

Letters to the *Fifth Estate*

Various Authors

1992

Money, Money, Money

Hi:

In his review of Counterfeit Currency, E.B. Maple asserted that gold has served as money because of arbitrary human assignation, an analysis which treats money in general as a mere sign. (See Winter 1992 *Fifth Estate*.)

In actuality, processed gold assured its role because, like other commodities, it is (even in its rawest form, sifted flakes) the product of human labor. But unlike other commodities, it is chemically stable, compact, and generally useless except as a medium of exchange.

Other substances have served the same role in different parts of the world, e.g., ebony. If an equal amount of social energy is required to produce a gram of gold as it does to produce a table, then on the average a table will exchange for one gram of gold. In reality, prices have always deviated from the average, and today have no reference point at all. But, it isn't the prettiness of gold that gave it its role as the general equivalent.

Jack Straw

Berkeley, Calif.

E.B. Maple replies: I did not say that gold was designated "the general equivalent" of value because of its esthetic qualities, but that its function as such was due to human assigned worth.

The valorization of the world came about as representation of human activity—commercial trade, slaving, warehousing, etc. Value had to be expressed by an abstraction so as to allow for exchange in a world of strangers. Value is expressed when community disappears.

The idea that money no longer has a "reference point" is one which haunts the money nuts, although they may be on to something. The classic concept of money having intrinsic worth or backed directly, dollar-for-dollar, by precious metal has long disappeared and instead, government printing presses simply crank out by fiat whatever denominations of currency are demanded for commerce.

This has led to situations of hyperinflation (although the value of all commodities including gold has risen through the ages), so now the worth of a particular currency is based mostly on the strength of the national capital which issues the money.

The money nuts assert this places us in a position of perpetual indebtedness to the government, a situation which robs us of the true worth of our labor and leads to eventual financial ruin and collapse. Their worst case scenario is that the government is preparing for a moneyless economy where individual credits and debits are assigned electronically. This, they warn, will place wealth under the control of federal bureaucrats, but more importantly creates a society based on paper (or computer file) wealth completely out of the hands of the citizenry.

None of this seems implausible to me yet I call the people most interested in this question "nuts" because they see the solution to the problem rooted not in a transformation of society which destroys the reign of the law of value and returns to a convivial society based on the concept of gift, but on a restoration of "hard currency"—The Gold Standard.

Having no vision beyond money, the “nuts” fail to realize that the international financial house of cards capital has built needs a quantity of currency vastly beyond what would be available from metal based monetary systems.

Also, capital is driven by an internal logic of its own, quite divorced from attempts at control. So, a stock which was worth \$10 today sells for \$35 tomorrow on Wall Street and the bankers celebrate that they’ve “made” money. Once capitalism’s panoply is torn away, its world is exposed as constituting an immense over-evaluation of its true worth, one best expressed in “funny” money.

Can it go on like this? Critics of capitalism have always predicted its imminent demise, but the system has confounded those expectations for 150 years by exhibiting an innovative capacity to totter from one crisis to the next. Capital’s unending wars and depressions continually give signals that its end is near, but it always rises, ghoul-like, from its premature grave.

How much longer will the illusion last? A good question.

Insightful Review

Dear E.B.:

Thanks for your insightful review of Counterfeit Currency (See Winter 1992 FE, “Isn’t All Money Fake?”).

You are the first reviewer who has noticed that while the text is straight forward how-to-do-it, this book leads to many interesting political and philosophical questions. In fact, this is probably the most subversive thing we have ever published.

Steve O’Keefe,
Editorial Director
Loompanics Unlimited
PO Box 1197
Port Townsend WA 98368

Back to Sanity

Dear People of the Fifth Estate:

Thanks for all the interesting, passionate and highly educational papers you have put out over the years. I’ve really enjoyed them and hope they will keep coming.

You have hold of one of the great truths of our contemporary world and you have found a way to talk about it and spread the news around. We don’t need centralized government, we don’t need rulers; we don’t need to support power blocs or build empire. The people can govern themselves...if they can only get it together to do it. It’s such a beautiful truth.

I feel I’m an old familiar of T. Fulano’s and George Bradford’s and that brilliant mind, Primitivo Solis. The Megamachine! The Megamachine! The *Fifth Estate* brought me the latest news of the Megamachine.

From away out here in the mountains of British Columbia I heard your voice. All the way from Detroit to the Canadian bush. The whole commune, not just me, reads the *Fifth Estate*; and then we passed it around to others in the neighborhood—the select few who were also pissed off at the conduct of civilization and empire.

In fairly recent times, I have been associated with *The New Catalyst*. We published *Home! A Bioregional Reader*. Perhaps some time you would take a look at that book. Although it is distinctly different from the sort of thing you advertise in your bookstore section, it seems to me appropriate.

It is a statement of self-government, and I know you would agree with the politics and the philosophy there. Somehow it goes with your view of the world. Home! is a response to the picture you paint. It’s a strategy conceived in the shadow of the Megamachine, once again. A way back to sanity, to good connections with each other and the earth—what we’re calling for.

Hello, then, to all you anarchists in Detroit. Keep up the good work. This bioregionalist still loves you.

Ivan Wucher

Lillooet BC

FE Note: Home! is available for \$18 plus \$2 postage from New Catalyst Books, PO Box 189, Gabriola BC, V0R 1X0, Canada. Subscriptions are \$16 a year or write for a sample.

See review of *Home!* in this issue.

Poor Wilhelm Reich

To the Fifth Estate:

Poor old Wilhelm Reich! Was there ever a time when the mere mention of his name didn't automatically elicit some remark that questioned his sanity? (See Summer 1991 Fifth Estate, "Families & Authority: Why We Choose to Submit.")

If someone has heard of Wilhelm Reich they're always quick to remind you that "he was great, but...he was insane." The FE thinks that Reich's ideas help explain why the masses acted as they did to Bush's murderous assault on Iraq, but it could not mention Reich without feeling it necessary to add its version of "He was great, but..." "Reich made enormous contributions (but) the side of him that can't be denied is that he searched the sky for aliens (i.e., was a crackpot) and fashioned orgone boxes to cure diseases (i.e., was a quack)."

How do such remarks add to your readers understanding of the extract from Maurice Brinton's book on Reich's ideas that you printed? They don't! You include them as if they were important but the implications of such are as usual: Reich was always mentally unbalanced and as such all of his writings were affected by, if not the product of, this mental instability. The message of these endless repetitions is: As this was the case with Reich, why bother to read his writings?

No doubt the FE considered many of its readers unfamiliar with Reich and his ideas, so added the brief biog as an introduction to the Brinton extract. But the biog is more a statement of the FE's position on Reich's ideas—a position similar to the 1970s leftists' practice of emphasizing their interest only in Reich's "Political writings" so as to not be thought to be supporting Reich's "other, suspect writings."

In case any reader's interest in Reich was encouraged by the Brinton extract, the FE includes a further "great, but..." discouragement: It boldly proclaims that Reich's ideas are "mechanistic [?] partial definitions [?] of the problem [?] rather than the serious scrutiny [?] of the totality [?]..." What the fuck does this all mean???

If you thought this, why bother to mention Reich; why bother to quote Brinton quoting Reich?

Maybe I've come to expect better from the FE, but after reading your "biog" of Reich, then a whole page devoted to shitting on Noam Chomsky for not sharing your critiques of technology, I'm wondering if the FE really is beginning to "lose it."

Winston Smith
Sydney, Australia

E.B. Maple responds: Poor ol' Reich. He has always gotten a bad rap, but, as Monty Python used to say, it was often "cruel, but fair."

We have always been fans of the crazy doc, and many of his theories about sexual repression and politics still inform the views of some of us at the *Fifth Estate*.

Still, to deny his nuttiness does no one a favor. In fact, one of his most powerfully written volumes shows great signs of mental stress and even that phrase may be too kind. In *The Murder of Christ*, Reich exhibited real traits of delusions of grandeur and paranoia.

In agonized, poetic prose, he examines what he calls the "emotional plague"—the existence of which continues human psychological misery, the submission to authority; he felt this plague was threatening to engulf him as well. In this text he compares himself with Giordano Bruno and Jesus, historic figures who were also spurned by people unable to face the consequences of their messages.

Of course, is it paranoia if they're really after you? Reich was persecuted by, in succession, the Communists, the Nazis, the psychoanalytic establishment, two European nations and finally the U.S. government. Reich died in a U.S. Federal prison in 1957 after his books were burned by court order, mirroring their earlier fate in Hitler's Germany.

But he did go a little cuckoo and all of his biographies, even sympathetic ones attest to this. Does that make him unworthy of being read? I think not. He could have stopped issuing disagreeable tracts about sexual repression being the basis of authoritarian mass character structures. He could have submitted to the U.S. government's demands that he stop his research into the origins of disease. But he didn't.

With just a little willingness to alter his ideas he could have easily obtained the status of his contemporaries such as Marcuse, Fromm or Adorno. But he remained adamant to the end. He was a brave, but often vain and unapproachable man who at the end of his life was wondering whether perhaps he himself was not one of the space men he and a decreasingly small band of followers searched for in the night skies.

I highly recommend a visit to the Reich Museum in Ranglely, Maine which is set in the mountains of that state just south of the Quebec border. Reich designed the house down to its shallow steps to accommodate an aging gait he expected later in life. The graceful fieldstone house overlooks two crisp lakes and remains as Reich left it when he entered prison in the late 1950s for his refusal to obey a federal court which commanded him to cease his work on an "orgone accumulator." He fashioned these devices to collect a mysterious energy force he had discovered which aided in the treatment of disease.

But as beautiful as the setting is, there is a palpable sorrow to the place, as if it were haunted by the ghost of a man too radical and too crazy for his time. While visiting there with friends a couple years ago, a curator (who knew much less about Reich than we did) played a tape recorded by Reich close to the end. He spoke of his deep loneliness and the realization that his life's work might not be able to proceed, so great were the forces arrayed against him. The profound sadness in his voice made it too wrenching for us to continue listening and we asked that it be turned off before its completion.

Just writing this made me return to the yellowing Touchstone editions of his works I have on my bookshelf. Skimming through some of them made me remember how little hope Reich had for his own generation. He deeded title to his works to the Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust Fund reflecting a confidence that those of a later period would be more sympathetic to his ideas. His credo, "Love, work, and knowledge are the wellsprings of our life. They should also govern it" contains enough challenging ideas to make any concern about his mental state irrelevant.

Still, the issue of his mental state is not what seems determinative here. Rather, as I said in the introduction which you objected to, his mechanistic insistence that the root of the modern dilemma lay solely in sexual repression with no further critique of the modern world led us to seek more complete answers elsewhere.

Also, his rigid scientism—cold facts, "objectively" applied—never allowed him to leave the terrain he criticized. The emotional plague forms the context of scientific investigation no less than the mass authoritarian character structure which produced its paradigm. Reich remains important to read and consider, but his insights should be taken as flawed with the curse which finally destroyed him as well.

Beer and Talk

To the Fifth Estate:

Reading the *Fifth Estate* and a couple of other publications I get is like sitting together with friends, beer and talk. I just wish the table was bigger, much, much bigger.

Reinhold Lang

Telkwa, British Columbia

Just Waiting

People, hello:

My name is (withheld) and I am incarcerated in a (withheld) prison. You recently generously sent me two copies of your publication. Unfortunately, the ignorant people who get my mail before I do, confiscated both of them and promptly placed them on a contraband list.

Don't worry, I plan to smuggle them in soon, so eventually they will arrive where you intended them.

I think it is a good idea if you remove my name from your subscription list to avoid problems. Don't think I take no for an answer; I'm just waiting to make a move.

I thank you for your kind gift and hard work. Many victories.

Fight the Power,

(name withheld)

Conscientious Objectors or How I Became an Anarchist

Dear Fifth Estate:

The Winter 1992 FE published a letter by R.L. Smith arguing against support for “anybody who voluntarily joins a branch of any government’s armed forces,...especially any soldier who becomes a conscientious objector because of a religious conversion.” R.L. holds that anyone who enlists already has complete knowledge of what the military is all about.

Mitchel Cohen—a Vietnam-era draft resister whose FE article on COs sparked R.L.’s letter—dismisses R.L. as a “stalinoid anarchist” because of his attitude. R. Rifles—an ex-Marine—dismisses R.L.’s argument as “ridiculous.”

I too disagree with R.L., but I don't see how anyone can call such a commonsense attitude “stalinoid” or such a rational argument “ridiculous,” and I'm sure that a number of FE readers must be similarly opposed to supporting COs.

The real problem is that “rationality” and “common sense” have no place in any discussion about the military or why people enlist. The same goes for the typical “poverty draft” argument.

You can read all the books ever written and see all the movies ever made on poverty or the military, and talk to everyone who's ever been poor or in the library, and think about it all you want—but if you weren't raised in poverty and never enlisted in the military, you don't really know shit about what it's like.

People don't enlist because They're poor, and most poor people don't enlist. Poor or not, if you have the right kind of upbringing, a real family, some smarts, and a little luck, you don't choose the military. And having the learning or the intellect to see the moral issues doesn't stop somebody who can't see any other option. Nor does knowing in advance that the military can be a real shit pit.

What if you have no education, no skills, no home, no job, no prospects, no future—and no hopes of getting them? For people like that—for people like me when I was 17—the military can seem like the only viable option, the only sensible thing to do. For me, in 1957, totally estranged from my abusive parents, a dropout, born stupid, ignorant, homeless, starving, filthy, smelly, a recession on, no way to get a job, less and less able to feed myself by stealing and hustling, unwilling to commit violent crimes or peddle my ass, deathly afraid of jail, unable to commit suicide: I didn't feel I had any real “choice.”

So I joined the Air Force, figuring it would be the best service for a committed pacifist like me. But they rejected me because of “acute malnutrition” and related ailments. Six months later, when I turned 18, I faked my way through the physical and got into the Navy. It took me 8 years to get my act together and get out, during which time I also served as a Top Secret cryptographer at an Air Force facility on Taiwan, as a combat radio operator with the Army in China, as a military policeman with the Marines in Japan, and with the Navy all over the Far East.

I knew more about the military before I joined than most people do, and I was still totally unprepared for the reality of “normal” military life or the unreality of combat. And it's the everyday life, rather than combat, that's the hardest for someone who thinks or has opinions or lives an examined life.

Most books characterize the military as an “institution,” like school or family, but it's really a totally separate, self-contained way of life—socially, a rigid caste system; politically, a combination of authoritarian dictatorship with aspects of both feudalism and chattel slavery. It's a social system where every person has to just stand there and get shit on by everybody higher up, and then is forced to turn around and shit on everybody lower down, day in and day out, on duty or off.

I told all this and more to both of my younger brothers, and then arranged for them to join the Navy and be stationed with me, which seemed infinitely better for them than the life they were living at the time.

But that was the case with pretty much everyone I knew in the military. Joining up or re-enlisting was always the last resort or the lesser of two evils or the best way to exit an intolerable situation. People had a zillion different reasons for joining, but I never knew anyone who gave “poverty” or “boredom,” or “adventure,” or “patriotism” as one of their main reasons. The one thing we all had in common was that we were all losers, and I don’t mean that unkindly.

Being in the military can indeed be educational, and it often builds character and gives people salable skills. It can wake people up or at least give them some self-esteem and confidence. And it does sometimes radicalize people. But so does prison, or so says one of my younger brothers who’s been in both and wouldn’t recommend either to his worst enemy.

As for me, being in the military was almost as terrible and violent as my childhood. I was “radicalized” early on, becoming a committed communist (of the Maoist persuasion) in 1960. But it wasn’t until I was sent to Vietnam in 1965 through 1966 that I came to see anything “immoral” about my being in the US military. Hell, I saw myself as a mere cog in a giant machine. Nothing immoral about that. But being in Vietnam forced me to examine my role, caused me to see clearly for the first time how merely being there—merely being in the military—meant that I was directly contributing to the evil around me.

But by that point, I couldn’t see any way out. Desertion or defection were physical impossibilities, and I didn’t know that a person in the military could apply for CO status. I just went quietly nuts, and managed to qualify for an “early out” near the end of my tour, supposedly so that I could attend college in the fall of 1966 on the GI Bill. Unable to get a job, I actually did go to college, which is where I learned about COs, learned to write and to think coherently, and learned about anarchism.

I’ve changed a lot since then. I’ve been an anarchist now for 26 years (and an FE reader for 21 or so), a principled intellectual, my own theorist, and a purist—a non-compromiser, a non-reformist, one of those anarchist who wave Berkman’s Prison Memoirs, a hobgoblin for revolutionary consistency. Were I back in 1965, knowing and feeling what I do now, I wouldn’t apply for CO status. I would simply refuse to obey orders, and damn the consequences.

But I’m not a missionary, don’t seek to impose my ethics on others, don’t get disappointed when COs do compromise or even lie their way out of the military, and don’t expect them to share my beliefs or even to see any sense in them. Rather, I “support” COs, in spite of their religion and regardless of their reasons, simply because they are trying to get out. For the same sort of reason, I’d support a GI who was in prison for refusal to obey orders, or anyone else who quits playing the game or gets caught monkeywrenching the machine.

And as much as I empathize with enlisted people in the military, and pity them, I sure as hell don’t “support” them, neither in peacetime nor in wartime, regardless of the “poverty draft” or any other reason they may have had for enlisting. And just because Mitchel Cohen or R Rifles or the people at the FE care about enlisted people, or write about them with some understanding doesn’t mean that they somehow “support the troops” or are being inconsistent.

I’ve always managed to resist responding to any letter or article dealing with the military in the past, since it’s not a subject that I can handle well. In the past 26 years, there hasn’t been a day that I wasn’t somehow reminded—by the sound of a helicopter, or any kind of low-flying plane, or any sharp and unexpected sound, or the sight of someone wearing an article of military clothing, or reading something about a war in the paper—not a day that I’m not forcibly reminded of having been in the military, and not a night that I haven’t dreamt about it.

And, the more I think about it, like I did in writing this, the harder it is for me to get back to normal. At any rate, I’ve gotten it out of my system for the time being.

Beni

PO Box 7179

Ann Arbor MI 48107

Capitalist Death Logic

Dear Comrades:

I'm very glad to receive the *Fifth Estate* especially after the Empire's war. A radical voice in the USA matters very much. The struggles in the U.S. have a greater chance to change the world than others do.

As an exchange of views, I enclose my document about this war. About the title ("B.U.S.H.")—this is a play on the Italian words Bisogna Uccidere Saddam Hussein which mean "It's Necessary to Kill Saddam Hussein." The title, as does the skull on the last page, serves to point out the international capitalist death logic.

Claudio Sabetta
vicolo del Bologna, 10
00153 Roma
Italy

Open Road Still Open

Dear Friends:

We have changed our post office box address and would really like to continue hearing from you.

We have really enjoyed getting your publication in the past, and even though we are not publishing, we use your paper in a variety of other anarchist projects here.

We work on a weekly anti-authoritarian news show that is broadcast throughout the Pacific Northwest of Canada and the United States, we organize information and video nights that we use the paper as background for.

We also use prisoner contacts for a new "Books to Prisoners" program we are trying to set up, and our annual "Rock Against Prisons. We will send copies of whatever we publish and we can make copies of some of our radio shows available.

Open Road News Journal
PO Box 66102, Station F
Vancouver BC
Canada V5N 5L4

Bad All Over

To the Fifth Estate:

We really appreciate seeing the *Fifth Estate*. I was horrified by the report of welfare just being stopped in Detroit (Winter 1992, "The War on the Poor").

Things are real grim over here as well—mass unemployment, home repossessions, benefit cuts. We've never had it so bad!

Steve
Hastings, E. Sussex
England

What's The Problem?

Fifth Estate Bookstore:

'ello, how's the hard-working prols of the FE Bookstore doing? I'm enjoying the hell out of Bakunin's *God and State*, looks like I'm not going to be checking out *Eco-Defense* anytime soon—the Warden here is reading it!

Well, it seems some government sharpie in the mailroom at this institution found the book, er, interesting, so that's why the warden has it on his bedstand at home—just a little late night "reviewing." As soon as he's done I'm afraid it will be winging its way back to Detroit without receiving an approval rating from the government people for "inmate consumption." They really didn't object to all of the eco-tactics, just the pages dealing, I was told, with disabling alarm systems and the proper way to scale a barbed wire fence.

I didn't anticipate any problems when I ordered the book 'cause I knew there were no trees in here to spike or bulldozers to wreck. Anyway, this is to let you know you'll be getting it back after the warden gets done with it (he's on Chapter 3).

Dan

Federal Correction Institution Littleton, CO

FE Note: Eco-Defense, edited by Dave Foreman and Bill Haywood, is a compendium of techniques of eco-sabotage. It is available from FE Books for \$14 plus postage (see book page for rates).

What follows is a letter from the above-mentioned warden:

Dear Sir: (sic)

On March 13, 1992, the following publication was received for inmate "Dan."

Eco-Defense by Foreman and Haywood.

This publication was reviewed in accordance with Bureau of Prisons Program Statement 5266.5 (Incoming publications).

During this review, our attention was directed to pages 115–156, which describe techniques for disabling vehicles; page 200, which describes lock jamming techniques; pages 213–218, which describe computer sabotage; and pages 278–284, which describe lock picking and jamming, and disarming fence alarms.

The Bureau's policy requires that publications be rejected from admission to federal penal institutions where they would be determined detrimental to the security, good order, or discipline of the institution or it might facilitate criminal activity.

The material referenced herein would, in the judgment of experienced administrators, jeopardize the security of this all male correctional facility.

Roger Rose,
Acting Warden
Littleton CO

Romanticized Pap

Dear Fifth Estate:

As a person who has enjoyed and loved Forrest Carter's books for many years, I was quite dismayed to learn that Mr. Carter was very possibly a former member of the Ku Klux Klan (Book Reviews, *Education of Little Tree*, in the FE, Winter, 1992).

I agree with your reviewer, E.B. Maple, that if this is true than a dramatic character transformation must have occurred, but Maple is way off in saying that the anti-government angle of *Little Tree* is an attitude that "doesn't seem much like what would come from a Klansman's mouth." Radical ideologies (left or right) sometimes share many similar negative views of government. Of course, they often want to place their own forms of government in power, but that's always a possible danger with people who claim to be anti-government, isn't it?

Maple also refers to Carter's sympathetic portrayal of the Jewish peddler in the chapter titled, "Mr. Wine," as "something one cannot imagine even a reformed Klansman doing." I don't agree. After becoming aware of the charges against Mr. Carter, this particular chapter seemed to me to reveal Carter's reformed Klansman status, as it appeared added on, a loosely related yet separate tale that served as a vehicle for Carter's amends-making.

Most disturbing for me was the realization that us modern folks will consume almost any brand of romanticized pap when it comes to Indians, or ancient colorful peoples in general, regardless of who concocted it so desperate as we are for a breath of the imagined former natural world even if it is just in the form of printed matter.

It is uncanny though, how authentic Carter's descriptions of Indian ways seemed, though truly I'm no expert. Perhaps Carter did indeed have Cherokee grandparents or relatives. Even if he did, this is no guarantee against growing up a racist as the Cherokee were one of the few tribes that held black slaves on their plantations (see *Black Indians*, by William Loren Katz). Apparently they treated slaves better than the whites did but they were slaveholders nonetheless, and this attitude couldn't have just vanished by the 1930's when *Little Tree* takes place.

Despite these questions, Maple is right on in saying, "There is something heartening about a person switching from cold to warm heart." Well said! This is a good essential lesson for all of us who get too damn self-righteous that we can't let people change when they finally come around to higher (r)evolution!

Scott Brownwood
Flagstaff, AZ

fifth Estate

Various Authors
Letters to the *Fifth Estate*
1992

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/339-spring-1992/letters-to-the-fifth-estate>
Fifth Estate #339, Spring, 1992

fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net