

Letters to the *Fifth Estate*

Various Authors

In the Spring 2006 edition of FE, Fred from San Francisco wrote, “Congrats on changing anarchist to anti-authoritarian on your front page description,” and we asked, “Do readers have any thoughts about the change?” This issue, more readers responded, and so did we.

Friends,

Recently, FE posed the question: Do readers have any thoughts about dropping anarchist from the masthead, and replacing it with anti-authoritarian?

Do possums try to cross highways? Does the Pope smile when little Tommy climbs into his lap?

I, for one, commend the change.

As an ideology, anarchism has a specific history. It was born in an era of mass labor upheavals, and is orientated around the primacy of class struggle. Among the many criticisms leveled at anarcho-syndicalism, anarchist communism, etc., is that these tendencies are mired in that history, that past. (At the risk of drifting hopelessly from the topic, as a platformist, I find much truth in these criticisms.) But whatever the case—and in spite of the problems that exist within class struggle anarchism—few would argue that these tendencies are not, in fact, the ideological descendants of (one wing of) the original anarchist tradition.

Not so with primitivism (the ideology that FE claims). Primitivism was born of a different era, that of rampant pollution and global warming; it makes the bold assertion that technology is the oppressor, and the earth, the oppressed. Hence, the ultimate goal of revolution is the destruction of civilization, rather than the liberation of the workers. (If I misrepresent primitivism, it is utterly without malice.)

These differences, the designation of the oppressed, and of the ultimate goal of liberation—indeed the very meaning of liberation—are not mere doctrinal details. They are fundamental. Primitivism and anarchism, though they have much to learn from one another, are more different than alike. Primitivism is not some offshoot of anarchism; it is a thing apart.

As I have said, I am of the opinion—unpopular in class struggle anarchist circles—that anarchism has things to learn from primitivism. But when primitivists employ a clumsy hyphenation, anarcho-primitivism, in order to create the appearance of a direct connection to anarchism, I can only wonder, “Why?” Are they embarrassed and so seeking to leech legitimacy from a tradition with a longer history (but with few real similarities)? Can primitivists not stand and claim their ideology, without shame? I know and admire certain primitivists. They are sincere and intelligent. They have no cause for such discomfiture.

At any rate, under whatever masthead, I will continue to read and enjoy your magazine.

prole cat

Georgia and Kentucky

Dear Fifth Estate:

I read the short letter you printed in your Spring 2006 edition about the guy talking about how you now had “anti-authoritarian” on your front cover instead of “anarchism.” I find it rather self-defeating that anarchists are afraid of anarchy now! Sounds rather cowardly to me.

I never thought in my whole life that I would send you a letter of complaint since you have been my very favorite publication since 1988. Since when is there something wrong with chaos, bomb throwers, and violence?

Chris
Seattle

Your renunciation...

of the “anarchist” affiliation is possibly your only act of editorial honesty in over twenty years. The weasel word “anti-authoritarian,” however, is in your case no great improvement because if you are not really anarchist-terminology aside—you are not really anti-authoritarian either. I suggest “statist” or, if that is still more honesty than you can muster, “leftist,” which, of course, implies statist. Your statism has been obvious for almost as long as your cowardice. “Anti-authoritarianism” is the refuge of scoundrels.

Your pretext is that you do not want to be identified with everybody who claims to be an anarchist. If you don’t want to be identified with all self-styled anarchists, and yet you are yourselves anarchists, you would contest the pretenders on anarchist terrain. You are prudent to walk away from that, because every time you try, you disclose your statism, reformism, and overall enervation.

But you can never undo the fact that when you were revolutionary (30 or, generously, 25 years ago), you inspired, directly or indirectly, the anarchists you are now afraid to be linked with, lest the FBI search your suburban homes in Detroit or your hippie hovel in Tennessee. We never forget.

A scary anarchist
Oakland, Calif.

Anu Bonobo responds: Only as recently as 2004—in a gesture that conformed to the marketing wisdom of the magazine industry—did we add any pithy phrase filled with buzzwords to the front page of our magazine.

For years, simply the title *Fifth Estate* and the non-serviam logo served our purposes. When we finally succumbed to the advice of the publishing whizzes, we of course debated what the wording should be. For only one edition (FE 367, Winter 2004/2005), we used the phrase “an anarchist magazine of ideas and actions”; then, from our anniversary issue through Spring 2006 (FE 372), we described ourselves as an anti-authoritarian magazine of ideas and action.”

Before 2004, the last time we used a similar phrase was in the mid-1970s, when, during our brief commercial period, we were Detroit’s *Alternative Weekly*, a claim now best taken by Motown’s popular and formidable free paper the *Metro Times*.

For us, our ideas and the words that express them are not stagnant, immutable, or non-negotiable. Still further, we liked anti-authoritarian as an adjective as opposed to anarchy as a noun. For some, “anarchy” is an irrepressible, utopian desire; for others, it is a fixed, left-wing ideology steeped in 19th century assumptions; then, some see anarchy only as a militant negation of the present society and not a plan or program for the future; and for still others, it’s the natural state of being before the state imposed its unnatural institutions upon us. Further still, bringing up the overlapping ideas promised by primitivism reminds us of radicals’ interconnected commitments but also shows us how thorny the path towards any theoretical clarity can be. We’ve never avoided the obvious tension in these terminologies; at its best, our extended milieu somehow marries the best that seemingly opposed tendencies have to offer, worrying not about whether its consistent with some arbitrary program or predefined set of principles.

Our decision to reject the “anarchist” tag is more accurately a rejection of all such labels that impose ideological and idealistic imperatives on a complex and contested social terrain.

We would rather invent ourselves than our latest logo; we seek liberty itself, not the best phrase with which to define it.

Or, as one of our collaborators suggested while we debated these letters, “I would be elated if we dumped any wording on the FE cover that attempts to define the magazine. Let’s remove ‘an anti-authoritarian magazine of ideas & action’ and vow not to replace it with anarchy, anarchist, anarchism, or anything else. Categories do not help define ideas and action; they suffocate them.”

Creators of the Fifth Estate:

I recently was blessed by having someone read your article on New Orleans to me (see “Letter from New Orleans,” John Clark, FE #371, Winter 2006).

It was so relieving to hear someone writing about what anarchy is, or what it can be rather than defining it as what it is not. To me, anarchy isn’t so much against hierarchy and oppression; it just isn’t hierarchical or oppressive in nature.

I experience anarchy every day of my life as being a leap of faith, a sense of trust that an organic social order exists to catch us as we let go of our desire to control. That as we take on the responsibility of truly being sovereign beings, we are able to develop more direct and hopefully meaningful relationships with each other and this life.

Samuel Stevenson
Cliff, New Mexico

We welcome letters that respond to articles or report on your activities. Please write us! Email correspondence is preferred. Please limit letters to 300 words. We reserve the right to edit for length, grammar, and clarity. If you are interested in a longer exchange, please let us know.

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fifth Estate

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/373-fall-2006/letters-to-the-fifth-estate>
Fifth Estate #373, Fall 2006

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