Fifth Estate Collective
FE Criticized and Our Response
April 30, 1978

Retrieved on 8th June 2022 from radicalarchives.org
From *Fifth Estate* #291 (Vol. 13 No. 3), April 30, 1978, pp 5, 10.

theanarchistlibrary.org

FE Criticized and Our Response

Fifth Estate Collective

April 30, 1978

ity will do more than announce another recuperation of capital (the ultimate fragmenting of society into single units), but perhaps your experimenting is more that we are presently doing.

The demise of Fifth Estate will not come about through our failure to meet an always elusive set of revolutionary standards, but rather through a failure of imagination. Any discussion of whether to cease publication always revolves around a decrease in our creative thinking and not in our inability to satisfy a sense of "self-revolutionariness." We too often let the joy of our project become the drudgery that is propelled by the demands of "produce the next issue." When we all decide that the paper is running us rather than the other way around will be when you have heard the last of us.

The Fifth Estate Staff
(A clever pseudonym)

of the Fifth Estate other than its writing (such as editing, rewrite, type-setting, camera work, lay-out, proofreading and finally the always hidden wage workers who do the printing and distribution of the paper).

We don't really know what you mean about us holding jobs that are in "service to the commodity and the state." Most of us hold jobs that are part-time in a variety of fields, none of them much more obnoxious than the employment you hold at a library, John. We don't do so out of a commitment to an abstract principle against wage work as much as that we hate to give up our time to deadening labor for capital and we prefer the lifestyle that goes with living on the margins of this society. When there are those of us who take full-time positions for one reason or another, it's not a question of "selling-out" or anything like that, but of us having our lives immiserated for that period of time.

Although we welcome (and even solicited) this discussion, we are somewhat disturbed by what appears to be your moralistic tone. We would be the first to admit that there is a separation between our daily lives and the critiques we espouse. In fact, it is through making those critiques that the cleavage becomes most evident. The whole question of how to live a "revolutionary" life within a system of domination other than being an outlaw is one all of us have discussed and debated endlessly. It was not through Camatte, but through a desire for honesty that we have ceased to call either our project or ourselves "revolutionary." To do so appears to us to be just another leftist pretension to justify life within this society. The concept that revolution only occurs at the point at which capitalist relations are overturned (which hardly originated with Camatte) serves the function of, rather than making us cynical, raising the ante of what we must do to justifiably call ourselves revolutionary.

We too have been continually questioning what our lives are all about and we know you have, as your letter indicates, as well. We are not convinced that moves to reduce exclusiv-

Contents

books from our catalog after our perspectives have changed (for instance, Marx or Murray Bookchin's *Post-Scarcity Anarchy).*

The Fifth Estate has a relatively large budget for a small libertarian project, again left over from the days of its commercial operation. Our expenses include rent on a fairly spacious office which also houses the bookstore, a printing bill which is often over $200, phone and other utilities, etc. This comes out to about $500 per month—certainly nothing that could be financed through out of pocket contributions—and necessitates that profits from Ammunition Books go into the paper to subsidize what is not made up by subscriptions, street sales, and sustainers.

It is easy to recognize this argument as similar to Black Rose's rationalizations about their activity and no one realizes the impact of dictates of a small business operation more than those of us who do the clerking each day. Again, we deal with (or rationalize, if you prefer) the negative aspects of our project by telling ourselves that the scope of it allows us to expand our dimensions so we are in touch with people all over the world, including the two of you in San Francisco. We've established close relationships with many people who we've contacted though the paper and this has created for us a feeling of community which allows us to at least ignore the most glaring of the contradictions we have mentioned.

Regarding articles with a lack of signature: many of us feel that to continually sign articles in the same journal over an extended period of time reinforces the bourgeois category of specialist—the writer. (Although all of our names do appear in the staff box each issue.) No one "knows" you through the mere appending of a name at the end of an article, but rather people begin to have their critical faculties reduced when they are confronted with a known name such as a Dolgoff, Bookchin or Castoriadis or some other luminary. It also serves to disguise the immense amount of labor that others put into a page

those of any other small business operating a newspaper such as all sort of record keeping, office hours, etc.

However, we continue this project knowing full well its contradictions for several reasons: 1) Within the small community in which it circulates, the Fifth Estate has had an impact on the ideas and perspectives regarding the revolutionary project it addresses itself to which probably could not have been achieved through a less complex form, such as leaflets; 2) it has forced the contributors to continually re-think our lives and to attempt to make some sense of the world in which we live; 3) it is activity whose major definitions remain outside of capital (labor and creativity for joy rather than wages) and which becomes part of what defines us as individuals unwilling to have our lives completely configured by capital.

Now to your specific objections: When we took over the Fifth Estate from its commercial managers in June 1975 we had no real ideas of how we were going to finance this paper and began Ammunition Books out of an enthusiasm for the literature and our desire to get it out to others—since much of it was difficult or impossible to obtain—not as a revenue producing venture. We have always acknowledged its commercial nature, but two important things stand out in the Fifth Estate's relationship to Ammunition Books: 1) Unlike Black Rose Books, a business is not at the center of our activity and; 2) we feel there is still importance to the literature we are distributing. The problem we had with Black Rose is that they were willing to parade themselves as revolutionaries *because* of their business activity whereas we have no such illusions.

Also, when we took on the Fifth Estate its pages had been swamped with ads for cigarettes, x-rated movies, albums and head shops. Feeling ads to be the voice of capital we immediately decided to no longer accept commercial ads, although co-op ads remained. The ads Search & Destroy accepts are determined solely by a media buyer's order; we offer books for sale usually that we feel are worthwhile and have often dropped

To the Fifth Estate:

The letter from "Kirk Johnson" (March 2, 1978 FE), which equated Fifth Estate's practice of running a profit-making book service (to support itself) with Search & Destroy's record company ads (for the same end), makes public a discussion that has been private for too long.

That the opening of this critique—which really began with FE's important remarks on Black Rose Books' capitalist procedures—finally arrives via a spokesman for Search and Destroy is a sad irony. S&D is a completely uncritical promo rag which hopes to be accepted by what it sees as the latest fad, punk rock. Done anonymously, it (characteristically) helped organize a recent two-day benefit for the UMW strike, this piece of liberal/leftist reformism easily coexisting next to censored interviews and ads for rip-off night clubs.

But what of FE, to us the only critical publication in North America? Ammunition Books fulfills exactly the same function as do S&D's ads. In neither case do the publishers wish to give their own money to their projects. Likewise, as with S&D's complete public anonymity, FE's articles are presented almost entirely unsigned or accompanied by clever pseudonyms. Is anyone's life really involved, or are both enterprises just separate hobbies, just words on a page?

With Search & Destroy, despite a tiny sprinkling of "radical" verbiage—a highly insulting pretension—one would not really expect any quality, any radical break, in the first place. With Fifth Estate one expects a great deal more; why, then, the chilling similarities?

It seems that one factor is FE's enthusiasm for the ideas of Camatte. C., of course, sees the world as completely domesticated, where virtually no activity can do other than reinforce the totality of capital, where the only thing revolutionary is the revolution itself. Behind this outlook, one's answer to crit-

icism is that since no project can be revolutionary, why be too concerned with its details?

It is precisely this kind of cynicism (whether or not C. is its sole inspiration) which leads to such deathly separations between FE's radical language and the daily lives of its creators. Camatte writes of the totality of the revolution required to break the hold of capital—and is a tidy little professor, living as any other bourgeois. It's arguable that some of the FE "staff" hold jobs which provide the most active forms of service to the commodity and the state.

The Sex Pistols—despite the rousing excellence of so much of their music—are seen by some as revolutionaries, as they line the pockets of Warner Bros. and show nihilist spontaneity as just one more product to buy and sell. Jay Kinney, resident FE cartoonist, advertises his reformist comic books everywhere and currently four pages of his cartoons appear in Playboy. Content aside, can anyone doubt that this approach can amount to anything more than making the truth just another moment of the lie of this life?

As for ourselves? Our Upshot efforts (flyers, posters, etc.) have always been paid for by us and we have only once ever sold anything. (*Breakdown*, which was almost completely given away; a few sold for 25 cents.) We adopted the name Upshot in So. Calif. in 1973 for "security" reasons; now, fortunately, our identities are an open secret. We now have separate living spaces, in an effort to attack our exclusivism.

Our attempts toward a radical break, however limited, are at least no cynical gesture. If that kind of falsity sets in, we hope we'll know to quit.

John and Paula Zerzan
San Francisco

Dear John & Paula:

It increasingly seems that almost every aspect of the Fifth Estate is a double-edged sword with every positive feature of our project having a corresponding drawback—you've hit on several. Before we answer your specific points, we would like to put our efforts into a context that raises the larger contradictions inherent in the form of media we have chosen as a project.

Once communication leaves the level of one-to-one communication, media begins to increase in complexity and in its ability to command authority and to render passive its receptors running up the ladder from leaflets to newspapers and radios to the final and most complex (and compelling) form—television. Most every receptor realizes at one level of consciousness or another that mass communication deals with authority—the ability of a few to define reality for the many—and more respect is given a form the more it appears to contain the authority of rulers or would-be rulers.

The extent to which the Fifth Estate may numb people rather than stimulate thinking, or begin to loom as a product of political or literary experts, certainly is regrettable, but it is the reaction we often get and while we may not desire it, we should realize it comes with the terrain. At the FE we scrupulously separate our content from the daily capitalist papers or from the 101 leftist publications taking Lenin's advice to begin party activity with the publication of a newspaper. The problem lies in that although the content of each differs, the form utilized by all three is identical and often is responded to in an identical manner—by submission to the authority that it carries.

Another problem area defined by our choice of taking on a large project with a regularly appearing publication demands that we undertake activities that are indistinguishable from