

Letters

Various Authors

2007

Picking on Chavez

To the Fifth Estate:

I disagree with *Fifth Estate* picking on Hugo Chavez (See Spring 2007 FE, "In Chavez's Venezuela: Continued Repression of Popular Protest").

Most of the charges made are correct; his regime is dictatorial. But there's also the tremendous work done in the barrios (or misiones as they call them), where clinics staffed by Cuban doctors are now almost in all of them, and public housing has been built. I visited one in Caracas on opening day: 218 units rented to poor families at 10 percent of their salary, or free if unemployed.

But that's not my real reason for not attacking Chavez. The real reason is how he foments anti-US imperialism, not just in Venezuela, where the newly created militias, now armed, will fight if US invades, but all over Latin America.

As long as the US tries to dominate the world, especially economically, no small country can survive within a democratic framework; it must use totalitarian methods or be overthrown. We have umpteen examples of this.

I view the US as the most dangerous and most terrorist nation in the world, and just as we supported FDR against the Nazis despite his concentration camps for the Japanese, so we must support all peoples and nations who resist US (and Israeli and Russian) imperialism.

John Gerassi

New York City

Walker Lane responds: John Gerassi's long career in publishing and activism is worth a Google or a trip to the library. His 1965 book, *The Great Fear in Latin America*, written after meeting Fidel and Che and traveling through the continent as a reporter for *Time* and *The New York Times*, was almost required reading for 1960s radicals. His father before him, a surrealist painter and Spanish Civil War figure, is also a fascinating historical personage.

This is a very unusual response from John. Almost all leftists deny that their favorite socialist country is undemocratic, even to the point of grotesquely claiming that long-ruling dictators embody the revolution and the aspirations of the people. They never, as John does, state that a regime is "dictatorial," and certainly don't advocate "totalitarian methods." This is honesty, but of a shocking variety.

He's right about the recent history. Third World countries which have had the temerity to rid themselves of brutal U.S. client regimes, e.g., Chile, Nicaragua, Iran, Cuba, and a host of others in the 20th century, have had to contend with American financed counter-revolutionary subversion and violence.

However, leftist dishonesty and hypocrisy is legendary. Think of the apologists for Soviet and Chinese police states who claimed those repressive regimes as "socialist." Their polemic against a reality obvious to all but those

**NO
POLICE!**

**--by order of the Loitering
Department**

A Runtzily Cloud from FFFF Systems Magazine, from 04H010, Firmware M1.40000

blinded by ideology corrupted their own political activities as well with an undemocratic methodology and deception mirroring the regimes they slavishly admired.

This isn't Gerassi, though. He says, once U.S. clients are kicked out, the situation requires less than socialist democracy to defend against their return. It's not a hell of a choice if he's correct. It would be nice, however, if one of these so-called anti-capitalist revolutions would at least give it a try. And, anarchists, as well as most people not carrying water for some police state, know how dramatically means effect ends.

The point has been well made in the articles published here by our Venezuelan comrades and one I wrote following my trip to the country at the same time as John, that Chavismo doesn't even ascend to the level of an anti-capitalist revolution. Does the Chavez government give the people a better deal under capitalism? Yes. Does he do a service in denouncing the U.S. empire for what it is? Yes. Does that mean we shouldn't criticize Chavismo? Definitely not.

There are deep problems within Venezuela and it is doubtful that the Chavez government has the ability to solve them. But as the Bolivarian state becomes the agency for even attempting to change the equation of wealth and poverty, it dictates increased centralization of the state, corruption, and internal repression.

Our task is to be critical of this process, not explain it away.

***Fifth Estate* Benefit**

Dear Friendly Fifth Estate Folks:

I've been reading your magazine since I was 15 and it's great to read such critical inquiry and analysis every issue.

In your Spring 2007 issue my partner and I read your pleas for support and she, my roommate and I decided to throw a benefit for FE. We had a tamale party and made a whole spat of tamales, sold the extras and got some folks to sign up to subscribe to FE and also order books from the Barn.

Hence, the big ol' check included with this letter.

I hope y'all know there's a gaggle of folks out here in Tucson who support FE.

I know from hanging out with the *Earth First! Journal* crew here that it's really tough putting out a publication like FE and it's great that there are folks still committed to putting it out quarterly, after so many years.

A lot of what comes out in the FE is among the most exciting and relevant analysis and social criticism being assembled anywhere today, and I always look forward to reading a new issue.

We had a lot of fun making (and eating) tamales. Some folks from the *EF! Journal* collective helped make tamales as well. We would have sent you some with this letter, but I think they would have gotten yucky. So, keep up all the good work.

Geoff (A former Detroit(ish)er)

Tucson

FE responds: It's events like this that insures the *Fifth Estate* will be around for a long time. Thanks!

FE Spot On

Dear Folks at FE:

I have to say right off the bat that the Spring 2007 issue of FE was one of the best yet. Starting off with the article on the food service industry was spot on, this being one of the most exploited sectors of the economy.

Good to see the piece on social movement in Venezuela with its sharp focus on Chavez's government and how we should not be taken in by all of the hype. At the same time, the article ends with a forecast of renewed grassroots protests this being something we can all get behind.

The "Strategy of Concealment" article was interesting, provoking a lot of thought on how language is cloaked and camouflaged, a subject I had not really given a lot of attention to.

"It's Anarchy Time" shows that cultural events have a strong place in social change. Musical presentations, street theater, can be more potent than status quo protesting. The rest of the issue was also very good and I'll just say that the piece on Helen Hill was truly moving and inspired me to try a little harder.

I have two suggestions for future issues:

1. Perhaps an issue could be built around two very important issues that I think keep people down in capitalist societies; lack of housing (or it's too expensive) and health-care. Anarchist solutions, particularly in the USA, can help on a practical level and inspire the wider anti-capitalist movement.

2. I would like to see an exploration/ critique of Islam from an anti-authoritarian perspective. Are there any liberatory aspects? How do we deal with the scarier jihadist manifestations? I find the homophobic/gender discrimination and prohibitionism aspects particularly troubling.

BMN in PA

Slang as a Weapon

Dear Fifth Estate:

I just finished reading the Spring 2007 issue and was impressed by the content and layout. It is the best issue you've released since the late 80's and early 90's.

Roger Farr's article on slang as a weapon of the "dangerous classes" (See "The Strategy of Concealment") was thoughtful and stimulating. All the same, I had difficulty relating what he is talking about to the world of today.

For the most part, the slang people make use of currently is derived from pop culture; idiotic blockbuster movies, vacuous television sitcoms and jaundiced "musicians." The sort of slang and parallel language developed by Wobblies in early 20th century America has been scattered to the winds. I have never encountered a fellow worker (other than an IWW member) calling someone "Mr. Block" or using various slang terms created by Wobblies to describe working conditions.

There is no richly developed language-slang or otherwise-any more. More often than not, I notice co-workers using utterly empty slang they've picked up from the latest Hollywood blockbuster. The sad part of it is that the effects of pop culture aren't limited to the way it shapes language. It affects people's bearing, gestures and expressions.

The strongly etched individuals who were part of the IWW in early 20th century America were, in contrast, shaped by the stories they told, the encounters they had, the books they read, the hard physical labor they engaged in, financial hardship, and most of all, the working class culture they were immersed in. All of these factors helped meld together the slang they used and the general language they spoke.

But I realize Farr is talking about creating a dissident slang and strategy of concealment in the here and now. I cannot disagree or argue with people who want to do such a thing. Nonetheless, I think language and the way people express themselves naturally changes when they change the way they relate to one another.

I also think that language is being degraded. Instead of kids actually learning to spell and read, they are off in the corner text-messaging and playing the latest videogame. I am not a fan of the asylum known as modern schooling, but I sure as hell am frightened to death at the illiteracy and sheer ignorance of people today. In such a predicament it seems like a bad idea to tell people to throw out a language they can't even speak or write.

When Alice Becker-Ho wrote about slang and argot she was relating it to a very specific context. Whether writing about the Roma or medieval bandits and "criminals" like Villon she related it to a broader social and cultural context. These contexts were often extremely colorful and teeming with life. The language spoken naturally grew out of that environment.

What do we have today, culturally or socially, that parallels such social environments? Nothing that I know of. Language doesn't develop out of a vacuum (at least ones that have substance and meaning to them); it matures and develops as different people mix with one another. To suggest that we just develop a new language using slang and argot doesn't vie with the historical record. Language changes when people change. That point, I think, was missed in Farr's article.

Anthony Leskov

Portland, Ore.

Discursive Interactions

Dear FE:

Despite the clear context of intra-anarchist discussions in my editorial in *Anarchy* #60 (available online at anarchymag.org) Roger Farr, in his article “The Strategy of Concealment” (FE #375) insists that my annoyance at the unfortunately pervasive anarchist reluctance/refusal to define buzzwords (or to use idiosyncratic definitions) has something in common with the attempt of “the masters of this society” to squelch slang and cant.

When faced with the surveillance of the state and its agents, I would insist that we enmesh our discursive interactions with as many layers of code and ambiguity as we can muster—provided this occurs without lapsing into total confusion. But that’s not what I was writing about.

When anarchists and other revolutionaries are writing and speaking to and for each other, we need to be able to communicate effectively, honestly, and in good faith; that’s the basis of discovering affinity and the potential for solidarity.

As I wrote: “If the point is to extend the reach of anarchist ideas... then insisting on uncommon, confusing, or manipulative meanings for expression that are (mostly) already well understood by the average curious reader is a self-defeating strategy.” I still think that’s abundantly clear.

Lawrence Jarach

Co-editor, *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*

PO Box 3448

Berkeley CA 94703

Anarchy vs. Anti-Authoritarian

Note. In the above title, in the print original, the at sign is used to denote the circle-A sign for Anarchy. The word “anarchy” does not appear.

To My Dearest Fifth Estate:

Thank you for doing such an awesome magazine! I especially enjoyed the Spring 2006 issue: the article by Peter Lamborn Wilson about the Amish, the stuff on Chavez’s Venezuela and the two on the civil war in so-called “Spain.” It’s good to read an anarchist publication that has a balance of historic and current struggles. It often seems like there’s too much history in the anarchist community, and although our history is full of lessons, what good are those if we don’t support the actions of people utilizing those lessons now?

I’m writing to add my two cents on the debate of anarchist v. anti-authoritarian in your recent letters section. (a bit late I know). I agree most with your current choice—no labels! Why tie ourselves down? But specifically I’d like to respond to a letter in the Fall 2006 issue from “Prolecat.”

This letter writer asks the question, if anarchism and primitivism have such distinct histories (one is born of the labor movement, while the latter is more environmentalist), why should primitivists “employ a clumsy hyphenation like anarcho-primitivism? “Can primitivists not stand and claim their ideology, without shame?”

I have a few answers to this question. The first is that I think many of us came to anarchism from a simple examination of the word itself. It comes from the Greek Anarkhos, leaderless, which is something I cannot help but agree with. To claim only that technology is the oppressor and the Earth as the oppressed is to ignore the terrible oppression perpetrated by certain groups of people against others.

Would it not be conceivable that society with very primitive technology or even none, a primitive society, could exist where one group of people exploits or abuses another? In fact has such a situation not occurred at certain times in history? There might be primitivists who do not think it necessary to eliminate hierarchy in all its forms, but I cannot count myself among them.

The second is that of course many of us respect the anarchist history and even many of its thinkers: Kropotkin, Bakunin, Goldman, etc., although we sometimes may disagree with them. We respect efforts such as the land collectivizations by Spanish peasants in the civil war, struggles among people of a more primitive time and with less access to the technology of their day.

For these reasons I consider it entirely appropriate to integrate the two ideologies especially for a magazine such as Fifth Estate which celebrates both constantly.

I prefer to call myself an anarchist-anti-civilizationist, if that doesn't sound too awkward, someone eagerly awaiting the collapse of civilization and the beautiful decay and regrowth it will bring with it, perhaps a world without totalitarian agriculture or electronic mediation, but not necessarily the complete elimination of art, language and all technology unlike many primitivists.

In any case, like "Prolecat," I will continue to buy and devour your publication, under whatever or no heading.

Daniel Brandt Winnipeg

Manitoba

P. S.: I find it dishonest and hypocritical that while Peter Lamborn Wilson takes certain communes to task for their "internet obsessions," FE encourages email correspondence.

Defending Derrick Jensen

Editors:

The first time I heard Derrick Jensen speak he was saying we should not attack those who have a different tactic than we do if the goal is the same, i.e., to bring civilization down, defining civilization as the dominant hierarchical and most violently destructive mode of human existence.

He was talking about the ELF activists who had burned an SUV and the negative responses it got from many in the movement who agreed with their greater goals. I think the FE review in the Winter 2007 issue of Jensen's book, *Endgame Vol. 2, Resistance*, was at least a bit unfair because Jensen never said the ELF activists and others who were caught were "stupid."

He said they got caught because of some stupid little things they had done, but he also pointed out that most activists doing similar work haven't been caught because they didn't. Very helpful info it would seem to me, and I don't think discouraging such dialogue at this time is a very ecologically sound strategy. Cooperation, not competition, is what we lack.

Jensen's work has been generally good, and I would prefer that people read it and decide for themselves what they can or cannot get from it rather than be discouraged to pick it up. He has, as you say, a "very readable and compelling" style, and he has contributed some very good points about pacifism and abuse, among other things.

We should never buy into cult-think or leave broad statements unexamined. The review sounds bitter because he didn't give us specific marching orders that were guaranteed to be 100 percent successful. While that would be nice, it is a bit much to ask.

However, I do share some of your frustration with this book in that it has such a narrow focus for being such a tome. His obsession with "counter-violence" fails to explore the other modes of resistance that he mentions at the end, but not in any detail.

I also agree with him that "defensive rights always trump offensive rights" (isn't that democracy?), but I think he would also agree with you, as I do, that there are "many layers of retreat and restraint shy of killing."

While Derrick insists on "doing whatever it takes," he clearly retains such a pacifist attitude that he is not a very convincing armed revolutionary. Thus, I think those who read this book may be a little surprised at your characterization of it.

Derrick's work is valuable because of the love for the natural world he is able to convey while exploring the awful reality of civilization without the arrogance you mention of so many of the other writers on this subject.

With regard to authors in general, it is helpful to remember that no one person is going to have all the answers, which is why increased public dialogue is so very important. Not many are pursuing it from this angle.

Richard Moore, in his book, *Escaping the Matrix: how “we the people” can change the world*, suggests employing community dialogues in the form of Wisdom Councils using Dynamic Facilitation. Community dialogues on the big subjects are critical to even beginning to find solutions.

Scientists studying “swarm intelligence” would likely agree. The answers will be in the harmonics that can occur in a community dialogue if properly facilitated. Obviously he has me agreeing with him.

What Jensen does repeatedly is to call us to action of some kind to resist civilization while reminding us that we already have a model of sustainability from the few tribal cultures that are left. As for the “miracles” that will bring civilization down, civilization has its vulnerable points not the least of which is the compliance of the general population. Human attitudes have the ability to change as quickly as our planet’s climate.

If we can continue the necessary dialogue about the planet’s “chronic illness of elite rule,” we may be able to address its “acute infection of unsustainable practices.” One can call it a miracle, but it may be a natural phenomenon akin to the gag reflex. One can only swallow so much crap before one gags.

Howard Switzer
Green Linden, Tenn.

Thin, Hazy Line

Dear Fifth Estaters:

After Ron Sakolsky (see Spring 2006 FE, “No More Safety Valves”) took me to task for buying into a government agency—the Federal Communications Commission—I was amused to see your pleas for U.S. dollars in the next issue, which arrived by U.S. mail, printed on paper made by a major manufacturing firm, inks purchased from another.

It’s truly a thin, hazy line about what societal institutions an anarchist can cooperate with.

If you were really as hard-core as Sakolsky propounds, you’d be delivering your publication by special courier, printing with home-made paper and inks, and soliciting donation in kind, or of food and clothing, or precious metals and gemstones, right?

Nevertheless, in spite of your failings with respect to completely fulfilling our shared vision, you are a vital addition to my intellectual diet.

Here’s a small donation (in U.S. dollars and a bank check; please, forgive me!). I want to keep the *Fifth Estate* intact.

Martin Holsinger
Nashville, Tenn.

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E.G. and Anarchy in Winnipeg

I noted in your Spring 2007 issue, the resurgence of interest in Emma Goldman (see “Anarchy in Murfreesboro” and “Emma Goldman: Beyond Anarchist Icon”).

Last winter, I discovered the inspiration by reading EG’s *Living My Life*, and an excellent little Canadian bio titled *The World’s Most Dangerous Woman* (Moritz and Moritz) which details her visits to several Canadian cities including Winnipeg.

As it was approaching the 100th anniversary of her first visit to Winnipeg, I organized an event to celebrate her and anarchy in our city.

It was held in May at Mondragon Bookstore and Coffeehouse (anarchist collective, run for 10 years and seller of FE) during our annual Mayworks Festival of Labour and the Arts.

We had an opening talk on anarchy by Patrick McGuire followed by the performance of the song, “Emma Goldman” (performed by Patrick on guitar and Garth Harding on accordion; a rousing, spirited rendition). Paul Burros then spoke about Emma in Winnipeg and her life and work.

An excellent local actress, Sharon Bajer, dressed in period costume as Emma Goldman, performed EG's 1930's London speech, "An Anarchist Looks at Life." It was a huge hit. The 80 or so people in the sold-out room were thoroughly inspired and entertained. Our event wrapped up with a set of radical bluegrass by a six-piece folk group, The Magnificent Sevens.

Anarchy is alive and well in Winnipeg. There is an excellent community involved at Mondragon, supporting the Junto Local 91 Radical Library, meetings in the Emma Goldman Grassroots Centre or the Rudolf Rocker Cultural Centre, coming together in critical mass bike rides, connecting through CKUW radio's "Black Mask" program and hanging out at the Bike Dump.

Tim Brandt

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fe — at- fifthestate -dot — org

OR for you old-schoolers:

PO Box 201016,

Ferndale, MI 48220



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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/376-halloween-2007/letters>

Fifth Estate #376, Halloween, 2007

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