

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

2003

Fifth Estate Letters Policy

We welcome letters commenting on our articles or other topics, but can't print every one we receive. Each, however, is read and considered for publication.

Letters via email or on disk are appreciated, but typewritten and legibly handwritten ones are acceptable. Length should not exceed two double-spaced pages. All submissions must have a name and return address, which will be withheld upon request.

Send to POB 201016, Ferndale MI 48220, or via email to fiftheatenewspaper@yahoo.com.

Defending Zerzan

FE:

It seems of the utmost contradiction that John Brinker concludes his review of John Zerzan's *Running on Emptiness* (FE #361, Summer 2003) with implications that we should "start listening to each other" rather than shout each other down. I completely agree with such a statement and the bulk of anarchists could definitely learn from this.

What seems to be prevalent in Brinker's review is the complete lack of understanding and criticism that we have of each other and of the ideas put out there. I'm referring specifically to the sentiment and subsequent treatment of Zerzan as "founder and leading philosopher of what he calls anarcho-primitivism." Not only has the idea of anarcho-primitivism (AP) being equal to "Zerzanism" been obnoxious in the mainstream press, but in the radical press as well.

This makes it much easier for folks to write off a critique rather than deal with what is being laid out. Brinker states that anarcho-primitivism separates from "classical anarchism" (assuming that "classical anarchism" refers to the workerist tradition) because AP is "based" on a "critique of civilization, representation, and interpretation."

What Brinker has got wrong is very simple. AP is not "based" on a critique; it is a critique. That is, it is actively put forth as something far different from ideology, which is a huge issue on its own that Brinker seems to be at odds with. Being a critique and not an ideology, there is no 12-point program or membership, or anything of the sort.

The AP critique says, power is the product of coercion or authoritarianism; the antithesis of anarchy (which is why it's anarcho-primitivism as opposed to primitivism).

By this understanding, domestication, cultivation, technology (not tools), as well as institutionalized hierarchies/division of labor, are all at the base of power; the building blocks of civilization.

Brinker seems rather irritated that anarchists like Zerzan tend to turn critiques on other "activists and writers," and this is where the contradiction I opened with comes in. If we can't be critical of each other, or we just blindly accept the "they mean; well-hands off" approach, then what do we have to say of ourselves?

Most people who call themselves anarchists have little to nothing in common with what I'm hoping for, and I'm not advocating that they do. I don't really care how pure someone's intents are. When they propose to fix up and carry on a way of life that has systematically denied wild and free life to all those who are excluded, I hope that people would take these critiques seriously and that we would all realize that everything we do has global implications, and it is the system which allows that to occur is what needs to be addressed.

Much like myself, Zerzan points out that issues of "United States foreign policy" are "missing the point," not as a denial of the reality of those policies and all the other statist evils, but to address the fact that so long as there is civilization, there will be these kinds of policies which amount to little more than systematized murder and enslavement.

For those interested in reading more about the AP critique, I recommend the zines *Species Traitor* and *Green Anarchist*. More info is at: www.blackandgreen.org.

On a side note: I'm curious as to why *Fifth Estate* (whilst sliding into lifestylist [for lack of better term] obsessions, yet unquestionably anti-war) offers free subscriptions to GIs. To put them on the level of true prisoners of the state is ludicrous to me.

For wildness and anarchy,
Kevin Tucker
PO Box 835
Greensburg, PA 15601

Walker Lane responds: "Lifestylist obsessions?" Whatever. How weird for an APer (of course, anarcho-primitivism isn't an ideology even though it is now apparently known by its initials) to use this opprobrium to describe us when it's a term coined by Murray Bookchin to describe the tendency Tucker defends! One hardly knows whether to defend or deny. Coming from Commissar Bookchin, it always made me want to accept the description; maybe now from Tucker, as well.

Why do we offer free subscriptions to GIs? Partly, it's a tradition of this paper going back to the Vietnam era. We sent thousands of issues (the paper was then a weekly) into the battle zone at the same time US troops were slaughtering civilians and laying waste to the countryside. The rationale? We wanted to encourage mutinies among the armed forces; and I would like to think we were at least a little piece of what made those occur and helped bring about the US defeat in Indochina.

Cello Masterpiece

To the Fifth Estate:
VARIATION ON A THEME

May I introduce the views of an excellent cellist of my acquaintance? She asserts that Yo-Yo Ma's performances and interpretations of cello masterpieces written by Dvorak, Haydn, Schumann, and Tchaikowsky are inferior to performances by the cello "greats" of European origin.

She is wrong.
DM Borts
Detroit

Death in June

To the Fifth Estate:

Thanks for some interesting reading in the Summer 2003 issue of *Fifth Estate*.

The juxtaposition of Michael Staudemaier's "Strange Bedfellows" article [on fascism] and your music and dance section called to mind what is probably one of the more disturbing trends in neofascism here in the UK: the "industrial folk" scene centered around the band Death in June.

You see the same kind of ideological mix described by Staudemaier in his article: anti-Israel, anti-capitalist, “pro-European” ...they’re reasonably subtle about who they really mean. The worrying thing about this tendency is that, unlike Skrewdriver and the neo-nazi bonehead scene, Death in June seems to draw in bright, literate kids with the attention spans to organize.

Their “fluxeuropa” is the most elaborate site I’ve seen.

Cheers,

DC

Edinburgh, Scotland

E.B Maple notes: The June death referred to in the band’s name must be that of Hitler in that month 1945. Their site is certainly an odd mix.

Misunderstanding Fascism?

To the Fifth Estate:

Michael Staudenmaier’s article, “Strange Bedfellows,” discussing antifascist alliances (FE #361, Summer 2003), struck me as a very strange bedfellow, indeed, for your newspaper.

Everything about it should have set off alarm bells for a publication which has always critiqued leftism as a dead end for revolutionary movements.

When Staudenmaier cites “anarchists and revolutionary anti-fascists,” who is he referring to in the latter category—the RCP, the Revolutionary Workers Party, or the other leftoid sects that share the same terrain, almost indistinguishably, with anarchists in anti-fascist activity?

He apparently feels no qualms about citing the writer, J. Sakai, calling him a “long-time revolutionary organizer,” but neglecting to mention that it has been as a Maoist, or, Don Hamerquist, whom he describes, in language that would warm the heart of Bob Avakian’s boys, as a “seasoned anti-fascist militant.”

Almost every line smacks of 1930s Stalinist Popular Frontism. The ideology of anti-fascist militantism is presented uncritically and goes completely unchallenged, failing to realize that embedded in it is but another form of capitalist rule—parliamentary democracy. In other words, beneath all the tough talk about fighting the right, even with physical force, anti-fascism comes down to nothing more than reformism.

Staudenmaier sees “anarchist and other leftists” (my italics) as partners in the struggle against the psychotic boneheads who often do real damage to people. “We as anti-fascists...” he says. Am I mistaken to think that “we” are instead revolutionary anarchists who, among other tasks, fight right-wing gangs of ruffians when the occasion call for it, not leftists whose every act is predicated upon recruiting members?

Staudenmaier completely misunderstands fascism, assigning its origins to a desire to maintain patriarchy and white supremacy. These are often powerful parts of fascist ideology, to be sure, but at the risk of sounding formulaic or like an economic determinist, let me say that fascism’s role in the 20th century was almost exclusively to rescue capitalism from an insurgent left or anarchism. The other stuff was what they employed as tools to organize vulnerable sections of a confused and desperate middle- and working-class.

Big capital let the different fascist movements in Europe and Asia play the repressive role normally left to the state when it appeared to be inadequate for the job of stopping revolution. The owners were willing to accept the psychotic ends of fascism’s ideology (more and less pronounced in different countries) because they needed it, even to the extent of giving up political control of the state.

To pose, as Staudenmaier does, a choice between capitalism and fascism demonstrates his inability to distinguish between the core of the dominant system—capital—and the many forms of political rule it exhibits, which stretch from electoral democracy to fascist rule. Almost all capitalist rulers now realize the experiment with the latter was a disaster for them and currently depend mainly on the former through the “manufacture of consent” to quell rebellious notions within the populous. They also are strengthening the political state to the extent that they will never again have to depend upon freebooters like Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, or Tojo.

A healthy organism naturally defends itself, and communities under assault, often aided by those committed to social justice and revolutionary transformation, will fight fascists whenever and however necessary. To raise,

however, what are episodic battles against twisted creeps to the level of organization and ideology, usually necessitating alliances with authoritarian leftists, seems to me to have no more future than past efforts.

Pedrito Peligro
Detroit

Stealing Culture?

Dear Fifth Estate:

Thanks for the excellent issue on music and dance (FE #361, Summer 2003). The title could have been, "Music, dance, and cultural diversity," since several articles (Maxzine, Apollo, Garon, Werbe, Halmos) dealt directly or indirectly with the roles that music and dance played or play in primary cultures and in communities of color.

In fact, it seems the whole magazine "dances around" the issue of how oppressed cultures have been epicenters of experimental and radical expression in direct opposition to dominant white culture. This, however, brings up another somewhat loaded issue: where do we, as mostly white, middle-class activists stand in the controversy concerning borrowing from these diverse cultural traditions?

Should we imitate, learn, borrow, and grow from African-American and Native American musical, spiritual, and political traditions, or invent our own? If musical styles, rituals, and the like are similar to ideas and cannot be owned, can they then be appropriated? Is the white blues musician or the white rapper or the white medicine man in his sweat lodge a kind of cultural plagiarist?

Without a doubt, white culture in North America owes a political debt to its African and indigenous peoples. But how does this play out in the realm of art and ritual?

As supporters and fans of the blues, hip hop, funk jazz, native ceremonial dances, and even some gospel (Sweet Honey, SNCC freedom singers), can white folks participate or just admire from a distance?

Joe Graves
Murfreesboro, TN

MaxZine responds: I briefly mentioned issues of cultural appropriation in my previous FE article on racism, and have had numerous discussions with people on the topic since then. It is interesting to me that even though cultural appropriation was a small part of my article, it is that single point which is most addressed by white people who have talked to me about it.

Other than a few white activists who do not live near me who told me that they too had witnessed similar problems of racism in their communities, in these discussions not a single white friend has raised current events reflecting racism and struggles against it (such as the Benton Harbor, Mich. uprising, the Supreme Court decision/discussion on affirmative action, various summer police killing sprees of people of color in too many locations in the US, etc.).

Joe, I'm not sure what your history of anti-racist activism is, but your letter reflects a pattern of defensiveness exhibited by white folks when their behavior regarding race is challenged.

Recently, I questioned friends who were having an Indian feast complete with paintings of Hindu religious figures that they painted for the occasion. I merely wanted to understand their motivations and plans in order to decide if I would be comfortable attending. I told them I wanted more information before the event because I am sensitive to the potential for problems with white appropriation of cultural forms. For simply raising my concerns I was challenged as judgmental, rigid and ideological.

When people say that appropriation is about rigidity and ideology, that is one way to look at it. I look at it differently. When people who are oppressed by the dominant (white) culture are crying out for people to recognize the effects that our actions have on them, I want to find a way to listen and respect their calls.

This does not mean a blind, rigid adherence. I personally err on the side of not whitewashing culture that is clearly not from my background or yours. My experience of ideology on this issue is different: I think white folks have created an ideology to defend their ability to do with oppressed people's cultures whatever they want under the supposed anti-ideological idea of creating a multi-cultural world. Any justification comes back to the idea of "do not tell me what I can and cannot do," which I think is a reflection of the "great American individual" ideology.

Due to my white privilege it is easy for me to choose or not choose to be involved in events that might be objectionable on these grounds. I am so fortunate to even be in this position. A lot of people in the world are not. Frankly, I think one of the best ways to ensure that predominantly white “radical” spaces remain predominantly white is to co-opt traditions from people of color. Then we can further alienate the hell out of people of color while protecting our right to practice our multicultural fun in our safe spaces.

Another person told me that they would do what they want “for fun” because there is so much pain in the world and they don’t need permission from some community to determine how appropriate their behavior is. It makes me wonder if I am being listened to or if the basic message is lost in the ideology of defensiveness. Why is it that when people are questioned about potentially racist practices that it almost always gets thrown back on the person who questions it, as though they are trying to stop someone from having fun or are just “rigid”?

As far as the questions raised in your letter, Joe, there are no clear rules for defining what is appropriate and what is appropriation. I believe, however, there are some actions you can take to determine respectful behavior. First, read one of the many articles and books published on the subject. If you have internet access you can find this by searching for “cultural appropriation,” “white shaman,” “plastic medicine,” and other similar phrases.

By learning more about the historical context that has created America, the land of white supremacy, you can learn more about the continuing effects of the dominant culture on oppressed peoples. Second, leave your mostly white, middle class milieu and see the world through different glasses. Finally, get involved in struggles of oppressed peoples when you are welcome as a white person and see how that shifts your perspective on issues of ritual, dance and music of other cultures.

It is very different when white folks, who are putting their bodies on the line to defend indigenous lands, are invited to participate in an indigenous healing ceremony than when white folks declare themselves sweat lodge experts after paying to take a workshop or reading a book.

Margo Thunderbird, of the Shinnecock Nation, decries the Euro-American theft of land, resources, water, and air. “And now,” she says, “after all that, they’ve come for the very last of our possessions; now they want our pride, our history, our spiritual traditions. They want to rewrite and remake these things, to claim them for themselves.

The lies and thefts just never end.” [emphasis added]

Editors’ Note: This discussion between Maxzine and Joe Graves is only the beginning. Please see our calls for participation on pages 17 and 45 for more info on our upcoming issue: Culture, Race, and Ritual.

Open Hearted Journalism

Hi:

I was delighted to discover that you exist. I had been wondering, missing honest open-eyed, open-hearted questioning, and thoughtful journalism for a long time now.

I do not own a TV, read the “news” papers nor listen to commercial radio news, and lately, I have even been saddened by what I hear on National Public Radio. Thank you for your commitment, your energies, your minds, and your hearts.

I earn my living as the manager of a chemical recycling plant returning “clean” distilled solvents back to the companies that created the used mixtures and keeping it out of our water, air and soil.

Pat Therrien

Floyd, Virginia

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