

Both Sides Now

an exchange

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)
Seaweed

2006

FE Note: A spin-off from our letters section, “Both Sides Now” presents two distinct views on a controversial topic, side by side. On the left [in print edition], FE reader Seaweed elaborates points first raised in his “Land And Liberty” (FE #367, p. 22–23). His views might be shared by many *Fifth Estate* readers and writers, but by no means all, as clearly evidenced by EB Maple’s response (see “Guns again?” in Letters, FE #370, p. 52). Hence, on the right [in print edition], we present Maples’s elaboration of an “opposing” view.

Seaweed

Can we claim autonomous space without getting bruised? Should we base the realization of our dreams and desires on a patient wait for objective conditions to create openings in the dominant reality? I don’t think so, unless anarchist space only refers to poetry readings.

I think we all agree that we—alone or in groups—should actively create fissures and breaks in the reality of domination using our will and imagination, our creative and destructive capacities. To me that means that a healthy community or a momentum of resistance would have a martial aspect.

Martial skills are not just guns. Guns are weapons—among many available—that could be a component of a martial approach. But, martial knowledge and experience would also tell us when to retreat and regroup, so I’m not only talking about fighting or weapons or always taking the offensive.

A martial aspect to our resistance might include, for some at least, acquiring a weapon, but it would also suggest learning martial arts, studying military history, acquiring survival skills, playing games which develop tactical and strategic thinking, and generally, making room for martial approaches within the anti-authoritarian struggle.

I’m not suggesting re-exploring a tired leftist “armed struggle” approach—but encouraging something completely different. We can learn from the past attempts of AIM, the Black Panthers, etc., but only as part of a larger study of martial traditions and attempts—not as admirable models.

There is no question that the state has overwhelming military might. For any group to advocate for an attempt to militarily overthrow the state at this point would be plainly stupid. None of my friends and allies want to sacrifice their lives. There is no naivete as to the military might of the state. However, I believe that some knowledge of martial skills and an acceptance of martial approaches generally could be helpful, even critical, when confronting authority. I’m talking about winning battles not about winning a war. I’m talking about training and demystification of weaponry and martial skills.

Not everyone has to participate in this aspect. I recognize that a diversity of means is needed for us to succeed. But the debate, for me at least, isn’t between “armed struggle” and “popular revolts” or between “violence” and “non-

violence”, it’s between making room for a martial component, in all the diversity that implies, and not making room for such a component in our struggle.

This isn’t about machismo or police plants. Martial study needn’t become the central focus of the anti-authoritarian milieu. But I am confident that creating space for these skills to be explored is a critical aspect of resistance.

E.B. Maple

While I’ve gained a tremendous amount of personal reward from studying martial disciplines for over 30 years, I can’t think of much I’ve learned that is useful to a revolutionary movement. Nor from time spent at the rifle range.

I’ve seen a lot of advocates of martial arts and weapon training, armed struggle, guerrilla warfare, and the like during my lifetime; most of them have a short-shelf life in our movements. They quickly pass through after denouncing people as not being ready for revolution, leaving others to clean up the mess they often create. Some are cops, some are plants, most are just angry men. (I don’t think Seaweed fits any of these categories. From what I know of Seaweed, he has a solid and admirable history within the anti-authoritarian movement.)

Sometimes, like in the case of the Black Panthers, the outcome from a martial approach is deaths and long jail sentences. Several BPPers are still in prison after 30 years, and the death toll at the hands of murderous cops is near 40. I’m not sure that the Black Panthers have much to teach us when it comes to martial matters other than in the negative.

We’re often told that the Panthers were much more than guns. Indeed, they had admirable community programs and gave a sense of pride to many black people who viewed them as willing to heroically stand up to racist cops and politicians. The same is true with MOVE and the American Indian Movement. But for all their bravery, nothing approaching a mass movement coalesced around these organizations; instead, their armed resistance was a spectacle eagerly consumed, but from a distance, by their potential constituencies. Most people hesitate to link up with an organization which calls for “revolutionary suicide.”

Those groups read Sun Tzu, Klauswitz, Tukhachevsky, Geronimo, Mao, Giap, Debray, Guevara, Marighella, but whatever they surmised from these strategists, as well as time spent in rifle practice, it never did them a bit of good when confronted with the overwhelming military might of the state.

A different approach comes from Tai Chi Chuan practice, which emphasizes harmony and balance and when done together with others, creates an amazing sense of energy. That spirit is what many Tai Chi instructors see as its transformative quality for a troubled world. Its philosophy, similar to anarchism, is based on the Tao Te Ching by Lao-Tze which I would recommend over any of the authors I mention above.

In the working parts of Detroit and its inner suburbs, great numbers of our neighbors have weapons in their homes as I do. Many of the men are army veterans, some of combat. If there was a popular uprising, or the need for community defense arose, armed units could be erected, complete with military strategy. Reading Sun Tzu may have some marginal worth—but me, I’m going to the poetry reading.

FE Note: Please let us know what you think of the “Both Sides Now” feature: give us feedback and suggest future topics.

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