

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1999

Fifth Estate Letters Policy

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.

Tao Article: A Missed Opportunity

Dear FE:

John Clark's essay "The Tao of Anarchy" (FE #351, Summer 1998) would have *Fifth Estate* readers accept Taoism as a theoretical breakthrough, a heretofore unacknowledged masterpiece of anarchist thought: "[A]n examination of the Lao Tzu reveals that over two millennia ago ancient Taoist thought had already begun exploring rather profoundly all the dimensions of domination that have concerned anarchists over the past century and a half." There are several problems with this assertion and with the publishing of the article as a whole..

Regarding the above quotation itself, which serves as a fundamental premise of Clark's essay, I offer the following points.

First, the "dimensions of domination" touched on in the *Tao Te Ching* in no way can be compared to the problems facing radicals at the end of the twentieth century. To do so from the standpoint of the contemporary resident of North America living a thoroughly modernized life is ludicrous. The social conditions are such that the *Tao Te Ching* is most useful now as a historical relic, i.e., only as a model which already belongs to another period.

Second, the specific problematic of the revolutionary process is not dealt with at all in the *Tao Te Ching*. By contrast, the theory and debate about that process occupies a central position in both classical and contemporary anarchist thought. The early twentieth century Chinese radicals adopted the language of classical anarchism and Marxism for precisely the reason that Taoism and all other traditional strains of Chinese thought do not offer a vocabulary of revolution.

Finally, I would note that the *Tao Te Ching* is famously abstract, a collection of instructive, but also contradictory verses that can be applied to many real world arrangements, and can be said to say many (not just anarchistic) things. It is a text at least as plastic as the Bible, and yet the *Fifth Estate* grants that "radical" text little attention.

Which brings me to my larger criticism. I find it hard to seriously engage with a piece exploring the "Tao" of anarchy when the source texts are so removed from the continuities of the history and culture from which they came. I have no problem with the serious discussion of abstract ideas; such discussions are necessary, but only when accompanied by similarly serious discussions of concrete, historical situations.

The balance between abstract, theoretical essays and reports and analyses of specific situations has long been a *Fifth Estate* strength. For example, for every academic essay on Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid, the *Fifth Estate*

also publishes timely reports on contemporary Russia or other Eastern European societies undergoing dramatic change.

For every David Watson essay arguing for the cultivation of a heightened sensitivity to place and time, the *Fifth Estate* reports on the local struggles of indigenous peoples, political prisoners, and radical activists.

In recent years, the paper has extended at least some radical perspective coverage to events in Eastern and Western Europe, North America, Latin America, and, in the context of U.S. imperial actions, Africa and the Middle East. What remains undiscussed is the contemporary politics of China and the rest of East Asia.

While the barriers of language and general unfamiliarity may account for a lower level of coverage, the absence of East Asian reports becomes something else when a piece such as John Clark's is granted featured essay space, taking up more than five full pages. The last eighteen months in East Asia saw the ending of classical colonialism in Hong Kong, the financial meltdown in South Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand, the ongoing self-redefinition of the Chinese Communist Party, and the bursting of the industrial economic dream in Japan—all happenings simply begging for the radical analysis for which the Fifth Estate is well-known.

Dan S. Wang
Chicago, Illinois,

John Clark responds: I'm grateful to Dan S. Wang for the opportunity to clarify the relationship between Taoist thought and practical matters like "local struggles of indigenous peoples." The idea that someone living "a thoroughly modern" life might learn something useful from the *Tao Te Ching* doesn't seem to me at all "ludicrous."

Indeed, it is perhaps those who are most "thoroughly modern" or even "contemporary" in their outlook and conditioning who might have the most radical lessons to learn from such a work. We are still living through the epochal historical crisis that the *Tao Te Ching* confronted and subjected to critical reflection. That crisis was the historical break with tribal society and its communitarian and holistic system of values, and the imposition of civilization with its monstrous system of economic, political, technological and patriarchal domination. The *Tao Te Ching*, in my view, was the first attempt from within civilization to learn from what was lost when "the great Tao declined" in society and the system of domination, destruction and disorder arose. As it so happens, one of my main preoccupations for the past decade has been working with the "local struggles of indigenous peoples."

In particular, I work with the people of West Papua, who have been subjected to domination and exploitation by the Indonesian colonial empire and transnational corporations for the past thirty-five years. The Papuan people are more familiar than most of us with "the revolutionary process" their tribal cultures have been devastated in the past generation through the economic, political and technological revolutions that have been imposed on them in order to expropriate and exploit their vast gold and copper resources.

The headquarters of the Freeport-McMoRan Corporation, the mining company that is primarily responsible for this exploitation, is here in New Orleans, so this has offered a unique opportunity to work with the Papuan resistance. For example, this week I invited Mr. John Ondawame, a former guerrilla fighter in the Free Papua Movement (OPM) who is now their international spokesperson, to speak here. We are also organizing demonstrations for the corporation's annual meeting in April.

How does this relate to the *Tao Te Ching* and its "contemporary" significance? Very closely, I think. One thing that I've learned from studying the Papuan culture and working with Papuans is that the historical transformations and contradictions expressed in that ancient work are still present, and are perhaps most strikingly illustrated when capital, the state and the megamachine confront the resistance of tribal peoples.

Mr. Tom Beanal, head of the Amungme Tribal Council, has visited us twice and spoken to us about the struggles of the Papuan people. He has explained that their struggle is rooted in a world view and spirituality that has much in common with the outlook embodied in the *Tao Te Ching*. I would certainly not equate the two views, but both look to ancient forms of community and ancient modes of relating to nature that pose a challenge to our "modern" and "contemporary" outlook.

They suggest that even the sophisticated "vocabularies of revolution" of "classical anarchism and Marxism" have in many ways failed to escape the language of domination. For the Papuans the "pre-civilized" world view is a living reality, but even we up-to-date, "contemporary," civilized people—slow learners that we are—can learn something from it. According to Mr. Beanal, "to the Amungme people in particular and to the people of West Papua as a whole, nature and man are one. Everything that has a use has a value greater than that ascribed to it by man."

Furthermore, he explains that according to the traditional mythology of the Papuans, “if the mountains and nature are harmed, our mother is hurt as well. The mountain we see as our mother is sacred, It is where the souls of men go when they die. We keep this place holy and worship it in our traditional ceremonies.”

In short, the Papuans have a holistic view of humanity and nature, and attribute intrinsic value to other beings in the natural world and to places that are of deep significance to the whole community. They also reject the masculinist project of human domination of a feminine nature. Also, there are in the Papuan culture remnants of the gift economy That challenge our concepts of value, exchange and accumulation in a very powerful way.

I do not suggest that “modern” and “contemporary” people should adopt the Papuan way of life and traditional mythology, nor that they should transport themselves thousands of years into the past to adopt the outlook of *Tao Te Ching* (both of which are impossible). However, I do propose that we can learn profound lessons from ancient texts such as the Tao Te Ching that look back to the tribal past, and from tribal peoples such as the Papuans.

To the extent that they help us to open ourselves to a radical otherness confronting civilization they have much to offer. On the one hand, they can help us imaginatively distance ourselves from the dominant ideologies that so deeply infect all of our thinking (including reactive oppositional thinking), and to see that fundamentally different forms of consciousness, modes of living, and relationships to the natural world are possible. And on the other hand, they can help us understand better and to oppose more effectively the forces of domination that Lao Tzu began to diagnose and whose globally genocidal and ecocidal consequences we are now beginning to comprehend.

Call for Solidarity

Dear Friends:

This is a short call for solidarity with a comrade of mine in Southern Kenya and the projects he heads, the Kipkoriony School and Library which services over 2,500 students throughout the rift valley area (where I lived during my time in Kenya). The folks involved with these projects are not anarchists or anti-authoritarians, but are interested in providing all types of literature.

In East Africa, there is a long history of resistance and autonomy ingrained in the culture. It is from that cultural diversity that I came to believe that we are “born anarchist” and that the rest is learned.

It is my hope that you, my friends, comrades and fellow revolutionaries will make a real effort to make anarchist and revolutionary literature available to these communities. Send basic, easy to read books and pamphlets, as well as videos (and typewriters, cameras, etc. if you have them) to: Claustrophobia Collective, ATTN: Kenyan Literature Project, P.O. Box 1721, Baltimore, MD 2120.

You can contact Kipkoriony Director John K. Amaina, C/o Kipkoriony Library, P.O. Box 29, Kaptagat, Eldoret, Kenya, for more info or me directly. This type of solidarity is an important step in making anarchism a global solution to global problems.

Refuse, Resist, Exist!

Christopher Lee Plummer 677345

Rt. 2 Box 4400,

Gatesville TX 76597

Spirit Raging

Dear Folks:

I will be released from prison sometime in the coming months and so I am writing to ask you to cancel my free prisoner sub.

Your publication was most enlightening, thought-provoking and kept my anti-authoritarian spirit healthy and raging during my time inside.

So, I send a heartfelt thank-you for your kindness over the years. May all good things find you.

RDB

Greenville, Ill.

Join Twin Oaks

To the Fifth Estate:

Twin Oaks is an egalitarian, feminist, nonviolent ecovillage of 100 people in rural Virginia. We have several worker-owned businesses, and all income is distributed equally throughout the community. A wide variety of people live here, including political activists and war tax resisters.

We're looking for people to visit and possibly join us. For more information, please contact Twin Oaks, 138-A Twin Oaks Rd., Louisa VA 23093; 540-8945126; www.twinoaks.org.

In Cooperation,
Valerie Porter
Louisa, Virginia

Union Fetish

Dear friends at Fifth Estate:

You people have too much of a union fetishism. Is the revolutionary/evolutionary potential that dead that you go from supporting a newspaper strike, originally because it was one of the few sparks of worker revolt, to obsessing like you do? When the unions signed on to the Joint Operating Agreement, to preserve their jobs of writing misquotes, corporate propaganda and the sex life of celebrities and politicians, the strike was over then.

Here is one reader who thinks you cheapen the overall quality of your discourse by devoting so much intellectual capital—not to a lost cause—but to a worthless cause. If there never had been a strike I would have, and do, consider workers on those papers as useless, ill-informed reproducers of everything you “pretend” to believe in.

If the workers at Fermi Nuclear strike, will you join the picket line, bleed with them, demand they be taken back for their just demands?

I love you guys, but I accuse you of getting too close to this issue—because of certain friendships—to be ideologically balanced. After my pie-throwing incident, the Detroit Free Press attacked me in an editorial as being a racist, a religious bigot and ruefully twisted my words. I'm convinced they do that, much, if not most of the time. And I should feel sorry that they don't get more money and benefits? Fuck-off.

As a taxi driver, I pick up hockey and baseball players and they always tell me that even in sports misquotes, rumors, and misinformation rule the day. Anyway, I do admire your tenacity but really am suspicious of your personal motives. How about committing yourselves to a cause really important (and union related): the downsizing of the workforce at Detroit's medical center? Sick and poor people will die over this, but nurses and other medical workers are not as glamorous as newspaper people, or is it that you don't have friends on the inside?

Sorry for my ruthless, honest question, but you have earned them by your attacks on scabs in a strike that was only possible by union signatures on the J.O.A. (By the way, in principle, people in this union sacrificed philosophical and journalistic integrity to save their jobs. The *Free Press* and *Detroit News* used to have competing political views before the J.O.A. Now, even the *Free Press* supported Engler for Governor—that would never have happened before the J.O.A. Engler, who gutted Medicaid and Medicare so that nurses, aides and even doctors were downsized, and care to the poor was cut, mental hospitals closed, etc. And I'm supposed to support higher wages, more benefits for workers who produce this crap?

If the workers on strike want to earn my support, they will gladly walk away from a paper that goes along with this. Otherwise, they have neither my support nor my respect. Let them get jobs at Fermi. They pay well.

Other than all that, I still love and support the FE.

Patrick (the Rat) Halley
Detroit

Peter Werbe responds: Pat the Rat was a stalwart *Fifth Estate* staff member for many years and is still an active journalist and writer in Detroit, beside driving his cab. Pat made international news in the mid-'70s when he pushed a pie into the face of the teen-age Guru Maraji as the Indian mystic was about to be honored by the Detroit city council.

The outraged followers of the Indian scamster later retaliated by an assassination attempt on Pat which almost cost him his life. [See "FE Staffer Puts a Pie in God's Face," FE #393, Spring 2015]

Pat's challenge to our coverage of the almost four-year-old Detroit newspaper strike is welcome since we have long inveighed against reformist actions and dominant institutions such as unions. It's also an auspicious moment to raise these questions since this year is the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Wildcat: Dodge Truck*, June 1974, in which a number of us involved in the *Fifth Estate* critiqued a spontaneous walkout at a suburban auto assembly plant, and addressed these questions.

In the pamphlet we expressed the view that unions have functioned since their inception to broker labor as a commodity to capital, and as the internal discipline mechanism within the organized working class. This hasn't changed. In fact, I thought I expressed this vividly in my article about the newspaper strike in FE #347, Spring 1996 (see "I'm Sticking With the Union?: The Battle of Detroit").

If there's a problem in our coverage, it may be that we don't express that perspective each time we report on updates of the strike, so it might look like our concern appears as little more than traditional leftist cheerleading for unions.

It's not like we're unaware of what was being produced by the striking workers. I wrote in the above article: "I wonder how many strikers would now agree that the papers they produced were a 'quality product.' To us, they were always 60 percent ads and 40 percent lies. Like all corporate media, they usually are on the wrong side of every social question, support every war, lie about every protest movement, and apologize for every monstrous act this system commits."

Since we agree on this description, including that the paper lied about your pie throwing incident, why do you buy the paper everyday believing what you do? Your violation of the boycott of the dailies called by the strikers, which has reduced circulation by a third, puts you in bed with them no matter how radical sounding your criticism. It's one thing to be too close to friends, another, to corporations.

Do you really think the strike is about higher wages? Only the newspaper management and its conservative readers believe that. Even a U.S. government agency, the National Labor Relations Board, has ruled the company is responsible for the strike, not the workers and that the papers don't want a contract, but to destroy the unions. You support this? Do you really want the strikers to lose and this media conglomerate to win?

Ultra-leftist critiques (including those espoused by this paper) have sometimes been used to justify reactionary positions. At one point in the strike, a former FE staff member, someone you worked with here, took a job with the *Detroit News*, and to rationalize it, used a radical critique of unions he learned during his tenure with us. He sold out for a few bucks; you just gain membership in the Party of Resentment.

How would I feel if the Fermi II workers went out on strike? If they began understanding the dangers of nuclear power, became critical of the whole repressive mechanism of this society from cops to jobs, fought pitched battles with the police, and took part in other radical activities including helping out anarchist publications like this one and the IWW paper (as some newspaper strikers have), I would consider supporting them as well.

I don't think our friendship with the strikers is the problem. I hear a lot of isolation and bitterness in your letter that I wouldn't trade for all of the experiences I've had with the strikers, what I've seen in their commitment to human solidarity, in their development as radicals, and their joy in fighting the corporations, the cops, and, at times, even the union.

In the meantime, Pat, how about the simple act of not buying the papers, particularly if they're as bad as we both agree they are?

If you want to read the *Wildcat* pamphlet, it's \$2 from our book service. Another title we reproduced in that period, *Unions Against Revolution*, by G. Munis, is excellent as well; it's also \$2.

Anarchist Resources

To the Fifth Estate:

The news of Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation and Profane Existence dissolving may dismay some people, while others may consider this a good thing. However, there are always new anarchist projects rising from the ashes. The ones below have pledged to be non-bureaucratic and fun to participate in.

Anarcho Punk Federation: The APF, is an attempt to spread anarchist political consciousness among punks. They publish *Counterculture*. Contact them about forming a chapter or getting the paper c/o Maryland APF, POB 65341, Baltimore MD 21209; email: cl4rruti36@aol.com.

Atlantic Anarchist Circle: Following a founding convention in 1998, the group publishes a newsletter reporting on what constituent groups are doing. Anarchist groups in the eastern half of North America are invited to join. Write AAC, 339 Lafayette St., #202, New York NY 10012; 212-979-8353; join AAC discussions online at major-domo@tao.ca with "subscribe aac" in the message text.

We Dare Be Free newspaper c/o POB 390085, Cambridge MA 02139; email: kronstadt@juno.com.

Anarchist Newsgroups: There are a number of USENET groups on the Internet for anarchists: all begin with alt. then.society.anarchy; anarchism; anarchism.ainfos; anarchism.comunist; anarchism.syndicalist; anarchism.individualist; and org.iww.

Cuban Anarchists: The Libertarian Movement of Cuba waiting for the day of Cuban government's collapse so an anarchist movement can be rebuilt there. Write Frank Fernandez, LMC, POB 1525, Jose Marti Station, Miami FL 33125.

Thank you for producing your excellent newspaper.

Jamal Hannah

Cambridge, Mass.

Zaginflat

Dear International Friends & Comrades:

We hope you remember our newsletter *Zaginflat* which we published since 1995. At present, our group can't produce a regular paper in English, so that is the reason many of you have stopped receiving it.

Besides working on our magazine, *Comunitas*, we are staying active on the local level. We have just published a booklet on Emma Goldman, and our infoshop is growing. If you can spare materials, please consider sending them.

Ark/ZAP—Zagreb Anarchist Movement

Gajeva 55

1000 Zagreb, Croatia

zap_zg@geocities.com

Help Needed

To The Fifth Estate:

Anarchist prisoner Harold Thompson has been brutally assaulted, robbed and placed in segregation for "his own safety."

Because of his work as a prison house lawyer, officials are colluding with white supremacists to halt his good work. Write letters: Warden Jack Morgan, Turney Centre Industrial Prison, Route 1, Only, TN 37140 asking that Harold be transferred to avoid further harassment. You can write Harold at the same address c/o Harold H. Thompson #93992.

Attention Prisoners

The Fifth Estate is expensive to produce and mail. Even if you requested a free copy, if this is the first issue of the paper we've sent you, you will not automatically be put on our subscription list unless you write back to say you've received a sample and want to keep receiving it. Thanks.



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