Notes toward a history of the *Fifth Estate*

Part 1: 1975–1981

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"Only movement can know movement."

–Herakleitos

Someday, if anything is left of any of this, and this epoch's fascination with historical records and documentation endures, I imagine some historian, grad student, or amateur archivist will write a text detailing, accurately or less than so, the vicissitudes of the small group of friends and comrades in Detroit and elsewhere who have produced the FE. This task will probably have to fall to such a person, I fear. My original attempt to write something that was both memoir and intellectual history led to arguments not only about how the history should be presented, but about what happened. To paraphrase Yogi Berra, it was Rashomon all over again. Woe to anyone who tries to write the history of shared, intense activities.

I considered cutting down my essay to a few short paragraphs, entitled "Against History, Against Memoir," but readers who know my work might guess that writing something short is far more challenging for me than simply trimming down what I already had. In the course of doing so, I have excised material that I think, after some reflection, was in fact problematic. And so this is a second attempt to get it right, even as I withhold some of my critical appraisal of our ideas and activities for a later time.

My history of the FE begins back in the fall of 1966, when I found a copy of the paper while touristing through a head shop on Detroit's single hippie street, Plum Street. I was in the ninth grade, already against the war in Vietnam, already publishing a short-lived antiwar, underground student paper (named, modestly, *The Voice of Youth*), hanging around Wayne State University on Saturdays and digging through the shelves of the Communist Party bookstore on Woodward Avenue, Global Books. In those early days, the paper billed itself as "Detroit's New Progressive Bi-Weekly Newspaper," and in his editorial in the first issue in 1965, founding editor Harvey Ovshinky wrote that the FE was "the voice…of the liberal element of Detroit." But what astonished and attracted me was the FE's combination of political and cultural subversion, the clearly radical content and context–the antiwar activism, antiracism, and bracing combination of new music, long hair, and metaphysical adventure. It didn't matter what it was called, or what it called itself–a lesson it behooves us to remember. I think I saved that copy for years in a little file of strange and inspiring things I collected, which disappeared, fittingly, in a flood.

Shortly after that, I became a high school organizer for the local and national antiwar movement, and spent a year in the Trotskyist Young Socialist Alliance/Socialist Workers Party. (Though it represents less than one-fiftieth of my life, my old friends have never entirely stopped teasing me about being an "ex-trot.") In the summer between my sophomore and junior year in high school, I discovered the Blakean wing of the radical movement, and dropped out of school and the party within the same few months. I turned up at the FE offices on West Warren Avenue in early 1969 and talked the staff members into letting me write for the paper, including a short-lived high school column. The relationship didn't last; I soon took off for Europe and California, and came back to Detroit both times in the middle of a blizzard, broke and sick. But I continued to read the paper and to take an interest in it.

Like many of my peers, I was a product of the decade, influenced by the politics of ecstasy and apostasy, with its brew of revolutionary theory, existentialism, Asian philosophy, dada, and surrealism. In 1972, my friend Paul Gribling and I founded the Workers Revenge Party, a provocative, parodic leftist party, a blend of cultural Bolshevism and Groucho Marxism, taking as its slogans lines that were in the air, like "Today's Pig Is Tomorrow's Bacon," and a line from the television character Archie Bunker of the popular sitcom All in the Family, "What's wrong with revenge? It's the perfect way to get even." (Gribling had gone to Wayne State University in Detroit with the intention of becoming a CIA analyst and ended up a hippie leftist–proof of the possibility of personal transformation.) We celebrated resistance and rebellion in all their forms; we wanted "two, three, many Vietnams," if that was what it took to end American imperialism, and we championed workers and oppressed people who responded violently to their conditions, such as Ahmed Evans, a Cleveland factory worker who had brought an automatic weapon to work and killed his boss. "Ahmed Evans Had the Guts to Make It Even Steven!" we declared.

I have no doubt now that we had too readily succumbed to what was, in retrospect, a macho bravado and flirtation with violence and nihilism, and the accompanying sense of the cheapness of life. But by the mid-1970s, the imperial ruin being visited on the third world (particularly the endless bloodbath in Southeast Asia), the racism, and the police violence against minorities, workers, and the poor all sickened and enraged the radicals and revolutionaries of my generation. The scandal, as we said at the time, was hardly the "petty" scandals of bourgeois political corruption such as Watergate, but the daily massacre of life–both in its physical and in its spiritual manifestation–that made the bloodiest revolution less violent than a single weekend under capitalism.

Situationist-styled "interventions"

By the mid-1970s, I was hanging around with a group of people who were discovering anarchism and left libertarian theory, and who insisted that they kept me, the leftist-without-a-party, around for laughs. My friends worked on and with the FE even before they took it over in 1975. Their dadaesque Eat the Rich Gang (ETR) had made its debut by publishing and distributing a cookbook, replete with recipes, with the title, *To Serve the Rich*. At the time, the paper had turned from a workerist collective to a small business trying to become an alternative commercial weekly, but it continued to be a source of radical incitement, despite the dismal liberal, commercial, and apolitical material that also appeared in it. For example, ETR published an Easter special of the FE in 1974 with a photo of two gangly feet sticking out of the ground with nail holes drawn on the soles. (They were the feet of our pal Gordon Barry, who participated in most of the local radical theater of the time, a hemophiliac who later died of AIDS from contaminated blood supplies.) The huge headlines declared, "Christ's Body Found–Easter Canceled." The gang placed these fake front pages in *Detroit News* coin boxes throughout the city on Easter Sunday, prompting one enraged Christian to drive his car into a box, and a zealot, at least so we were told, to fire a bullet into another.

Most of these surrealist/situationist-styled "interventions" took place around the central city and especially the Wayne State University-Cass Corridor area, and I collaborated on some of them. In one action, we presented a pig's head to a meeting of the Wayne State Board of Governors, which was considering eliminating a college that had been a radical hotbed. A photographer friend got a perfect shot of the visibly stunned bureaucrats, with the pig's head in the foreground. It ended up front and center on page three of the local daily, and as a poster in the FE: "Pig's Head Meets Head Pigs." (No animal was harmed to carry out our stunt. The pig was already dead when we bought the head at the Eastern Market.)

Later, after the board did decide to abolish the college, an anonymous group of students, calling itself the Second Street Players, surpassed our stunt by dumping pig and other animal guts all over the office of the president of the university. "Pig Guts for Gutless Pigs: An Offal Situation," declared the headline of FE staff writer Pat Halley's article in the March 1976 FE. "Happy entrails to you until we meet again," he concluded.

A charismatic working-class poet and practitioner of a theater of comic cruelty, Pat Halley was an important figure in the FE in those days. (He would become particularly famous for his wrestling skits in which the Marquis de Sade did political slam-downs with burly nuns.) An irreverent and funny individual who wrote under pseudonyms like "No Name of the Animal Kingdom," he may have been the first person I knew to actively articulate–and to live–a sensibility of wildness and intuitive connection to nature. I will never forget meeting him; I was at a party on

the far east side of metropolitan Detroit, where the first constructions of condo-style apartments and parking lots ended and the last few trees and fields began. He was high up in a tree in a lightning storm, howling like a wolf.

Pat was a wild man, rough-and-tumble, vigorous, but also sweet and spiritually robust in a Whitmanesque way. In August 1973, he walloped the Guru Maharaj Ji with a cream pie at City Hall just as the proclaimed "child god" was about to receive the key to the City of Detroit. A tipped-off photographer got the shot and the story went international. Shortly after, two of the guru's thugs nearly killed Pat by hitting him in the back of the head with a hammer. Pat survived, and continued to write an occasional article for the FE into the 1980s. He still lives in Detroit.

Similar provocations continued after ETR took over the FE in 1975. Prosecuted for publishing information on how to rip off the phone company with a "mute box" to get free phone calls (the issue in question had been printed before the 1975 takeover), the new staff went to court and beat the charges in a burlesque of denial and derision. They then continued to print information on various scams for ripping off Ma Bell. [1] During a time of widespread layoffs and accelerated war on the workers, the FE published names and addresses of General Motors executives, even including maps to their residences, in a bogus advertisement from the company, which begged the public, "Please! Do Not Kidnap These Men!" This stunt earned the paper the epithet of "psy-war terrorists" from local and national media outlets.

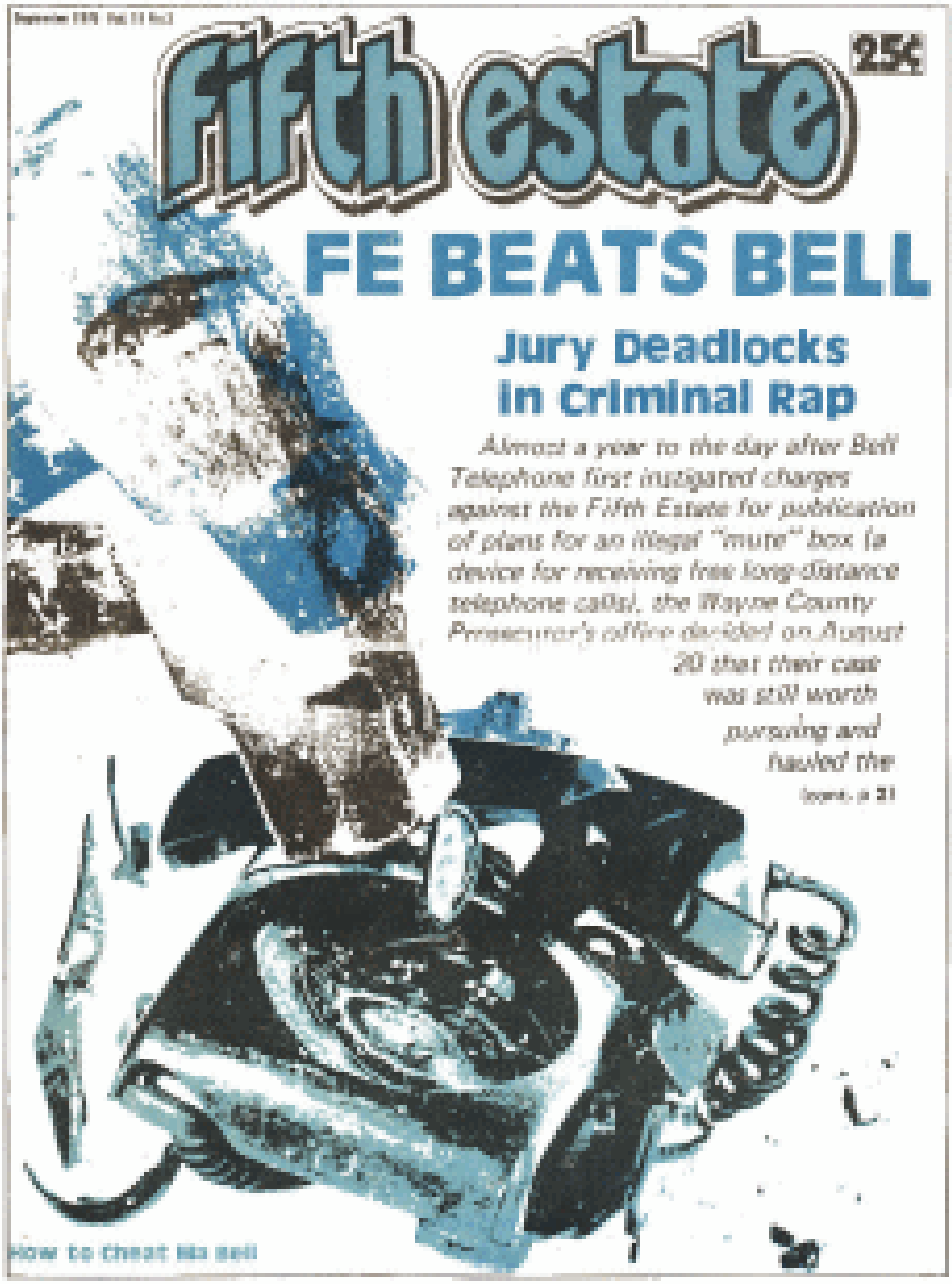
I remained on the fringe of the emerging FE collective in those days both before and after the ETR takeover in August 1975. Most of the people in this group had started participating in the Detroit Printing Co-op with a number of other radicals, and the Black & Red project with Fredy and Lorraine Perlman and others. B&R had started publishing texts carrying radical winds from Europe–anarchist classics like Voline's and Arshinov's histories of the Russian' Revolution and the Makhnovist movement, as well as texts from the Situationist International, the libertarian left group Solidarity, ultra-left and council communists, and Jacques Camatte's *Invariance*. [2]

Ralph and Alan Franklin had turned up with several others to publish a literary magazine, riverrun, and had stayed, becoming stalwarts of ETR. They became my friends, and Alan and I, with money provided by a sympathetic student organization, published a mutinous, one-issue magazine, *Fly-Back: A Journal of Cheap Shots*, a mixture of poetry and rants against art (including Pat Halley's "Toward a Renaissance of Arson") and lurid dada collage parodies against religion, leftist cults, and even California situationists. [3] It ended with a sentimental (and overwritten) eulogy to my Workers Revenge comrade Paul Gribling, who had succumbed to melanoma at the age of twenty-six. With Paul's death, the Workers Revenge Party was disbanded, and I left for Mexico in the fall of 1976 with the idea of never returning. But of course, as they said to me when I quit every lousy proletarian job I ever had, you'll be back, everybody comes back. And I did come back to Detroit, in the middle of a heat wave, and started working with the paper in the early fall of 1977. [4]

In the mid-to-late 1970s we saw the left, new and old, going into eclipse, its diminishing ranks disappearing into private life, or authoritarian sects little distinguishable from cults, or what seemed to us a formulaic workerism. The 1960s were clearly coming to an end; the energy behind movements for social change was ebbing. Nixon was president, then Ford. The capitalist spectacle had colonized the counter-culture, the war in Vietnam had ended with the consolidation of authoritarian stalinist states in Vietnam and Laos and a genocidal regime in Cambodia, and economic recession had deepened. Detroit sank from what European leftists and some here had insisted would be the "black Petrograd of the American revolution" to a depressed, increasingly lumpenized, third-world ghost town.

French and German radicals had arrived in the late 1960s and early 1970s to take in the auto plants and Motown and the revolutionary black union movements of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. They now came to see with their own eyes the increasingly notorious, vast expanses of empty fields and the boarded-up plants, homes, and store fronts, with ailanthus trees (the famous "ghetto palms") bursting through the collapsed roofs. When I came back from Mexico and worked on my first issue as a staff member, we even published a cover with an aerial photo of downtown and the headline, "Soon to be picturesque ruins!" But the place already was a ruin, and we took to giving visitors "the Entropy Tour" of desolation and decay, often starting from the wealthy suburb of Grosse Pointe, where many auto execs lived, down along the river through the city and its wasted neighborhoods to the Ford Rouge complex where a poisonous Rouge River flowed into the Detroit River. [5]

We were ambivalent about the entropy. People were suffering. Motor City was now called Murder City, the murder capital of the world. The city was dangerous, though not nearly so much as terrified suburbanites believed. We (and others in our neighborhood) flaunted a kind of combat veteran's pride in our street savvy and in our merely


Fifth estate
25¢
FE BEATS BELL
Jury Deadlocks in Criminal Rap
Almost a year to the day after Bell Telephone first instigated charges against the Fifth Estate for publication of plans for an illegal "mute" box (a device for receiving free long-distance telephone calls), the Wayne County Prosecutor's office decided on August 20 that their case was still worth pursuing and hauled the
(cont. p 31
How to cheat Ma Bell

surviving in the place. (A popular tee-shirt in those days displayed the line, "Detroit–where the weak are killed and eaten.") Some of us had guns, and practiced using them, and some carried tire irons and baseball bats in their cars. We laughed when we heard that the word Detroit itself had become a pejorative adjective connoting down and dirty, funky, worn out. (In the midst of my writing this essay, I heard on the radio of a study that has been published naming Detroit as only the second "most dangerous city in the United States, after Camden, New Jersey.")

We took particular pleasure in what one might call the aesthetic of the postindustrial sublime–the savannas where neighborhoods had once stood, the occasional pheasant taking a quick fly over the freeway, the deserted downtown, and the trees growing out of the factories and along the railroad tracks, like some post-apocalypse landscape. We rarely had to deal with traffic in the city; we learned to identify wildflowers in those meadows around abandoned factories and where houses once stood, in what would later be called "brown-fields." The place seemed to be reality, and allowed us a chance to reflect on ruins, which has been an activity of revolutionary romantic circles since the eighteenth century. (One French visitor, shaking his head in bewilderment at the stark contrast between the wreckage of the black city and the sterile, vapid idyll of the surrounding white suburbs, commented, "Detroit is like a….a donut. Nothing in the center, everything around the outside.")

Exhilarated by the decline

We were also exhilarated by the decline and breakup of the left in its old and new varieties. For us, it opened up possibilities rather than signaling defeat, though in retrospect we were overly certain, and took excessive pleasure, in pointing out not only the limitations but often the alleged counterrevolutionary dangers of every response to the so-called "movement of Capital," including generally innocuous activities like co-ops and community organizing efforts. Disillusionment, Fredy Perlman liked to say, was liberating, and we agreed. The authoritarian left was bankrupt; it had functioned only as a rival gang within capital, a "left wing of capital"; rather than bringing about authentic revolution, Leninist cadres had built state capitalist police states in places like Russia and China, where the imperial world system made classical bourgeois forms impossible, and authentic communism unlikely. The political sects and their front groups that championed these tyrannies were little more than rackets organized, however ineffectually, for the project of seizing power for the Jacobin militants who directed them.

Marx's merciless criticism was our watchword while, with Bakunin, we insisted that an act of destruction was also an act of creation. My friends published a poster declaring in four-inch letters, "FUCK AUTHORITY." At the bottom, a small figure asked another, "All authority?" The one with Mickey Mouse ears responded, "Yep, all authority." I always thought this statement glib, even linguistically simplistic, but at the time it was a provocation that I considered preferable to submission; I don't think the FE ever had to defend it in any serious and sophisticated way.

My comrades began to dismantle everything, taking on the authoritarian plague in all its manifestations. They might have been reading the nineteenth century nihilist Pisarev, who wrote that in the realm of ideas, "what can be smashed should be smashed; what will stand the blow is good; what will fly into smithereens is rubbish; at any rate, hit out right and left–there will and can be no harm from it." The FE book service, called Ammunition Books, featured a photo of a Smith & Wesson service revolver and advertised books by classical and contemporary anarchists, as well as by Marx and various neo- and ultra-left marxists, and from groups and small presses like Black & Red, Bratach Dubh, Cienfuegos Press, Freedom Press, Left Bank Books, Solidarity, Charlatan Stew, Zerowork, For Ourselves, Internationalism, and others. Ammunition Books also sold Kafka's *The Trial*, Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Homage to Catalonia*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Malcolm X's *Autobiography*, and works by Wilhelm Reich, Ivan Illich, E.P. Thompson, and other authors.

The FE read and printed radical critics like the Situationist International, the council communists, Cornelius Castoriadis and Socialisme ou Barbarie, Bookchin, Camatte and Collu, and the work of many others from outside Detroit, including John and Paula Zerzan's early articles on Luddism and industrialization and John Zerzan's articles on unionism, as well as their (and later exclusively his) collage-style sociological surveys of "The Decline and Fall of Everything," as one article was titled. FE staffers began corresponding with the Zerzans and others on the West Coast, including Bob Brubaker, who would later move to Detroit and join the staff. [6]

Many of the articles led to spirited debates that lasted over several issues of the paper; there was plenty of recourse to theoretical posturing, saber- and chain-rattling, macho dick-waving, and unwarranted invective, but there was also thoughtful exchange, and there was often humor. Throughout this process, many readers did participate in the paper, and the letters sections and exchanges sometimes made up the bulk of an issue.

A survey of articles in the first couple of years after the ETR takeover in 1975 yields reports on struggles in Italy, Germany, Poland, and elsewhere; ultra-left critiques of Chinese state capitalism and maoism; Reichian critiques of authoritarian sexual repression (both the traditional kinds and leftist puritanism); critiques and denunciations of unions, work, and the ideology of industrial progress; rants against art, culture, and museums; and explorations into the authoritarian-conformist influences of urban space, architecture, and decor. There were also critiques of education and education reform (such as school busing); of politics, marxism, the left, and the "myth of the party"; of religion and the family, but also of feminist reforms; of consumerism and mass society; of health care and medicine; and of the limitations of anarchism, syndicalism, political terrorism, and the Spanish Revolution. There were articles on police brutality in Detroit, prisoners, labors wildcat strikes, the genocide of native peoples, and police surveillance. (Eventually, we recovered the FE's and our own police files after successful class action lawsuits against the State of Michigan and the City of Detroit forced state and local authorities to release secret "Red Squad" dossiers.)

We published a cover with an aerial photo of downtown and the headline, "Soon to be picturesque ruins!" But the place already was a ruin, and we took to giving visitors "the Entropy Tour" of desolation and decay.

The paper contained continual, fierce attacks on and parodies targeting local politicians, mainstream and leftist, and sometimes against former collaborators who had come to earn the FE's scorn. My own diatribes, which my ETR friends had encouraged to attack liberals in the pre-1975 FE in the letters section, continued in the new FE. Someone (not I) coined the pseudonym "Mr. Venom" to capture this caustic voice. I am not sure my friends did me any favor by encouraging this kind of writing. It took a long time for me to shed the habit of resorting to vitriol where there was merely disagreement. But we cultivated a barbarous, sharp-tongued, poison-penned insolence, watered in a number of our cases by generous amounts of alcohol and repeated attention to contemporary comedy like the work of Lenny Bruce, Monty Python, the Gong Show, and Richard Pryor.

In the late 1970s, the FE did not mince words, and no doubt we were sometimes too hard on people. I am not speaking of people like Nelson Rockefeller, Werner Von Braun, and Chou en Lai, who were given spicy obituaries, or national and local politicians and celebrities who either had it coming or had enough rewards to be able to take the heat; but people mostly like us, well-meaning people with whom we disagreed. We may not have been as bad as the situationists, who bragged that they knew how to treat their "enemies as enemies," and who by their own reckoning insulted fifty-eight percent of the people mentioned in their journal, but we were arrogant and often treated our critics and people we differed from with a generous helping of contempt. In our defense, our disdain was sometimes a reaction to bitter attacks rather than the first stone thrown. I think that all of us have gotten

better at avoiding this kind of tone over the last decade and a half or more, which I attribute to our experience and evolution, as well as to the larger influence of a few key women on the paper in the 1980s. [7]

Toward a more radical position

No issue was complete without at least one fake ad, a political version of *National Lampoon* and harbinger of *Adbusters*. Such texts were common among the ultra-radical milieu we inhabited–bogus resignations of bureaucrats now apparently gone situationist, ads claiming to speak for, or making fun of, new age and religious cults and left-wing political sects, and fake corporate ads. One ad for a make of Scotch focused on the use of the bottle as appropriate for making a Molotov cocktail; another celebrated unemployment benefits and the rewards of life on the dole; still another, which we reprinted from a West Coast group much like ourselves, was a poster calling on Christians to "Jump for Jesus" from the Golden Gate Bridge. There was a Burger King ad with a picture of a security guard brandishing a shotgun in a Cass Corridor franchise, with the headline, "Hold the pickle–Hold your fire!" and announcing a new meal, the "self-burger."

There was a fake ad from theAmerican Funeral Directors Association celebrating the inherent necrophilia of capitalism and declaring, after the Spanish fascist slogan, "Long Live Death!" On the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence, we printed a centerfold with a picture of a coffee mug and four individual serving bags of sugar like those found at the time in restaurants. The bags, part of a patriotic US presidents series, showed the four assassinated presidents; a gun, lying on the table, poked its barrel into the corner of the photo. The centerfold also sported an "Official Boy Scout Manual for Properly Burning Your Flag," and Lakota victory songs sung after the defeat of Custer.

Other posters and covers asked, "Did You Ever Want to Kill Your Boss?" or declared, "You Create the Society that Destroys You," and, paraphrasing Bob Dylan, "If You're Not Busy Being Born You're Busy Buying." Another announced, "Pope Perishes," after the death of Pope Paul VI in 1978. "Like a full moon," it said, "like the blazing collapse of a bank in an earthquake, like the comedic sinking of an imperial barge, the death of a pope, and the giddy and liberatory revelation that we are now–if only momentarily–living during a time when there is no pope, is a cause for celebration."

The practical (if there was any) and theoretical orientation was in a sense to keep pushing the envelope toward a more radical position–to paint oneself in the corner and then dynamite the room. One had to continue a process of continual or permanent supersession of previous, still incomplete radical moments; there always was a "more radical" or "more revolutionary position"–one more step, comrades, if you would be revolutionaries, we paraphrased Sade.

According to this view, there could be no half-measures–any failure to go "all the way" meant recuperation by capital for the purposes of a living death. People who turned away from the project of absolute negation were soon, inevitably, "re-absorbed" into capital, and thus into a pseudo-existence of living death, doomed to thingification. As people faded away from contestation and re-entered the life of normalcy, we compared our situation to the last holdouts in Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Re-absorbed, we would intone with a mock sententiousness, making a sucking sound that ended in a pop. We were quick to concede that we, too, were inevitably victims of this process. But surely, we'd add with the same irony, surely our flyers and pamphlets and newspapers elevated us from the rest of the conformist herd. [8]

Noticeable in the first five years is a growing awareness of the dimensions–and the implications–of industrial capitalism as a technological system, and its destruction of global ecological life webs. Many articles covered the emerging anti-nuclear movement in Europe and the United States and the political debates therein. One of my first articles about these themes, "Case Study of an Industrial Plague," on the PBB contamination disaster in Michigan in 1976, discussed how a fire retardant chemical used in plastics production was mistakenly mixed into cattle feed and ended up in the food chain and bodies and organs of most of the population of the state.

In retrospect, I had not yet thought out the way in which industrialism made all such disasters (as I later put it) "not only possible, but inevitable," an understanding that gradually became clearer to all of us. In October 1979, writing, under the pseudonym P. Solis, I described "the gruesome tailspin of industrialism" in the form of a massive

oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and criticized simplistic leftist reactions that capitalism was to blame, as well as the anti-nuclear movement, which had remained silent on the spill:

> "The problem is not who or what party happens to be in power but the ideology of development which in the West takes place under the aegis of private development and which in the Third World takes place under a mixture of socialist, Islamic, and nationalist mystifications.
>
> "Just as nuclear 'accidents' are built into that system of technology, oil spills are an integral part of oil drilling and exploration. This is why engineers calculate probability statistics for every system that they design.
>
> "Human error, metal fatigue, miscalculation, freak interventions of nature–all and any of these possibilities render breakdowns in such a technological system not only possible, but inevitable. Socialist technicians or private corporate technicians will not make the difference. Nor will this or that brand of machinery; nor will its having been produced by wage labor in the East or the West. The increasing complexity of the system, its dependence on more and more diverse factors for its success, only guarantee its ultimate breakdown." [9]

I had read some work by Ivan Illich by then, but nothing of Ellul or Mumford, or any of the other books that later informed my writing, and the writing of others, on technology. The insight in this article came from discussions we were having by then, sometimes at a restaurant or bar in the Cass Corridor or down in Detroit's Greektown neighborhood, sometimes around the kitchen tables of the Perlmans, sometimes out at Belle Isle, as we watched Lake Sinclair spill into the Detroit River and flow south toward Lake Erie. (I should add that my emerging understanding also came from discussions with my father, a field and research engineer with a profound and critical understanding of the problems of technology, though hardly a luddite.)

I remember all of those discussions being grim, invigorating–this was Minerva's owl flying at dusk, we told ourselves. How were we going to find our way, how was humanity to break its way out of this tailspin?

In June 1978, the FE had already started to publish explicitly luddite texts. Ralph Franklin, writing under the pseudonym "deLusory," issued the challenge in "QUBE TV: Pushbutton 1984." Describing an early version of an "interactive" television-computer technology, he wrote, "For many years now, capitalists, Marxists and some libertarians…have held aloft technology as the 'liberating force' that will provide us with the means…to build a totally free society." Indeed, he pointed out, "the most explicit theorists of this technological utopia" were the situationists, with their visions of "translucent trees," houses on railroad tracks "to give the inhabitants a daily change of scenery," and "a television network that would let everyone discuss global problems from one corner of the earth to the other–instantaneously!" In their fervor for technological progress, however, the situationists did not consider technology's "dehumanizing aspects," or "whether or not modern technology, born out of the needs of capital, can be worthwhile in anything but a capitalist society," or who would even build these machines. (TV, the article insisted, is "inherently authoritarian," no matter who builds and uses it. In fact, articles in the FE dating back to the 1960s had questioned aspects of progress, modernity, and industrialization, an orientation that would become integral to the FE over the next 20 years.)

The FE also published sharp attacks on nationalism and national liberation movements, including zionism and Arab nationalism, that turned out to be in many ways incisive. This anti-nationalist and anti-state capitalist position came from the ultra-left communists, especially the International Communist Current (which I doubt had more than a dozen members), but also from the palpable lessons throughout the Third World. Though (in my view then and now) this orientation suffered from a certain scholasticism typical of ultra-left currents, it proved useful in critiquing and countering the mystique of national liberation movements that inevitably degenerated into dictatorships (where they weren't simply crushed); this would prove especially true during the most intense period of US military intervention in Central America, when we were largely correct in actively opposing the imperial violence and the death squad regimes while refusing to support the authoritarian nationalist guerrilla movement in El Salvador and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Fredy Perlman's short book, *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, which first appeared in the FE in the Winter 1984 issue, was a product of these conversations, and the examination

of nationalism remains a topic of concern for us–for me, in particular, in my investigations over the last several years into the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

A time of transformation and turmoil

Many of the group drifted away from the paper shortly after it got started, but a large number of them remain friends–no small accomplishment in any political milieu. We suffered our own squabbles over our various compromises with work and consumer culture, and our acts of submission, real or imagined. The arguments were sometimes moralistic in the style of the nineteenth century nihilists in novels like Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, or Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?* (whose title Lenin borrowed to write his Bolshevik polemic). They sometimes took a defiantly anti-moralistic stance, too–a favorite quip, from Blake's "Proverbs of Hell," was "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires." But the sucking sound and mock solemnity were also moments of laughter, at our political acquaintances, our friends, and ourselves. While the laughter may have been an evasion of the logical consequences of our argument, it was also at least implicitly a useful recognition of our limitations–an understanding that we did not have all the answers after all. "Puzzled by the contemporary movement of capital?" announced the subscription box. "So are we–subscribe anyway." I would like to think that because we were able to laugh at ourselves, we were able to maintain our principles, to live both against and within this society, to live with our failed efforts and our errors, and to remain friends.

Indeed, ironically, wrapped in the swaggering theoretical arrogance of the FE stance was a kernel of experimental practicality. Perhaps that was what my collaborator Peter Werbe's frequent joke, borrowed from an underground comic character, that he was "only in it for the entropy," ended up meaning: radical activity was a process, personal and collective; the important thing was to keep pushing, make mistakes, push more. The "sixties" would never end; radical theory and praxis were an ongoing project (one of our favorite words), a lifelong process of social and individual transformation. [10]

Our old friend Rick London, a Detroiter and former FE staffer from the first ten years now living in San Francisco, recently told me a story in which a zen master was asked if he had ever made any mistakes. His answer was, appropriately, that a zen monk's entire life is one mistake after another. I know the feeling. Similarly, the FE collective's attempts to find a revolutionary synthesis, to break new ground, led to exciting discoveries and a fresh paradigm for looking at the world. Of course, it also had to lead to errors and excesses.

What is interesting, as Lorraine Perlman pointed out to me recently, was that almost all of the issues we took up then remain, in significant ways, unresolved–the question of organization, of our relation to politics and political movements; the problem of nationalism; the critique of culture, daily life, and authoritarian conditioning, where I think the FE wrote with energy and insight; the question of technology, science, and industrial plagues; the very question of reason and a possibility of an alternative reason. These questions will continue to confront us, and we have only our experience, our intuition, our flimsy theories, and life itself to respond.

One of my comrades recently disputed my comment that we were arrogant in those days. "Maybe you were," he said. Well, I know I was, but others who were around then simply rolled their eyes at his claim. In fact, the FE was pretty haughty and over-confident about its new ideas and actions and dismissive of the perceived worthlessness of the views and activity of others. Not only did many people of a variety of perspectives accuse us of arrogance, we were also frequently called hypocrites, since after our all-or-nothing declarations were sent to the printer, we couldn't claim to live differently from anyone else.

Looking back, I think they sometimes had a point. Not only were we severe toward people we disagreed with, our ideas did in fact find little practical outlet outside the pages of the paper. We used to joke that we were in many ways the object lessons of our own critique, and even, in more bitter moments, that the FE was little more than a hobby, something we did when we weren't doing what everyone else was–working and consuming. As time went on, we engaged in experimental activism that more hardened purists derided as "reformism" and "eclipse"–e.g., anti-nuclear activism and activism within the anti-nuclear movement, anti-war/anti-draft/anti-intervention activism, local environmental activism (most notably, to stop Detroit's trash incinerator), radical ecology activism, strike support, and even, ultimately, in the case of some of us, voting (but here I am moving too far into more recent

events that need much more discussion in a later article). Thus, during the 1980s and 1990s, we typically fought rearguard polemical battles with a small number of dogmatic, super-revolutionary critics who claimed to defend the positions we had taken in our earlier, "heroic" phase against our present "flabbiness" and "collapse," who might accuse us of going full circle to once more becoming a "voice of liberal Detroit."

By 1978, the FE had already started to publish explicitly luddite texts. TV, the article insisted, is "inherently authoritarian," no matter who builds and uses it.

Speaking for myself, at least, I think that even if we were arrogant, we weren't merely being arrogant; we were attempting to explore what we considered a more revolutionary perspective at a time of transformation and turmoil, both in the world capitalist system and in radical movements in response to it. We were not genteel in our approach, but the ideas had merit.

Nor do I think we went into eclipse, though I think it would be sheer denial to pretend that there are no (healthy, in my view) tensions between what the FE believed and argued some thirty years ago and what most of us believe and argue today. I gradually came to feel that if the practical reality of our daily activity was modest, and the consequences and meaning of our actions uncertain, then our texts should reflect this modesty, nuance, and uncertainty. Simple honesty and a growing humility about the 'vastness of the problems we face required that we engage in some "experiments with truth." This meant lowering the revolutionary decibel levels, for one thing. For another, it meant looking skeptically at the call to violence and the taking up of arms (which the paper, to its credit, did very early on in a series of critical articles challenging the shibboleths of revolutionary violence). And it meant a healthy skepticism toward absolutist expressions of all or nothing, or of representing "the totality, a radical posture that reflects far too literal a faith in labels and abstractions." Life is too full and too complex for me to take such discourse as seriously as I once did. As Blake put it, those who never alter their opinions are like standing water and breed "reptiles of the mind."

Certainly, though we were hardly the only ones to do so, our rediscovery of a libertarian radical perspective did in fact both foreshadow and reflect the emergence of new social movements, and with them anarchist values and politics, as well as the current culture of political experimentation and visionary resistance to the New World Order. This is true even though most of those movements emerged (as they had to) well behind our backs, and frequently through the activities of people with ideas different from our own (to name a few examples, deep and social ecology, eco-feminism, indigenous movements, radical democracy). It was to our credit that we were willing to take up these ideas and evolve, as we did in the 1980s and 1990s. If our own activities led to no more success than some of the activities of other well- meaning radicals with different views, be they "workerists," greens, non-party leftists, feminists, community organizers, or whoever, it was perhaps not so much the case that we were completely wrong, but rather that industrial capitalism has progressively narrowed the terrain of revolt to make the most radical (and perhaps utopian) desires less tenable and even less comprehensible.

We were always happy, and still are, to wear the mantle that an anonymous FBI agent once placed on our shoulders in his casual description of the project to his superiors. "The *Fifth Estate*," he reported, "supports the cause of revolution everywhere." Of course, in time we would come to doubt the promethean or political notion of revolution

itself, along with the over-determined notion of revolutionary "coherence," which had rapidly degenerated into an (increasingly incoherent) ideology. The insistence on critical coherence and the sanguine vision of revolution of the late 1970s were bound to erode during the course of the decades that were to follow of intellectual discovery, political experimentation, and the living of our lives. But the general orientation of expanding freedom, creating ethical and egalitarian communities, opposing a dehumanizing civilization, and rigorously examining our premises and activities has continued.

The enduring ideal of freedom

I began writing this essay without an outline in the only way I thought I could: writing from memory, and then turning to my file of back issues to fill in the many blanks. It has turned out much longer than I anticipated, and there is obviously much more to say. I had intended it to be a continuation of an article written ten years ago at the thirtieth anniversary, and instead I have not gone much further than that first incursion into our roots and history. Despite my intentions, this has become only a first installment in what after all will hopefully become a series of articles.

It has also turned out to be far more personal, more centered around my own perceptions than I thought it would, and for that I ask the pardon of my readers and my friends. Others would surely tell the story differently–I might have myself. I realized in the process of writing this that the history of the FE corresponds with most of my own life, and it has been harder to lay down in a linear text than I anticipated. It does seem to be the place to end these ruminations for now, nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1980s, when we began to question the technological system and to head in the direction of a radical ecological perspective, moving (we told ourselves) so far to the left that we fell off the spectrum altogether.

I have no doubt that the FE was and is an achievement, theoretically and journalistically. Our small group accomplished and continues to accomplish a lot with the relatively modest skills, talents, and resources at our disposal. I look at some of those pages from the early days now–their energy, their fury, their defiance, their insight, their occasionally tiresome certainty and lack of ambivalence, their swagger and their jargon–with a mix of admiration and embarrassment. I have the same mixed feelings looking at the paper today. But I am glad to see it out there, making trouble, pushing limits, seeking true understanding, and fighting for and dreaming of a new world.

I would like to think that the FE enjoyed no "classic period" or golden age, and that its best years lie ahead. In matters of reason and revolt, to paraphrase Breton's Second Manifesto of Surrealism, we require no ancestors–not even ourselves.

As for me, I was at the margin of the FE in the beginning and in a sense I have returned to the margin. I no longer have the time I once had for the project; other writing projects, as well as personal, familial, and parental obligations, now keep me from being as involved as I once was. I continue to remain in the paper's orbit, but I also have other lives to live, and it has fallen to others to carry the banner and to keep the project going. This essay is dedicated to them.

Not long after the ETR takeover of the FE, a letter arrived from California with a donation and the explanation that people at an anarchist cena had collected the funds "for the comrades at the Fifth Estate." This later led to a bumpy, useful, and somewhat brusque exchange (see related article). But the result was that a generation of elderly anarchists, mostly Italians but also from other ethnic backgrounds, discovered the paper and decided the FE was anarchist enough to merit their friendship and support. That community continued to support the paper until they mostly passed away. Through this network, we ended up becoming friends with some of the most fascinating people we have ever met–Marcus Graham, Attilio and Libera Bortolotti, Peter Puccio, Tony Bulgar, and of course Federico and Pura Arcos, who had participated in the Spanish Revolution and he in the resistance afterward. They became our elders in the ancient, tribal sense of the word, reminding us of a great human archetypal pattern at least as worthy as the others: the enduring ideal of freedom and the desire to establish an authentic community of equals.

Federico, who after going into exile in Canada collected a stunning archive of anarchist primary documents to which many researchers, academics, and activists have made pilgrimages, became a collaborator with Black & Red

and an indefatigable volunteer. He remains to this day the yayo or abuelo of a small community of like-minded friends here in Detroit, a model of a humble but meaningful, principled life, caring for and passing along the torch of a worthy ideal. As my friends and I have aged, the high-mindedness, courage, and modesty of our elder comrades here and elsewhere–who gave every means they had to change the world, and then lived with the consequences of revolutionary defeat while maintaining a new world in their hearts–have continued to serve us as reminders, and exemplars, of lives honorably lived.

Endnotes

1. "A. Shady Character" reported in the following issue that the trial was "boring…It bored us, it bored the jury. Our attorney, Ken Mogill, called it the most boring case he'd ever undertaken… [S]ome of us had wanted to blow up Ma Bell's Michigan headquarters that week, and there had been some talk of assassinating the president. Plans to kidnap and eat (raw) the enemies of communism everywhere had to be put off until the glare of the enormous publicity afforded our case by the bourgeois press had abated…" Such intransigence gives a sense of the degree of insubordination and audacity pervasive at the time, even if the article was a markedly piquant example.

2. Lorraine Perlman's *Having Little, Being Much* (Black and Red, 1989) does an admirable job of describing this milieu. Since Peter Werbe tells the story of the takeover of the paper by former staff members and their allies in his history of the FE, I won't repeat it here.

3. *Fly-Back* was one of many of the FE circle's spin-off publications, which also included *Bad Attitude*, an FE newsletter, Alan Franklin's *Modern Citizen Magazine*, and, most significantly, Ralph Franklin's *Daily Barbarian*, which he began publishing sporadically in 1979 after a centerfold poster he had proposed for the FE was rejected. Ralph decided he needed to do his own publication, but after the first issue, they all were published simultaneously as FE inserts anyway. Ralph spun the *Barbarian* into a poetry series and other cultural events that enjoyed widespread interest in the city. He was also a key participant in and frequently the instigator of many cooperative projects, including the Grinning Duck Club, a kind of voluntary cooperative social club and hangout and precursor of the free spaces, clubs, and infoshops that would later follow. In the 1980s, the Franklins, along with frequent FE illustrator Stephen Goodfellow and others, would also found the Layabouts, a radical band that became wildly popular in the Cass Corridor and a regular suspect at FE and other community benefits.

4. In *The Second Surrealist Manifesto*, in a long passage on defections from his movement, Andre Breton comments that it seems to him that his former comrades (who had abandoned surrealism for other pursuits, including allegiance to stalinism), and for that matter anyone at all, should find a way "to give an accounting for what they do and justify their position on a human level. The mind is not a weathervane; at least it is not merely a weathervane. It is not enough to suddenly decide that one must devote oneself to a specific activity, and it is not unusual that, when someone takes such a step, he feels himself incapable of demonstrating objectively how he arrived at that point and where precisely he had been prior to reaching it." This is not the time and place for me to explain how I abandoned even my eclectic Leninism for full participation in the project of the FE. Over 1974–75 I wrote a critique of my ultra-left friends, "Anarchism and Anti-Authoritarianism: A Contribution to a Critique" (which I also dubbed "an 'Eat the Rich Gang' Production"). By 1976, some of my criticisms remained (and looking back at the paper, and rereading my polemic, some of the points seem valid even now, if most of the essay, in part a defense of mass technics, was worthless). But I was going through a paradigm change, and it was as if I had to set down a last energetic defense of my old viewpoint before abandoning it. I threw it in a file drawer, and left for Mexico. A year later, I returned some kind of anarchist, took up with my old friends, and began collaborating regularly on the FE.

5. In his excellent environmental history, *The Late, Great Lakes* (Wayne State University Press, 1987), William Ashcroft, with whom we later collaborated in fighting the Detroit trash incinerator, reports that a program-

mer for computers on the LANDSAT Satellites, which photograph the earth's surface from space, told him, "We can't program the computer to recognize the Rouge River as water. The Rouge is so filthy that if the computer recognizes it as water, it won't recognize anything else in the world."

6. I have more to say about the work of both Zerzan and Brubaker in a future essay on FE history that considers theoretical development in more depth. They are subjects too large to include in this essay. I intend to reprint some of Bob's published and unpublished work in the future. As for Zerzan, let me say that despite general agreement on his contribution to the critique of unionism and his work on the luddites, his articles claiming to document the breakdown of capitalism and imminent revolution were met with more skepticism, and usually were printed simply because much of the anecdotal evidence was interesting, and the claims provocative. Early on, the Detroit staff began printing disclaimers with his articles, and by the early 1980s, when he began writing his now famous essays on time, language, and related themes, they almost never were reprinted without responses. These essays, which have hardly been seen by those who read him with interest today, deserve to be collected and reprinted.

7. When John Sinclair, listed in the FE staff box in the 1970s as the paper's official political prisoner after he was set up on drug charges and sent to prison, came out of prison proclaiming himself pro-capitalist, the paper printed a fake ad spoofing the previous campaign to defend him, demanding, "Jail John Now!" In an article published in 1985 in the *Detroit Free Press*, Sinclair told our old friend, reporter Bill McGraw, "They argue with people who agree with them on ninety percent of the issues. They debate how many angels can dance on the head of a pin." Of course, when John was saying, "We used to call it revolution–now we call it business," and praising the cops (proving, one FE wag later commented, that prisons do occasionally rehabilitate people for capitalism, though John was incapable of playing that role for very long), we disagreed by more than ten percent. But he had a point, even if I still think most of the arguments (if not all the invective) were meaningful. But I am glad that much of the rancor of those days has faded.

8. The line came from a witty poster Linda Weins did of movie stills with cartoon balloons to lampoon the San Francisco Bay area post-situationist milieu. "Annihiland Presents: Still Life in the Inner Circle" was typical of individually produced work at the time, but it was one of the best I saw, reproducing the passions, hypocrisies, and quarrels of these ultra-radical enrage circles in order to dig down to the hard substrate where the personal and political came together. The poster was about San Francisco, but we recognized ourselves in it, too. In one panel, a still from Little Caesar, John Zerzan/Edward G. Robinson tells Bob Brubaker/Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., "Listen, Bob, our lives may be a shambles, and we may be emotional cripples, but at least we put out flyers!" Brubaker responds, "Yes, John! And surely that alone elevates us!" This was Linda's swan song from that milieu; she briefly visited Detroit in 1981 and helped put out an issue with another of her posters as a centerfold (alas, poorly reproduced by the FE printer, whom we owed thousands of dollars we never paid and who we feared was the only one in town willing to print the paper). Linda was extremely perceptive and creative–she arrived in Detroit with a gift of fortune cookies she had bought empty and to which she had added gnomic situationist utterances and pleas to be liberated from slave labor in the fortune cookie factory. We were sorry she didn't stay, but who would choose Detroit over the Bay Area, except for those of us doomed to live our lives out here?

9. See "PBB: Case Study on an Industrial Plague," in the May 1976 FE, and "Mexican Oil Spill Disaster: Industrial Plague Widens," in the October 1979 FE. For discussion of the limitations in the PBB article, including the influence of Murray Bookchin on it, see my Beyond Bookchin: Preface for a Future Social Ecology (Autonomedia/Black & Red, 1996), chapter 5. I intend to explain the use of pseudonyms in a future article.

10. Emerson comments in his essay on self-reliance that "an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." I think there is some truth to this in the post-1975 history of the FE, which was almost from the beginning, and has remained until its most recent period, a handful of people, sometimes only two or three, with perhaps a few more coming in to help in some small way. I intend to talk more about this history in a future article–the process through which we produced the paper; but there is no doubt that Peter Werbe was, from 1975 until

the paper became a Detroit-Tennessee operation, the person without whom the paper would not have lasted long into the 1980s. More than anyone else, he deserves credit for its survival, at least until our friends in Pumpkin Hollow saved the paper from extinction.

David Watson
Notes toward a history of the *Fifth Estate*
Part 1: 1975–1981
2005

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