

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

2000

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.

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Give Credit

Dear Fifth Estate:

The response to the letter you published in the last issue, "Shades of Berkman," [FE #354, Spring, 2000] left the impression that this was not a successful escape, when in fact, it was! (FE Note: this refers to an account of a recent tunneling escape by inmates at the Western Penitentiary in Pittsburgh sent to us by one of the participants. The identical plan was attempted unsuccessfully by Alexander Berkman 100 years previously.)

True, everybody was recaptured within two weeks, so it wasn't real successful, but the point is, six people got out of that tunnel, and all made it from Pittsburgh to Houston and were certainly "at large" in the sense that no one knew where any of them might be, until they made various mistakes and got caught.

C'mon, gang, give credit where credit is due. That was one of the greatest escape stories ever to happen, and you made it out to sound like they got caught before they even made it out! This was Hollywood extravaganza stuff with power tools, homemade keys, various gizmos and contraptions made to order for various tasks, synchronized watches, close calls, all under the swine's nose!!!

Then later, evading a SWAT team that is claiming on TV that they have you surrounded and you'll never make it out of the swamps (this is in Texas), but you still get away! That's just a quick highlight reel.

This was classic stuff. And, make no mistake, we were aware of the Berkman story, and thought all along of "taking care of his unfinished business." J [name withheld] is a true anarchist here, deserving whatever support the community can give. He's also dealing with serious kidney problems down in that Super-Max hell-hole, and, of course, not getting the care he needs.

A prisoner in Pennsylvania

Habit Perturbs

Dear Comrades:

In your latest issue, you make a plea for old copies of the *Fifth Estate*, specifically, nos. 347 and 351. I dug those up and enclosed them for your use.

I really enjoy the FE, but I must admit I'm occasionally perturbed by your habit of trashing any and all anarchist theorists or movements that disagree with your own views. Maybe you don't like everything Chomsky or Bookchin advocates, but let's be realistic—they're on our side. I think Voltairine de Cleyre was right on the money when she recommended an "anarchism without labels." We should spend our time denouncing the forces of repression, not attacking each other. But I don't suppose my opinion is going to matter to you.

Anyway, keep up the (generally) good work. I hope you can make use of those old copies.

Richard Kidd

Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

FE responds: Thanks for the papers. Of course, what you say matters; why would you think otherwise? Your advice is generally good, but perhaps best directed at one of the parties you counsel unity with. Murray Bookchin's screed, *Social Anarchism versus Life Style Anarchism*, doesn't get much more polemical or nasty.

'60s Street Fighter

To the Fifth Estate:

Regarding the Seattle issue [FE #354, Spring, 2000]; while I'm in accordance with the Black Bloc, I can see Michael Albert's viewpoint [see "On Trashing and Movement Building," Spring 2000 FE], having been both a street fighter in the 'sixties, and someone who, being temporarily bonded to the May Day Tribe, had to talk Trots out of starting a riot in NYC in the aftermath of Attica, seeing it as a place where families were.

Isn't Albert the one who, in the 'seventies, tried to follow Guerin's path of a libertarian Marxism?

Tom Rathgeber

Coram, N.Y.

Gave Up FE

Editors [sic]:

Although I gave up on FE several years ago, for some reason I bought the Spring 2000 issue. I'll never make the mistake again. Apparently, FE is sliding into green (?) leftism. You publish avowed Marxists like Michael Albert (doesn't he have a magazine of his own to bore the public with?), Roxanne Dunbar and Alex Cockburn.

Elsewhere there's "Organic Cuba," an essay that says nothing about its subtitle, "Farming & Politics," and some delusional, wishful thinking about Russian capitalism.

Please, guys, give it up. No one is paying any attention to you. I know many anarchists coast-to-coast and most of them have never heard of FE and most of them that have heard of it consider it a bad joke, much like your reportage of IWW political maneuvers.

I also want to take issue with Walker Lane's pacifist, half-reasoned rant (see "The Unabomber's Unending 15 Minutes of Fame" [FE #354, Spring, 2000]). Lane writes that militants often make messes that "has to be cleaned up by those committed to long range organizing." Leftist long range organizing has a 100-year plus record of failure in this country, and (surprise!) it's not because of impatient, armed strugglers. It's because of people like Lane—Know Nothings.

Lane writes that he doesn't have any problem with "breaking windows, trashing cars or fighting cops." Typical leftist bullshit; he doesn't mind violence as long as it's a losing gesture, as long as defeat or meaninglessness is assured.

Some of us have read mucho history and learned from it. If Lane believes that "real (political) work" is possible that "won't wind up with blood on our shoes," he/she probably believes that David Watson is a radical intellectual. You can wash your shoes off, fucker, but a dead planet is dead forever.

You people lack desire and you lack coherence and you lack a feral nature. As someone who lives and works in wilderness, I couldn't believe that a "radical enviro" mag could have less relevancy to my life than the Earth First! Journal, but you have shown me it is possible to sink even lower into the bog.

Perhaps the industrial death machine will collapse in the next decades. If so, you people will have nothing to do with it. I can see FE going on forever, a bunch of octogenarians still bragging about what they shouted at some demo in the '60s.

Check out Antipathy Zine (\$2 from POB 11703, Eugene OR 97440) to just see how irrelevant you old, hippie fools are.

John Mulberg
Tulsa, Okla.

Walker Lane responds: I'm not quite sure what our crimes are that invoke such an ugly and ageist response (I certainly hope I'm doing this when I'm 80). If the FE is not radical enough or relevant enough for you, so be it; go read another publication.

By the way, you don't inform us what your radical practice is that makes us so "leftist" by comparison.

Besides the authors we published commenting about Seattle who we realize are not writing from an anarchist perspective, you neglect to mention the ones who are, including our front page lead story by a participant in the Direct Action Movement, as well as the Black Bloc statement which is supported by the zine you mention.

Kiss-Ass References

To the Fifth Estate:

Please, no more bullshit stories about aliens creating the state (see "Did the City and State Come From Outer Space?," FE #353, Summer 1999) or kiss-ass references to Fidel Castro's Cuba.

Kevin Coogan
Long Island City, N.Y.

Citizen Kane responds: Rest easy for now, offended ideologues. The Cuban organic agriculture conference was postponed until May 2001, due to the bureaucratic ineptitude and indifference of the government agencies involved.

As for the above comments about my article, I really can't respond to them because they don't have any relation to what I wrote. They must be conditioned reflexes, preset to some agenda's position on the Cuba Question. Certainly, I don't condone the Cuban state's racket of repression and self-enrichment: like all governments, they exist to maintain their own power.

When I'm on the island, my Cuban friends and I spend most of our time playing cat-and-mouse with the cops (my game here in Detroit as well), so I have the motivation to understand how the incarceration game is played down there. Come check the place out sometime, but make sure your papers are in order!

Against Technology

Dear Fellow Anarchists:

The munificence of Internet addresses and level of Internet entanglement taking grip in the anarchist community is disturbing.

I counted 35 URLs (or whatever you call them) in the Spring 2000 Fifth Estate, basically terminating each article and brief. I challenge the reader to count those in the present issue. Pretty scary that a minuscule milieu supposedly most fervently against technology (or, for the old-guard, the "misuse" thereof) proffers this much Internet crap as if we need yet another form of technology to be hog-tied to.

I've read that the "Net" (barf) played a key role in mobilization for the WTO and IMF protests, so I do think twice about wholly vilifying it. If this asinine medium has the potential to broaden and strengthen the movement, then (ugh) use it for that. But for entertainment, purchasing, correspondence, even "love letters" as Sunfrog and a growing herd of anarchists do?

One excerpt in particular from the last FE caught my attention: "the failure of anarchists' ideas to take on mass expression is a complex question, but suffice it to say most people at this time are mesmerized enough by the

dominant culture to remain mainly passive and indifferent to our message. We are not living in a fascist police state. We have all the latitude in the world to organize counter-communities where revolutionary values and a culture of resistance predominate, but unfortunately with a few exceptions, not very many people are interested at this time.” (Walker Lane, “The Unabomber’s Unending 15 Minutes of Fame”) What mesmerizes people more than ever now? The Internet.

I remind readers that techno compromises like this endorse violence and myriad monstrosities much, much greater than WTO protest smashed windows and whatever other ceremoniously lamented direct actions.

I live on an Indian reservation. Just less than 100 years ago we here led a semi-nomadic, hunter-gatherer existence (rather than the unflaggingly referred to 10,000 years for other parts of the world).

Put another way, in under 100 years we’ve been dragooned to adjust to an agricultural, an industrial, and an information revolution (and we have the highest alcoholism, drug use and suicide rates of any race to prove it). It is a sad, sad motherfucking story to behold the faces of these people now glued to computer screens, mesmerized.

I admonish people if they lapse into the www.makemepuke.com shit, to employ it only to further our causes. Finally, if and when the revolution is successful, be prepared to yield these idiot boxes with nary a whimper:

In revulsion to compromises,

Mosa Charlo

Flathead Indian Reservation, Mont.

FE reply: Well said; we agree. We put list URLs because many comrades include those as part of their addresses, and the Internet has become almost the common method within the anarchist movement for communication.

However, we realize even their inclusion implies an endorsement, and adds to the pressure for those not wired into the system to conform. To be “off-line” comes to mean being out of the loop.

What to do about it is problematic. We increasingly depend on the Internet for alternative information, and to contact one another. Our paper is laid out on a computer, and soon newspaper printers will accept our layout only on disks.

I think we’re stuck with these infernal engines (at least until the revolution) unless we want to take the route of the editor of the anarchist publication, *The Match*, who uses half-century and older equipment and prints his magazine himself. He scavenges and cannibalizes if parts are needed, and has even done blacksmithing when no other alternative was available to repair his antiques. It’s an admirable effort and a critique of technology in action, but not a route any of us here are prepared to take.

Also, everything conspires against you. Just for a laugh, I entered www.makemepuke.com to see what would come up and, as I suspected, it’s an operational URL. The banner on the page advertises it as the “award winning top fetish site for the last two years,” and is filled with images so gross I refuse to even suggest what they are (although I’m certain this will mean hundreds of our readers will go immediately to the Web to check it out!).

ELF: Stay Out of Wisconsin!

& A Response

FE Note: The following is an exchange between mainstream Wisconsin environmentalists and the publisher of such books as *The Last Days of Christ the Vampire* and *The Nihilist Princess* regarding the actions of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF).

As the confrontation with capitalist institutions and technology sharpens, the debate over tactics takes on greater importance. Reader response is encouraged.

Write to III Publishing for a complete list of their titles at the address following the letters.

To ELF:

The undersigned members of the Wisconsin environmental movement have a simple request for the Earth Liberation Front: stay out of Wisconsin.

The recent destruction of 500 trees in a federal forestry laboratory near Rhinelander, for which the ELF claimed responsibility, was an act as cowardly as it was stupid. The trees were not genetically engineered, which is your stated reason for the attack. However, even if they had been, we condemn your use of vandalism to make your point. Moreover, ELF members refuse to take responsibility for their violent acts. The principle laid down by responsible activists is that those who commit acts of civil disobedience should be willing to suffer the consequences of their actions. You pointlessly destroyed a legitimate long-term research project, committed \$750,000 in vandalism and then retreated to the shadows without attempting to justify your acts or to take personal responsibility for them.

Your website openly advocates the use of vandalism and violence. It suggests that power lines should be sabotaged, transformers blown up, computers should be smashed, buildings should be flooded and trees should be spiked. It suggests that nonviolence has violent consequences. We reject ELF's use of violence and its cowardice. ELF's methods are both morally reprehensible and damaging to the legitimate environmental movement. Stay out of Wisconsin.

Signed: David Cieslewicz, 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, Caryl Terrell, Sierra Club, David Wood, Center on Wisconsin Strategies, Gary Werner, Sierra Club, Spencer Black, Assembly Environment Committee, Todd Ambs, River Alliance of Wisconsin, Peter McKeever, Heartland Environmental Consultants, Carl Zichella, Midwest Regional Staff Director, Sierra Club

Fellow Bipedal Apes:

This letter is in response to your letter of July 28, 2000, sent to the Earth Liberation Front care of III Publishing. Since III Publishing has no direct involvement with / ELF, but posts information about many environmental and liberation groups on our website, I have posted your letter to the site, where others may see it. Its exact address is <http://www.iiipublishing.com/elfto.htm>. I am also posting this response there. My personal take on your letter is that you are confused about both environmental and moral issues.

You say ELF claimed responsibility for destroying trees in a federal forestry laboratory in Wisconsin. You say the trees were not genetically engineered. Why would anyone in their right mind believe anything corporations or national governments say at this point? Have you not noticed that you have been lied to, over and over again? Corporations and their wholly-owned governments and news media are now habitually lying about ELF actions, consistently pretending that the targets were not engaged in practices harmful to the environment. It's the standard line.

You call the ELF action cowardly. So now environmentalists who risk their lives to save the environment are cowardly, but those who run paper-pushing organizations are what? Brave?

I doubt very much anyone is "using vandalism" to make a "point." ELF is destroying the things that are being used by corporations and government to destroy the earth. This is called direct action. In my opinion, given how rapidly the earth is being destroyed and how little is being done about it, a lot more direct action is needed.

You say my Web site "openly advocates the use of vandalism and violence." Actually, my web site advocates minimizing violence by defending the earth and her biped apes against institutionalized destruction and violence. You work with the government of Wisconsin and the US Federal Government, which are both violent organizations. The latter killed over two million persons in the Philippines and over another two million in Vietnam; murdered most of the aboriginal peoples on this continent (estimates vary), and continue their murdering ways on a daily basis. They are murdering children in Iraq and peasants in Columbia as I write.

You say, "ELF's methods are both morally reprehensible and damaging to the legitimate environmental movement." I presume that means you think you are the legitimate environmental movement. Need I comment on such arrogance.

You say, "Stay out of Wisconsin." You don't own Wisconsin, though maybe your corporate sponsors think they own most of it. Certainly they own the politicians there, or the environment would not be in such trouble. But in reality no one owns the earth.

I hate to break the news to you, but it's highly unlikely anyone would go to Wisconsin to do the action you described. I believe that if you could poll the people who live in the artificially constructed legal fiction, the State

of Wisconsin, and people could answer without fear, many more people would support ELF-style actions than you can imagine.

Why can't biotechnology food even be labeled as such in this country? Why can corporations flood the landscape with Roundup? Are these not acts of violence? If a company is doing its best to poison me and the earth, have I no right to defend myself, my community, and the earth?

Perhaps you would criticize the French resistance during World War II for engaging in sabotage against the Nazis, or the Viet Cong for defending their country from U.S. invaders.

The Third World War is the war against the environment by the multinational corporations and their flunky governments.

I admire the courage of those who do ELF style actions and wish them well. I hope some day you join this struggle to save humanity and the environment.

William P. Meyers
III Publishing
P.O. Box 1581
Gualala CA 95445

Dear Fifth Estate:

Here's money for another year and some for your prisoner of war fund.

Have you changed your editorial position? I have come to appreciate your fine theoretical work, post-Situationist critiques of technology and workerist society in general, and various other aspects of industrial society.

It seems you have now got a somewhat more typical leftist publication (covering current events six months old, solidarity, and so called anarchist news); a kind of *Love and Rage* version of the world. I hope you are not going through an anarchist vanguard period.

Let's have more theoretical analysis and less reinterpreted current events or class struggle news.

Gary Rumor
Venice, Calif.

Brains of Anarchy

Dear Fifth Estate:

I bought the Summer 2000 *Fifth Estate* from one of your touts at the Avalon Bakery in Detroit. "A Humble Call to Subvert the Human Empire," by David Watson was first-rate. Michael Albert should be restricted to the "rubric" of *Z Magazine*.

I was amazed to see John Zerzan shown on TV [FE note: "60 Minutes II"] as the brains of U.S. anarchy. For years, one was exposed to his tedious tracts. I was inspired to hear the breaking of Starbucks' glass.

Dimmy Nassar
Detroit

Radical Alternative

Dear Fifth Estate:

Thank you for including the articles by Michael Albert and the ACME communique in your last issue [FE #354, Spring, 2000]. Together they make for an excellent discussion of the black bloc's window trashing mobile tactics in Seattle. While I appreciate Albert's non-reactionary evaluation, I disagree with his conclusions. At the same time, the ACME collective's eloquent statement lacks one major point.

And that is: by their actions, the black blocs made explicitly clear the difference between autonomy and disobedience. It is in this sense that the black blocs offered and momentarily realized the radical alternative, not merely with regard to tactics, but vision as well.

Those engaged in civil disobedience were and are essentially petitioning their rulers, asking to be heard, to be granted a hearing. (It should be noted that this a priori self-subordination to the authorities can be incredibly disempowering, and, for that reason, reformist strategy ought to be critiqued as frequently as are more radical tactics.) Civil disobedience is a squeaky wheel tactic used by those without enough money to buy the rulers' attention. The aim is to practice disobedience as speech, and thereby call attention to an injustice, with the hope that guilt, shame, and bad PR lead to a change in heart in the powers that be. The culture of self-sacrifice and self-purification that inevitably attends this approach betrays the inverted egomania of those who would be morally pure.

By contrast, the black blocs, by all their actions, but especially by their refusal to sacrifice themselves to the police and judicial system, and their ability to "unarrest" comrades, assert their own rule. Such acts are not petitions; they are declarations of autonomy, of freedom, of living without having to ask for permission.

The equation of property trashing with genuine violence has been dispelled so many times that I won't bother reviewing it here. It is enough to say that to focus on that question is to completely miss the point, to voluntarily forfeit any possible inspiration to be had from the black bloc actions. Albert's laying of the blame for police brutalizing passive demonstrators at the feet of the radical activists "provocation" is ridiculous.

The cops and nobody else are responsible for their unwarranted violence against persons, period. Second, what did the passive demonstrators expect? Cops routinely intimidate, beat up, and even murder people for doing nothing in cities across this country. An absence of radical mobile tactics is in no way a guarantee of civil treatment by the cops.

We live in a world of rules and controls, and compromise our values and vision in large and small ways every day in order to simply survive. Even progressive movements—by virtue of their mass aspirations—demand that individuals toe a line. Our very language imprisons us in a one-dimensional logos. Why would anyone who believes in and dares to hope for a world of freedom deny the inspiration to be readily taken from the black blocs of Seattle?

Southside on Strike

Chicago

Walker Lane responds: Are these really mutually exclusive tactics? Didn't they work well in tandem in Seattle and other places? As long as actions are autonomous of the state and the practitioners are willing to violate its rules, don't both suggest a break with daily life if either were generalized.

For instance, we fought the placement of the world's largest open burn incinerator, in the midst of our neighborhood a few years ago. One of the many tactics we employed was a sit-in across the driveway of the facility once it was ready to go online. Only 17 people took part (not including me) in what was, because of its limited numbers, a symbolic action which only lasted a few minutes (although we got good publicity out of it).

Had thousands nonviolently blockaded the entrance, suddenly it would have no longer been symbolic, but instead a powerful act of citizen resistance. I don't think that would be "pacifism as pathology" as some have arrogantly suggested. After all, while it was the glass breakers who got the most attention in the corporate media, it was the nonviolent sit-ins in Seattle that actually stopped the WTO proceedings.

If people want to break corporate franchise store windows, fine. I think the resulting publicity, that was part good photo op and part attempt to smear all the demonstrators with images the media thinks will discredit them, didn't hurt anarchism a bit.

The trashers probably shot our philosophy into the homes of millions thanks to the media, and contrary to what several conservative anarchists have written, probably has done more good than harm.

Anyway, no one has really shown what works and what doesn't except on a very limited scale, so let's cool down the condemnations and let people work out their own strategies.



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