

Letters

Our readers respond

Various Authors

2011

Cuba's Future

I, too, have fears about the Americanization of Cuba and that it will end up “just like other Caribbean resorts” and that IMF-driven and other economic decisions will lead to the end of the many services provided to everyone and a change in the life and culture and well-being of its citizens. [See “Adios, Socialismo,” by Walker Lane, Summer FE 2010.]

I agree that it's “likely that the island's future is already determined by its reintegration into the global economy” and its historic lack of “capacity for self-reliance.”

But, I also think that this “likely” is still only a “likely.” Cuba has surprised many people over the years. Who thought it would survive and maintain a semblance of their commitment to sharing its wealth after the downfall of the Soviet bloc? What was the likelihood that Castro would not be assassinated even with the experience, effectiveness and track-records of the CIA and the Mob?

My attitude is not to give up on the future. It's not here yet. My hope is Cuba will emerge with a new approach that will help it maintain many of the real positives including its health program, education, concern for gender equality, community development, maintain control of their land and industries, and that it will lose its somewhat frightened authoritarian approach to governing.

The fact that the Ladies in White were permitted to march regularly and the release of some political prisoners are good developments. This attitude may appear naive. I may be, just as the cynical take comfort in their correct views of the world. It is comforting to “know” what is unknowable.

If I had to make a bet it would be difficult to conceive of a world in 2110 (if this small planet still houses civilizations) that did not have a McDonald's or more likely a Mr. Noodle on every street corner run by mega corporations that also control governance.

But for now, my hope is that some of the intelligent, well-trained and egalitarian people in positions of power and influence will lead Cuba to a more enlightened and hopeful future.

That they will have some ability to balance the necessity to bring positive and meaningful change and create a different kind of relationship with the elephant of the north. One that brings wealth that can be shared and used for the betterment of all Cubans and does not relinquish ownership of their little island.

A friend in Canada

Walker Lane responds: The letter writer above is a *Fifth Estate* subscriber and Sustainer, and wrote for the *FE* in the 1960s. He has traveled to Cuba many times. I like my friend's optimism about the future of the island, but he's absolutely dystopian in his (not so optimistic) view that fast food corporations will dominate the planet's politics in the future.

In my article, I talked about the Jamaicaization of Cuba—a return to its pre-Revolution status as a tourist destination, with sharp class divisions, high crime, and few social benefits. Perhaps a better phrase would have been

Vietnamization, referring not to the 1970s American military strategy prior to the ignominious defeat of the U.S., but to the type of economy and political structure that country currently has.

Vietnam today is marked by continued authoritarian rule, a command economy in the state sector, large western corporate investment drawn by low wages, with little for the poor. It still refers to itself as a communist nation which it does so only through a grave misunderstanding of the term.

Can Cuba resist this? The more a small country is immersed in the world market, the less opportunity it will have to control its own economic destiny. And, it looks like the process I described in my article is accelerating.

Cuba, like all nations, is facing budget deficits and they are dealing with it in the same manner as the overtly capitalist economies: austerity and shedding workers.

An August 18 Associated Press article quotes President Raul Castro as saying, "We know that there are hundreds of thousands of unnecessary workers on the budget and labor books, and some analysts calculate that the excess of jobs has surpassed 1 million."

The country's labor minister, Margarita Gonzalez, assures the nation's nervous workers that, "Cuba will not employ massive firings in a manner similar to neoliberal cutbacks," but when the state identifies upwards to a half million workers as redundant in state employ, it's the beginning of a class of poor like in other countries.

The global financial crisis and the damage suffered from three hurricanes in recent years has left the island's economy in a deficit to the point where it is unable to pay back credits they owe to China and elsewhere. As it is, Cuba is slashing spending on importing food and other basics by a third from the previous year.

Other indications of the country stepping away from its commitment to social equality are present. When Raul Castro says his government will scale back controls on small businesses, combined with increased foreign investment in tourism and large scale industrial projects, it seems any semblance of socialism will soon be in name only.

Even state subsidies for cigarettes which allow the heavy smoking Cuban population to buy the cancer sticks at 40 cents a pack are being eliminated, but that will undoubtedly be a good thing for the people.

Can the incredible projects and the spirit of revolution present in so many people Michael and I met in Cuba be extinguished by the rush in of foreign capital and the return of more private enterprise? Probably, but we can hope that it doesn't

However, hope is a pretty thin reed on which to base a future.

Hard Cider Recipe

One of my friends was reminiscing about his youth and told me about fond memories of making hard cider using a recipe that the *Fifth Estate* published every autumn. Where could I find a copy of this recipe?

Clinton Andrews

(P.S. I still remember Plum Street)

FE replies: If you are able to remember Plum Street, no wonder you can't remember the recipe! Plum Street was Detroit's version of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district in the mid-1960s where the *Fifth Estate* moved its offices in 1966. It was there that the publication established itself in the city's hip arts and political communities.

Back before the days when you could look up anything on Google (including at least 50 recipes for hard cider), the directions probably appeared in our cooking column, "Eat It!", which featured healthy cooking instructions (rare back in those days) and exotic confections such as hash brownies.

A usually sober-for-the-revolution *FE* contributing editor (Don LaCoss) adds: Interested readers ought to check out our friend Sandor Ellix Katz's book from 2003, *Wild Fermentation: The Flavor, Nutrition and Craft of Live Culture Foods*. Sandor includes two hard cider recipes in his chapter on wines, mead, and ginger beer; one takes about a week, the other about six months—plan accordingly!

On Wilhelm Reich

While Patrick Dunn's thesis in "A Radicalization of Reich," Summer 2010 *FE*, ("wild, ungovernable pleasures" as a practice for the accumulation of power towards "tearing down the material structures that make these pleasures unattainable") is exciting, I take issue with certain assumptions and attitudes throughout.

I find it quite uninteresting to frame our current social nightmare as being the aftermath of some only vaguely defined and certainly, though not necessarily knowingly, pseudo-Christian (“Fall-of-Man”) “prehistoric crisis.”

Quoting Dunn: “...one thing is clear (is it really? I disagree so hard): Something occurred to precipitate the shift in the physical relations among early humans, and the wound has never healed.” Seriously? Can we please get over social utopianism? Are you actually fighting for a social body without conflict?

I find it over-the-top naive to imagine relationships without conflict and violence. In fact, Pierre Clastres in *Society Against the State*, an author Dunn has probably read, writes about tribal warfare as a decentralizing, somewhat anarchising force. Dunn uses it as another indicator of our post-Fall condition.

“Bodies that once moved in harmony became alienated and divided,” he writes. It is mind-boggling to me that one can make such a statement. Consider the complete impossibility of verifying the fact of “bodies (having) once moved in harmony.” This is a philosophical experiment at best, with no empirical evidence whatsoever. To construct an argument on such fantastical, quasi-religious grounds is totally nonsensical.

I would offer that it’s pretty commonly accepted that humans are now at the highest point of alienation from our bodies and from each other in their known history, which is probably good enough grounds on which to build this argument. So why make up total bullshit about the unknowable past? It runs the risk of turning a good essay into a ridiculous one.

And, a quick note on the whole “origins of alienation” issue that fascinates so many. If you cannot come up with a fucking good excuse for early humans to choose the path of alienation and misery, it might be hard to construct a solid argument for its sudden appearance. Or, maybe it’s not so simple as it would seem.

“The logic born of our prehistoric crisis—enshrined in the image of Adam and Eve hiding their naked bodies—culminates in the disembodied rationality of technological civilization. The destructive capacity of this logic is directly responsible for our present catastrophe, sexual and social.”

If I read that correctly, Dunn is actually saying that the “prehistoric crisis” carried in it the seed of our present society. This somewhat carelessly glosses over individuals’ historical agency in favour of a vision of history carrying along autonomously from human intervention, spurred on by some omnipotent “logic.” I’m not saying Dunn views history this way; this is simply what I think comes across in these statements.

I see history as a struggle, not just a class struggle, I might add, where the outcome has never been predestined, although it seems to be closing in on us at an alarming rate. I also think that it’s a bit much to say that the same logic is at work in today’s prisons as was in societies thousands of years ago. It’s a theoretical leap for sure, but in my opinion it just doesn’t sound plausible.

“The sovereign, self-propelled human body is reduced to a lifeless cyborg.” “Despite having nine hundred Facebook friends, nobody knows anyone else.” “Pleasure is ritualized at best...,” etc. While I can perhaps understand the appeal of hyperbole or exaggeration, these passages and many that follow seem so awkward, as if Dunn is trying to convince us that it’s worse than it actually is.

I mean it’s fucking horrible out here, but who is this “we” that he writes of who are “governed by the normalizing images of celebrity culture and mass media?” There’s no room to maneuver inside of Dunn’s blanket statements on our lives. Maybe all he’s missing is a touch of subtlety in his attempts to assess our condition, but let’s just say that when one seeks to impose a general diagnosis of society’s emotional/ social state, one had better be crafty and careful. I just thought it was weak.

I would be happy to have the thoughts in this piece brought forth in a way that didn’t seem so dualistic and instead offered a certain continuum of alienation and conflict. Utopia is a beautiful idea for fantasy and play, but in terms of theory it eats shit pretty hard. Ok, let’s fucking party on dead cops,

negative prole (via e-mail)

Patrick Dunn replies: The purpose of my article is not to construct an argument. If the article has a point, it is to suggest that sexuality might be at the root of the logic of alienation.

There is no evidence that prehistoric humans lived free of conflict or suffering. Such a condition seems neither attainable nor desirable. The desire to overcome alienation, on the other hand, is the basis for all radical thought. This leads to reflection on the nature of our present condition, and on the events of which it is the result.

My suggestion is that the alienating logic embodied in the institutions of civilization—symbolic thought, division of labor, domestication—is inseparable from an original consciousness of violence rooted in human sexuality.

We do not know what a non-alienated sexual experience would be. But if we wish to attain such an experience, we are inevitably led to imagine the sexuality of humans prior to the emergence of civilization. This is true even, and perhaps especially, when empirical evidence is scarce.

Solidarity With the Reykjavik Nine

I would like to make a simple request. As you all should know, Iceland's first post-collapse trials are going on. Nine people, The Reykjavik Nine, are being accused of charges that could give them between one and 16 years in prison.

We really, really need international solidarity, and that is my request. There is a web site focusing on the case, www.rvk9.org, with an English section, not great but with the information needed.

A new piece was just written for the Bristol, England Anarchist Bookfair that is taking place while these words are written. So far, the text has only been published here: www.bristolabc.wordpress.com, but it needs to go much further. This is not a great, long and complicated analysis, but simply an update on what the case is about and where it is situated inside the court system at the moment.

The proceedings will start soon, so spread the word and do solidarity actions! The Icelandic state, government, and nation worries about criticism from abroad. Therefore, solidarity actions are very important for putting pressure on those in power, making them scared and last but not least, giving a good story to the people. So far there has only been one solidarity demonstration, which took place in Barcelona. Read it here to get some inspiration: www.savingiceland.org/2010/07/reykjavik-nine-solidarity-demonstration-in-barcelona/.

When an article on the case was published on an anarchist news site recently, it got comments about how "this has nothing to do with anarchism," and other bullshit, probably because the article was not written in militant, insurrection rhetoric. Please don't take up this elitist crap.

There are nine people being oppressed by the state, anarchists' common enemy, for taking the first steps in a revolt that later toppled a government. Some of them are anarchist and some not; who cares!? Their lives are threatened.

With the rest of hope I am able to have,
Siggi Ponk,
Reykjavik, Iceland

Greek Anarchists

I was delighted to see the *Fifth Estate* reprinting informative materials about the Greek anarchists. [See: In Critical and Suffocating Times, *FE*, Summer 2010.]

What most of conventional media has ignored is that large segments of Greek society, especially well-educated youth, have been attracted to the anarchist banner by their revulsion against authoritarian rule, whatever the political branding. The same revulsion can be found in the recent Greek film, *Dogtooth*, a box office hit in Greece and a prize winner at Cannes.

A new group calling itself the Sect of the Revolution has been proclaimed as anarchist by Western media. The very name of the organization, its murder of an investigative journalist, its threat of random violence, and its rhetoric indicate that is likely a right-wing group posing as a left formation. This allows them to destabilize a social democratic government while besmirching the anarchist banner.

If so, this likely indicates the worst elements of the Greek right have some broader political agenda in mind. Another possibility is that it is a criminal enterprise using ideological camouflage. Least likely is that it is a devolution of an anarchist group to nihilism.

More significantly, following the unintended death of three bank employees at a major rally, some 300 anarchists had a semi-public assembly in Athens to discuss how to avoid such outcomes, the exact opposite of the blanket violence espoused by the Sect of Revolution.

What is most obvious, however, is that there is enormous social anger in Greece that could erupt into a mass movement in which genuine anarchist thought would be a leading force.

Dan Georgakas
Amherst, Mass.

FE Note: The writer is the consulting editor of the film magazine, *Cineaste*.

Tyranny of Capital

I wish to thank you for Andrew Dobbs' article, "Conspiracy or Anarchy," in the Summer 2010 *Fifth Estate*. I tire greatly of the 9/11 conspiracy people, as well as all the other crazies who think focusing on an abstraction will solve everything.

There is often a distraction from the wider picture of the tyranny of capital and ecological collapse. I find that most seem to be either apolitical in terms of working toward a world free of poverty and oppression, or right-wing, god, guts, and guns people.

Thank you also for the interview with Ursula K. Le Guin in the Spring 2010 *Fifth Estate*. Her books, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, both blew my mind when I read them so many years ago. They still do.

Mark Nevin
Lancaster, Penn.

FE Note: both issues mentioned are available for \$4 each, payable through PayPal or by mail to our P.O. Box.

No Supernatural

Don's book review of Guy Ducornet's *Surrealisme et atheisme* was interesting and entertaining [See "Surrealism & Atheism," Summer 2010 *FE*] There have been and are lots of parody churches and religions around including Church of the Everlasting Collection, Church of Banana Bread, Our Lady of Perpetual Collection, ad infinitum. Surrealists have a valuable contribution to make as humor, ridicule, and parody can be very effective.

LaCoss mentions the 1948 Surrealist, anti-clerical tract, "Dogs of God;" it should be noted that the medieval phrase, Domini Canes, (Dog of God) referred to real dogs who barked at beggar priests, which ironically is what the author is doing in his book. However, he has fallen into a semantics/ sophistry trap by using "supernatural," a word designed to create confusion and has done so for hundreds of years. There are only two worlds: the natural visible, and the natural invisible. The latter now being explored by quantum mechanics. There is no supernatural anything.

Robert J. Zani
Tennessee Colony, Tex.

Holy Cocoons

I'm sure you know the story of Florida minister, Terry Jones, who had planned to burn a pile of Qur'ans on September 11. While this was being written he canceled his international Qur'an burning day. The irony of the official response, from mass murderers and liars at the top of the political feeding chain, is not lost. The enormous power of symbols shows how a man with a pile of books can be seen as worse than those who are objectively creating new generations of "enemies" through ruinous predation and profiteering warfare.

Look who's worried about sending a bad signal! The pyromaniac pastor (who has since called off his stunt after a phone call from Secretary of War Robert Gates) was proposing to burn the Qur'an in the name of his own rancorous "faith" while remaining apparently blind to the desecration of humanity that his church has created. Ignorant of the historical roots of Christianity, he would step up to make war on a fixed idea in the name of his own fixed idea. Jones represents the uptight, fascist character of a Reichian "Little Man" who seeks to destroy cardboard foes. He falsifies a complex reality so he can think of himself as good.

I can't help but think of street theater here, in a hypothetical scene, and so as to stand outside the context of "religious war" or "taking sides," every holy book is gathered, pages are torn from them and pasted to people until eventually the person is covered up in religious scripture. This could be done through a body suit or shrink wrap over clothes for visual impact.

Layers of wheat paste, papier mache or other items can be added so the person is literally weighed down by the words of religion. Eventually only air holes are left and the person is placed on the ground to dry. The spirit-extortionists begin pasting others with the pages, all the while telling them in soothing voices that they're helping them out, saving their souls, doing their thinking for them.

Soon there would be a small crowd laid helplessly on the ground. Some of the cocoons could be maneuvered into chess-like positions as ideological support for simulated global crises.

With the scripture cocoons now hardened, a few people would gradually begin to struggle against their bonds, as if finally realizing their confinement. Bystanders might react and start helping them, breaking the spell of control that the priests have placed over humanity.

In the spirit of Monty Python or the Marx Brothers, the priest types could be chased away by those no longer weighed down. Bits and pieces of the religious armoring would lay discarded. Nietzsche, Sade or a surrealist writer could be quoted on behalf of erotic imagination and the magic of the senses, against the stifling pontifications of those who fondle their doctrines in fear of life. If it were a film, a sudden downpour could further the decomposition of the religious cocoons while the priests fled for shelter.

M. K. Shibek
Portland, Oregon

Gettin' Skooled

I am writing in response to Joseph Smecker's *Commodifying Experience: The School of Tyrannical Indoctrination*. Summer 2010 *FE* highlighted some important perspectives surrounding the pitfalls of the public school system. I also see that many of his blanketing arguments and universal conclusions need further discussion and analysis.

It seems as though Smecker's arguments stem from two main ideas about education. One is that historical and contemporary schooling comes from the interconnections between a capitalist reproduction model and what students learn in the classrooms, basically meaning that schools are vessels to indoctrinate certain political, economic, social and cultural values in young people. The second idea is that public schools do not take into consideration non-western ways of knowing and therefore validate or reinforce a particular world view.

Starting with the first argument, Smecker maintains that certain ideological forces drive schools and help reproduce working class subjects. In the early and mid-19th century, Horace Mann and others in power, believed in compulsory public schools that would indeed create an obedient workforce. During the late 1830s, officials in Massachusetts argued for public schools because it would be cheaper than putting some of the new immigrants in prison (see Michael Katz's work).

However, as Horace Mann's idea of state run compulsory schooling began to unfold, we saw that students did not always follow the obedient route as Smecker suggests. For example, how do we take into account Voltairine de Cleyre, Emma Goldman, Alex Berkman or the IWW at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century? There is no mention of these people or organizations or for that matter, their analysis and critique of schools in Smecker's article.

Although Smecker offers some important points in his first argument regarding schools and obedience, leaving the analysis at the economic level has its limitations. In fact, Smecker leaves us with a cliffhanger and only offers us a "green praxis" as a solution for current schooling practices.

If anyone has read anything about critical pedagogy, most know the work of Paulo Freire and his popular book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In Smecker's article there is no reference to any of his ideas and movements to disrupt banking education or oppressive educational practices or even to his discussions surrounding the "respect for the autonomy of the student."

Additionally, in 1983, Henry Giroux wrote an important book, *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition*. Giroux called into question whether individuals living under capitalism passively take on the role of obedient workers and become company folks—rather he created a more complex argument that individuals use their agency to expose and resist certain power structures.

It is not that I disagree with Smecker that schools reproduce certain social, political, economic and cultural practices. However, it is somewhat dangerous to see the analysis cut short and to assume that these processes are universal. Many teachers understand that schools reinforce particular monocultural and global capitalist perspectives, yet they struggle to contest power from what Foucault describes as “multiple fronts.”

I don’t particularly see state-run schools as ideal sites to construct mutual, non-hierarchical and voluntary learning spaces, but I do acknowledge they are important spaces. Many critical educators are working under the oppressive state, but that does not always mean that they are incapable of navigating and sabotaging the structures that are encroaching upon student autonomy, creativity or our abilities to think beyond western and monocultural thinking.

Yes, it is important to expose public schools for what they are and the twisted values they uphold, but it is equally important to acknowledge that these spaces have the potential to drill holes in the structures that attempt to make schooling a mundane, monocultural and reproductive machine. This means that we can create something out of the ruins of these “tyrannical and indoctrination” mechanisms. There are individuals and collectives that are doing this in situated spaces in the here and now and they definitely need our support.

Robert Haworth
La Crosse, Wisconsin

Dead End

In the Summer 2010 issue of *FE*, my article, “Cul de Sac,” was printed. Unfortunately, it was edited, and parts were even re-written, without my consultation. Such was this editing job that my intention to engage anarcho-primitivists on this interesting topic have probably now been lost; and, moreover, my critique of all “revolutionaries” was changed to a critique of “traditional left revolutionaries,” which seriously thwarts the meaning of my piece. I was surprised and shocked that my words and the meaning I intended were altered without any consultation with me.

If you would like to read the unadulterated text, go to: www.salon.lettersjournal.org/viewtopic.php?pid=5929#p5929.

It will also be appearing on the Letters Journal web site. You may also like to visit our Wikipedia page for more links: Monsieur Dupont.

For a human community,
Le Garçon Dupont
Australia

Walker Lane responds: All texts submitted to this publication, as with most, are edited for style, length, grammar, etc. The objective is to improve on the author’s original manuscript and present it in the best manner possible while retaining the author’s voice and intent.

The article mentioned above was particularly problematic and needed an immense amount of work. After submitting it back to the author with different versions, time constraints meant he did not see the final version as our publication date loomed.

We thought the article was substantially improved through the editing process; the author evidently did not.

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