

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1995

Network Forming

Dear Friends:

The Primitivist Network aims to promote networking of broadly defined anarcho-primitivists. The network is not an organization and has no fixed ideological line. It is designed to act merely as a means of fostering contact between like-minded people with the aim of generating projects that are broadly anarcho-primitivist in nature.

Individuals interested should write the address below with two stamps (or an IRC) to ensure receipt of the next network list.

At present, the Network is primarily centered in England and members are meeting every 2 to 3 months in London. The present members of the Network wish to encourage autonomous anarcho-primitivist projects and actions.

Feel free to use the network as a resource for this purpose. The limits of our imagination should be the only thing that holds us back.

Primitivist Network
PO Box 252
Amphill
Beds MK45 2QZ
England

Thoreau's Advice

To the Fifth Estate:

Best regards to Sunfrog for his "A Treatise on Electronic Anarchy & The Net" (see Winter 1995 FE). Folks seem to forget the megamachine behind the computer industry and the Net.

Also, it reverses Thoreau's dictum—simplify, simplify, simplify—to centralize, centralize, centralize. Best thing to do is slow consumption to diet the beast back somewhat.

All Health & Vigor,
Bull Thistle Press
PO Box 184
Jamaica, VT 05343

Even Sanskrit

Dear FE Collective:

It would seem your paranoia of machines, even those capable of helping people, has reached a new plateau with “A Treatise of Electronic Anarchy and the Net,” created by FE writer, Sunfrog. I doubt if anybody with half a mind would deny computers are being used every day to subjugate people. The same may be said for the typewriter, the pencil, even Sanskrit etched in stone—all and more have been used in exploitative ways by everyone from Assyrians to fascists to military-industrial bureaucrats. Even so, millions of people use these things daily without nefarious result.

I find Sunfrog’s assertion that “the [computer] medium itself subverts our own mental and imaginal aptitude” completely fatuous. If we follow this line of argument, the same might be said for the artist’s paintbrush, the musician’s piano, and the hunter and gatherer’s wood drum. Capitalism, of course, largely ignores the ecological balance, as you are wont to illustrate on the pages of FE. This is not to say every “invention” devised by capitalism—the “megamachine,” as you call it—is inherently odious.

Sunfrog, thankfully, is thoughtful enough to consider the FE’s paradox: the collective writes, designs, and probably keeps a mail database on computers. I imagine you also “hire” exploited wage-slaves to operate dangerous and toxic web-offset printing presses, to say nothing of the vast and faceless bureaucracy you “pay” to deliver the tabloid by second class mail. If we follow this logic more closely we see that you are guilty of murdering trees to mill the newsprint, and also complicit in adding more useless shit to landfills, that is, if the people who “buy” the FE don’t bother to recycle.

Does it make sense to use printing technology where heavy metals and petrochemicals are used—and castigating it as pernicious computer technology? I’d say you have painted yourself into an ideological corner. If Sunfrog and Company were serious about finding “kinship with the animals,” they would have long ago chucked any semblance of technology overboard, declaring a PAZ in the outback—provided the indigenous population didn’t object too much—and left “the zombified procession of automatons behind.” Anything less stinks of hypocrisy.

Bob Black, in *Anarchy* #41, hits the nail right on the head. He slams it harder than I do, but it’s all in the windup. I wonder, as does Black, why you “persist in living in Detroit, the epitome of industrial urban ruin.” I was born in Detroit, too, like Bob Black, and lived there through Reagan’s ‘80s, and I also “left and never looked back,” as did Black.

Finally, I bought the latest issue of FE in a corporate-controlled strip mall bookstore (Borders, owned by K-Mart), the glaring essence of modern consumerism. Borders had affixed a bar code sticker on the cover of FE, so it might be more effectively manipulated by computers. Considering FE’s luddite dogma, a product code sticker on the face of your newspaper is entirely surrealistic.

Get a Horse,
Kurt Nimmo
Canton, Mich.

Sunfrog responds from on the road: I always look forward to the engaging dialogue and debate which emerges in the letters section of this newspaper, but if Kurt Nimmo’s predictable diatribe is any indication of the prevailing technoid response to my “Treatise on Electronic Anarchy and the Net,” I’m not sure such didactic forays are always fruitful.

Nimmo’s basic assertion appears to be, “If you don’t like technological society, move to the outback.” This reminds me of the, “If you don’t like America, move to Russia” rhetoric which was popular to sling at peaceniks and leftists during the Cold War era.

What both common sense and the *Fifth Estate’s* ongoing critique demonstrate is that there is no perfectly pristine, so-called “outback,” no place untainted by the megamachine’s ubiquitous tentacles or uncolonized by technology’s global dungeon. At the same time, examples of the rural, communal, “Permanent Autonomous Zone” are plentiful in North America and I intend joining or forming one soon (and not because Nimmo suggested it).

But even the most remote and radical PAZ maintains at least some connection to and complicity in the modern web. I’m equally impressed by how much relatively unspoiled wilderness remains on our continent as our post-nuclear family begins to roam. Does the fact that we use a gas-guzzling, American-made automobile to reach our

quasi-idyllic destinations or that I'm writing this response on a lap-top computer prove the hypocrisy Nimmo contends has consumed us in our ideological corner?

I find it difficult to understand why Nimmo invokes Bob Black who harbors disdain for the FE collective because of where we live (probably not the genuine reason Black resents us). Why is it deplorable that we've made our journal a sort of micro-autonomous zone in the belly of the beast for three decades?

The *Fifth Estate* collective members engage in struggle in their native community of Detroit. This exemplifies a commitment to hold vigil on the home front where the enemies of freedom wage daily attacks against us. Is it somehow more noble to flee than defend our own community? While I have also left Motown since the publication of the "Treatise," I do not chastise my comrades who remain.

My Detroit kin may persist to resist in the "epitome of industrial urban ruin," but Nimmo slings his inane remarks from one of our satellite suburbs. Detroiters daily bite the bullet of civilization's bulwark in the face of imminent collapse, while Nimmo lives in relative tranquillity—I've seen the digs of Canton and metro-Detroit's other bedroom communities—where the citizens still reap the bounty of their own acquiescence to capital's consistent plunder. This is not to say that urban resistance is the only respectable way to rebel in these times, but it's hardly worthy of Black's and Nimmo's dubious contempt.

I do not assert, as Nimmo implies, that every human invention is inherently odious merely by virtue of the fact that it is a human invention, or that all inventions of these times necessarily serve the interests of capitalism, though most of them do. I only hoped to illustrate the manifold and problematic pitfalls inherent in our relationship with machines, exemplified by "the net," and the need to explore creative alternatives to uncritically plugging in.

Yes, even the use of printing technology, the United States postal bureaucracy, and corporate-controlled bookstores, all of which Nimmo explains the FE are guilty of, are examples of our dependence on what Adorno called "the fetishism of means." I argued why the personal computer, virtual reality and other postmodern gadgetry are qualitatively more dangerous for us and more useful for draconian mind-control than Nimmo's examples of "the artist's paintbrush, the musician's piano, and the hunter-and-gatherer's wood drum."

The basic tenets of this position are not all that subtle or complex, but Nimmo doesn't seem to get it. His retort sounds like, "Machines don't domesticate people, people domesticate people." He may be right, but if he is, then all tools are objectively benign before meeting the subjectivity of their operators; if so, the pencil is as exploitative as the computer and the sharpened stone as lethal as the nuclear bomb.

I originally embarked on my research about cyberspace more from fascination than revulsion, less from paranoia than from curiosity, but as I devoured more articles and essays, the enchantment of futurism waned. The more I learned, the less I wanted to know.

At the prodding of a friend, I even spent a few hours surfing the net looking for cybernetic thrills and adventure, but found nothing as exciting as any average titillation in the real world.

The Net Beast

Dear FE:

I skimmed Sunfrog's "A Treatise on Electronic Anarchy & The Net" with interest and amusement.

Sunfrog must have been caught up in one of those horrible dilemmas; how can you damn the beast if you have not slept with it. For Sunfrog to have written his treatise, he presumably needed to acquire the necessary data, which in turn means at least a little bit of exposure to the Net Beast.

I respect Sunfrog's conclusion that the net should be eliminated; if I came to that conclusion, I would not use the net either.

If we are to have an impact on our own lives, on the people who love us, our communities, we must live by the principles we espouse.

That has been the basic problem with a plethora of ideologies. The very people who espouse them do not live by them. They merely want other people to live by them.

My experiment with the net is not yet over. I have not come to any solid conclusions yet, but Sunfrog's treatise has made an impression on me and I have taken note.

Consequently, I will be very disappointed if I discover that Sunfrog has maintained an E-Mail address or associates any other way with the beast he has seen and condemned.

I have some helpful hints for those of us who are still in the balance:

Security: There are some excellent file encoders that the powers that be have a hard time breaking. I recommend using these. Append your message to be sent as an encoded attached file. Chances are good that no one will make heads or tails of it in transit.

Saving paper: Don't do printouts. I've got an old printer gathering dust; I hardly ever use it. Need to convert electrons into wood pulp? OK, but remember, every time you press "print" you help the timber barons remove forest.

I shall now send this letter to the Fifth Estate by "Snail Mail," because the FE does not have E-Mail. This entails rummaging around for a stamp—I am out of them and so have to pollute the air by getting in my car to go get stamps. I stick my "floppy" (at least it is reusable) into a disposable wood pulp receptacle—an envelope—which I also had to pick up at the shop.

Posting the letter triggers a sequence of events and energy consumption that make me shudder. The U.S. Post Office goes to work on getting my wood pulp package to its destination. Some unfortunate person has to traipse 'round to the FE office with the sent object; I'm sure that person could find something better to do with their time.

Non Serviam!

Stephen Goodfellow

Highland Park, Mich.

Sunfrog responds: Thanks to Stephen Goodfellow for his challenging and respectful reply. The fact that he acknowledges "skimming" my article (as opposed to actually reading it word-for-word) offers concrete evidence of how all our thought processes have been distorted by the "menu-driven" entertainment evident in computer programs and shopping networks.

Despite what his conclusion implies, my article was by no means intended as a defense of "snail mail" or the United States Postal Service. Choosing e-mail over Uncle Sam's diesel & buggy express is an understandable compromise. The ethics which bind my entire argument require abandoning much more than merely computers or the internet, but creatively destroying an entire mega-industrial matrix and its accompanying paradigm of amnesia and acquiescence.

All the detrimental hazards of technological society are intertwined. Choosing to publish an "old-fashioned" newspaper rather than join the myriad of electronic networks may look like an empty choice like so many of consumer society's "either/or" decisions which pit competing miseries against one another: Dole/Clinton or Pepsi/Coke, blah, blah, blah.

But computers and the Internet are not "value-free" inventions. They do not grow on trees. They, no less than the components of the postal system, are based in the extraction, production, and transportation sectors of the petro/industrial/chemical grid which is destroying the planet.

We have a vision of direct and egalitarian relationships with each other and the wild world which do not depend on the industrial grid. We are critics of an entire technological mindset, not merely the tools and toys which represent it. E-mail may be an "experiment" for some; for us it remains an abomination.

A Bad Experiment

To the FE:

Lately, I've been studying skills for rural living on my own and in some classes, keeping my eyes and ears open for possibilities. A lot of rural places are pretty grim and lonely and dangerous in ways that manifest themselves differently from urban areas.

Plus, there is the economic depression of the rural infrastructure designed primarily for the "extraction industries"—mining, timber, agribusiness and ranching. Most small, regional ways people used to "make a living" in both the recent settler and pre-1492 epochs have been driven out of existence by the highest and higher tech.

So, getting out of a city to escape being in the roaring vortex of the nothingness of crowds of neurotic people and flashing money structures, can land one in some strange zones of gravel pits and suffering of both the land and people. What a hideous, bad experiment.

Peter Kalberer
San Francisco

Anarcho-Voting I

To The Fifth Estate:

Thanks for your last ish! Just wanted to say that your articles on anarchists attempting to work within the system were quite oversimplified (See "Anarchy and Elections," Winter 1995 FE). Just because a few egotistical individuals in Montreal give anarchism a bad name doesn't mean all anarchists-should avoid the electoral process.

As I've said many times, I think the half-hour Americans spend every two years voting will bring about as much change as their investment is worth.

Nonetheless, I hope you enjoy some of the flyers I've enclosed.

Jason Kirkpatrick
Arcata CA

Anarcho-Voting II

Dear FE:

I enjoyed the articles in your last issue about anarchy and elections, but I disagree with the general message that anarchists have no place in electoral politics and should avoid voting booths altogether. I think anarchist should poke their heads in everywhere and fuck with all the mechanisms of the state either by monkeywrenching them or using them for our own means.

It's too easy for anarchists to simply reject voting along with the majority when the arena of electoral politics is so dominant in controlling the world we're all currently forced to live in.

I've written for the FE before and also ran for mayor of Los Angeles with the idea I could get some of the same radical ideas out to more people. The basics of my platform were that individuals and communities should be self-sufficient. We should have control over our own housing. We should grow our own food. We should be free to have space that is not controlled or owned by the rich or government.

When I qualified for the ballot, I got to speak on TV shows and although I didn't usually get much time, I was never censored. I got written about in several articles in the mainstream press. The *LA Times* gave every candidate a short article in its opinion section and I said what I wanted. Most articles about me didn't say much, but occasionally they quoted me or at least mentioned the basis of my platform.

I also got to speak at about 20 community forums or debates to audiences of conservative Jewish businessmen, black churchgoers, militant Latino activists, college students and even 100s of high schoolers where I said they should take over their schools while angry teachers and parents looked on unable to do anything.

Somehow, I got 647 people to vote for me. That's a lot of folks I don't know and never met. I did this all in the electoral politics arena that anarchists are supposed to reject. I had no illusions of trying to win or create a new political party or take a leadership role in anything. The elections and the media that covers them were just another forum for me to spread some of the things I believe into a larger group of people and a fun way, also.

Completely writing off voting also is a very popular idea. Most anarchists can't stomach voting for any of the candidates. I have no problem making it to the polls to vote no on a more cops or anti-immigrant initiative or yes on a single payer health care or save the local mountains initiative.

Avoiding voting can also mean for some anarchists not being informed enough about local issues, local development, the local crooks who are running the government, who is funding them and what they get out of it. It is

the system that governs our country. You can just avoid it. Good luck. Or you can use it for your own means all the while pointing out how full of shit it is, which is an idea many Americans can agree with.

Most importantly we must point out how we have better ideas. As anarchists, too often we ghettoize ourselves, preaching to the converted and passing on our propaganda to those who agree with us. In LA, our small, long-running group is a clique most people don't know exists. We're more involved in infighting than we are in reaching out beyond our milieu. Most people still think anarchy is what is going on in Bosnia according to Dan Rather.

We must make our way into mainstream society via any or all forms of communication. One fun and effective way is to use the mass media that is supposed to control the flow of information and use it to disseminate ours.

Adam Bregman

Los Angeles

E.B Maple responds: The preceding two letters are different than what we've often gotten in response to our putting forth the traditional anarchist anti-electoral position. Rather than advocating the passive act of voting, these two readers have run for office!

Unmentioned in Jason's letter is that he is an elected official of his Northern California city where he sits on the town Council. The leaflets he refers to are radical in nature including one announcing an anarchist -gathering.

First, it seems to me all arguments favoring electoralism as a tactic are easily negated if one begins with an irrevocable principle of opposition to the existence of the political state and not participating in the mechanisms of its governance.

The logic behind this anarchist principle goes beyond a simple ethical rejectionism, since historically electoral or governmental participation by anti-statists has either been a disaster, such as in Spain, or a clear move away from the fundamentals of anarchism, as was the case in Montreal we chronicled last issue. Also, (and I'm sure both Jason and Adam would agree) nothing fundamental regarding the state or the economy can be changed through voting or the rulers wouldn't let it exist as an option.

That all said, let's look specifically at each letter since there can be exceptions to every rule especially among anti-authoritarians. We want to see what works, not create dogma. Adam's argument seems to me no different than that of the socialist parties such as the Socialist Workers or Workers World who regularly field candidates and which give pretty much the same rationale for their participation: "We don't expect to win; we don't think revolution will be achieved at the ballot box, but since public attention is focused on the process, it gives us a chance to get our ideas across."

There is obviously some truth to this as Adam's experience shows, but I wonder what tangible results remain for him or for the idea of anarchy after the votes are tallied. Maybe a few people who had never heard of anarchism learned a little, but nothing is left of even large scale campaigns following the voting other than an affirmation of the state and the legitimation of political rule.

Also, Adam doesn't speak to the question of how much time, money, people power and resources he utilized in his effort. If he ran his entire campaign single-handed or with a friend or two in support, then, why not? He enjoyed it, but if you really want to "make our way into mainstream society" through electoralism, one should advocate a serious effort to do so. Run anarchist candidates, create a campaign staff, seek endorsements, put on election rallies, print bumper stickers, buy TV ads, etc. That's what the mainstream does and that's what "serious" anarchist candidates would have to do (or did as in the Montreal case). Does he suggest this? I hope not.

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), the advocacy of the elimination of the political state, the capitalist economy and its industrial megamachine does lend itself very well to glad-handing politics. What electoralism leads to, if it is taken on as a serious endeavor, is an opportunistic dilution of revolutionary ideals and soon becomes indistinguishable from the activity of the gaggle of leftists and liberals who are also trying to make their way into the mainstream.

Now, Jason is successful; he was elected and ran on an admirable program of left/liberal social and environmental issues. If one is going to live under capitalism, having people in positions of government in upscale, all-white, privileged enclaves such as Arcata, probably will make life there a little nicer for most people and easier on the environment, but it has little to do with anarchism. One of Jason's campaign slogans, which calls for "Actively support Arcata small businesses," isn't exactly what you would have heard Goldman, Kropotkin or Berkman shouting, but

it is if you want to get elected. I'm glad Jason is in office although what is possible in Arcata isn't in Detroit or other grittier areas of this society.

It's not as though anarchists of any perspective have much to show for their efforts, so I'm not real critical of either of their efforts. But if we are interested in authentic, autonomous projects which will act as a base for the revolutionary transformation of society or as the locus of resistance to the empire, voting and office-seeking seems pretty ineffectual. I'm not quite sure what Jason meant by his last remark about a half-hour investment to vote, but I take it to mean you will get very little.

I know working in small collectives is often frustrating, but a resurgent anti-authoritarian movement is currently being created. A variety of projects, including the radical environmental movement and a wave of community centers and info shops, are opening around the country that need the participation of anti-authoritarians to remain viable. Electoralism is only a diversion from such solid autonomous and radical activity.

Killer Analysis

To the Fifth Estate:

Hey! This is Marko. I met some of you folks at the Earth First! Round River Rendezvous in Tenn. this past summer.

I saw your special Fermi II ish, and as usual, y'all had the killer analysis going on.

I think the anarchist influence on E.F.! has made it one of the most happening gigs around. I'm glad to see the critique y'all spearheaded back a bit actually had a positive impact.

Adios,

Marko

FE Note: The critiques mentioned in the letter above are available as a pamphlet, "How Deep Is Deep Ecology" (1987) for \$5.50, and "Return of the Son of Deep Ecology," (1989) as a FE back issue for \$2: both can be ordered from our book service.

Light a Fatty

Dear FE:

A response to Zerox Vermont's letter last issue: The mildest form of hallucinogen or psychedelic, marijuana, may allow the individual to transcend the ego and life's hierarchies. This may allow the anarchist the clarity needed to plan his or her resistance.

This is why the CIA abandoned its experiments with Mary Jane, as the reaction of the subjects to marijuana were unpredictable. In other words, the CIA found it an unreliable drug for its purposes. People whose behavior is unpredictable when stoned cannot have their minds controlled by the government.

Anyone a government considers uncontrollable is, by definition, a free citizen. Therefore, we suggest all FE subscribers light up a big fatty as a small measure of resistance, as well as being a small step on the long road to clarity.

Grace and Mike Hogan

Amsterdam, Holland

I Scream, You Scream

To The Fifth Estate:

Peter Kropotkin once wrote of a familiar idea that "man is the result of the environment in which he grows up and spends his life." This writer believes that social existence determines consciousness and that most people who seriously stop consuming for a moment and think hard about how human personality is formed, molded, and to some degree manipulated, will perhaps also agree with that central thesis.

This theory of environmental influence on personality might explain this writer's opinion on a photograph and the image it produced about eight years ago while thumbing through one of mass media's many gems, *National Geographic*. The theme of the photograph was the common one of wild man meets technology and loves it.

The photograph was of tall African tribesmen dressed in tribal gear with feathers, bones, dyed cloth, etc. The setting was a jungle and in the center of the picture was an open refrigerator with the tribesmen standing close beside it eating ice cream cones. The caption stated that the indigenous ones preferred to keep the refrigerator open as they ate the ice cream.

Eight years later, and after heavy doses of radical literature such as the *Fifth Estate*, I came to the conclusion that not only are images dangerous, but this particular one of technology, consumer items, and the hunger for them is false. Looking back at the photograph, would the tribe want the refrigerated techno-package if they knew what it would entail? After discovering the radical change that would have to occur, the total transformation of every aspect of their lives, would they still want ice cream that's rotting their teeth?

To answer these questions it is important to understand where these indigenous peoples and others like them are coming from, that is, how they organize themselves.

Societies without a surplus, societies without refrigerators, are societies without a State. Perhaps community is a better word, for they are communities who live cooperatively without government, without hierarchical arrangements of power and wealth. They are egalitarian, an egalitarianism that is not administered from above or from anywhere else; it comes from a tradition of free agreements.

Their economy is not an economy at all, but a lifestyle of subsistence living. That is not to say these indigenous ones must scrounge around all day just to satisfy their basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and medicine for the entire community. The surrounding environment has no owner and they use of it just what they need and no more.

Pierre Clastres and other anthropologists point out that these communities usually spend on average only three hours a day on the basic necessities of life. Three hours, not of the hustle and bustle pace of the modern world, for the conception of work is nonexistent. It is a pace more like a leisurely walk, for they are not working, but living. And what about the rest of their day? It is up to them, be it hunting, exploring, playing, smoking, sleeping, etc.

Could the absence of prisons and mental institutions give us an idea of the health of the community and of the individual and could the absence of revolutionaries give us an idea of the acceptance of their living arrangements?

Perhaps the question isn't whether the tribesmen will choose the techno-package or not, but when will the indigenous ones be put to work. Clastres made the sobering observation that, "men work more than their needs require only when forced to."

Benjamin P. Hurst, Wage Slave
Lincoln, NE.

FE In The Trash

Dear FE:

I apologize for not writing sooner. I have been moving around for the last two years and lost track of the passing time. I have enjoyed your paper immensely for several years now— since I found a copy in the trash can at Wayne State during the Gulf War.

You have had a profound impact on me from that time on. Back then I was a promising engineering student and everything felt wrong. Now, I pass the time sanding drywall and trying to figure out how to live everyday life.

For Anarchy,
Don Bickel
Warren MI

Rock, no Fuck, The Vote

Dear Fifth Estaters:

Wow! I just read your newspaper after maybe 25 years and feel your stance is as close to mine as anyone's. I parted ways with your paper and many others on a senseless pursuit of marxist purity. Hey, I was an asshole; what can I say?

After reading an article, "Disaffected Youth are Truant from Polls" in the November 16, 1994 *Wall Street Journal*, that venerable organ of international capital, I was painfully reminded of the ideological sellout of american rock bands during the hype prior to the 1992 sham elections.

The sham was relatively successful in 1992, in part due to the gratuitous assistance of the bands whose prime motivation was simple greed for public exposure and the record sales it engenders. The Journal was disappointed, however, because this crap didn't carry over to the 1994 elections. I feel and hope the youth of america just woke up!

Historically this sellout has been an ongoing thing on the american music scene with numerous '60s bands campaigning for George McGovern during his 1972 presidential run. The same self-proclaimed "peace candidate" who, a few years later, led the clamor for american forces to invade the Khmer republic (Cambodia) to punish the Khmer Rouge for killing people by killing them.

Today, we have so-called "political bands" such as Megadeath and Warrior Soul, running the gamut from the popular to the obscure, telling american youth to vote. For what? Democrats or republicans? Clinton or Bush? Is there a difference? I can't tell.

In the ultimate paternalism, the *Journal* article featured a quote by Warren Bennis, a business professor at the University of Southern California, who stated, "There is a collective attention deficit disorder—they (the youth) are impatient, and they want change immediately in their own lives." Hmmm, now that is something that caught my disordered attention for real.

Well, Prof. has-Bennis, you are right! We want change immediately, if not sooner, and we really ain't going to get it by voting.

Rand W. Gould
Pontiac, Mich.

Zapatistas & Laundry

Dear Friends at the Fifth Estate:

I recently saw T. Fulano's article, "Insurgent Mexico," in the fall issue of the *Alternative Press Review*. [FE Note: the article originally appeared in the Summer 1994 *FE* and was reprinted in *APR*.] Having had the good fortune to live here in Mexico during these desperate times in which the zapatista movement has been a blazing star on the horizon, I'm eager to pass on some information and exchange some points of view with you.

First, to summarize the letter I sent to *APR*, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) never signed an agreement with the government. Instead, after a thorough process of consultation with the indigenous communities that make up their base of support, they rejected the government's offer as an attempt to buy them off and to reduce a national revolutionary struggle to the local level.

Second, I share your disgust at the consumer society and also recognize that it's probably economically and ecologically impossible for the entire world to make commodities the center of life as the First World does. But I think it is an error to say that the zapatistas suffer from the influence of consumerist ideology. In your article, you do justice to the more profound causes of the struggle, but to then characterize the EZLN as "fighting for television sets" is really a distortion of everything they have said in their communiques, interviews, and speeches. If they did mention television, stoves, refrigerators, and washing machines in their demands (which they alone have the right to determine), I don't think this means they have fallen into the consumer trap.

T. Fulano, I assume you have gotten rid of your own stove and refrigerator and you don't wash your clothes in a washing machine if you are going to say that an indigenous woman should not have a machine that could save hours of drudgery. I don't imagine you've ever spent several hours a day scrubbing clothes on a rock by a river. Not just one day, but every day for the rest of your life. Not just your own clothes, but clothes for an entire family. Not just clothes that smell a little funky under the armpits, but clothes soiled with dirt from the fields. I think the

appropriate place to start reducing dependence on commodities is right up there in the land of the blind and the home of the KKK ...

C. Cualquiera

Somewhere in Mexico

T. Fulano responds: Cualquiera has missed the point. The essay did not merely express disgust at consumer society, but was an attempt to critique epochal social developments. Consumerist ideology, as my article indicated, was an important component in the consolidation of power by the Mexican state (a phenomenon also true of state socialist societies). Conversely, one of the reasons for the continuing relative cohesion of indigenous resistance to empire has been a certain fidelity to old ways and a refusal of (or lack of access to) industrial development. Clearly, revolutionary movements like the zapatistas have also been animated by the spectacle of consumer plenitude as the messages of mass communications have seeped into the rural fringes of industrial civilization. Thus rising expectations of the society at large have fueled resentments and radical agitation among specific marginalized sectors. All this was laid out in my essay.

Development spurs revolt, yet it simultaneously tends to undermine the very wellsprings of community and solidarity that underlie an ability to resist. How can this crisis be understood and perhaps resolved? I don't pretend to have any unambiguous response or answer: I ended my exploration of this problem with a call for solidarity with the people of southern Mexico, whatever the outcome. But I felt compelled to ask (and I believe it imperative for radical critique to ask), whether this troubling dialectical development would lead the oppressed to limit their horizons to a fight for a "reformed" industrialism and a correspondingly precarious niche at the bottom of the hierarchy. It's easy to declare that these are not at all the intentions of the Mayan campesinos (or the possible unforeseen outcome of their actions) but if their demands include the accouterments and appliances of industrial civilization, in addition to land and clean water, don't they indicate the influence of consumerist ideology?

True, I live in the industrialized world, enjoying its cornucopia of freeways, television, packaging and allegedly labor-saving devices. Nevertheless, one of the most important contributions of anti-authoritarian politics and radical ecology has been to demystify the illusory nature of this alienated existence (thus converging in many ways with the outlook of traditional indigenous peoples). If third world revolutionaries are demanding televisions (and with them "everything necessary to make housework easier," as the zapatista document phrases it) and in the first world radicals are smashing the same machines in demonstrations, the issue of development is clearly one which needs to be addressed from both ends of the spectrum.

Unfortunately, Cualquiera reduces the question to whether or not I personally wash clothes by hand. As a matter of fact, I have washed my clothes by hand, with water drawn from a village well. In Portugal, where I lived for a time in a small village, I didn't reap the rich experience of local women, who did it as a group activity one day every week or so. But I know what hard work washing is, and I rather think there is something to be said for it. (In fact, the introduction of washing machines by a few households while I was there aggravated muffled class antagonisms in the village, isolated certain women in their houses, and wasted large amounts of water from the village commons.) My companion and I also lived quite well without a refrigerator, by the way (and still do without a television and several other almost ubiquitous gadgets), but we did use a simple stove. I believe it necessary to be pragmatic, which was precisely why I raised these issues as explorations, not as absolute judgments.

Survival being what it is here, my life in Detroit is decidedly different than it was in the village. I use a washing machine, a car, and many other industrial processes and machines. I try to make careful decisions about how and what I use, and I don't always make good ones. I doubt that my correspondent, most likely a self-styled enemy of capitalism and the state, has decided in the name of principle to throw away money and passport. But is this really the point?

Does questioning industrialization and the ideology of development automatically render one a defender of human misery? Cualquiera seems unaware that working to overcome one kind of drudgery can bring about another. Washing machine factories (and TV factories, too) have to be built, maintained and supplied with energy. Perhaps Mayan women can get jobs in them and take on the notorious "double duty" so common everywhere in the developed and developing worlds, working ten hours a day for Whirlpool or Westinghouse and then a few more in the evening watching tv while folding clothes at the laundromat. (I won't accuse C. of never having experienced this form of drudgery.)

Cualquiera's concern for poor women is touching; industrial planners, state bureaucrats and developers everywhere share it. Yet it lacks a critical understanding of the problems modernization brings; even an awareness of gender politics is missing. Indeed, if the problem is women's work, why must the solution be found in factory construction and the concomitant nightmare of power plants, steel mills, distribution bureaucracies, ecological devastation and the rest, rather than in a relatively low tech focus on the age-old division going back to the origins of patriarchy and class society, namely, having men share such tasks? That might make laundry day a rather festive affair.

Despite the perfunctory qualifications, Cualquiera seems to fancy the industrial option, what Ivan Illich calls the "conventional wisdom of today's good guys." And since the zapatistas "alone have the right to determine" their needs, outsiders apparently should engage only in an entirely unreflective solidarity. Yet that is precisely where we should be most cautious.

I detect a similar lack of caution in Cualquiera's description of zapatista decision-making. Perhaps I was inaccurate in describing a cease-fire as a peace accord and stand corrected. How the proposed agreement was later rejected is another issue. We don't know exactly how 98 percent of the population rejected the peace accord, and most written material produced so far on the zapatistas is vague on the matter of their internal politics. Either we have to accept uncritically the words of the zapatista representatives or we keep a critical distance. I'm for maintaining criticality, while trying to find ways to show solidarity with social struggles there.

Dimly Informed

To the Fifth Estate:

When I read in your last issue "Montreal Anarchist Candidates off and Running," I barely recognized the party I work with, the CDME, and more specifically, Ecology Montreal. I felt compelled to respond to this unverified assault waged by someone who seems dimly informed about us.

First of all, the author, Michael William, begins on the wrong foot. The CDME (specifically the ME, Ecology Montreal) is not an anarchist party, nor was the mayoralty candidate presented as an anarchist. Social Ecology incorporates strains of anarchism, but we are not an anti-electoralist party.

The author's hostile sarcasm thoroughly infused the article and was rarely toned down enough to garner some sense about the campaign. I wondered sometimes if the writer lives in the city or not.

Dimitri Roussopoulos, who was one of several candidates, seemed particularly targeted with scornful invective. Speculative irrelevancies about his past and present economic activities heavily flavored what was supposed to have been an overview of the candidates Ecology Montreal presented. Of the space devoted to six candidates, five received a token appraisal of a sentence or so, while Roussopoulos accounts for three-quarters of the verbiage.

As for the community paper, Place Publique, charged by a rival of Roussopoulos with being founded for use as a campaign instrument to promote his candidature, that would seem to be a very costly and laborious way of achieving this end. Place Publique, like all papers, is partisan.

Specifically, its mandate is to promote community activism, urban heritage and ecological issues. It's a tall and ambitious order in a city where these papers come and go, or are sedate or reactionary excuses for bringing together advertising.

In the name of a supposed impartiality, should the paper have ignored that the CDME was the only left-alternative to the three main contenders, two of which were center-right and right? In the same vein, why is the litany of criticism so focused on our party? Our electoral complicity was marginal and our program is light-years closer to a decentralist, anti-authoritarian vision than the other parties. Was there so little to criticize in the other parties?

The portrayal of Place Publique goes well beyond being uncharitable. In a passage where William refers to a cartoon that cast our mayoralty candidate, Yolande Cohen, in an excellent light, he glaringly failed to indicate that it was not of the paper's making and that it first appeared in La Presse, Montreal's most important French daily.

No one is spared being passed through the mill; even “Bicycle Bob” Silverman, our town’s exemplary cycle advocate, is smeared. In 20 years, Silverman’s organization has brought about more tangible improvements in making the streets less bicycle-hostile than William could achieve in a few lifetimes of trashing left-activists.

About Bernard Bourbonnais’ score of 23% in the ward of Mile-End, he says nothing, simply because he has nothing good to say about Ecology Montreal. Unfortunately your journal uncritically accepted the rantings of someone interested in trashing a movement that is a potentially strong voice of contestation in Montreal’s municipal politics-as-usual.

Bernard Cooper
Westmount, Quebec

Michael William responds: I am accused of expressing “hostile sarcasm” toward electoralism, in other words, of agreeing with a traditional—and eminently sensible—anarchist, anti-statist approach. Bernard Cooper, for his part, expends little energy making a philosophical case for electoralism, which he takes as a given, preferring to attempt to discredit my article and to exercise damage control vis-a-vis the CDME’s dismal showing in the most recent election.

In North America, “libertarian municipalism” is the most developed in Montreal. Since the late ‘80s, I have documented the phenomenon in several articles in *Demolition Derby*, *Anarchy* and the *Fifth Estate* (copies of the articles are available from the address below).

These tales of the antics of local partyists have hopefully been informative for the many anti-authoritarians who don’t have to deal with an organized anarcho-electoral pole in their city. (From hard-core pacifists I expect only the knee-jerk organizational patriotism displayed by Cooper.)

In my article, I didn’t say that the CDME is an anarchist party. In effect, the Democratic Coalition, one of the groupuscules of which it is composed, is social democratic.

As for Ecology Montreal, not all members are anarchists, but there has been a clear anarchist connection from the outset. “The social ecology and urban theories of Murray Bookchin” (the most prominent libertarian municipalist theorist) have influenced the party, according to CDME candidate Phillip Chee. Bookchin traveled from Vermont to address an Ecology Montreal policy conference.

Another element has been the number of anti-authoritarians running for office (at least seven the last time), not to mention quite a few more who support the party. Pro-party puff pieces emanating from Montreal have also begun to appear in anarchist journals outside Quebec, such as Phillip Chee’s article in *Kick it Over* (Fall 1993) and Larry Gambone’s shorter piece in the London fortnightly *Freedom* (mid-January 1995).

Some of the more prominent partyists have managed to gain access to the local media, increasing their visibility and damage potential. When libertarian municipalism reaches a critical mass in a city it begins to take up a lot of space in an anti-authoritarian milieu, polarizing people with respect to it. Hence, the numerous anti-electoral activities during the last election which were mentioned in my article.

Roussopoulos, the owner of Black Rose Books and a self-described anarchist, was instrumental in founding Ecology Montreal and remains the spokesperson I most often see quoted. As a catalyst in channeling local energies in the direction of bureaucratic statist reformism, Roussopoulos has played a confusionist and destructive role here in the eyes of many.

Concerning Roussopoulos’ firing of two anarchists at Black Rose when they attempted to collectivize the project, which Cooper dismisses as “speculative irrelevancies” on my part, documents are available from me at the address below. Cooper downplays this kind of activity on Roussopoulos’ part. Others, I think, will find it instructive about how this guy operates.

Also a given for Cooper is that community newspapers should support political parties. One must back the “left-alternative” lest other, more sinister, alternatives take power. In my opinion, on the contrary, achieving autonomy with respect to party rackets constitutes a necessary first step.

According to Anarchos Institute founding member and CDME mayoral candidate Yolande Cohen, the mayor would continue to “provide the main orientation” in a CDME regime. There is no reason for community newspapers to reward such (would-be) oppressors with front-page plugs, as in Place Publique in Milton-Parc’s case. Also, four out of five of the journal’s editorial committee members belong to Ecology Montreal and three ran for office in the last election. Backing the party and its candidates under these conditions is hardly surprising.

Cooper says that I smeared former anarcho-candidate "Bicycle Bob" Silverman by mentioning that he had been publicly cheer leading for cops on bicycles. Roussopoulos, meanwhile, has been "pressuring the police for foot patrols" according to a profile in the *McGill Daily*. These pro-police statements are Silverman's and Roussopoulos' problem, not mine.

Party-thinking's capacity to turn people rotten certainly seems to know no limits.

Michael William

CP 1554 Succ. "B"

Montreal, Quebec

Canada H3B 3L2

Misanthropic Rage

To the Fifth Estate:

I have been a subscriber in the past and, income permitting, may be so in the near future. I am presently incarcerated in the Federal Correctional Institution at Florence, Colorado for the crime of armed bank robbery.

Fed up with an inability to earn a decent living and motivated by anarchist philosophy and misanthropic rage at consensus reality, I attempted to launch my own personal revolution, robbed two banks, got caught on the second one, and sentenced in December 1993 to nine years. I should get out in the year 2002, maybe 2001, depending on good time.

The Bureau of Prisons and I are not getting along. I came in with the intent of being a "model prisoner," just to ease my time, so I could concentrate on reorganizing my life when I get out. I owe \$3,367 in restitution and have no outside resources, so they gave me a job as a janitor in Unicor, Federal Prison Industries.

Then, over a minor rules infraction, they took the job away. So, I told them that if they weren't interested in getting their restitution and in helping me rehabilitate by giving me an income, I had no reason to cooperate with them. I asked to be put in "The Hole," and intend to remain here for the next eight years.

I need to develop some contacts on the outside. I had a few when I was out, but lost all the addresses when arrested. I got your address from a publisher's directory at the library here before coming to the Hole.

The reason I'm writing is that I understand there are a few anarchist prisoner support groups around and also some zines that are free to prisoners. Please send them to the address below.

Richard S. Hack 87690-011

FCI PO Box 6000

Florence CO 81226

fifth Estate

Various Authors
Letters to the Fifth Estate
1995

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/346-summer-1995/letters-to-the-fifth-estate>
Fifth Estate #346, Summer, 1995

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)