

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

2008

Send letters to

fe — at — fifthestate — dot — org

or

Fifth Estate

P.O.B. 201016,

Ferndale MI 48220

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Counterfeiting Mischief

I've been taking my time enjoying the Summer 2008 issue of *Fifth Estate* and just read "Counterfeiting Sovereignty" by Don LaCoss. The story about the superdollar in the last paragraph of column 1 and then the top of col. 2, p. 20 is amazing. Given the reported cases where people (like Iraq proconsul Paul Bremer) have gone into hot spots and started handing out money, the counterfeit idea makes a certain sense. I suppose the stuff keeps a certain value, as long as it keeps circulating abroad, causing who knows what sort of mischief.

But the real deal is the idea money helps mainly the power elite. My Progressive farmer grandfather in the upper Midwest saw precious little currency, but he and grandma and the kids raised food, made clothes, and cut wood. Grandpa actually made shoes. They survived. So, I guess I'm saying your idea hits a deeply vibrating string somewhere in my gut.

There are no farmers left in my family (something I wouldn't have guessed 40 years ago), largely because the system you describe warps the real value of everything. Small dairy farming is gone. Organic farming has replaced it to a degree, but if you shop at a local co-op, you know the value of homegrown cabbage is as skewed upward as milk was skewed downward.

A primitive trading culture corrects that, somewhat. The result isn't what Americans want, however. The Nahua people in the mountains of Mexico don't see much currency either. They are a trading culture that few of us would really want to emulate, admirable as it is.

Finally, there's another, more critical question that lingers after reading your piece. A great many contemporary Americans live almost without currency. Their pay is deposited electronically and they disperse it by way of debit card. Certainly that needs to be part of the discussion.

Remember the disturbing passage in Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* where the new Christian fundamentalist government simply erases the accounts of working women so they will be dependent on men? Currency would be one step better than that, right? You can always hide it under your mattress—or something.

Troy Roberts [via e-mail]

Two Buck Chuck

Yo, your Fine Selves:

Here's \$10 for a treat (or two). Your most recent issue is superb! Buy a bottle of cheap red and ...(finish this sentence.)

Love & ruckus & Viva Lakotah!

Coyote

Twin Oaks, Virginia

Fifth Estate response: Thanks, Coyote, for your contribution. We might consider buying some Two Buck Chuck when we get the cash to cover our print bill. Until then, we're going to add your donation to that fund.

IWW Alive & Well

Very much enjoyed FE's Summer issue including, "Counterfeiting Sovereignty," by Don LaCoss, finding the historical information concerning currency enlightening.

Also, "Tarot Cards and the Left," by Joshua Sperber, hit the nail on the head regarding apocalyptic pretensions within certain activist circles. One annoying example I see a lot of is this 2012 Mayan doomsday cult that is a cottage industry for many New Age publishers.

Wake up, people! You are so right that as long as capitalist/authoritarian structures dominate, all this nasty shit around the world will continue...on whatever date.

The obit for LSD innovator Albert Hofmann was wonderful, as was the one for Utah Phillips. Just one note on the latter. The author refers to the IWW as an "organizational artifact."

This has the connotation that the IWW is a dead tool of another time. I assure you the Wobblies are a living body of resistance to bosses everywhere. We ain't perfect, but we strive to help wage workers of the planet with the same solidarity and mutual aid as you would. Just a little healthy correction.

Mark

Pennsylvania

Fifth Estate replies: Thanks for that important correction. Most of the text of Utah's obituary was taken from his web site utahphillips.org that was posted by his friends and family. They might also appreciate your comments. And, indeed, the Industrial Workers of the World are alive and well and still kicking the shins of the bosses. Their site is www.iww.org.

Real African Anarchism

Jim Feast's "The African Road to Anarchism" (see FE Summer 2008) emphasizes the apparent decline of the state authority in African societies today. It totally overlooks traditional African anarchism. It mentions the village socialism of Julius Nyerere, a man who would have little sympathy for anarchism and if he knew it at all in Africa would have discouraged it.

Particularly in pre-colonial times, but even down to the twentieth century, there were many anarchist polities in sub-Saharan Africa. Just as a small sampling I would suggest the following: Lugbara, Konkomba, Tiv, Plateau Tonga, Anauak, Ibo, Nuer, Bushman, and Pygmy (see my *People without Government: An Anthropology of Anarchy*).

Perhaps the author might acquaint himself with the real African anarchism before jumping onto a hypothetical road to what?

A widespread feature throughout Africa is a form of social organization referred to as a segmental lineage system. Significant groups within such systems are lineages which are based upon patrilineal descent. The maximally integrated unit—the tribe—is segmented into major branches which in turn are further divided and these are further divided into segments.

Leaders of tribes and segments are elders who have achieved status as influential men. They are not policemen, but rather men of influence. They are mediators in disputes and not arbitrators. Lineage systems additionally provide for friendships and neighbors independent of specific identity with the lineage.

Another similar type of decentralized arrangement is found among the Tonga, a population of half a million in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Tonga are a matrilineal group living in small settlements engaging in cattle keeping and growing sorghum and corn. They are organized into four social groups by residence, kinship, age, and voluntary associations.

One has ties to his local community and to a neighborhood of communities. The most important are those of kinship with the largest kin group being the clan, none of which are corporate groups or have any leaders.

In addition to the numerous obligations associated with membership in one's matrilineal clan, one is also obligated to a less degree to his father's matrilineal clan and to his affinal kin as well. Further, one is bound to an age grouping.

The central mechanism of Tonga society is that any given individual is a member of a number of different groups, which in turn are a part of a network of further obligations, so that any negative action against 'an individual or group resulting from one set of relations has its counter restraining effect resulting from affiliation with other groups and individuals.

Harold Barclay

Vernon, British Columbia

Jim Feast replies: There's probably nothing more irritating to an expert in a particular field of study, say the social arrangements of a foreign country, than to run across a blowhard, who, after a one week visit, becomes a self-appointed "expert" on that country.

It's humiliating for the "expert" when he or she meets a real expert, a position you might say I am in upon reading your deserved rebuff to some of the shortcomings of my piece. I've been in the position of the actual expert when it comes to the one foreign culture which I have studied for years, to the point of learning one of its languages, namely, China. How bothersome to hear some know-it-all at a party who just saw a PBS special on "The Hidden Kingdom," loudly spew misinformation, so ridiculous it would take hours to refute. I hope I haven't reached the state of self-delusion of such a bore.

I will definitely look into your book, which, judging from your few remarks on the subject, reveals exactly the type of information I find most absorbing. Not vague comments, but a careful enumeration of what arrangements in the African village set up a system of democratic functioning. Moreover, equally valuable, you show in your comments on the Tonga that certain structural aspects of their life, that is, each person having more than one affiliation, sets up checks and balances, so the community does not have to rely on the good will of its members to maintain relative equalitarianism but on a structure that makes selfish resistance to it counterproductive.

Your comments on the segmental nature of African societies makes me wonder if this type of social organization is more conducive to anarchist living than other possible ones. You may know the relatively obscure book *Bolo Bolo*, in which a Swiss anarchist lays out a utopian vision of the future based on interconnected social segments.

It also calls to mind Niklas Luhmann's argument that social structures have gone through a "natural" historical development from segments to hierarchies to networks. I wonder, if this were true, would there be a marked anarchist tendency (not necessarily realized) in all early social organizations.

If I had done more homework, I wonder if I might not have shown my thesis is highly compatible with yours. My main idea, which may not have been expressed with enough clarity, is that, in some cases, if a state in Africa gradually (not cataclysmically) collapsed, this would not represent a defeat for civil society, which still maintains ties to (or even still has) anarchist social arrangements and could get along perhaps better without the intrusion of government and capitalism.

This idea was generated by reading such doom-sayers as Mike Davis or Manuel Castells (whose ideas I discuss in the African section of my book on AIDS) and contrasting to them the impression I got from my (one week) visit to the Gambia, where in a village, I found such a vivid sense of vitality, peace, humor, and equality.

Cuba & Gays

I enjoyed your article on Cuba (see Summer 2008 FE, "Socialism or Cell Phones: An Anarchist in Cuba").

Cuba's relations with the U.S. left were affected when Castro's government announced anti-gay policies around 1970, just at the time of the rise of the gay liberation movement in this country. The Venceremos Brigade [which brought Americans to the island] soon followed suit by adopting a policy banning gays from their trips.

When I went to the People's College of Law in Los Angeles in 1977, there was a big fight between gays and straights over allowing the Venceremos Brigade to use a room at the school for meetings. The pro-Brigade forces won on a narrow vote, and most of the gays left the college.

After that came the period when Cuba sent hundreds of thousands of troops to Africa to fight the apartheid regime, winning some important battles and hastening their fall. Many of those troops came back with the AIDS virus and the Cuban government ordered HIV positives to be quarantined in specially designated housing separate from the general population.

In the late 1990s, I attended a town hall meeting of 200 people in San Francisco on the question of Cuba and gays. San Francisco has quite a few left of center folks plus more gays per capita than any other U.S. city.

There were quite a few people present who wanted to defend the achievements of the revolution, but also many who wanted to criticize the Castro government for its anti-gay policies, and to dump on the Brigades for going along with the prejudice.

A speaker or two tried to defend the Cuban government, and another admitted the Brigade policy had been wrong. The Cuban revolution took place in a different historical period, and one version I heard was that Raul initiated the anti-gay policies because of his admiration for the Soviet bloc Eastern European regimes.

Bob Hippler
Portland, Oregon

Walker Lane responds: Cuba has come along way since the days when they maintained the anti-gay laws enacted by the Spanish colonists. The last statute criminalizing same sex conduct was repealed in 1993.

Today, because of its medical and public education systems, Cuba has one of the lowest HIV/AIDS rates in the world with a 0.1% infection rate. In contrast, the US rate is six times greater according to the United Nations. In Cuba, HIV treatment, related drugs, medicines, and care are free. Schools teach anti-bullying and harassment curriculum.

On my February trip to the eastern provinces of the island, I didn't see any evidence of overt gay culture, but from every report it flourishes in the big cities such as Havana and Santiago.

This year, Cuba announced its medical system would provide gender-reassignment surgery. Also, Cuba endorsed and held state events on May 17 for the International Day Against Homophobia, which was attended by its national leaders.

One of our guides, Rita, is active in the pro-LGBT National Center for Sexual Education (CENESEX), headed by Mariela Castro Espin, the daughter of President Raul Castro. Rita told us she and others are agitating to include a prohibition in the nation's constitution against sexual preference discrimination.

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