

# Letters

Various Authors

2004

## IDEAS AS SERIOUS

Over five different decades, though dogmas inside my head and your pages have come and gone, something seems to have largely been constant: the *Fifth Estate* treats ideas as serious things even worth pissing-off friends for (now and then).

And, that's the sure sign of a genuine radical.

Enclosed is a token of gratitude sent by a Two Cheers for Civilization non-anarchist simply to thank you for keeping this unbeliever un-smug.

Kent Sykes

Indianapolis, hid.

*FE response:* This newspaper, now in its fifth decade, having begun in 1965, depends on readers like Kent both for financial support as well as giving us the sense that this project is worth doing. His donation, like that of so many others, comes at a critical time for the *Fifth Estate*.

We are currently operating at a deficit that could potentially sink this publication unless we quickly retire several thousand dollars in outstanding debts. Also, this figure says nothing about the need for new equipment and other expenses.

We urge readers who appreciate this paper like Kent does to make an emergency contribution and/or to add an extra donation when renewing their subscription. Buying books from our info shop is a way for both of us to benefit.

## DEFENSE OF VEGANS

Dear Fifth Estate:

I enjoyed Tomas' article, "Pencils Like Daggers," in FE #363 Winter 2003/2004 edition until I got to the part where he calls veganism an "isolated individual anarchist practice..." that fosters only "development and liberation of the individual," a lifestyle only the wealthy can afford.

Veganism can be a very inexpensive lifestyle for those who choose to forgo processed foods. I know money is an issue for most of us, but there are issues here much more pressing than the financial cost of vegan food.

Veganism is not an isolated individual practice. I don't know many vegans who are into veganism for its health benefits alone. Rather, we think mostly of the most downtrodden beings on the planet, the animals who suffer and die to make so much food from their milk and flesh.

We also understand the impact of agribusiness on the small farmer and the environment. These businesses tend to hire "illegal" immigrants from South and Central America to work the factory farms because they will not complain to the authorities about the working conditions or the cruelty suffered by the animals they slaughter.

I am damn sick and tired of people involved in so-called liberation movements assuming that it is our right, as humans, to terrorize, castrate without anesthetic, confine, slice alive, boil alive, whip, brand, set afire, sacrifice, make money off and eat animals. Does Tomas, for one moment, think that if animals could organize themselves into a political movement that they would just sit by and let these things happen to themselves?

People who call themselves anarchists or environmentalists and continue eating meat are the worst kind of hypocrites. I mentioned some of the ill effects of meat consumption above. Here's another: speciesism. Kind of well, hypocritical for anarchists, isn't it? What happened to equality?

If anarchists want to hit the US establishment, we have to hit them where they'll feel it: the bank account. Americans will never come together like the people of Bolivia; most presume they have more to lose than gain, so committed economic boycotts seem to be the only real solution. How can we defeat agribusiness if anarchists, Greens, and socialists continue to buy and consume meat?

Why can't Tomas and others understand that whoever controls our water and food supplies—and make no mistake, this is what is happening with unprecedented corporate takeovers of smaller businesses—why can't you see that whoever controls these things will control the world, and no amount of locking down, chanting, or home schooling will stop it?

I have to disagree also that individual liberation is an unworthy practice. To know oneself is the ultimate liberation; self-knowledge increases each person's ability to foster change through dialogue and communication and response rather than anger and knee-jerk reactions. You cannot have a peaceful society when the individuals are angry, frightened, insecure, and unhappy. Self-knowledge does not serve the individual alone: a person who knows herself is much more likely to stand up for and stay with her causes than the person who believes only in a Movement which, when it fails to meet his expectations, he may in all likelihood quit, thereby weakening it.

Veganism is among the most selfless lifestyles in the world; it fosters the liberation of Earth, of animals, of migrant workers, of small landowners and farmers, of starving children, and yes, even the individual. That, to me, is a good thing. And goddess knows, we can use some goodness in this world

Wendy Kobylarz

Kodak, Tenn.

*john johnson adds his two cents:* Thanks for writing, Wendy. I agree that veganism is a worthy lifestyle and that if you put some thought into it, it doesn't have to be expensive or just whatever comes from the dumpster. However, I do have a problem with your arguments relating to speciesism.

You seem to be saying that since anarchists promote egalitarianism, equality, etc., then why do so many of us still eat meat? Aren't the mammals that provide the meat worthy of consideration as equals? I would agree with you that, yes, they are. But could it be short-sighted and speciesist to have an egalitarian ethic that ends with mammals? All life wants to live, be it a tree, river, soybean plant, or chicken.

If you are an aspiring egalitarian, why would you assume that cows have more of a right to live free than plants? What makes plants any less important than mammals in the scheme of life? If speciesism is your argument for veganism, than I say it's bunk.

Eating kills, and under the current industrial order, eating kills a lot—no matter your diet choice. In an ideal ecosystem, we are all food. The cow, deer, spinach, wheat, etc., do not "give themselves to us" as some eco-mystics would have us believe. We interrupt their life so that we can eat, the way a shark or cougar would happily interrupt my life if I happened to be around when it got hungry.

A whole myriad of life contributes to the richness and beauty of planet earth. Some of it is downright ugly, some of it we don't understand, and most of it is not cute, furry, and on four legs. Don't you think that if trees or vegetables could organize against their own exploitation that they would?

Now, a vegan argument based on the cruelty, filthiness, and ecological damage of agribusiness makes sense. However, in an attempt at an egalitarian, anarchist lifestyle, it makes more ecological sense for me to get my protein from the animal friendly, organic, sustainable, free-range meat farmer 20 miles down the road than it does to eat tofu from chemical laden soybean farms in California.

Consider the oil consumption as it gets trucked across the country.

Additionally, vegetable farms exploit migrant laborers. (see [www.floc.com](http://www.floc.com)). Don't get me wrong, I like tofu and do eat it, if it comes from California or much better, if it comes from the folks over at The Farm in middle Tennessee. And, vegan cooking is some of the yummiest around.

But, proponents of veganism are as often as not selfish—especially when they propose to dictate to the rest of us how and what we should eat.

Lots of folks who have made important lifestyle choices (veganism, giving up cars, proclaiming oneself to be an anarchist, etc.) think their choice is a good substitute for working against the system of death and/or working for life. How one lives in the here and now is a vital part of political work for social change. However, the dominant social order makes it really, really hard to live out one's ideal. Some people work hard to be vegans and I respect that.

The fact remains that most of us still use cars and the automobile industrial complex kills just as much as the industrial meat complex.

I look forward to the day when we can live in harmony with each other and the planet and learn to love the lives we take so that we can eat. For a parting note, here is a little slogan that I clipped from an ecological conference ad defining life:

"It's all alive. It's all connected. It's all intelligent. It's all relatives."

And, my addition: "It's all food."

## HAPPENIN' HERE

*Note from Walker Lane:* The letter below essentially says the writer created the demonstration that was the basis for Stephen Stills' Buffalo Springfield song, "For What It's Worth;" you know, "Something's happenin' here; what it is ain't exactly clear." Also, this newspaper stole its name from the coffeehouse mentioned in the text.

The founder of this periodical, then a 17-year-old Harvey Ovshinsky, worked on the fledgling *Los Angeles Free Press* in 1964 and came back to Detroit with the idea of starting a similar paper. He used to hang out at the Fifth Estate Coffeehouse which was down the street from the weekly's office, so he appropriated its name for his upstart paper once he returned to Detroit.

The owner of the Los Angeles coffee shop was pissed that his location's name was taken without permission and at one point threatened legal action, but soon dropped it.

The FE was founded after the *LA Free Press*, *the Berkeley Barb*, *the East Village Other*, and the *East Lansing Paper* had launched their publications, making us the fifth paper in a movement which eventually became hundreds of regularly appearing alternative papers between 1965 and 1975 with a circulation of about four million copies a week.

Hi:

In the fall of 1966, I was harassed by the police in Hollywood, California, one too many times. I was living downstairs at the Fifth Estate Coffee House on Sunset Boulevard at the time. I had been out driving around in a 1955 Pontiac that was painted with psychedelic designs all over it. The police stopped us, asking if we were boys or girls and searched us and intimidated us, etc.

They let us go, but when we got back to the Fifth Estate, I started saying we should organize a protest against police harassment of long haired individuals. So, we printed up flyers and handed them out the week before November 11, 1966. We gave them to cars cruising down Sunset Boulevard in front of the coffee house and the following weekend a thousand people showed up.

We stopped traffic on the Strip and then the police showed up in full riot gear and spread out through the crowd swinging billy clubs. At one point, I climbed up on to the top of the bus and someone handed me a pedestrian

crossing sign they'd broken off, and I was photographed standing on top of the bus holding that sign. That picture appeared on the front page of the Los Angeles Times the next day.

I climbed down from the bus and walked up to Schwab's drugstore where they'd stopped another bus. Several policemen were holding a man down and one of them was doing knee drops on his neck screaming, "This will teach you to try to set fire to a bus!"

I walked west on Sunset back toward the Fifth Estate Coffee House when I was stopped by two plainclothes policemen that blocked my way saying I was under arrest for arson. I said, "I didn't set fire to anything."

A cop in riot gear appeared and said, "Is this the son of a bitch that tried to set fire to the bus?" or something like that. Then he grabbed me by the throat and choked me until I nearly passed out. There was a Marine private on leave from Camp Pendleton standing there saying, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

They handcuffed me and took me to a police bus. The Marine sat in front of the empty bus and watched me so I wouldn't get away. I was able to get the handcuffs over my feet and in front of me, but since the Marine was in the front of the bus, I couldn't get away. I was taken to Los Angeles County jail and spent the next two weeks awaiting trial.

The judge said there are other ways to protest than what I'd done and in the future please don't do what I'd done. She gave me a year's summary probation, and I was released.

If you go to [freshwidow.com/atascadero](http://freshwidow.com/atascadero) and click on, "Get the CD," you can listen to some free song samples from my new CD, "Scott Thomas Lowe & Atascadero NAKED." If you like anti-authoritarian shit, dig mine.

Scott Thomas Lowe,  
Veteran, Peace Movement '65-'74

## NO STRUGGLE

Greetings!

I was recently given the four most recent issues of your magazine. I'm impressed by the level of activity, verbal and otherwise. Of note, however, is the preponderance of battle fronts visualized by the contributors to your magazine. It is my opinion that there are no battles to fight, no enemies to conquer. No struggle to participate in!

Revolution, yes. Rebellion, no. Let's stop wasting time on pointless battles. Let's promote positive activity! If you want to live as an anarchist among other anarchists, get out there and do it. Sure, we have to 'submit' to some political indignities. Yes, we are forced to pay taxes and obey some silly laws. But, the more we pursue the dream, the closer we get to actually living it! And let's face it, we won't get there by instigating battle with the obviously fearful, reactive folks that currently hold the reins to the political machine.

Fear begets fear. Feel sorry for them in their tiny shells. Set an example for them, as you would for any confused brother or sister. We win by co-operating wherever possible. It is our perception of what is good that leads us to happiness, not our recognition of what's wrong.

Assent/ascent, dissent/descent. Don't climb down into a nasty hole because you don't like it. Wake up and set an example of what is good, as you know it to be! We live in fearful times. Fear drives people to do irrational things.

Deny the fear. Embrace the sureness of what we humans can be and do. Show all those around you what cooperation means. A helping hand does not go unnoticed. Every time we act as a sister or brother, we are promoting our cause. Every time we get red-faced and spitting at someone, we do humanity a disservice by promoting fear and anger. Every revolution based on fear and anger has been a revolution only, coming back full circle to the same place.

Sam Dodge  
Prairie Farm, Wis.

*Coatimundi responds:* Letters like this sadden and exasperate me. Sam Dodge says he's for "revolution"—a highly ambiguous term that most people would be better off leaving alone. I have no idea what he means by it, or what he means by "positive activity," or "our cause."

Does he think that lending a helping hand is enough to turn back the suicidal juggernaut? People have been acting like sisters and brothers, engaging in mutual aid, for a very long time. These are good ideas. But somehow, they seem less than adequate for understanding, let alone confronting, the staggering crisis we face.

Setting an example for what each of us thinks is good is what is happening now—it's just that some of us, who have a lot of material and military power or who support those who do, think it is good to wreck and pillage the planet. And they are working overtime.

Sam is apparently willing to submit to indignities and obey “silly” laws—perhaps he thinks putting the word submit inside quotation marks changes the meaning, as if somehow he isn't thus collaborating at least passively with a terrible system that oppresses and imprisons millions of people and ruins the biosphere along the way.

I submit to laws, too, out of self-preservation; I won't deny it. But I also, in my own small way, participate in some struggle to change things, to put an end to those horrific conditions.

How about Sam? Where does he draw the line? Will he also put on a uniform, follow direct orders to conquer and kill, when so ordered? Or is it “silly” to raise our voices when others obey at such a cost? Does he think his endeavor to “pursue the dream” absolves him from responsibility in his paying for the desolation of places like Iraq? Exactly what dream is he talking about? Have a nice day?

Recently, out of desperation, I walked in a monthly silent demonstration of the faithful in a Detroit suburb, organized by Women in Black to protest the war and massive violence those men in their tiny shells are presently unleashing all over the world. As the imperial catastrophe spiraled downward in early April and Fallujah burned, a few friends thought there might be significant turnout.

Just about everyone I run into thinks the war is appalling. But the WIB turned out their typical 175, down from the days before the war actually broke out, when they were pulling maybe 300. I guess there was a big sale at Pier 1 or Home Depot that day. In May, they drew 150.

Thus, my response isn't really about Sam Dodge. I wonder about the powerful inertia I see around me, about the atomization and passivity. What are people thinking? Do they think, as Sam apparently does, that random acts of kindness are going to keep the hard, little men he feels sorry for from killing and destroying life as we know it?

I do not expect people like him to fight on “battle fronts” with Black Blocs and others—I am too old for that myself, and not so dogmatic as to deny that there are myriad ways to do positive work. But “no struggle to participate in ... no battles to fight?”

I know Pangloss was not entirely wrong in advising Candide and the rest of us to cultivate our gardens, but do most people really think like Sam? Is that why this society is going blithely, or grimly, but in either case lemmingly along? Do they doubt that their lack of action today will have anything but ghastly consequences for them and the next generation tomorrow?

There is already terrible, universal, and truly unnecessary suffering going on—systematic, structural violence, and devastation. And, there is more to come. Some vast change, some shift is necessary to turn things around. In the face of what we see happening around us, to nature, to people, to the possibility of a decent society and habitable world, Sam Dodge's platitudes and complacency are tragic—and offensive.

## **SUFISM & ANARCHY**

To the Fifth Estate:

In the Winter 2003/2004 issue of FE, Peter Lamborn Wilson refers to Sufism and it seems also, Shiism, as Islam's “traditional anarchism.” I would question the anarchistic credentials of either of these. (See “Roses and Nightingales: Looking for Traditional Anarchism in 1970s Iran.”)

First, on Sufism. Wilson mentions the Ni'matallah or Ni'matollahi triqa. Trimmingham in the Sufi Orders in Island states that Ni'matallah, the founder of the order, “enjoyed the favour of kings and this partiality for the great of the world was continued by his descendents.” W. Ivanow writes that this tariqa “was always selective in its membership and occupied the position of an ‘aristocratic’ organization. Later on, it became a fashion in the higher strata of the feudal society to be a member of this affiliation...”

Sufi orders in general are organized in a distinctly hierarchical manner, and when one is initiated into membership, he must swear an oath of allegiance to the khalifa, the head of the order, of complete obedience.

Shiism, too, is permeated with authoritarianism. All Shiites believe that the successor to Muhammad should have been Ali, his son-in-law and nephew, and that there should follow from him a patrilineal succession of leadership of the Muslim community. This leader is known as the Imam who like the Roman pope is the absolute infallible ruler who must be accepted in order to achieve salvation.

For the so-called Twelver Shiites who prevail in Iran, the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam was “occultated” to return one day to rule the world as absolute ruler. In the meantime Twelver Shiite jurists have the right to interpret sacred law. Until the Ayatollah Khomeini, these jurists saw their role as avoiding participation in government, but acting as critics of what they thought was not quite a correct government. Khomeini, however, changed things and proclaimed himself ruler.

The Isma'ilis, the second largest of the Shiite groups, believe in a continual line of infallible Imams, an office now vested in the Agha Khan.

There are a very few Sufi orders which exhibit some anarchistic tendencies, but all of a highly individualistic and mystical sort. They are all quite oriented to obedience to a supreme leader. Some of the so-called Extreme Shiites or Ghulats also share these tendencies—again all highly individualistic and mystical. They are not concerned with revolutionizing society.

Indeed, the Sunnis have a much more decentralized arrangement than any Shiites and in the beginning were at least democratic, a system which soon degenerated. Some of the Kharijite groups, while all rigidly puritanical, are very egalitarian and in one case at least quite anarchist. See Crone, Patricia, “Ninth Century Muslim Anarchists” Past and Present, pp 3–28, May 2000. See also my own “Islam, Muslim Societies and Anarchy” in *Anarchist Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, November 2002.

Harold Barclay

Vernon, British Columbia

*Peter Lamborn Wilson replies:* It's an honor to be criticized by Prof. Barclay, but I still have to disagree to some extent. What he says about authoritarian aspects of Sufism and Shiism is largely correct, but I feel he has ignored other aspects of these very complex and non-monolithic phenomena, aspects that might demand a more complex and nuanced interpretation than he offers.

Sufism and Shiism have both been in power in some places and have been oppressed by Sunnis or other theological enemies in other places. Where they have been oppressed, they have sometimes revolted. Not all Sufism is quietistic. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, some Sufi orders in N. Africa led anti-colonialist and anti-Imperialist struggles, for example.

Some Sufi orders (especially in Central Asia and India) are *bi-shahr*, that is, “outside the Law” or Shariah. (See, e.g., Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*.) Such groups may surely be compared in some ways with Western religious anarchists like the Ranters or Dukhobors.

As for Shiism, *vilayet-I faqih* or rule of the chief mulla is by no means a universally accepted doctrine. Many high-ranked mullas and even Ayatollahs never agreed with Khomeini's ideas on this.

Shiism per se has never produced real anarchist theory, but it has inspired a kind of Shiite socialism with some libertarian elements, as in the writings of the late Ali Shariati. True, the Hidden Imam will rule “some day”—but meanwhile a certain aura of freedom attaches to his very non-presence.

Henry Corbin (who himself harbored sympathy for heretics and rebels, especially those of May 1968) was no anarchist himself, but pointed out that the total esotericization of Ismailism may lead to the realization of the “Imam-of-one's-own-being,” i.e., to mystical identity of believer and Imam. In this sense, the initiated Ismaili is his or her own “authority,” except in relation to an Unseen World of Archetypes.

One last point: nowadays Sufis and Ismailis and the like are persecuted by mullas, bigots, modernists, and in some cases, governments. Some of them are amongst the last in the Islamic world to speak of tolerance and peace and to reject both Puritanism and capitalist culture. Unfortunately, their voices are scarcely heard. In the mass media they are invisible. In the West, almost no one even knows they exist. Rather than condemn them as authoritarians perhaps we could take a more diplomatic approach.

It's my belief (or hope) that even if Sufis and Ismailis, etc., are not card-carrying plumb-line anarchists, they may be our allies. Prof. Barclay feels that the rigid puritan Kharijites are more "anarchist" than the tolerant mystics—but political structure is not everything. The Lawless dervishes may still have a guru (albeit "invisible" perhaps), but they lead free lives (or so it appeared to me).

The Kharijites may not have a guru, but they live like Cromwellian dragoons.

Wa salaam,

Peter Lamborn Wilson

New York

## QUOTE ADDED BY EDITORS

"...But even when it seemed these troopers, in their cruel tyranny, had clean lost their wits, there came such a swarm of armed peasants out of the wood that it seemed a wasps'-nest had been stirred. And these began to Dell so frightful) and so furiously to attack with sword and musket that all my hair stood on end...This sport took from me well-nigh all desire to see civilization, for I thought, if 'tis all like this, then is the wilderness far more pleasant."

— from Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, *The Adventurous Simplicissimus, Being the Description of the Life of a Strange vagabond Named Melchoir Sternfels von Fuchshaim* (1669)

## 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 typed or hand-written ones are acceptable. Length should not exceed 400 words. We reserve the right to edit for length or style. If you are interested in writing a longer response, please contact us.

Post Office Box 6, Liberty, TN 37095

fifthestate@pumpkinhollow.net

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