

Letters

Various Authors

2004

Fifth Estate letters policy

We welcome letters commenting on our articles, ones stating opinions, or reports from your area. We can't print every letter we receive, but each is read by the collective and considered for publication. Letters via email or on disk are appreciated, but type- or hand-written ones are acceptable. Length should not exceed two double spaced pages. We reserve the right to edit for length or style. If you are interested in writing a longer response, please contact us.

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Fifth Estate:

The deconstructing race issue of *Fifth Estate* was a valiant effort. There's plenty to screw up with such an ambitious and easily misunderstood theme/topic, but the issue was, for the most part, well done. I hope it generates the kind of discussion among readers that you wished for. With that said, I must register my discontent with some of the content, particularly Sunfrog's article.

The issue of guilt has figured prominently in the nexus of Third World "revolutionary nationalism," the identity politics of the New Left (more specifically the Maoist varieties), and the attempted solidarity of "white radicals." Sunfrog tries to address this troubling and not-very-useful issue by arguing "white radicals should replace guilt with responsibility and radical consciousness."

Naturally, this is easier to write than accomplish. Nowhere does Sunfrog give readers any ideas on what possible strategies might facilitate such a move from guilt to responsibility, how he manages it, or perhaps even more importantly, what the differences might look like. In other words, how do we move from charity to solidarity, from tolerance to authentic respect? And this is totally separate from the moralism of the "shoulds" with which Sunfrog regales us—this is after all the language of guilt by omission, as opposed to the responsibility of commission.

Furthermore, Sunfrog says "Essentialism can often revert to an ethnic-based neo-conservatism.: Not to quibble too much, but when has essentialism not been an ethnic-based conservatism? The essentialist categories of the powerful (racism, classism, sexism) are based on the exact same assumptions of the essentialism of the oppressed, only turned over. The inversion of essentialism remains essentialist. Essentialism manifested politically in the real world is usually called nationalism, and as anarchists we understand that there's no such thing as a "revolutionary nationalism" (as Pedrito correctly points out to M. Staudenmeier).

The issue of essentialism and identity politics would seem to be inseparable, leading to a no-win situation for those with a critique of each or both. Racist-baiting is the first refuge of the scoundrel, yet it is tolerated among

anarchists trying to wrestle with the vagaries of racism. Sunfrog's watered-down version of the Race Traitor line remains as unconvincing as their own slogan. It may look and sound like an alternative to white guilt politics, but from where I sit, it looks like more of the same.

In revolt,
C. Boles

Fifth Estate:

This is in response to your back page text of the Winter 2004 FE, "Which One is the Real Tool?," where you compare the internet to television's "empty promise of a global village." Further, you refer to the collapse of the anti-war movement and raise the question, "Could it be that what appears as lethargy and lack of concern, is really digital blowback?"

I don't find the internet to be nearly so alienating as television. As a consumer of mass media, I spent a quarter of a century thinking that activism had died in the early 1970s. When the "Battle in Seattle" registered a quick blip on the radar screen of manufactured culture in 1999, it was due to the internet that I was able to follow up and make physical contact with those who are now my comrades in struggle. If I spent all my internet time at corporate web sites, then the internet would rival television in its spiritual destructiveness.

Moving to your characterization of the anti-war movement's collapse as a case of digital blowback: If this is truth, it is only in part. Surely, the collapse of the anti-war movement can be traced more directly to the false expectations of its participants, as well as to the myth of positive electoral change.

There was a popular misconception that if we just "put enough people in the streets we can stop this war, like we did in Viet Nam." Serious students of radical history know that the resilience and perseverance of the Viet Cong had more to do with ending American involvement in SE Asia, than any American street demonstrations. The American ruling class has never been especially concerned with what the mass of its subjects want. In the face of this fundamental misreading of history, when half the world turned out last February to oppose the war, but then the invasion went ahead exactly as scheduled, of course there was a huge disappointment, and a sense of "Gee, maybe protest doesn't work after all/anymore."

Now, this is all well and good, because protest alone doesn't accomplish very much, and the sooner we face this unpleasant truth, the sooner more "progressives" will become revolutionary. The problem is that most of the former protesters, rather than moving in a more revolutionary direction, are going the other way and throwing themselves into the "Stop Bush at Any Cost" movement. And the cost of this approach, in terms of creating a counter-culture of defiance and resistance that we both agree is needed, will be high indeed.

You say that digital technology is alienating and sapping the strength of the anti-war movement. I contend that it is reformist politics in general, and electoral politics in particular, that are so utterly alienating and sapping our strength. I must echo Comrade Vaneigem, who said that it is not the tool which alienates the worker, but rather the master's ownership of the tool. The enemy is not a new digital one, but rather a very old social one, the seductive false promises of social democracy.

I have no easy answers to the dilemma of the modern revolutionary. We have lost the element of surprise when attacking the trade summits. And, we have seen that while carrying signs can serve as an effective communication tool ... as can the internet...both fall far short of being revolutionary. Where do serious revolutionaries go from here? That is the question that I have no good answer for, and that I would like to see addressed, in lieu of knee-jerk reactions to the growth of technology under capitalism.

Yours in struggle, sitting at a flickering computer terminal somewhere in the wooded hills of North Georgia,
prole cat
www.prolecat.com

P.S. My buddy in Reidsville prison (who is too lazy to write you himself) says everybody passes your mag around the cell block, and loves it.

Walker Lane responds: I'm glad our excellent back page rant has provoked response. It resurrects a debate that goes back almost twenty years in this publication when, in response to *Time* magazine naming the computer "Ma-

chine of the Year” (rather than a person), the *Fifth Estate* named the sledge hammer as “Tool of the Year” accompanied by a drawing of a monitor being smashed.

The debate continued with a 1990s anti-internet screed by Sunfrog, and now, here we are, chained to our keyboards even in the backwoods of Georgia. If technology was all bad and provided no benefits, no one would use it. Obviously.

In a world where the social has been pulverized and we interact with it as isolated atoms, the internet does seem like a wonderful and powerful tool. Elation about computers and the internet ignores, however, who gains social access to them, permission which is based on class, race and geography, and how they are produced and by whom.

The answers are not a mystery: Adequately waged, First World citizen users, who mostly don’t notice the entirely toxic production process staffed by Third World workers who suffer the health and social consequences, as well as the impact on the natural world (computers are all plastic, eh?).

We all sing the praises of how much the internet links us together, but this thought fails to consider how people used to accomplish communication and community. I spend way too much of my day writing messages and messing with my web site, and wonder how my time was spent prior to this infernal machine entering my life, and worse, my consciousness. There have been great movements of resistance much larger than anything currently fielded against the state, and some even before electricity. Gee, how did they do it without the internet?

Prole’s most telling remark is his quote that it’s “not the tool which alienates the worker, but rather the master’s ownership of the tool.” Pure Marxist blather. When we workers own the means of production, blah, blah, blah. Capitalist production is based on class domination and wage slavery and can’t exist without it. Who is going to go into mines or oil refineries, plastic fabrication plants, or construct chipboards without the coercion of wages? Most answers to this are technocratic fantasies; oh, the machines will do it themselves.

Anyway, I’m glad Prole wrote and hopefully this will reopen an important ongoing discussion.

To the Fifth Estate:

I’m going to pipe up and join the discussion that’s been going on between Michael Staudenmaier and Pedrito Peligro on anarchist approaches to combating fascism (FE #361-#363).

While I agree with Peligro’s assessment that “our fight is still against the capitalist state,” I remain sympathetic to Staudenmaier’s insistence that we need to prepare for confrontations of any kind with extreme right-wing elements who may threaten our comrades. My biggest problem with the arguments made by both writers, though, is that they do not make distinctions between the intensely sectarian views that the groups themselves use in defining their own motivations and objectives.

It’s important to remember that the extreme right in North America has been split into innumerable factions, the majority of whom would not define themselves by either set of terms sketched out by Staudenmaier and Peligro.

We’ve got white-power, anti-Semitic, anti-Federal Government militias at the same time that flag-waving skin-heads are firebombing mosques in Michigan, and law-and-order Bible-quoting Christian Reconstructionists are calling for increased support of Israel. A united front among these groups seems unlikely; in fact, in addition to those existing organizations, we can also expect the current social and political tides in the US to throw up new waves of neo-Confederate ultra-nationalists, clerico-Fascist anti-abortionists and homophobes, theocratic political parties, and Euro-American “heritage” anti-immigration nativists.

As the factions continue to divide and subdivide, they will require distinctive characteristics to define their program and rely upon these more and more in order to establish viable identities, and we need to pay attention to how they define themselves.

If we are going to counter these poisonous ideas, then we need to be able to assess the sources of their support and their ability to back up their empty-headed threats. In order to do so, we should be more careful about recognizing the value of the contrasts between and among them.

When we fail to make those distinctions, we risk coming across like those ignorant volunteer cops at the Southern Poverty Law Center who can’t understand differences between the New Black Panther Party and Council for

Conservative Citizens, or those reporters on Fox News who think that a Food Not Bombs anarchist, an anti-WTO fair trade activist, and a Wahabi Sunni suicide bomber are equivalent synonyms for “terrorist.”

Clarence Pearl
Decorah, Iowa

To the Fifth Estate:

Your publication is a continuing inspiration, one of the top periodicals that we are allowed in this plantation gulag. The issues you send me are read by about a dozen political prisoners and revolutionaries as they follow present struggles.”

I hope you are able to find space in your budget to continue my free subscription.

Name and prison withheld

FE replies: This paper has historically sent free subscriptions to prisoners of the state—inmates and GIs. Tens of thousands of our issues have gone into prisons and to army bases from Vietnam to Iraq. We continue that program today but realize that we inadvertently deleted the box on our subscription renewal form which allows readers to help offset the cost of sending them by contributing to our prisoner subscription fund.

Please consider making a donation for this purpose when renewing your subscription, or by sending an earmarked donation. Thank you:

Dear FE:

Potlatch is probably one of the aspects of primitive societies that was and is still now most studied, and everybody seems to have something to say about it. That’s OK if potlatch is a mere phantasm, a fantasy, a pure abstract concept meaning “gift and counter gift,” a concept that has nothing to do with a real society. But, unfortunately, you seem to be speaking of potlatch as practiced by the NW Indians and I wish to make some brief comments.

How do you think all those goods came to be offered? They had to be produced. Salmon, for instance, didn’t just rise out of an abundant sea and didn’t preserve themselves all alone! These societies had slaves—a lot of them, between 10% and 20% of the population.

In order to obtain things, there were exchanges of goods (not gifts, but exchanges of mercantile goods). You surely are aware that this society was very non-egalitarian, not at all the model of a “free,” “communist” society.

For this aspect of the question, and for the others too, I refer you to the works of an important anthropologist, Alain Testart, who wrote a lot of important stuff (mostly in French, but some in English) on this very subject: *Le potlatch, entre le lustre et l’usure* (“Potlatch Between Display and Usury”), *Journal de la Société des Americanistes*, 1999).

You consider potlatch only in an aspect I consider pathological because the aim of potlatch was generally not “to secure great prestige by sensational expenditures too excessive to ever be repaid,” nor for the purpose of destroying lots of blankets, ... or even slaves. This is one result of white man’s “colonization.”

You seem to link potlatch and an absence of war. On the contrary, war, raids and vendettas were common in the societies of NW North America (before white men forbade war and potlatch for moral and mercantile reasons). There were primitive societies that did not know war (only raids), but these did not know potlatch (for example, the Australian aboriginal societies).

You are probably joking when you write about a capitalist state’s panic over unassimilable economic activity. Capitalism is much stronger than you seem to think. As long as some “unassimilable economic activity” remains localized, no one cares (but some old-fashioned Victorian moralists)! Potlatch is actually expanding in Canada (a very capitalist country, as far as I know). As long as people work and consume, no capitalist Kwakiutls are likely to emerge; but happily, there will be Kwakiutl workers and consumers! Capitalism can deal with that.

Potlatch permits us to dream of exchanges in a future “free,” “communist” society because it is supposed to have been the mode of exchange in a primitive “free,” “communist” society. But the societies that knew potlatch were not “free” societies and potlatch is not the way things will be exchanged in a future “free” society.

Maurice Fhima
France

Hi:

I recently found the *Fifth Estate* on the shelf of a video rental/newsstand in Overland Park, Kansas. The format isn't the same as the ones I used to buy in Detroit back in 1968 and 1969, but the content is just as exhilarating.

Although I'm a pacifist and have moments of believing in God, most of your message suits me just fine. Since an anarchist culture is the only kind that wouldn't ever force violence on me, and would allow me belief in exactly the God that I want to believe in, I believe in anarchy.

Reminiscing: I used to buy the FE when it was a tabloid at the Plum Pit in Royal Oak. I read some of the greatest writing of my life in your paper (and I'm an inveterate reader). There was one article about the funk of blue jeans in a teenager's closet that was related to political freedom—so well done! Also, the 'Furry Freak Brothers' won my heart. For some reason (long sad story), I lost my political bent and even more stupidly stopped reading FE.

Michael Bailey

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