

# Letters to the *Fifth Estate*

Various Authors

1990

## Quite a Drag

Howdy, Folks!

(That's the only non-sexist salutation I can think of.)

I've been an unaffiliated Anarchist for years. That's mainly because I'm from a lower-class background and most Anarchists I've ever met have either been college students or punk anti-everythingers. It's good to see that there are some serious people out there who realize the scale of the struggle we have before us.

I've only recently heard of your publication and had the luck to see it for sale at a progressive restaurant. It made for a great afternoon of reading. I particularly liked the piece on the Cointelpro war against the Black Panther Party. This is a subject I advise all my leftist friends to read more about, particularly those who consider themselves revolutionaries. It was very fitting that the same issue contained an on-going debate about infiltration of Anarchist groups by Marxists (I hate when that happens!).

Well, I hope to find something in my mailbox from you some time. It can be quite a drag when every Anarchist one meets is just going through a phase while they pursue a degree. As for me, I have no place in the capitalist world, except maybe a death-camp, so Anarchy for me is a tool for my survival.

Robert Thaxton

Austin, Texas

## Ignores Issues

Dear Fifth Estate:

Thank you for the great Summer 1990 issue! Enclosed find a check for \$25 to renew my subscription for at least five years!

Your coverage of the Cointelpro program and the FBI's fascist war on the Black Panther Party was great. [See "FBI War on the Black Panthers," FE #334, Summer, 1990.] So much of the Anarchist press seems to ignore issues when it comes to people of color or struggles going on in the third world, and this country's interventionist, imperialistic actions such as we're now experiencing in the Middle East.

Marvin Yust

Clearwater, FL

## Release Detainees

Dear Friends,

We are a small group in Hong Kong and we support the fight for democracy in China and Hong Kong. We have functioned since June 1989 as the United Front for Peace and Democracy and staged a number of street theatres in support of the Chinese Democracy Movement. These were widely reported in the media in Hong Kong.

Apart from street theatres, members of our group have also taken part in many other activities in support of the Chinese Democracy Movement and we have also joined forces with other groups in Hong Kong in actions condemning the suppression of the basic democratic rights of the Hong Kong people to demonstrate and assemble by the British colonial government. Together with other groups, we are seeking the repeal of the Public Order Ordinance, the enforcement of which is a blatant violation of human rights.

It will be a long fight for democracy and freedom in Hong Kong and China. Many have lost their lives in China. Some have gone into exile, some are still on the run. But more than a few have been arrested and are facing the prospect of long imprisonment.

As part of a campaign to focus concern on those arrested, we are publishing posters/information sheets of these democracy fighters on a monthly basis. These are available in both English and Chinese. One side will be a photo and the other side will contain a short biography and selected writings of the student/worker/ intellectual now imprisoned by the Deng-Li-Yang clique. We know of no sure or best way to secure the release of the detainees.

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*FE Note:* The above mentioned posters are also available from our office free with book orders or we will send them if you include postage. We are far from agreement with many of the statements contained on some of the posters, but these are people literally under the gun. China has been carrying out thousands of executions of those imprisoned for anti-government agitation while the Bush administration continues business as usual with the Beijing butchers. We will argue about their politics when and if they can be rescued from the dungeons and firing squads.

## The Big Lies

Dear Fifth Estate:

Just recently I had the bittersweet pleasure for the first time of reading your magazine—the Spring 1989 issue, “Return of the Son of Deep Ecology” [see FE #331]. I found the magazine combined wit and substance. In fact, I was not expecting quite the level of literacy that the magazine achieves; I had never read an anarchist periodical and only picked up FE out of curiosity.

Still, it’s very reassuring to know that I am not entirely alone in my opinions. Half my friends think I’m a well-concealed lunatic for my expressed opinions on capitalism, technology, ecology, and the end of the world. However, in the past two years, I’ve gone from cheerleader for Progress to an utter malcontent.

Although my hatred for technology and capitalism springs more from Malthusian ideas than from an anarchist anti-authoritarianism, (sorry, George, I know Parson is your pet peeve) I share with you a recognition of the need for a radical deconstruction of the industrial, expansive world order—and its replacement with a sustainable system.

At least I’ve found, in your magazine and the many others listed in it, a community that at least knows what I’m talking about. My peers (I met them when I was still a Progressivist) have no clue where I’m coming from on most of these topics and explaining anything to them seems futile. If I hit them with my whole world-view, they pass me off as loony and forget all about it. If I try to argue for just one point, one postulate in the structure of my whole argument, they put it into their world-view, and it immediately looks impossible because of the implications, and so they reject it.

In the meantime, we all go about living our lives, and by the mere fact of our existence in an industrial society, we contribute to our collective misery, alienation, and slow suicide. The only difference is that my friends, by their collections of little myopias, accept this as normal, as, in fact, the “best” it could be. As much as I would like to also, I can’t. I won’t believe in the Big Lie Progress, the Big Lie Democracy, the Big Lie Freedom.

I find it increasingly hard to live with all the little lies that make the Big Lies go down smoother: my roll-on antiperspirant isn’t saving the ozone layer, the paper recycling box isn’t saving the rainforests, and my third-party vote last election wasn’t an expression of Democracy or Freedom, it was a resigned and muted “aye” for the status quo. In short, things aren’t going as they should, and we need more than a few patches to a “solid” system.

Stephen Tarrant  
Montreal, Quebec

## Save Mumia

Dear Fifth Estate:

I was pleased to see the article about Mumia Abu-Jamal (“Black Panther Political Prisoners”) in the Summer ’90 FE. I have been corresponding with Mumia for nearly a year, and have visited him several times. I am convinced of his innocence.

I have a concrete suggestion that may help Mumia. We can contact Governor Casey, the PA Governor. He is for capital punishment, and he will be making the decision to sign Mumia’s death warrant. His toll-free action center hotline (in PA only) is: 800-932-0784, or you can write to him at: 225 Capitol Bldg., Harrisburg, PA 17120.

The Governor has received thousands of letters in support of Mumia, and so far has failed to respond to any of them. But, we need to keep trying. If you want to write to Mumia directly, his address is: Mumia Abu-Jamal No. AM-8-335, Drawer R, Huntingdon, PA 16652.

Karry Koon  
McVeytown, PA

## A Sinister Pattern

Dear Fifth Estate:

In a recent letter to the FE (see “Suicidal Straw Men?”, FE #334, Summer 1990), Jon Bekken accuses me of misrepresenting the content of a leaflet put out by the Resurgence group and George Bradford of distorting the writings of Kropotkin. These alleged distortions, he contends, are part of a sinister pattern: a deliberate effort by FE writers to misrepresent the anarchist position. “Your vision runs directly contrary to the most basic needs of our fellow workers, and to the potential survival of the planet on which we live,” he proclaims. “Because your case is too weak to stand except when buttressed by straw men, you are constantly forced to misrepresent other positions.”

These arrogant accusations are completely groundless. In the first place, my characterization of Resurgence’s leaflet was quite accurate. In my article “No Radical, Utopian Vision” [in “Anarchy in San Francisco: The 1989 gathering: 3 views,” FE #333, Winter, 1990], I criticized Resurgence for limiting its concern over the present state of the anarchist movement to the Revolutionary Socialist League’s alleged attempt to infiltrate it. I argued—correctly, I believe—that Resurgence and the anarchist movement as a whole have only themselves to blame for this problem, since they have not “sufficiently distanced themselves from the model of industrial communism that the RSL advocates. If during the past decade the anarchist movement had done more than merely revive the contradictory visions of past generations of anarchists, perhaps the RSL wouldn’t now be ‘targeting’ them for infiltration.”

Rather than engage my criticisms directly, Bekken chooses to focus on an insignificant detail. The Resurgence leaflet “was hardly limited to the RSL’s infiltration of the anarchist movement,” he complains “Rather, we criticized the takeover of the movement by Marxists (including the RSL), spiritualists, lifestyle ‘anarchists,’ and cheerleaders for third world dictatorships and aspiring dictators. We did discuss RSL infiltration, but as an example of how

anarchists' failure to hold to and take seriously our ideas has left the movement easy prey to non-anarchist elements of all types”

Bekken's criticism however, is simply beside the point. It would have changed my argument not one bit had I written, “Unfortunately, Resurgence limits its concern to the relatively trivial problem posed by the efforts of the RSL and other non-anarchists to infiltrate the anarchist movement.” The same criticism applies whether we're talking about the RSL alone or the RSL in concert with other non-anarchists: Groups like the RSL are attracted to the anarchist movement (especially anarchist federations) largely because they recognize that the ideological differences between orthodox anarchists and themselves aren't all that significant.

Orthodox anarchists and the RSL both advocate a society based on industrial communism, and they both believe that the main task is to build a political organization to achieve that goal. They may disagree about how the future industrial society should be managed, but they are as one in their conviction that industrial production will be the backbone of the new social order.

These basic ideological similarities give the RSL all the opening they need to attempt to infiltrate and impose their own agenda on the anarchist movement. The problem isn't simply that anarchists have failed to hold to their principles, as Bekken believes, but that the principles themselves are insufficiently radical. As I wrote in my article: “An anarchist movement that had grown and matured would regard the RSL as offensive not merely because their commitment to democracy is only ‘skin deep’ (Resurgence), but more importantly because the RSL's belief that ‘an industrial society [can] be organized along anarchist lines, without losing either productivity or freedom,’ is one that true lovers of anarchy (and enemies of work) have long since outgrown.”

The day the anarchist movement embraces a truly revolutionary perspective, the problem of leftist infiltration will disappear once and for all.

In other words, the real problem isn't the RSL, it's the failure of contemporary anarchists to formulate and act upon a compelling and plausible vision of the future.

Today, most anarchists define themselves mainly in terms of negation. To be an anarchist is to be against the state, against capitalism, against authority, against sexism, racism, and homophobia, and so on. Some younger anarchists appear to believe that anarchy means fighting the police or creating the latest version of the youth culture. Others define their anarchist sympathies in spiritualist terms, attempting to create what they see as non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian spiritual practices to counter the alienation of modern life.

The movement as a whole is an extremely loose network of groups and individuals of differing political tendencies, most of whom are preoccupied with some fragment of the social totality: peace, feminism, animal rights, the homeless, AIDS, etc. The closest thing to a comprehensive vision emanates from the anarchist wing of the ecology movement, but even here the tendency is to focus on defensive struggles against polluters and destroyers of wilderness rather than create an offensive strategy aimed at realizing an ecological society.

The recent entry of large numbers of young anarchists into the movement is a clear sign that anarchy remains a vital social impulse. At the same time, the fact that many of these young anarchists identify themselves as such mainly via their commitment to some partial struggle is a major symptom of contemporary anarchism's lack of revolutionary vision.

I suspect that few in this emerging generation will be attracted to such relics of the classical anarchist era as the IWW, the CNT-AIT, or even the prospective new federation. These organizations' continuing advocacy of industrial workers' self-management and similar moribund ideologies will make them unpalatable to these ecologically-aware youth. Yet while many anarchists have deep doubts about the relevance of classical anarchism to contemporary problems, so far nothing has emerged to replace it. Hence the crisis of contemporary anarchism: the anarchists' failure to create a new utopian vision rooted in the awakening desire of the vast majority of people to live in deep harmony with nature. It's clear that without such a vision of the future, anarchy will never reemerge as a revolutionary force.

In this context, Bekken's attack on George Bradford is particularly shortsighted. In his essay “Revolution Against the Megamachine” (FE Winter 1990), Bradford fruitfully compares Kropotkin's position, which recognizes that during a revolutionary period workers would find it necessary to abandon many useless enterprises and learn to provide themselves with the necessities of life, with his own position which calls for the complete dismantling

of the industrial system. According to Bekken, this comparison is nothing less than an “obnoxious distortion of Kropotkin’s writings in a cynical effort to connect your primitivist ideology to the anarchist position.”

Bekken apparently believes that Kropotkin’s thought is the exclusive possession of the orthodox anarchist faithful; others can have no legitimate claim to his legacy. He would prefer to see Kropotkin’s ideas locked away in some musty archives of nineteenth-century anarchism where they can mold away out of sight rather than allow a new generation of revolutionaries the freedom to determine what is still useful and relevant in the anarchist theorist’s work. Needless to say, Bekken’s proprietary attitude toward Kropotkin’s ideas is completely foreign to the searching, inquiring attitude that characterizes the best anarchist writings.

Bekken goes on to offer the following, presumably “authorized” interpretation of the passage cited by Bradford: “In the article you mention, “Kropotkin made the point that in a revolutionary society workers would reorganize production, abandoning industries that served no useful purpose. Anarcho-syndicalists are in full agreement with Kropotkin on this point. We would certainly either dismantle the factories where nuclear weapons and power plants (to cite just two examples) are produced, or convert them to more useful activities should that prove more feasible.”

In a footnote to his article in the FE Bradford penned what has proven to be a remarkably prophetic answer to this kind of tedious, unimaginative, intellectually stultifying literalness: “Presumably, many anarcho-syndicalists will object, furnishing quotes from Kropotkin in which the anarchist prince reveals the optimism toward technology so common in his time. There will always be those who insist on overlooking what is more visionary and far seeing in writers like Kropotkin while clinging to what has not withstood the test of historical experience. The myth of progress has become the real ‘dead weight of the past’ weighing like a nightmare on the imagination of the present.”

Contrary to Bekken, there is nothing cynical about Bradford’s appropriation of Kropotkin’s argument. He is drawing an analogy between Kropotkin’s ideas and his own, not claiming that they’re identical or in some other way “distorting” the former’s arguments. Bradford’s footnote should have made his intention quite clear.

His point is that Kropotkin was a much more courageous and far-seeing thinker than many contemporary anarchists—Bekken, for instance, who can barely concede that any industry should be abandoned. For him, everything is potentially salvageable: “Abandoning our workplaces would not only be suicidal, it would result in ecological disaster on an unimaginable scale,” he opines. Instead, industry should be reorganized, “building upon what exists, but transforming it to meet our needs.”

This is magical thinking at its worst, the modern version of the medieval alchemists’ dream of transforming lead into gold. Just how industry, the very essence of which is the destructive transformation of nature for human ends, can be made to harmonize with nature is left entirely to the imagination. For Bekken it is enough merely to repeat the leftist incantation that industry should be made responsive to “human needs.” Never mind that the “needs” shaped by industrial production and the needs of the planet and its myriad of species are in direct and deadly conflict.

Were Kropotkin alive today to witness the terrible ecological devastation now threatening the planet, I’m confident that he would draw the appropriate conclusions and arrive at a much more decisive rejection of industrialism than was possible from his vantage point in the early part of the century. But then, that’s the difference between a serious thinker like Kropotkin and the tunnel visionaries who speak for contemporary anarchism: the ability to perceive the true dimensions of the social crisis and what we must do to overcome it.

Bob Brubaker  
Numazu, Japan

## Related

See more letters in this issue: “Prisoners Respond to the *Fifth Estate*,” FE #335, Winter, 1990–91.

# fifth Estate

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