

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 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.

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SMOKEY'S HAND

To the Fifth Estate:

Someone gave me your interesting magazine. While I don't "buy" (a dirty word in your vocabulary?) all of it, you make some good points. However, whoever described the Smokey the Bear graphic on the Spring 2004 cover doesn't seem to know their left from right. To me, it seems that the not-so-friendly looking Smokey has his shovel in his left hand?

W.S. Zimmt

FE reply: Your observant mind could be put to better use than comparing the lines in Gary Snyder's "Smokey the Bear Sutra" poem and the cover graphic which was produced independent of the text. How about a little proof-reading for us?

DEAD REAGAN

To the Fifth Estate:

The vast majority of people on this planet were thoroughly disgusted by the media's revoltingly prolonged glorification of ex-president Ronald Reagan. Amidst all the hoopla, they forgot to mention his achievements as an arch coward, scab, union-buster, racist, war criminal, mass murderer, and America's (possibly the world's) biggest cocaine dealer. Reagan is dead! Long live Reagan!

The media seem to have conveniently forgotten that Reagan arranged for tons of cocaine to be smuggled into America to finance his illegal subversion of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. A mass-marketing stroke of genius, maybe. A heinous criminal conspiracy, surely.

There is little doubt that these crimes against humanity can be directly attributed to Reagan, and no doubt that, if a trial were held, he would be convicted of conspiracy to commit murder. That is, he knew damn well the actions he took would result in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, if not millions: deaths directly caused by Reagan's sanctioning of the corporate pollution of the world and subjection of its inhabitants to known toxins, such as asbestos; deaths caused by Reagan's importation of cocaine; deaths caused by Reagan's sponsorship of terrorist death squads throughout the world (i.e., the Contras, Taliban, etc.); deaths caused by Reagan arming both Iraq and Iran; deaths caused by Reagan sending troops into Lebanon and Grenada. Reagan is dead! Long live Reagan!

Now "America" is going to decide which criminal should be "elected" next: John Kerry, the self-admitted war criminal, or George Bush, the draft-dodging, born-again coward? There's absolutely no point in voting at all. Why give known criminals a political mandate so they can commit more crimes?

Can't stand the suspense? I can't stand the hypocrisy and refuse to be suckered by the spectacle. As Rob Tyner of the MC5 once sang, "I'm sick to my guts of the American ruse!"

The statist death-trip blood-drip is killing us all, just as surely as it is killing this planet. The only rational choice left is to tear the whole edifice up and use the stones to destroy the builders. "Under the paving stones lies the beach!," said the Situationists and I'm all for swimming, and sun bathing too—if we could get the pollutants out of the water, and our minds, and get the ozone layer back! Reagan is dead! Long live Reagan!

Rand W. Gould
Mound Correctional Facility,
Detroit

NOT NEW MASTERS

Dear 'rades at Fifth Estate,

I'd like to comment on the "Selecting a Master or Ousting a Tyrant" collection of essays regarding voting in your Spring 2004 edition.

Larry Talbot says he is one dog who won't be answering his master's voice this election day. My question is, why must voting necessarily be an answer to the master's call, and, how is it that few can see how voting could be used to oust the capitalist master class and dissolve the political state without replacing these with other masters and hierarchical social structures?

Anarchists rail against the idea of using the ballot in this fashion saying that by doing so people are legitimizing the state and all its myriad corruptions, or abdicating anarchist principles; yet, anarchists use American currency every day, and many even push for reforms within the capitalist state apparatus. Does this mean they wish to validate the political state?

To exhort people not to vote for rogues who seek to run capitalism, be they Republican, Democrat, Greens, reform socialists, or authoritarian Marxist Leninist-Stalinoids, makes good sense. But what if the over 50% of the non-voters were to organize into leaderless, bottom up, democratic structures and pick from among the ranks persons to run for political office with a clear mandate to end capitalism and dissolve the state once a majority of these persons are in office?

What we seek is not new masters or an extension of capitalism, but to end the whole rotten exploitive system. Perhaps this could be achieved through mass insurrection, which will entail a lot of bloodshed; or possibly a mass general strike, which does not necessarily guarantee the death of the state or of hopefully minimizing death and violence. Many may protest that political office, even for only the short duration of time necessary to dismantle the state would automatically corrupt.

If your objective were to gain and hold state power, as capitalist and state capitalist Marxist Leninists, seek to do, you'd be corrupted from the outset. But a massive majoritarian effort with the clear objective of making an end to capitalism need not be so.

All you have to do is ask yourself if you as an anarchist, along with perhaps hundreds of other anarchists, were elected to the executive and congressional offices, would power corrupt you? Would you run capitalism, or immediately set about its dissolution before you nailed shut the doors on the White House?

Be rational, demand the impossible,
Kevin Glover
Huntsville Unit
Huntsville, TX

THE STONE AGE

To the Fifth Estate:

I ran into the Summer issue of your journal on a visit to N. Carolina and it took me back to Berkeley in the 1950–1960 era. I won't bother trying to point out all the errors, but the article by Derrick Jensen, "Beyond Backward and Forward," (*Fifth Estate* #365) was too much to resist.

The Stone Age is something I know a little about, and want to point out that Stone Age groups consisted of small numbers (20 to 40 people), and they lived short, hard lives. Murder, animal attacks, disease and weather contributed to their misery.

It was only when groups of about 10,000 formed, with leaders and specialists, that life became worth living. We find samples of health treatment, clothing, storage of food, and religion from this larger group. I might note that the Chinese have lived in really big cities for 7000 years and show no signs of "big city deterioration."

The loss of forests by present day man are generally localized and due to inadequate development. In the US, the national forests have increased in the last 30 years—go to New England and see it. The number of wild animals—deer, moose and coyote—are much larger; ask anyone who lives in Pennsylvania and tries to have a garden. Even in Yellowstone the wolves are doing well.

Cities are not all growing at the expense of the non-settled land; New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, etc. are shrinking. All of the above cities are declining as people move to less settled areas to get away from people like Mr. Jensen and his friends.

AIDS, tuberculosis, plus other invented diseases that attack the poor under crowded conditions, are part of it. Who would want to send their kids to schools with other kids who have AIDS? Why do you think private schools are doing so well?

Population is a problem; that is why we want to keep the poor and ignorant out of the US. In fact, the population growth of the earth is starting to slow down; by 2050 it will start to shrink.

The author talks about hydrocarbon fuel running out; it is limited, but the new Japanese engines will be more efficient; the use of plants to produce unlimited fuel for autos and heating—plants grow naturally and regularly; did you know that? Nuclear power is becoming safer (the first use of steam led to awful accidents; we didn't know how to do it.). Now that we understand it, nuclear accidents will be small.

I am sure none of you will agree with me or learn anything. Your clumsy efforts to interfere with modern civilization are amusing.

Stuart A. Hoenig
Professor, University of Arizona,
Tucson

Derrick Jensen replies: There are so many factual problems with Stuart Hoenig's letter that I hardly know where to start. But I'll try.

Hoenig asserts "that Stone Age groups...lived short, hard lives." He is factually inaccurate. The "nasty, brutish, and short" cliché has been debunked by anthropologists for at least the last forty years, and the myriad descriptions of American Indian life reveal a life far richer and happier than that of the civilized.

Since Stuart probably wouldn't believe Indians anyway, here are a couple of European sources: In *Letters From an American Farmer*, Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur noted, "There must be in the Indians' social bond something singularly captivating, and far superior to be boasted of among us; for thousands of Europeans are Indians, and we have no examples of even one of those Aborigines having from choice become Europeans."

Benjamin Franklin was even more to the point: “No European who has tasted Savage Life can afterwards bear to live in our societies.” It was commonly noted that at prisoner exchanges, Indians ran joyously to their relatives while white captives had to be bound hand and foot to not run back to their captors.

Hoenig writes, “It was only when groups of about 10,000 formed with leaders and specialists that life became worth living.” The indigenous who have fought against the civilized for the last several thousand years evidently haven’t agreed that their own lives weren’t worth living. And that’s fine if Stuart wants to live his life within this madhouse called civilization, but he and his kind have no right to force this lifestyle onto the indigenous.

He says, “We find samples of health treatment, clothing, storage of food, and religion from this larger group.” The indigenous have no health treatment? They have no clothing? They have no food storage? They have no religion? This would be news to the indigenous.

Stuart simply doesn’t know what he is talking about. Health declined with the rise of agriculture. Indians in cold climates did not walk around naked. Pemmican is a form of food storage. And, in many climates the indigenous have no need of food storage, since they do not destroy their land base.

Regarding religion, here is what native American writer Vine Deloria told me about Indian religion: “Most Indian traditions never had a religion in the sense of dogmas and creeds, nor did they have the sort of ongoing deity that Christians speak of, by which I mean they didn’t see a specific higher personality who demanded worship and adoration. Rather, they saw and experienced personality in every aspect of the universe and called it “Woniya” (Spirit), and looked to it for guidance, a lot like Socrates obeying his “daemon.”

I don’t know what Stuart is talking about with “big city deterioration.” But China makes my point perfectly. The natural world is a wreck. The forests are gone. The rivers are trashed. And the indigenous? There are pockets, but most have long since been conquered.

Hoenig’s sentence, “The loss of forests by present day man are generally localized and due to inadequate development,” is both factually inaccurate and nonsensical. As George Draffan and I write in *Strangely Like War: The Global Assault on Forests*, the forests of the world are in bad shape. About three-quarters of the world’s original forests have been cut, most of it in the past century. Much of what remains is in three nations: Russia, Canada, and Brazil.

Ninety-five percent of the original forests of the United States are gone. One estimate says that two and a half acres of forest somewhere in the world is cut every second.

His contention that “in the US, the national forests have increased in the last 30 years” is factually inaccurate, and once again nonsensical. By “national forests” does he mean USFS land? In which case the land hasn’t increased. If he means that the forests have increased on USFS land, he’s still wrong. Native forests are down to about 5 percent in this country.

He says, “the number of wild animals...are much larger. Even in Yellowstone the wolves are doing well.” Ninety percent of the large fish in the oceans are gone. Bison are essentially gone. Salmon, essentially gone. Wolves are at a tiny percentage of their range.

Even when Stuart is right, he’s still wrong: he says deer numbers are up. Wrong, Stuart. White-tail deer are up. Mule deer are down. It depends on the species.

As George Draffan and I say in *Strangely Like War*, “The Forest Service and other timber industry supporters often claim that their treatment—i.e., their deforestation—improves wildlife habitat. This is sneaky on their part, since they’re defining wildlife only to be those creatures who prefer edges, for example white-tailed deer...Always, always, always ask, ‘Whose habitat improves? Whose habitat is degraded?’ And then, of course, you should always expect them to lie to you. But you knew that already.”

Hoenig thinks “Cities are not all growing at the expense of the non-settled land; New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, etc. are shrinking. All of the above cities are declining as people move to less settled areas to get away from people like Mr. Jensen and his friends.”

First, I don’t live in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, or Cleveland, so if Stuart thinks they’re moving to get away from me, he’s as wrong here as he is with everything else.

Second, the point is the importation of resources, as Stuart would have understood were he not ideologically blind.

Where do the resources come from that allow him to live his civilized lifestyle? Where do the metals come from, and what are the ecological effects of their mining, smelting, and transporting? What about the plastics? Cities require a countryside from which to steal resources. The people who live in New York City could not live there without stealing resources from the countryside. Prior to the arrival of civilization, the people who lived in what is now occupied Mannahatta lived there sustainably for thousands of years.

Hoenig talks about “use of plants to produce unlimited fuel for autos and heating.” William R Catton Jr. wrote in *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change*, “To become completely free from dependence on pre-historic energy (without reducing population or per capita energy consumption),” and remember this was more than twenty years ago, meaning that things are now far more extreme than his description, “modern man would require an increase in contemporary carrying capacity equivalent to ten earths—each of whose surfaces was forested, tilled, fished, and harvested to the current extent of our planet.

Without ten new earths, it followed that man’s exuberant way of life would be cut back drastically sometime in the future, or else that there would someday be many fewer people.”

The contention that “nuclear power is becoming safer” is a statement of faith. Many components and waste products of nuclear programs are lethal for tens of thousands of years or longer. It strikes me as foolish to irradiate and poison humans and nonhumans so people can have retractable stadium roofs and aluminum beer cans.

Hoenig finishes saying, “Your clumsy efforts to interfere with modern civilization are amusing.” I say, civilization is not sustainable. It will crash. The only real question at this point is what will be left of the natural world—the world that is our home—when this happens.

ETHICS, AS VEGANISM

To the Fifth Estate:

In your Summer 2004 edition, you printed a letter by Wendy Kobylarz and a response by FE staffer John Johnson on the topic of veganism. I admire Wendy’s desire to defend this lifestyle, but I believe her argument rests on a very common misunderstanding regarding animal rights, which also touches on the broader topic of anarchist principles.

We are called egalitarian because we uphold the principle of equal rights for all. But when asserting that we wish to extend equal rights to all, we should be clear that we are not referring to some classical liberal notion that “all men are created equal,” and thereby extend that to an argument for the moral equivalence between humans and animals. Not only is this patently absurd, but when drawn out to its logical conclusions, it’s downright frightening.

We observe the world around us and develop a system of values. If done rationally, this will lead us to a “truth” that is, as far as our limited human understanding can determine, factual: in agreement with reality. These collective “truths” are the principles upon which we base our (moral) code of conduct. And so, our code of conduct will depend on what values we assign to things.

To say that a non-human is not identical in value to a human is not to set human above animal in some hierarchical scheme where animals lose all importance under the “superior” worth of humanity and where animals only have value depending upon their relationship to humans. It is to admit, however, that there are qualitative differences between all forms of life and that at times we are required to make value judgments between them.

So, the question is not whether the mammals that provide the meat are worthy of consideration as equals, but what criteria are we to use when making such value judgments? All of us must eat. But when deciding what to eat we should rely on our ethics to guide us. Food, as defined, is any substance taken in by a plant or animal to enable it to live and grow: anything that nourishes. Johnson states that in an ideal ecosystem we are all food.

If we’re all food, then what is to prevent me from consuming you, or your Aunt Judy? First, I wouldn’t want to because you’re not exactly nourishing. You’ve probably taken most of your nutrients from another animal, who got it from the healthiest source that is available to us animals: plants. Until we can grow roots and do that photosynthesis thing, we have to rely on plants. And, are there any ethical considerations that would insist that we cut the cow and Aunt Judy out of the food chain? Yes, and it’s quite simple.

Apart from nutritional considerations, animals have a greater degree of sentience and therefore are able to experience suffering to greater degrees. It seems that in evolution, life expands out to greater measures of complexity with accompanying and increasing levels of awareness and sensitivity.

The more developed the nervous system, the more pain—and luckily pleasure—you can feel. And, being that we humans have what appears to be the greatest level of awareness (if not a corresponding level of intelligence), and along with it more potential to be sympathetic, it follows that when we make our choices about where to get our nutrition we should do so in the most compassionate way possible.

This is the best reason to choose a vegan lifestyle. It simply hurts less to eat a carrot than a cow. This is why we choose not to eat or wear animals; because we have the awareness to understand that, when we consciously choose to refrain from being a cause of that suffering and facilitate that happiness—even if it simply means leaving them alone—we are asserting the rights of these animals to exist of and for themselves.

Malcolm Wright
Spruce Pine, NC

DIVERSITY, FREEDOM

Dear Fifth Estate Folks:

I just read your Summer 2004 issue on primitivism and am much impressed. Good to see you're still out there fighting. The more of us, the better.

I'm working on a pocket guide that will include info on stuff like running a car on straight veggie oil and on other biofuels like pelletized switchgrass.

We haven't done so well protesting and complaining, or even, let's face it, voting. So, at this point, the most serious way to free ourselves from the fuckers in the suits is to simply make them irrelevant. If you gotta get around, use a bike. If you need to move big stuff, use a freight bike. If you've gotta have a car, run it on "waste" and let the oiligopolists go to hell.

I'd be a much happier guy if every Food Not Bombs group could get a few hundred acres under horticulture-style/permaculture cultivation and start really spreading the free comestibles. After all, Mexico City raised tons of food on rooftops and little rafts until the Spanish came and "improved" it.

And, remember, their "disorder and chaos" is our "diversity and freedom."

Justin
New York City

DEMANDS

To the Fifth Estate:

One of your questions in your request for articles on education struck me as kind of odd coming from an anti-authoritarian publication: "How can communities demand radical pedagogy?" Demand from whom?

Caliban

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