

Technology: There's the Rub

Ken Knabb's *Public Secrets*

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a review of

Public Secrets, Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, P.O. Box 1044, Berkeley, California 94701, 408 pp., \$15 (available from FE Books)

Do radicals get more pleasure from life?

For most of us around the *Fifth Estate*, the answer is yes. We might not all agree on why, but our detachment from many of this society's ideological bonds lets us laugh at, ridicule, and debunk antics of popes and politicians. We distinguish ourselves from obedient zeks and this gives us satisfaction.

It's true that we, too, are obliged to sell our labor time, but insist that wage work doesn't define us. The zek roles we fill at our jobs aren't our "real" selves; they're superficial, temporary.

The comfort—and pleasure—we find depends to a considerable extent on 'our being many. A project like the *Fifth Estate* definitely helps maintain a collective spirit, even for people who don't actively participate in production of the paper.

In his recent book, *Public Secrets*, Ken Knabb agrees that pleasure is to be had from revolutionary projects. The "Joy of Revolution" section offers a political perspective which in many ways is shared by *Fifth Estate* radicals: problems can't be solved individually, capitalism has extensive capacities for cooptation, and authoritarian and statist programs are trash. In a social transformation that would abolish hierarchy, money and subservience to commodities, neither vanguard parties nor omniscient leaders will play a role.

Knabb admits that individual acts that challenge authority can be difficult to carry out, even ones like speaking out or distributing a written statement. But specific action helps choose subsequent tactics and also provides experience. Here is one of his formulations: "The alpha and omega of revolutionary tactics is decision...The simplest method of bullshit detecting-consists in noting whether an individual's decisions lead to acts and his activity to decisions."

He warns that it's easy to get sidetracked fighting extremists: "If all problems can be attributed to a sinister clique of 'total fascists,' everything else will seem comfortingly progressive by comparison. Meanwhile the actual forms of modern domination, which are usually more subtle, proceed unnoticed and unopposed."

Beware, too, of reformism: "To suppose that a series of reforms will eventually add up to a qualitative change is like thinking we can get across a ten-foot chasm by a series of one-foot hops."

Readers familiar with Knabb's work as translator and interpreter of the International Situationists will recognize how heavily his analysis has been influenced by the work of Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem and their milieu. His adaptation of this body of thought to the North American context makes the French writers' abstract formulations more concrete.

Knabb's application of Situationist theories makes them more specific and thus more challenging. Advice to produce and distribute a leaflet can get someone moving in a way that a slogan like "Be Realistic, Demand the Im-

possible!” can’t match. But the Situationists’ rigorous, cruel critiques of liberal do-gooders and glib Establishment toadies have helped him analyze and discredit contemporary North American analogues.

Knabb doesn’t take the Situationists as a model in every respect. In “The Realization and Suppression of Religion,” a widely distributed essay written fifteen years before *Public Secrets*, the concluding paragraph reads:

“We need to develop a new style, a style that keeps the trenchancy of the situationists but with a magnanimity and humility that leaves aside their uninteresting ego games. Pettiness is always counterrevolutionary.”

A comprehensive social critique is frequently followed by consideration of an ideal society, and Knabb considers utopian writing in “Joy of Revolution.”

Far from being too extravagant, most fictional utopias are too narrow, generally being limited to a monolithic implementation of the author’s pet ideas. As Marie Louise Berneri notes in the best survey of the field (*Journey Through Utopia*), “All utopias are, of course, the expression of personal preferences, but their authors usually have the conceit to assume that their personal tastes should be enacted into laws; if they are early risers the whole of their imaginary community will have to get up at four o’clock in the morning; if they dislike women’s make-up, to use it is made a crime; if they are jealous husbands infidelity will be punished by death.”

In his view of a post-capitalist society, Knabb rejects parliaments, money and elitist managers but balks at imagining that 20th century machines could be eliminated. In ten succinct paragraphs at the end of “Joy of Revolution,” we find his rant against technophobes, but its vehemence casts shadows over the pages that precede it—pages that consider diverse possibilities for generous, libertarian social relations.

Once the revolution is accomplished he foresees and welcomes decentralization and diversity. Dissension won’t disappear, but he is confident that rational collaboration on the part of a community’s residents will alleviate much of the distress-causing arrangements imposed by capitalism.

Certain technologies—nuclear power, for example—will be unacceptable in his post-revolutionary society. But please don’t threaten access to what he calls his “dandy computer.” Acknowledging that current computer technology has some shortcomings (sweatshops and pollution), he nevertheless is confident that the problems can be solved with the help of what? “Computer automation.” [!]

Knabb mistakenly asserts that everyone antagonistic to technology foresees “the return of a primeval paradise.” He indignantly rejects the possibility that social satisfaction might be achieved without 20th century urban comforts and toys. His worry that technophobic authoritarians will one day outlaw airplanes, telephones and automobiles in a post-capitalist egalitarian society is misplaced. These objects will disappear because “operatives” for the factories, steel mills and mines—even self-managed ones—won’t be available. Without being coerced, it’s unlikely anyone would spend a single hour in such environments.

He assures us, “Airplanes will be retained for intercontinental travel (rationed if necessary) and for certain kinds of urgent shipments.” It takes a lot of people in disciplined subservience to machinery in order to produce an airplane, provide fuel and runways. True, should a sophisticated object like this exist, rationing will likely be required. And once “urgent” priorities as well as rationing exist, can an administrative cadre be far behind?

Section Two of *Public Secrets*, “Confessions of a Mild-Mannered Enemy of the State,” is an appealing 70-page autobiographical memoir. Knabb shares with the reader the political and personal itinerary that made him a radical. Influential literary mentors were Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman and Kenneth Rexroth.

He was shaped by the revolutionary and counter-cultural movements of the ‘60s: drugs, music, demonstrations. Between 1970 and 1993, he penned many texts presenting his critiques and analyses of events and political platforms. All are included in *Public Secrets* and constitute two-thirds of the book’s pages.

As the tumultuous period of contestation wound down, he undertook to translate a large body of Situationist texts and spent time rock climbing, fiddling, playing chess and tennis and in Zen meditation. He continues to publish subversive texts.

It’s disappointing that Knabb’s exposure of various public secrets stops short at technology.

One more step, comrade!

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