

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1999

We welcome letters commenting on our articles, stating opinions, or giving reports of events in your area. We don't guarantee to print everything received, but all letters are read by our staff and considered for publication.

Typed letters or ones on disk are appreciated, but not required. Length should not exceed two double-spaced pages. If you are interested in writing longer responses, please contact us.

Unabomber Symbol?

Dear Fifth Estate:

Your recent article/editorial about the Unabomber makes some good points: the people he targeted were mostly innocent folks, not big corpocrats. But in some ways your assessment falls short. (See FE #351, Summer 1998, "Unabomber Cops A Plea.")

I am reading FE right now: an article about a global street party to resist "the global capitalists" who "wrench more power from local communities and siphon it into their self appointed dictatorship" [FE #351, Summer, 1998]. You link this action to worldwide protests.

Excuse me? A street party to resist/ protest world capitalism? How effective is that? The corpocrats probably sit in their boardrooms and laugh at those stupid hippies and commies. At least the Unabomber shook them up a bit.

Elsewhere in your admittedly excellent newspaper, you list other demonstrations. There seem to be few effective means of resistance. It seems to be either demonstrations or bombs.

I'll admit that bombs are not at all nice, nor do I advocate them. But please realize the symbolic importance of the Unabomber. Your zine decries his supporters, not realizing how the Unabomber provided a symbol and a rallying point for a substantial little mini-movement (at least on the Internet, where hundreds must have logged in at one time or another to read his manifesto and were exposed to his anti-tech ideas.)

You must realize the importance of a rallying point. The reason the anti-authoritarian movement was so strong in the '60s was because we had a common focus (the Vietnam war). Now, we don't have one issue, we have hundreds of little issues which all together add up to a planet in serious trouble.

I think people realize this. That is why the Unabomber appealed to them. He represented their own choked helpless feeling that they got when looking at the state of this world. Do you have any idea how many people joke about blowing up their workplace? There is a lot of discontent out there and the Unabomber provided a focus.

So, while feeling sympathy for the Unabomber's victims, I am not ready to righteously condemn him. At any rate, the government pulled random quotes out of 30 years of Kaczynski's journals to prove that no, he was not politically motivated, he did it for "personal revenge." (Gee, I guess none of us have ever felt personally enraged enough to want to strike back.) In turn, Kaczynski says that these quotes are distortions and to wait until he has a chance to have his say. (Can you believe what the government tells you?)

Even if it is true that Kaczynski is a psychotic whose actions should be condemned, the mere fact of his resistance to the Machine remains as something remarkable, singular and memorable. Take your symbols where you find them.

Shadow

shadow42@geocities.com

Check Ted's Motives

To The Fifth Estate:

Both mainstream news media and anti-industrial movement publications have given a formidably small amount of discussion about the Unabomber, now professed to be Theodore Kaczynski, and virtually no attention to his manifesto, "Industrial Society and its Future," in the past two years since he was arrested.

The minor amount of discussion that has occurred seems to be largely characterized by negatively-biased criticism of him and almost complete ignorance of his manifesto. The quantity and quality of attention to him by mainstream and anti-industrial media is low considering the magnitude of the Unabomber case as the most major FBI investigation in history and the emergence of an anti-industrial manifesto.

Current discussions about Kaczynski seem to be governed by much prejudice about his mental status which has hindered serious consideration of his manifesto. Only a few groups and individuals have actually been seriously devoted to discussion of Kaczynski and his manifesto. These include "Unabomber Political Action Committee" (UNAPACK) and the Unabomber fan website on the Internet: alt.fan.unabomber. The vast majority of Americans remain totally oblivious to these groups and individuals devoted to the Unabomber, or even that such groups and individuals exist.

Discussions seem to focus only on Kaczynski and his psychological status. He is reported by the mainstream media to be suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. He is also argued to have a host of personality defects such as lack of rage control and pathological shyness. These personality issues were supposed to be the true cause of his bombings and desire to write the manifesto, rather than a real concern for the condition of industrial society.

My intention is to attempt to initiate more discussions about him and especially his manifesto. This goal is directed in particular to anti-industrial publications. This is justified by Kaczynski's role as quite possibly the greatest link between various anti-industrial movements and also between these movements and the general public. Kaczynski is more widely known both among anti-industrial movements and also among the general public than any other prominent anarchist (Murray Bookchin, Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, etc.) or any other prominent neoluddite or environmentalist (Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, Kirkpatrick Sale, etc.).

To initiate the preliminary discussions in this forum, I would like to present to anti-industrial movement contributors a number of questions.

What were Kaczynski's true motivations in the actions performed by him with relation to his anti-industrial ideology? Are his assumed personal problems based in fact? If so, were his personal problems the sole motivation for his actions? What should one's motivations be in efforts to destroy the industrial system? Has the media not misrepresented him with relation to the above motivations?

Were the bombings an inappropriate or unnecessary means by which Kaczynski should have attempted to propagate his anti-industrial ideologies? Is physical violence always inappropriate or ineffectual for the purpose of destroying the industrial system?

To what extent should Kaczynski's manifesto be valued for the promotion of anti-industrial movements? Should his motivations (whatever they may be) with relation to his anti-industrial ideology and his bombings be reasons to dismiss his manifesto? Is the argument true that he has only made such a discussion appear more negligible and marginal?

It remains to be seen what effects this will have for the future of industrial society.

Thank you, Ted.

Mosa Charlo

Polson, Mont.

Peter Werbe responds: If we're reduced to symbols, I suggest we find one less flawed than Ted Kaczynski. If he's the person most worthy of representing a perspective challenging the Megamachine, it may be time to come out of the woods with our hands up and get a good job.

Are we so desperate that we want to hitch our star to someone who has justified mostly indiscriminate bombings with the cynical excuse that in a media-dominated society only murder would bring attention to his ideas? Or, who gloated about shredding another human being and cursed when a bomb set to go off near a classroom failed to detonate? Kaczynski's fifteen minutes of fame (garnered by blood) are almost, if not already, over. The spectacle deals in images, not ideas. We're better off with those authors you mention who may not be as well known as Ted, but at least their hands are clean and their minds a little clearer.

Ultimately, we remember people for their most significant acts. The German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote eloquently at times about the destruction of the individual under modern industrialism, but it is his cooperation with the Nazis, not his philosophy, for which he is most remembered.

Chumbawamba? Who Cares?

Dear Fifth Estate:

It's a shame that anarchists in general have so little in the way of cultural breadth. Re your piece, "Will Success Spoil Chumbawamba," in FE #351, Summer 1998 on that middling pop band, and whether or not their lyrics retain their anarchic explicitness.

Who cares?

Several weeks before this issue of FE came out, Wendy O. Williams, lead singer of the Plasmatics, committed suicide after a lengthy bout with depression.

Wendy O. held a special attraction for me, not solely for her music, but for her persona and grace, her ability to combine femininity with strength. Without being especially attractive, she expanded my awareness of feminine beauty. Most of all, these attributes were spontaneous to her, unlike the majority of feminists I've met, whose tacked-on self-righteousness and awkward displays of willfulness usually confound any charm they might possess.

I'm taking up this issue not so much with FE as with the anti-authoritarian community in general. There is something artificial in our finding solidarity with any purveyor of elevator music who parrots our ideas without advancing them, while the most creative of musical genres (electronic, ambient, doom, thrash, grind, black and death metal, etc.) lumber about in relative obscurity. Anarchy is more than words, and so long as it lacks even the beginnings of an aesthetic awareness (among other things), the doings of a triple-platinum pop group from Leeds, and their albums with faux anarchist Noam Chomsky, will somehow seem worthy of notice.

Meanwhile, the Queen of Thrash, forgotten, lies dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

John Filiss

Port Jervis, N.Y.

FE Recycling Article Not Helpful

To The FE:

Enclosed is a contribution. Your article on recycling is not helpful. (See FE #351, Summer, 1998, "How I Stopped Recycling and Learned to Love It") There was no discussion of selective use, reduced use, recycling of paper (newsprint, shiny journals), metal (cans, scrap), paint, etc., although the reality of the market problem for recycled materials and the limit of times they can be reused, needs some technological attention.

How are you involved in the environmental movement, if at all? The old black flag workers have not always been prominent in the hands-on movement related to matters eco-environmental, matters related to health care, ways of thinking beyond the cooptive and temporary solutions of our would-be masters.

The anarchist press worldwide is too busy engaging in quasi-theological discussion of consistency, purpose and the frailty of our attempts at problem solving. There's still work to be done, if we have strength and will to do it.

Chumbawamba, indeed!

Gene Perrin

Detroit

Peter Werbe responds: Brother Gene has been a supporter of this newspaper since its origins 33 years ago, and has been an environmental and social justice activist even longer. His friendship, energy and generosity are almost legendary in the Detroit community.

The point of my article was to suggest that believing capital's waste problem can be solved without confronting its productive apparatus is an illusion. Also, to demand that the system churn out far fewer commodities than it does currently, brings one onto a collision course with Capital's motor force—relentless production.

Citizen recyclers are well-intentioned, but the industry that reprocesses waste is highly toxic itself. Rather than diminishing the industrial grid, recycling expands the whole panoply of what anarchist revolutionaries seek to eliminate—factories, wage slaves, hierarchy.

A lot of old newsprint is being recycled (including mine), but the paper industry's appetite for clear-cutting forests hasn't been diminished one bit. However, rivers in Wisconsin are destroyed from effluence of the paper recycling process.

By the way, the 100-year-old, Swedish, anarcho-syndicalist magazine, *Brand*, featured Chumbawamba singer Alice Nutter on the front cover of their January 1998 edition. Sample copy from *Brand*, Box 150 15, S-10465 Stockholm, Sweden. (Swedish language with English summary).

Out Of Context

Dear Fifth Estate:

There were a few errors in the Summer FE that I felt should be corrected. In the review of BM Ignition's dossier, *Uncontrollables vs. the grotesque Frame-up...*[News and Reviews, FE #351, Summer, 1998], Alfredo Bonanno is listed as one of the four people arrested in 1994 for bank robbery. This is not the case.

The fourth person arrested for that robbery was Antonio Budini. In the same review, you mention that the Italian state was trying to pin several crimes on the many anarchists arrested, but completely ignore the central charges. The state is trying to charge 38 of the arrested with membership in an armed gang, and the rest with membership in a subversive organization.

This alleged organization is called by the prosecutors the Revolutionary Anarchist Insurrectionalist Organization, and they accuse Alfredo Bonanno of being its leader. That all of the accused are anarchists who reject formal organization in favor of affinity groups with specific projects is what makes this a grotesque frame up.

In David Watson's diatribe against "Fixed Ideas and Letter Bombs," he makes two errors. [See "The Revenge of Albion: Readers Respond To David Watson's 'Swamp Fever,'" FE 351, Summer 1998.]

Venomous Butterfly Publications is a publishing project which publishes pamphlets and a zine called *Willful Disobedience*. Also the last quote Watson uses from "Fixed Ideas..." is actually a misquote.

The actual text reads: "I Will gladly sacrifice anyone or anything that interferes with my ability to create my own life and interactions as I choose." The deletion of these five words significantly changes the connotation of the statement.

Finally, I'd have thought that David Watson would be aware that "most people know" that principled debate does not consist in quoting your opponent out of context in order to make snide comments, or comparing them to movie psychopaths and fanatical cultists. "Most people know" these latter tactics are a smear campaign.

Wolfi Landstreicher

Los Angeles, Calif.

David Watson replies: The errors in my essay to which Wolfi refers were inadvertent, but I see no meaningful difference between his line as I cited it and the line with its original dependent clause intact. After all, why else would

Wolfe bother to “sacrifice” people unless they got in his way (say, by making annoying noise, as did the passenger planes overhead that the Unabomber intended to blow up)? As for “movie psychopaths and fanatical cultists,” it was *Green Anarchist* that advertised one Freddy Kreuger as spokesperson of its Kaczynski defense campaign and which explicitly praised the actions of the Japanese Aum Cult (which spread poison gas in the Tokyo subway) and fascist bombers in Oklahoma City.

It's Very Simple

Dear Fifth Estate:

Perhaps having seen Stewart Home's reply about the tailor's dummy, you will now understand the problem, and see for yourself the crooked way the Neoists operate, the crooked way they argue, their many lies and fabrications. (See FE #351, Summer 1998, Letters) We have had all this since 1994.

I know it is a long way between us, and there being a lot of ocean between here and Detroit, but you ought to know that selective quotations from your article about the *Green Anarchist* versus Neoist conflict have been put together into a Neoist leaflet “Militant Spasm” to make it look as though the Fifth Estate supports the Neoists and condemns GA.

On the one hand airhead Home supporters in London might well want to read FE because they think it condemns GA. Readers and sympathizers like this you can well do without. On the other hand, those in the know about what is really going on, but too lazy to check it out may well condemn FE too, along with Home.

As I said in my last letter, it really is very simple. Home and Tompsett fly flags of convenience. Sometimes they are “anarchists,” sometimes they are “art terrorists” or whatever trendy label they think their audience will go for. The fact they are written about favourably in Searchlight magazine ought to concentrate your mind a little.

Green Anarchist magazine is under attack by-the-state, the police and the secret state. DSI Desmond “The Loony” Thomas and the Hampshire Thought Police attacked GA with “Operation Washington.” They are trying to close us down.

At the same time as this, GA has also been under attack from—within” (ha, ha) the movement by the state's proxies; firstly in 1990–1993 by *Searchlight*, Hill and Hepple, and latterly, 1994 and onwards, by Stewart Home, Fabian Tompsett and all their front organizations—Neoist Alliance, Unpopular Books, Luther Blissett, Karen Elliot, etc.

If you can understand this, then you will know that to side with Home and Tompsett is to side with the state.

Having said this, I personally have no problem with you analyzing and criticizing GA's politics in your magazine.

Yours in a personal capacity,

Artt Harries

Lancaster Bomber magazine

Shoplifting Is Consuming

To Fifth Estate:

It bothers me to see pieces glorifying shoplifting in anarchist publications like the Fifth Estate (See “Shoplifter's Prayer,” FE #351, Summer 1998) or *Live Wild or Die*. I know the riff: “Oppressing Institutions ripping us off to support CEO's at bloated salaries...,” but I still don't think that's what we should be about.

First of all, people who take from stores are still tied in to the industrial production system. They are still dependent on that system to provide for their needs. They are still “consuming” the products of the industrial growth society.

Rather, we should be developing our own support systems based on the work of our own hands, providing for our own basic needs, whether distributed through co-ops, by local currency, by barter, by free distribution, or however. The object should be to be buying and/or using products created within our own communities, however we define them.

This strengthens those communities and liberates those who produce and consume those handmade, home-made, community-workplace-made goods. Capitalist goods are an addiction. The shoplifter is like a crack addict who is not capable of providing for him or herself and depends on peasants in Columbia to provide for his or her needs. The analogy is apt, because when one “liberates” discount store goods, it usually means that seriously underpaid and exploited workers in some foreign land are providing for one’s needs. Self-reliant is independent.

If we can’t make what we need, let’s try finding the means to do that, rather than feeding our “stuff” habit.

Those who want to do away with property would have more success in convincing others, I believe, by freely sharing their own stuff by giving it away than freely sharing someone else’s stuff by shoplifting it.

Labor can be shared, too, either as activism or community service or just neighborly help (“mutual aid,” if you want to be ideological about it)—“Food not Bombs” comes to mind. In terms of communication, their message is clear and bright. Shoplifting does not communicate nearly as well to a public which knows that, unjust or not, they are going to end up paying for the shoplifter’s spree by paying higher prices for everything else. Never in recorded history has a CEO taken a reduction in salary because of shoplifting losses.

Anarchy is the most difficult of political (apolitical) systems. It requires a high degree of awareness, and self-responsibility.

That is the main reason why it is still so unpopular. It is particularly hard to attempt to establish anarchy within the context of an individualistic—particularly a rich, individualistic society such as ours. Where it has succeeded for any length of time has been in societies where it is an integral part of the culture, handed down through the generations, when it was just “what you do”—no question about it.

Anarchy grows when people first take responsibility for themselves, then take responsibility for the health and welfare of their community, then they can think about their bioregion, and soon. Of course, all this usually happens more or less simultaneously, but the point is clear: without rigid institutions to rely on, we are going to have to be responsible for ourselves. The time to start is now—“The way to win the revolution is to act as if we have already won.”

An anarchist future of necessity will have to be more about giving than taking, more about growing than destroying, more about loving than despising. If it sounds hard that’s because it is. Autocracy or self-centered individualism are much easier—that’s why they are so widespread.

Rather than shoplifting, which seems to me to spread further covetousness and distrust throughout the urban centers, why not plant gardens instead? There is a sign of faith in the future. Feed others, build housing—for money or trade if it is your livelihood, for free if you can afford it—but be a producer, not a consumer of the stolen work of others’ hands. That, I believe, will produce a change that is far more likely to last.

David

Whittier, North Carolina

Feminism Truly Disturbing

To the Fifth Estate:

The nauseatingly PC criticism of Richard Mock’s Summer 1997 FE cover as “sexist” and “misogynist” (See Letters, FE #351, Summer 1998) serves as a reminder that feminism is one of the most authoritarian ideologies- around. It is truly disturbing that many so-called anarchists associate themselves with the rigid leftist dogma of radical feminism.

“Anarcho-feminism” is as contradictory as “anarcho-capitalist.”

For Freedom,

CR Walsh (vaginally deprived)

Ft. Worth, Texas

FE reply: You probably would have done a tiny bit better if you hadn’t included the parenthetical phrase after your name. Its ambiguity is as sadly suggestive—is it that you don’t have one or that you aren’t getting any?

Your anger against anarcho-feminists prevents you from noticing the world of difference between the valuable feminist critique of patriarchy and those women who simply want to be cut in on the capitalist/statist racket that currently exists. An anarchism without feminist concerns is hopelessly impoverished.

Anarchism on Radio

Dear Fifth Estate:

Loved your article, "1918: Russian Artists of the Anarchist Revolution" (see FE #349, Summer, 1997). I used it to illustrate the truth with regard to the beginnings of the Bolshevik repression of anarchist, S.R., "Green" peasant organizations, etc. Lenin, from the start, used the tactics of a police state, not of a fellow revolutionary. This clarification was useful for countering several Marxists at the June 20–21 West Coast Micro-Power Radio Conference in Los Angeles.

Contacts were made at the conference and there has been progress in spreading the anarchist word across the LA basin through Micro-Power radio. There's a station in Highland Park, one in Long Beach, another in the San Fernando Valley and soon we'll have one in West LA, and Santa Monica.

Discussion of the merits of the *Fifth Estate* vis-a-vis the new *Anarchy* came up with San Francisco activists, who lean towards the *Fifth Estate* and approve of your perceived movement in a "leftist" as opposed to "Luddite" direction.

What is this Bookchin slam? I've noticed the end sheet description of his books are calling him a "student of revolution" as opposed to an active participant in any process. Is he giving Noam Chomsky a run for his money in "legit" circles, perhaps hoping to become a talking head for media reportage of upcoming riotous events?

In solidarity,

G. Rumor

Venice, Calif

Call For Posters

To The Fifth Estate:

The enclosed is a xerox of a block-printed poster, the first of a series on theme of "Building Community." This poster and the call for more such art is a collaboration between Nicolas Lampert in Oakland, Calif., and Susan Simensky Bietila in Milwaukee.

We ask that people send a copy of their art to the Riverwest Art Center and we will circulate copies of all submissions to the other contributors. We will give credit to artists, but they should be clear that the posters are intended to be freely copied and exhibited to make their work a living force and an inspiration for change.

Send posters to:

Susan Simensky

Bietila Riverwest Art Center

3178 N. Fratney St.

Milwaukee WI 53212

Capitalist-Created Ecocide

Dear FE:

I write this in response to the letter by Grace and Michael Hogan in FE #351, Summer 1998.

They, like a few other people I've met, assert that environmentalism is a mere "red-herring" constructed by capital to keep people divided and distracted from "true" revolutionary activity.

First, I would ask whether they are making the mistake of confusing the environmental movement with environmentalism. The former being composed of largely ineffectual, highly bureaucratic organizations which are

more interested in the size of their membership lists (profit) than with any real change. The latter consisting of the ideals necessary to challenge the predominantly capitalist created-ecocide which is already well underway.

However, from the Hogans' letter, it seems they disagree that there is an environmental catastrophe at all. They state, "There is no scarcity on the planet that a modest redistribution of income wouldn't solve...so [all men and women] live as well as any bourgeois burgher..."

I quite agree that a redistribution of wealth should take place, but we should not fool ourselves into believing that earth can support anywhere near the resource consumption it would take for six billion people to live at the standards of a rich North American, or European. The lifestyles of the wealthy are dependent upon the continued assault upon the earth's soil, air and water, as well as the continued exploitation of humanity, animals and the wild.

Such lifestyles must cease to exist if we are to survive over the long term. Realistically then, if the human population is to exist in relative material equality, it will be at a much more modest standard.

As anarchism should challenge all systems of exploitation, hierarchy and domination, it seems that environmentalism (addressing the exploitation of all of nature) should be as important to any viable anarchist analysis as is hierarchy and exploitation among humans.

The most relevant environmentalism is becoming increasingly anarchistic. I see it as a positive sign that the *Fifth Estate* and the *Earth First! Journal* are looking ever more like each other.

Anyway, this seems neither the time nor the place to go into a lengthy discussion of the necessity for an ecologically-based anarchism. I would suggest to Grace and Michael that they check out the following books as a solid argument for biocentric (life-centered) anarchism: *The End of Nature* by Bill McKibben, *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations* by Jerry Mander, and *Earth for Sale: Reclaiming Ecology in the Age of Corporate Greenwash* by Brian Tokar.

Two other excellent places to find material about human, earth and animal liberation struggles within a radical context are *Live Wild or Die* (Issue #7 due out this summer) and the 'zine *Strong Hearts*, put out by Animal Liberation Front prisoner Rod Coronado.

Finally, thanks for a good issue. "How I Stopped Recycling & Learned to Love It" is one of the best things I've read in quite a while. "The Tao of Anarchy," however, would have been a much better piece if the author hadn't consistently confused the name of the author with that of the book. Lao Tzu was the author, not the title of the book.

No revolution on a dead planet,
Mark Stoddart
West Kootenay Green Anarchist Collective
Nelson, British Columbia

John Clark responds: The answer to the question about "The Lao Tzu" is really not so interesting. That's just what it has been called by many people over the ages, just like, "The Chuang Tzu."

For example, Fung Yu-lan in his standard history of Chinese philosophy begins his chapter on early Taoism: "The book known as the Lao-tzu, but popularly called the Tao Te Ching..." Of course, there's the question of why I chose the former rather than the latter. Well, the article was originally written for the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* and I suppose I automatically used the ordinary philosophical title.

If my article had been aimed at "Lifestyle Anarchists" and denizens of the "Mystical Zone," I might have used the more popular title.

Sign of the Swastika

To the Fifth Estate:

In "Swamp Fever, Primitivism and the 'Ideological Vortex'" (FE #350, Fall, 1997), David Watson attempts to clarify the distinctions between anarcho-primitivism and eco-fascism, "to allow our ideas to evolve and become more nuanced" as we search for a way "out of mass society and to a liberatory society." Despite his trepidations of obscurity, the issues that Watson implicitly raises—in their very sensitivity and difficulty—are crucial.

Under the sign of the swastika—a primitive and venerable symbol of shamanic spiritualism—all members of my tribe, the Jews, were marked for extinction. Was this merely a Nazi anomaly, an awful coincidence? Or does it raise deeper, more troubling questions about how we view humanity's relationship with nature, myth, and history?

In discussing such (questions—most recently in “On The Road to Nowhere,” in the same issue (FE #350, Fall, 1997)—Watson frequently cites *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness*, by Frederick Turner. In Turner's words, this book “is a spiritual story...of a civilization that had substituted history for myth as way of understanding life”—which, for Watson, reveals, the spiritual and psychological underpinnings of the “megamachine,” and of modern civilization's war against nature.

What brought this curse on mankind? In an early chapter, “The People of the Book,” Turner writes of the Jews: “[An] anti-nature bias...is reflected in the grand covenantal experience at Sinai, both in the specifically historical character of the religion there spelled out, and in the monotheism that sets it apart from the nature-based polytheisms of all other peoples...

“It seems inevitable that the [Hebrews'] god should call the people into the wilderness to reveal the ultimate content and direction of their special historical destiny...The cumulative effect of all this is to emphasize the destructive aspects of nature and to reinforce the anthropocentric, adversary attitude toward the natural world announced in the paradise myth...

“[The Hebrews developed] “sacred history” as distinguished from cyclical and therefore timeless myth, and it seems no accident that the Israelites, as is widely acknowledged, were the first people to create and inscribe a consecutive historical record...In this fundamental way the religion must stand in contrast and antagonism to all natural religions, which, to the extent that they are truly bound to the natural order and rhythm of things, must be deeply repetitive and ahistorical.

“The prohibitions announced at Sinai against imagery and idolatry are a necessary part of such a governing bias. First, images are fated to be representational to some extent, and so...connected to that cyclical nature the god himself was so infinitely removed from, and was now commanding his people to live beyond...The second reason for the anti-image prohibitions is that traditionally images had been associated with shrines, which are in turn attached to specific localities. Here were people on the march; no attachment, then, was possible to the land...

“The separation from nature and myth and the commitment to history is emphasized...in the new religion's monotheistic character...It was the Israelites who established monotheism in the spiritual geography of humankind. And with it came the terrible concomitants of intolerance and commandments to destroy the sacred items of others and to “utterly destroy” polytheistic peoples wherever encountered...”

Turner fixed the Jewish people in his crosshairs, condemning them for their “special historical destiny.” He marks this tribe—at the most fundamental core of its identity—as the progenitor of history's most fundamental oppressions, including the destruction of nature. The villain, according to Turner, is the introduction of monotheism.

This is a distortion of monotheism as anyone familiar with Einstein and Spinoza—or the kabbalists before them—will recognize. In fact, even Einstein and Spinoza, in their very pantheism and universalism, stood by (and deepened our understanding of) the watchword of their tribe: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

Many Jews—from neoconservatives to anarchists like Murray Bookchin—may well recoil from primitivism (or its countercultural manifestations) because, sensitized by millennia of experience, they instinctively recognize the potential for attacks like Turner's to issue from such quarters. By itself, however, reflexive hostility is superficial.

As David Watson himself says, “We all need to tread carefully, mindful of our world and the world we say we desire.” Every group, every individual, every belief, is susceptible to corruption. Jews wary of the megamachine might also be wary of our own age-old vulnerabilities—to “idolatry of the text,” and to a belief that any one individual or group has an eternal patent on Truth' or God. We don't own God; God owns us. Or, at least that's part of my “take” on monotheism, and on what it means to be a Jew.

What about monotheism, and about Turner's attack on it? Monotheism is, indeed, a unitary, abstract, and universal apprehension of spirituality. But why must this be viewed as fundamentally “anti-nature”? Is it that monotheism replaced the “earth gods” with a “sky God?” Ask Einstein: do we live on the earth, or in time and space? Both! Talk about false distinctions and stupid questions!!

The heart of monotheism, then, is a sense that the grandeur of the natural universe may be belittled and lost—not emphasized—in the particularities and reifications of idol-worship and polytheism, and in false distinction.

This sense of grandeur—of Oneness—is a blessing, not a curse. Humanity’s tragic history results, not from an Enemy, but from the limitations of an alienated consciousness. It results from failures, by monotheist and others alike, to recognize the manifestations and implications—the humility and awe—implicit in such a perspective.

Mitchell Halberstadt

Daley City, Calif.

Watson responds: By describing my essay as an “attempt” to “clarify distinctions” between primitivism and fascism, and then immediately linking them once more, Mitchell Halberstadt’s letter—apparently without intending to do so—undermines the very nuance my essay establishes.

One of my essay’s key points was, as Mitchell acknowledges, that any belief can be abused in the interest of domination—including diversity and free-thinking Enlightenment rationality, as certain (here unnamed out of respect for the many people sick and tired of hearing about them) hyper-rationalist anarchist demagogues have been doing lately with a vengeance.

If Frederick Turner has discerned an anti-nature bias in the culture and texts of the ancient Jews, it is not a shocking or even entirely original thesis (it has been a discussion in ecological literature at least since the 1960s); it’s even less any proof of anti-semitism, any more than a critique of ancient Greek thinking about nature would be racism against the Greeks. Accusing Turner of anti-semitism (of fixing the Jews in his “crosshairs”) strikes me as unfortunate and irresponsible as the kinds of thinking I criticized in my essay that dismiss ecomysticism and extra-rational modes of thinking as automatically fascist.

There may be problems in Turner’s discussion of monotheism—clearly there are also deep ecological currents or potential deep ecological currents in all the world’s monotheistic traditions (as recent scholarship in those fields indicates). But whatever the book’s flaws, it seems a useful thesis about the Western tradition as a whole, one worth considering, given the undeniably bloody history and anti-nature hysteria of the judeo-christian tradition overall. Bringing in such unique personages as Einstein and Spinoza as representatives of this tradition who disprove Turner’s discussion of antiquity seems too anachronistic an argument for my (non-theistic) mind to accept.

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Various Authors
Letters to the Fifth Estate
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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/352-winter-1999/letters-to-the-fifth-estate>
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