

The *Fifth Estate* Essays of Peter Werbe

A perhaps not so tasty solution to the world's problems

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a review of

Eat the Rich & Other Interesting Ideas: Selected Essays by Peter Werbe. Black & Red-Detroit, 2023

"To live outside the law, you must be honest." B. Dylan, "Absolutely Sweet Marie"

Eat the Rich, a compilation of Peter Werbe's journalism from the *Fifth Estate*, demonstrates in formidable detail how he has been getting our attention for the last five decades.

He pricks public complacency with headlines/chapter titles such as ("Burn all Flags!" "Republicans, Get out of Town!" "Eat the Rich"). The shock tactics follow the grand anarchist tradition: "Property is theft." "Don't vote, it only encourages them." "Be realistic, demand the impossible." "Smash the state."

Werbe's journalistic instincts are unerring. The article titled "Eat the Rich," argues visually, moving through images to contrast the champagne self-righteousness of Detroit's elites as they gather at an exclusive athletic club with the hopeless squalor of a nearby crack house.

The book is autobiographical, presenting his view of what happened over the last fifty years in Detroit, in America, and on our planet, all of which spin inexorably in their orbits. Werbe describes, yes, and we can piece together the historical sequence of joys and disappointments in his articles. But he adds color and analysis to the play-by-play, all from the perspective of trying to define what an anarchist should be doing now.

This collection of essays follows publication of his 2021 novel, *Summer on Fire: A Detroit Novel*, which follows barely-fictionalized *Fifth Estate* staff members through a season in 1967 of an urban uprising, anti-war demonstrations, LSD, fighting fascists, anarchism, rock and roll, bomb plots, and Wilhelm Reich. For starters.

Unflinching analysis is crucial because the world has changed since the classical anarchist era. The confrontation of classes and no innocent bourgeoisie has been replaced by the real domination of a consumer/Internet culture in which individuals not only cannot imagine an alternative way to live, but also enjoy their subservience, as long as there is an app for that.

The book's range of topics is prodigious, from chronicles of the *Fifth Estate's* birth in the early period of the underground press in the 1960s until today, when it is the last underground paper still publishing. The essays observe national political campaigns, criticizes media pseudo-events, comments on the sexual revolution, marijuana, the military draft, religion, and recycling, with thoughts on visits to Cuba and Venezuela. There is no one unifying theme, though certain patterns do emerge.

Unsurprisingly, Werbe pokes fun at the pompous smugness of politicians and their lackeys in the press. "Revenge of the Nerds" blasts right wing parties in the U.S. and Europe as they preen in self-satisfaction after winning elections. The Democrats and other Left parties got what they deserve, Werbe writes, because of their own elitism and corruption.

"What a Day It Wasn't" exposes the media's patriotic frenzy over the release of American embassy hostages held by Iran. Werbe writes that this show was orchestrated to coincide with the defeat of Jimmy Carter and the

1981 inauguration of Ronald Reagan. The article also mentions that at least some of the Americans were spies and operatives of the CIA, with its long record of engineering anti-democratic coups and assassinations.

Right-wing politicians have no monopoly on smugness or pomposity. Marxists, such as the historian Eric Hobsbawm, are not spared Werbe's righteous rod. Their key failing as a group is their unflinching conviction that the masses will revolt through lectures correctly analyzing their misery. Werbe believes people will revolt when they simply cannot stand it anymore.

Another pattern may be described as confidence in hope. It appears as a coda to almost every article, including the interview that concludes the book. No matter how dire the crisis being described, how helplessly we may be mired in the cultural and political quicksand, or how complicated the choices we face, Werbe never fails to rally spirits. The existence of egalitarian, self-reliant, cooperative communities, whether they consciously call themselves anarchist or not, constitute the seeds of the new society in the shell of the old. Authority, your order is built on sand!

For most of us, living on the margins means finding a space on the edge of polite society, but still inside. Others cross that line, moving altogether off the grid. Either way, the best life-guide is not Dylan's famous lyric now an aphorism, but what is suggested in Werbe's essays. It's not honesty we need to live outside the law, but an instinct for responsibility.

Anarchists are against many things—state authority, repression, consumerist culture, and militarism, to start with the most obvious. To these non serviam, Werbe adds what he calls an attitude of absolutism, including anarchist absolutism. Slogans such as "Don't vote," despite their undeniable head-banging appeal, simply cannot be applied absolutely without regard to the situation or the consequences.

He has written often and eloquently about the futility of elections, because they only affirm the state, discipline us as good citizens, and provide cover for lethal repression. Yet, he writes in a postscript that he voted against Trump for reasons of harm reduction. The rationale against voting is still valid, but the consequences of another four years of a tyrant needed to be avoided.

Harm reduction as a strategy nuances many cases of all-or-nothing intransigence. But there are decisions not so easily finessed. How to express revulsion at television as he does in his "Turn It Off" essay, and the logorrhea of apps and so-called social media? They are truly opiates for the masses and should suffer unforgiving Luddite destruction. Yet, not having a TV screen or an Internet phone is today akin to refusing a refrigerator or electricity.

Responsibility also requires an honest and open-ended examination of the choices available in a given situation. Here is the rightful place of honesty as a value! The absolutist rejects any and all nuance as dithering.

Werbe responds to this rigidity in "Recycling and Liberal Reform." Prefacing a detailed, open-minded criticism of the strategies of recycling-as-a-panacea, Werbe writes that, on the one hand, reforms led by politicians and moderate social activists are false promises, because they coopt protest and reassert control by the system; on the other hand, however, he understands that rejecting reform in expectation of the apocalyptic revolutionary conflagration leads to the self-isolation of "writing angry tracts denouncing everything." His call for support of unions, and the defense of the benefits they have won for workers and their families are more grist for absolutist rejection. If it is not a revolutionary union, it is a lackey of the state. We want nothing less than the militant IWW, CNT, or wildcat strikes. Yet, Werbe reminds us, workers are better off for the reforms won over the last century and a half. However, this doesn't change the function of unions as brokers selling labor to capital as a commodity, albeit bargaining or striking for its highest price. The *Fifth Estate* has great credibility in the anarchist community, yet surely Werbe realizes how closely his harm-reduction strategy comes to undermining pure anarchist principles. It is indeed thin ice, but that's the world in which we live. If you live outside the law, do so responsibly.

In its roller coaster survey of the last five decades, *Eat the Rich* shows how certain anarchist traditions reaching back to the 19th century have been applied in recent history. Now what? The U.S. and the world are riven into implacable, culturally and politically polarized camps. Internet technology feeds their frenzied flailing by supplying blindered information to each side.

Audiences all over the world, like the lotus-eaters of Greek myth, now complacently chew the seductive lotus of scrolling through their favorite apps. The final sentence of "Getting on the Road: Beats & a Sub-culture of Resistance" is worth holding on to: "A sub-culture of resistance is no longer a choice, as in the '60s, but a matter of our survival."

Now, more than ever, we need Werbe's coda. As long as the *Fifth Estate* can report on resilient, (non-absolutist), cooperative gatherings of human beings, we have hope. Long may it flourish!

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/414-fall-2023/the-fifth-estate-essays-of-peter-werbe>
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