.

This is exactly the same process that took place in Earth First!, why it grew beyond the expectations and the conservative politics of some of the founders, got out of their control in spite of all their “damage control” and maneuvering. They simply could not stop the flood that an “earth first!” ecocentrism implies once they opened the levees.

In the case of the anti-incinerator fight, action was to some degree initiated by radicals already holding a broader critique. In the first tabloid fact sheet published in 1986, the authors wrote, “We recognize that the horror of this intended assault on the ecology and our health is not an isolated incident easily remedied by simple reform. Rather it is a part of a complex web of science and technology run amok.”

They called for the end of petrochemical civilization and demanded “a world free of domination, secure from war and where people live in harmony with each other and nature.” Yet they nevertheless called on the community to attend and show opposition at a public hearing. Hundreds showed up at a picket line and thronged the auditorium, heckling the bureaucrats and waving picket signs. Many testified. The bureaucrats approved the incinerator, but not without a protest still remembered in this city.

I will try not to duplicate the comments of Mary Wildwood, who happens to be one of three original people from the community who went to the state capital to demand that the hearing be moved to Detroit in 1986. But if J.B. didn't catch the irony of her recent article, her recognition of the “survival” aspect of the battle we're waging, then he's lacking in subtlety, to say the least. I think her point is and was that since this is capital's terrain, we are forced (as people, communities, not only as anti-authoritarians) to do battle when and where it attacks.

And capital is on the attack. We don't face a choice of revolution or single issue reformism, but rather a choice of using our creative energies to defend ourselves the best we can or to do nothing. They have placed the incinerator in our midst. It is not only reflective of every awful aspect of the industrial megamachine, it will severely degrade the conditions of life of people already under the gun. If we miss any opportunity to promote, encourage, expand resistance available to us, given our miniscule forces, it's automatically a victory for the enemy.

Mary Wildwood showed how we shouldered this responsibility, not with a sacrificial, survivalist, offer-anything approach, as J.B. suggests, but with good cheer, humor and a sense of play, and with an intransigence and toughness that belie his characterization of our activities.

Let me review how those of us asked by the Evergreen Alliance and the community group, North Cass Community Union, to intervene in the state government hearings saw our role. Not all were anti-authoritarians or anti-industrial radicals, but none had any illusions about the process or the commission. We assumed the commission would approve the incinerator, no matter how patently the incinerator Authority violated even the weak terms of its operations.

Nevertheless, there did seem to be a small division occurring on the commission, as the Authority failed time and again to meet the conditions of operation. We decided to turn their hearings to our advantage as much as possible, which we had done the previous winter when an EPA commission came to town to hear citizen comment on proposed federal incinerator regulations. Our position was, “they provide the venue, we bring the demonstration.”

At the EPA hearings we had made a mockery of their proposals. A large, spirited picket with creative street theater took place outside, where signs demanding recycling comingled with those calling for revolt, an example of the kind of fermentation I wish to promote everywhere. Inside, important powerful testimony was given. We ignored their time limitations and put on a teach-in on incinerators, the waste crisis and its ecological and social context.

In one FE member's testimony, to the cheers and applause of a couple of hundred people, he told them that for the record, this was the beginning of a revolution against them and their system, that their commission was abolished and that they were fired. They were hence free to join us as human beings or to get out of town. We heard later that the stenographer had been moved to tears, had had her thinking shaken up by our testimony. We may never know what went through the minds of the EPA bureaucrats, but we weren't there to convince them, we were there to put them on notice. Others, of course, pleaded with them—every possible testimony was given—but our strategy was one of intransigence, a dramatic, spirited confrontation.

Hearing about the stenographer was personally gratifying to us. Did she become a revolutionary? Not likely. But as someone once said, we want revolutions without revolutionaries anyway. The point is that people are capable of change, of solidarity, even if social transformation doesn't happen overnight. As a radical with revolutionary desires, this was one of my reasons for involvement.

We followed the same strategy with the state DNR (Department of Natural Resources) hearings on the Detroit incinerator. We did not want them to hold their hearings in comfort, without feeling nervous and threatened, in a way that people living near toxic facilities are made to feel nervous and threatened.

When one friend held up a sealed jar of highly toxic ash that had been smuggled out to us by workers, telling the commissioners he was going to open it in front of them, they blanched and stiffened with fright. He didn't do it, saying he had no intention of doing so, but that they should remember their own fearful responses when they voted. We assumed they would remain robots and not cross over to become human beings—though both representatives of “the general public” voted against re-starting the incinerator—but we were making important points to the community at the commissioners' expense, undermining their legitimacy with admittedly symbolic victories where no other was possible.

If we hadn't shown up, they would have had a *carte blanche* to do what they liked with nary a peep out of their victims. Each time we came, we came with more people, more angry, more belligerent, and with more complete, more sophisticated and more crushing proof that the incinerator is a murder monster on every level. When they voted to shut it down at the second hearing, we were stunned.

We had achieved far more than we had expected. So we made the most of it.

## **We Shut It Down**

And we shut it down—not the bureaucrats, but the people. We shut it down, even if ultimately some political operative signed an order and a technocrat pulled a plug, just as we had ended the Vietnam War.

In the latter example, the large part of the credit goes, of course, to the heroism of the Vietnamese people, but American anti-war activists kept the U.S. from further expanding the war or perhaps using nuclear weapons, which they would likely have done had there been no opposition. Stopping the war didn't stop capitalism or imperialism, to be sure.

Stopping the incinerator won't stop the industrial system, either. Besides making our air noticeably better, our strategy was, and is, to hurt the industry, to slow it down, by punching a few well-placed holes in the hull of the world's largest burner, which we consider the Flagship of the Death Fleet. (Actually, shutting down the Detroit incinerator for a couple of weeks appeared to send more panic ripples through bondholders and the incinerator industry -than the entire Wall Street blockade the day after Earth Day, an irony that should tell us something about the relative effectiveness of typically militant demonstrations and the often disparaged “reformist” hearing process. We supported the Wall Street action, by the way.)

We couldn't prevent the capitalist class's damage control, their propaganda war, or their back-room maneuvering to get the incinerator going again. We cannot determine their moves, and they have more pieces in this game than we do. But we certainly could not ignore them. The week after the incinerator was closed, we went ahead and held our mock funeral for incinerator victims, a demonstration that was dramatic, carnivalesque, and celebratory.

Soon after they called another commission hearing, and we had to appear again, or restart would have been rushed through without protest. We showed up with theatre, with science, with drama, with condemnation, with the demand that the commission be abolished. We held another teach-in, which went until nearly midnight. People were already setting up tents at the incinerator when the commissioners voted to start it up again. The mini-riot that followed in the auditorium earned us an editorial in the Detroit Free Press a few days later, calling us “boorish and illegitimate.” Boorish, maybe, but illegitimate, never. We made our point. We were a presence and we helped to make crystal clear to more people in the city than ever before what a sham and dirty deal the entire affair was.

I don't feel defeated because the incinerator is running (with its share of problems, by the way, and after a summer during which it barely burned, partly we suspect due to some technical obstacles that our protest helped to place in its way). I'm actually amazed that we were able to do as much as we did with so little and so few people.

Am I satisfied? No. But I know we did not waste our time. We were a presence. No waste technology bureaucrat is showing up at mayoral conferences using Detroit as an example of why the next town should buy an incinerator. And other groups have formed or have grown in part because of our work. If there are exemplary acts, we did a share of them. The mistakes we made were tactical, logistical, not in principle or theory. (In any case, you never learn from your mistakes unless you are willing to risk making them.)

J.B. is disappointed that the FE portrays what he considers mere survival endeavors as liberation. I don't think we have ever made immoderate claims for our activities. But I don't happen to agree with his dichotomy; I think there is a connection between basic defense and the larger picture of revolutionary transformation. In fact, elaborating just this connection is the secret to extending our vision not only theoretically but practically.

There is not complete unanimity on strategy or analysis even among Fifth Estate staff members (see for example "Stopping the Incinerator, Starting the Movement," in the Summer 1988 FE, and "Stopping the Incinerator...A Response," in the Winter 1988-89 issue), but no one can seriously deny that we anti-authoritarians have constantly considered the incinerator in its industrial-capitalist context, as a model and microcosm of an entire social system.

## **Totality Is Confronted**

As far as basic defense goes, no one should have to justify such fights against the totality, not to anyone. J.B. quite poignantly recognizes this in relation to the destruction of his watershed.

It has been precisely the intention of the FE to explain that in the long run, none of these fights will be won in any significant sense until the question of the totality is confronted. But, as George Bradford notes in "Stopping the Industrial Hydra: Revolution Against the Mega-machine" (FE #333, Winter 1990) this recognition should not be taken "as a call to abandon practical struggles" around specific local conditions.

"It would be a grave error to simply give up such struggles on the basis of a more abstract image of a larger totality," he writes, "for it is in such experiences where many people learn to fight and where the possibility of a larger perspective begins to present itself." I have become more and more convinced of this subtle connection between the particular and the general as the worldwide anti-toxics movement has emerged over the last decade.

This takes in far more than a revolt centering only on "what one does with pop cans after they're empty," as J.B. puts it—a formulation that reveals a touch of cynicism along with a real lack of understanding of the issue. This is a fight that at least suggests a critique of the character structure of the modern consumer of commodities, of technology, of modern civilization's relation to Being. Recently, while on a visit to Detroit, the radical-reformist critic of the waste crisis (and valued ally), scientist Paul Connett, made the interesting remark that the Greenhouse Effect is the global counterpart to the local trash crisis. Both in his discussion of this interconnection between specific and general, and in some of his suggestions about alternatives, I found correspondences to the critical luddism that we have espoused, despite other areas of disagreement. I think working with such people is valuable for both them and for us—because of our differences!

## **Commoditized Good Life**

Nothing in J.B.'s argument suggests the subtle connections between emerging reactions to the crisis being caused by industrialism (the commoditized "good life" delivering toxic contamination and death) and the erosion of the old order, the appearance of elements of the new (anti-) politics he and we all desire. There is reason to believe that such a new perspective is fermenting (though I must emphasize here that the anti-toxics movement is for the most part still thoroughly reformist, that we are its revolutionary or radical critics as we participate in it and with it).

As Michael Edelstein shows in his book *Contaminated Communities: The Social and Psychological Impacts of Residential Toxic Exposure* (1988), experience with the toxics crisis "not only changes what people do, it also profoundly affects how they think about themselves, their families, and their world. In short, it represents a fundamental challenge to prior life assumptions." Edelstein documents such changes in people in the communities he studied, people whose prior loyalties to the state, to citizenship, to consumerism and work have begun to erode, people who are becoming increasingly disaffected and to some degree radicalized.

Edelstein is describing, in fact, the process in which the conditions of life under industrial capitalism are bringing about its demise, even if he offers no guarantees as to where people will take this crisis/ opportunity. A radical politics that sees only the shortcomings in the process and not its promise is ultimately self-defeating, retreatist and defeatist. We've still got some powerful pieces left on our board; it is up to us to find creative ways to use them. And our biggest pieces are solidarity and mutual aid.

I am not simply talking about reform versus revolution, or "single issues" versus the totality. I'm skeptical of these dichotomies. I'm not convinced that "reforms always reinforce the system" (original emphasis); sometimes they might reveal new possibilities, create breathing space, up the ante. In his book *Building the Green Movement* (a very exciting book with which I also find much to disagree), Rudolph Bahro prints a conversation he had with Norwegian economist Johan Galtung. I found this conversation intriguing precisely for what was said about the relation between reform and total transformation.

Galtung observes that "we must have an overall concept. But of course this overall concept runs the risk of becoming too totalitarian. And of people saying that we must change everything all at once. If you say that we must change everything, that is acceptable for 2 percent of the population, but if you say that we could take small steps in this direction, that is perhaps more acceptable. I see it as a family of factors and that even small steps in the right direction do signify some-something although they are intellectually not so extraordinarily satisfying..."

Bahro responds, as I would have argued in our own activities, that minimally some people must insist that the whole thing must change, and Galtung agrees, adding, "But you could also do both at the same time, though for that you need an elastic brain. That is also a possibility. I think it is very important for people to say that we need a total concept. But one should also be thankful if things are moving in the right direction, but haven't yet gone the whole way."

I was struck by the image of the elastic brain—an image which might be said to correspond to the idea of a "total tactic," in which a number of things occur on many different levels at the same time, changing the content and the context of the situation. Certainly, it might be easy to imagine a general (anti-industrial) strike, but it's harder to bring one off. And we cannot wait for the workers to occupy the incinerator and shut it down—a legitimate idea that, given current conditions, is little more than a syndicalist fantasy. (I don't expect the worker who ran into my brother with his car at the incinerator gates during our blockade after the restart order to be participating in an occupation any time soon.)

Of course, I agree with J.B. that our measures are inadequate—all our measures are inadequate. We're fighting a hydra that wins its battles through its own inertia and entropy. And we're losing. All we can do is rub shoulders with people, create networks of mutual aid and resistance, expand the discourse whenever possible, hope to radicalize others, and hope that others will bring the practical experience and wisdom that will open new paths to the world we want. The profound changes we desire won't be invented by theoreticians, they will be forged in practical struggle. Giving up activism is a very bad idea.

I've met J.B. and corresponded with him, and have admired him tremendously for his activism, his creative pranks, his incredible energy. He's paid some dues, too, but I know people, including FEers, who were doing actions (they weren't called that then) before he was born. If those people hadn't gone to Mississippi, we might not be, and he might not be, where we are today. I hope we don't lose him to a radical quiescence that, by gazing at the totality, becomes paralyzed before important specifics.

Finally, a note on his remark that the last FE was "only 'good reading'" that lacked the new insights he has come to expect from each issue. The demand for theoretical breakthroughs and surprises is a bad habit that the avant garde has picked up from (and which has been aggravated by) capitalism itself. It's a cult of the new. Theory, a category of language, is supposed to provide the thrill and shock that once derived from conquering new territories and creating new commodities.

We can't provide what he and some others have asked for. The conditions under which we presently live have even made it difficult for us as a group to respond at all to many events transpiring in the world and in our lives, events which get discussed but which, for many reasons—important responsibilities as well as sloth and work—do not appear in the paper. Sadly, I do not often find in other publications a point of view compatible with our own, so I share his sense of loss. But there was much in the last issue to applaud, apart from the 25% of the paper J.B. thought was excellent, partly because of the many different voices that were heard there.

One of the best contributions, in my own view, was David Porter's appreciation of Emma Goldman [FE #334, Summer, 1990], which revealed to me how an anti-authoritarian rebel must evolve in his or her thinking to meet new challenges and to understand evolving reality. It made me realize that however far we have moved from classical anarchism (or the customary genuflection to France 1968, for that matter), we are trying to keep faith with her vision that one maintains fresh ideas and practice only through a willingness to test and to change them.

"We who pay dearly for every breath of pure, fresh air," she wrote in a passage which unconsciously and hauntingly reminds us of our present situation, "must guard against the tendency to fetter the future." Let this serve as a warning never to let a sense of the distance we must travel impede our taking the first few necessary steps. The world hangs from that thread.

—Lewis Cannon

### 3. 'The Cops Guard Even Our Dreams'

*Bert Wirkes responds*

The far-reaching calls for revolution which appear in the pages of the FE represent the visionary core of our hopes for the future: this world abolished and a new one—free, and in harmony with nature—replacing it. I appreciate J.B.'s challenge to us to be as radical in our acts as in our words.

I share J.B.'s concerns that the environmental movement will not live up to its revolutionary potential in the manner of so many movements before it, but rather unwittingly aid capital in reforming its productive and disposal sectors while leaving its deadening social structure intact. I also question how we can act more radically than current reality permits, and how we assure that we are not just the advance guard of capitalism's latest wrinkle.

The willingness to stop at reform is built in to the limited options permitted by this society, so it should come as no surprise if there are opponents of the incinerator or activists in Redwood Summer who limit their visions to recycling or programs for "sustainable timber harvests."

In a repressive culture, the cops guard even our dreams, or, perhaps I should say, they especially guard our dreams. So, I am heartened when we go beyond the guards in our actions and our desires, when, in bursts of liberated energy, we surge past the expected and the permitted and begin to operate on our terms.

#### **Don't Confront Capitalism**

I agree that reforms and their advocacy can be a trap for revolutionaries. By their very nature they don't confront capitalism's structure, but rather seek to alter its administration. In so doing, surface adjustments in power relationships are made and the governing apparatus gains an appearance of responsiveness and flexibility. However, the core problems are never resolved.

For instance, after a strong campaign by mainstream ecology groups, the McDonald's Corporation recently agreed to stop packaging its hamburgers in environmentally damaging styrofoam containers. Although McDonald's cynically stated that its decision was based solely on public relations factors rather than environmental ones, it is able to present itself as a responsible corporate citizen.

What went unchallenged, and was hence affirmed by the environmentalists who struck the deal with McDonald's, is the corporate domination of food and its accompanying industrialization, the wretched quality of what is served, fast food's role in further reducing the conviviality of meal taking, and the ecologically damaging process of beef production. Had groups like the Environmental Defense Fund raised any of these issues with McDonald's, the door would have been slammed in their faces.

As one of his criticisms J.B. mentions the connection between Redwood Summer and the California ballot proposition, "Forests Forever." An ironic twist to the tale is that had the initiative been passed, arch-redwood-chopper, Charles Hurwitz's MAAXAM Corporation, would have become the recipient of a state bond issue designated to buy his forest land from him at a price tag of up to \$700 million for essentially what amounts to extortion—pay up or I'll kill your loved ones (the redwoods).

(In fairness to Redwood Summer, we should state that their project was based on direct action to prevent logging of the redwoods. *The New York Times Magazine*, November 4, 1990, cites Judi Bari as being “indifferent” to the ballot initiative and quotes her as saying, “I may vote for it, if I happen to vote. We don’t work in the legislative system.”)

I think the significant difference in the above situation is that the official environmental groups which bargained with McDonald’s went as far as they wanted, whereas the Redwood Summer people (and the Evergreen Alliance) went as far as they could. I often feel, similarly to J.B., that our tactics fall short of our rhetoric, although I am at a loss as how to formulate strategies which more closely mirror our vision. Maybe we’re doing all that is possible at the moment, although as I write that phrase, it has a decidedly conservative ring to it.

## **I Have Great Hope**

The argument that environmental concerns contain the potential to unravel the entirety of industrial, state civilization is, to be sure, a compelling one. My fear, however, is that the momentum for change will lack the collective confidence to go beyond localized and ecological concerns. At other times, I have great hope. The community-based environmental movement, including the Evergreen Alliance, at this point is mostly reformist in its scope, but has moments of radical clarity, and visionary ebullience along with a high degree of human and community solidarity which make me believe anything is possible.

I think the Evergreen Alliance and its history of fighting the Detroit incinerator is a good example of these contradictions. The group’s meetings often strike me as maddeningly dull, mostly concerned with the nuts and bolts of operating a single-issue ecology group with precious little discussed that would make one realize that numerous anti-authoritarians are involved. I’ve often been critical of much of what the group has participated in, as have others who consider themselves radicals. But our sense of a community under attack has always led us to pull together even around tactics about which there were disagreements, including the value of hearings and trials, use of the media, what speakers to invite, recycling, collaboration with other groups, etc.

However, on balance even though the group is currently in a period of relative eclipse, not much has been done which has made people less radical or more accommodating of authority. In fact, I would say the opposite is true, and despite the criticisms I or others may have, the Evergreen Alliance is generally perceived as being radical and militant by both the City of Detroit government and most of the group’s participants.

## **Strong Ambivalence**

I’ve always felt a strong ambivalence about participating in commission hearings, trials or the like, even if we have been able, at times, to turn them to our benefit. I usually sit through them seething at having to be at these long, boring rituals, controlled by authority and being forced to function on the terms set by power. However, as Mary related in her article, the character of constraint slipped its moorings at the wild finish to the last incinerator hearing where the state commissioners were verbally and physically attacked even by those who had the most hope for its possibilities.

I and others, both defendants and spectators, felt drained by participation in the trials that Lewis mentioned, but if he (and one can assume others) took inspiration from them, what can be said other than that people respond differently?

One picks and chooses where to expend energy and I usually spend little time sitting at commission hearings and, in the above incident, had left long before the ruckus broke out, going ahead to the incinerator to prepare for a demonstration when the commission’s predetermined decision came in. So, I and other “militants” who shared similar feelings about hearings were standing in front of a closed building while our friends were giving the state stooges what they deserved!

This doesn’t mean that it was “correct” to be at one place or another, but rather that it is impossible to predict under what circumstances resistance will break out, particularly, and most importantly, if this is what those involved desire. Authentic revolt is not willed into being by radicals; revolution has a way of just popping up, which

is what I take the message of Paris 1968 to mean. That year's events were set in motion by a demand for student rights at a small university and ended with French society almost being overturned.

Similarly, an anti-incinerator demonstration that J.B. or other radical critics might have characterized as a well-mannered ecology march ended with a spontaneous mass blockade of the gates, stopping entering garbage trucks, trying to unarrest people and shoving back at the cops (see FE, Summer 1989). At that demo no one was raising banners calling for the end of the law of value or the emergence of the repressed in history (although next time I think I will), but rules were being broken all over the place. It is these small acts of refusal and rebellion which contain the potential to lead us to the big rules by breaking the mind set of submission this society fosters.

At this point in my life, I find the question of participation in sit-ins to be personally problematic. I've been arrested in them before, but recently haven't wanted to willingly put myself in the hands of the cops even though I realize that there is low physical or legal risk involved for middle-class whites. Still, I've always strongly supported my friends who have elected this as a tactic and realize that symbolic, ritualistic actions are not what any of us desire, but only what was possible at the time they were utilized.

However, at the demonstrations mentioned above, I realized why I always felt positive about the sit-ins. On that day, the symbolic message contained in them was made manifest when we took up their theme of obstruction massively and spontaneously in a way that did entail physical and legal risk.

I don't mean any of the above to suggest that militancy by itself equals rebellion or that we should be accepting of the hopeless reformism and nascent leftism present in so much of the environmental movement. Rather, I think we should refuse to become self-satisfied, either as critics or advocates of ideas and actions (or, worse, self-congratulatory) and be willing to expand our concepts of what is radical realizing the dominant society's capacity for cooptation.

I think that it makes sense to demand that the actions of those who publish radical statements bear a fidelity to what is being advocated. The power of radical vision lies in postulating a standard which makes compromise with this society untenable or one's willingness to do so unbearable.

At a recent suburban anti-incinerator protest where the assembled homeowners were probably pretty far from most of the ideas espoused in the Fifth Estate, an FE staff member gave an anti-industrial, anti-economic growth speech filled with strident criticism of this society. He was given a rousing cheer.

There is hope.

# fifth Estate

Bert Wirkes-Butuar (Peter Werbe)  
Mary Wildwood  
Lewis Cannon  
Environmentalism and Revolution  
A Challenge to the *Fifth Estate* and Responses  
1990

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/335-winter-1990-91/environmentalism-and-revolution>  
Fifth Estate #335, Winter, 1990-91

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