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Fredy Perlman: An Appreciation

David Porter

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Revolution had two faces for Fredy Perlman. One was a series of immediate, simple, and direct action: people in large numbers rejecting the social roles for which they were trained, and asserting the need for adventure and for responsibility for their own lives. Such an image inspired Fredy to continuing efforts to demystify the process of personal and community liberation, and to clarify the nature of direct choices to be made. On the other hand, revolution was seen as a long-range historical project, to date, in fact, easily manipulated by vanguard elites. Here, Fredy fully recognized the power of emotional inhibitions and the ability to channel such feelings in various cooptive directions by establishment and “revolutionary” leaderships alike.

In this continually evolving dual awareness, Fredy learned from and pushed beyond the libertarian socialist tradition. Limited only by his premature death at the age of 50, his writing qualitatively expands and imaginatively articulates a contemporary anarchist vision. In this effort, Fredy avoided creating models potentially transformable into new, more

sophisticated ideologies: Instead, he sought to re-sensitize us to the fact that self-responsible, nonhierarchical community had been and still could be a genuine human possibility. He was more articulate than most about the nightmares of domination in contemporary politics, society, and culture, including the likelihood of global nuclear extinction. Yet he was intellectually and emotionally committed to revive the deepest level of anarchist hope. This commitment as well as the magnificent poetic clarity of his later works are themselves powerful symbols of the vitality of that potential.

Fredy's broad cultural and political exposure no doubt provided the basis for much of his insight.¹ Escaping with his parents shortly before the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, he lived in Bolivia until 1945. Arriving in the United States and after several years of public school in Brooklyn and Queens, Fredy moved with his family to Kentucky, where he graduated from high school and began college studies. He then attended UCLA for two years and, in the harsh atmosphere of the 1950s, became openly active in politics for the first time. Subsequently living in Mexico City, New York City, Copenhagen, Paris, Belgrade, and Kalamazoo, he finally settled in Detroit in 1969. During these years, Fredy pursued graduate studies at Columbia University (influenced especially by C. Wright Mills), became printer for the Living Theatre, received a Ph.D. in Belgrade for his work on economic development, taught for two years at Western Michigan University, and participated in the May-June 1968 upheaval in Paris.

It was in Detroit that Fredy, his companion Lorraine, and others established a radical print co-op, and where Fredy pursued most of his anarchist research and writing. He read enormously and eclectically, drawing particular inspiration

¹ More specific autobiographical details are found in his *Worker-Student Action Committees: France, May '68* (with R. Gregoire) and *Anti-Semitism and The Beirut Pogrom*. Much of the Detroit material in *Letters of Insurgents* is also based on Fredy's life experience from a variety of contexts.

from literary, historical, and political statements of the anti-authoritarian tradition. Among his published translations, for example, are works by the 1920s Soviet economist I.I. Rubin, Russian anarchists Arshinov and Voline, and contemporary French writers Debord and Camatte.² At the same time, as his lengthy *Letters of Insurgents* demonstrates, he drew constantly from the contexts of daily life from the radical atmospheres of campus upheavals and Paris in 1968 to the immensely satisfying printing co-op and his rich network of personal friends and comrades. At the time of his death, he was only a few months from completing a large work, *The Strait*, that was seeking to articulate the perspective of Great Lakes Native Americans in their first clashes with Western “civilization.” Having personally examined the notes and manuscripts involved, I can attest to the enormous range of his research and the amazingly complex and intricate methods he used to organize his material. Like so many in the past, Fredy was an anarchist who truly defied the stereotypical images of disorganization, inarticulateness, and inability to sustain projects to completion.

The unifying concerns of Fredy’s work are the obstacles, inhibitions, and illusions that prevent genuine social liberation. Although capitalism is seen as the overall framework for domination and self-repression in the modern era, Fredy’s special talent was to demonstrate the variety of its political forms. Bourgeois democracy, fascism, nationalism, Marxism-Leninism, and even past attempts at libertarian socialist alternatives—all in different ways permitted continued accumulation of capital by elites, and the extraction of surplus value from alienated populations. Also examining pre-capitalist societies as far back as 5000 B.C.E., Fredy sought to uncover the roots of all political ideologizing and domination (as well as evidence of alternative human consciousness and behav-

² In some cases, through collaborative efforts.

ior). Whether involving a soldier caste, priesthood, or rebel directorate, the issue was the same as in the modern period. “Liberation” that depends on others’ initiatives and specialized leadership creates its own servitude. Each accumulation of unequal power leads to the privilege of a few and the degradation of the others. Every major step toward apparent liberation produces further domination instead.

The core energy of much of Fredy’s writing apparently came from an intensely lived experience of revolutionary upsurge. In Fredy’s case, this was the May-June 1968 upheaval in France. Arriving in Paris on the last train before strikes closed the lines, Fredy thrived on that enormously vital context of radical hope, imagination, and solidarity. He was especially active in the occupied Censier University Center and one of its products, the Citroen Action Committee. A booklet that he and R. Gregoire later co-authored, *Worker-Student Action Committees: France, May ’68*, dramatically presents the general exhilaration of these contexts, especially resulting from the spontaneous abandonment of traditional ideologies in favor of self-organized revolutionary projects.

Yet the ultimate purpose of this writing was to demonstrate and critique the limitations of what actually occurred. It focuses not on De Gaulle’s police, but on the ultimate paralysis of the Center militants and others before an apparent collapse of traditional social authority. Despite the wildly social libertarian rhetoric and the actual suspension of everyday institutions at Censier, militants (including Fredy) were unable to move beyond passive voyeurism toward those-the factory workers-expected to carry the struggle further. Despite the most creative visions to free the means of production for the benefit of all, “the militants did not go to the factory to liberate themselves; they waited for an inexistent power to liberate them” (*Worker Student Action Committees: France, May ’68*, 90).

If the Censier militants did not feel themselves sufficiently deprived to liberate the factories and other institutions on their

fully aware of the strong possibility of nuclear war, Fredy felt that an attempt should be made. As articulated in his earlier *Against His-Story*, “It is a good time for people to let go of [Leviathan’s] sanity, its masks, and armors, and go mad, for they are already being ejected from its pretty polis” (301). Fredy sought to participate in this process and to encourage others to understand and immerse themselves in it as well. His final gift, through *The Strait*, was to present a nonhierarchical alternative through its own voice, as spoken in the context of its direct conflict with white encroachment in the Great Lakes region, the first local agents of Leviathan.

In the end, Fredy was *perhaps* hopeful. He saw America today as “a place where human beings, just to stay alive, have to jump, to dance, and by dancing revive the rhythms, recover cyclical time. An-archic and pantheistic dancers no longer sense the artifice and its linear His-story as All, but as merely one cycle, one long night, a stormy night that left Earth wounded, but a night that ends, as all nights end, when the sun rises (*Against His-Story*, 302). Through his life and work, Fredy not only identified the wounds, he did his best to enlarge the circle of that dance.

Fredy Perlman’s publications are still available from Black and Red, P.O. Box 02374, Detroit, Michigan 48202.

The *Fifth Estate* is available at P.O. Box 02548, Detroit, Michigan 48202.

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A more substantial interruption, or rather a prolonged concentration on one phase of his agenda, became ‘an intense book-length recapitulation of the past few thousand years of human history. More specifically, Fredy was interested in tracing the birth and expansion of a “cadaverous beast,” the social system of institutionalized domination spreading from the Middle East to eventually devour and incorporate all the original free communities of humans which had covered the earth for thousands of generations before. *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!* is a tightly structured overview of the vast conflict between insatiable hierarchical society and its victims, from the Sumerian origins of Western civilization to 19th-century North America.

Yet this was also a prelude to the manuscript, *The Strait*, which he finally resumed and brought near to completion before his death. Tapping another dimension of his own genius, Fredy here attempted to leap beyond the consistently delimiting perspective of contemporary revolutionaries, which had been the focus of so much of his earlier writing. Now, he sought to discard the Western perspective entirely and to immerse both the reader and himself as writer as fully as possible in the worldview of Woodland Native Americans. Not only does the content describe a mature vision of non-hierarchical society, but the language and syntax of the presentation itself are an attempt to articulate non-Western consciousness through the poetic imagery of that culture.⁴ The possibilities of this approach were important. In Fredy’s view, the monster of domination was presently at a stage where pockets of humans were being discarded as superfluous to its further progress. Although unsure of the potentials for such people to regenerate their liberatory energies, and while

⁴ Revealingly, in a note in the *Strait* manuscript, Fredy attributes part of his inspiration for this task to his surreal trans-historical dreamlike experience in the midst of a high-tech institutional context, while recovering from heart surgery a few years earlier.

own, the workers in turn allowed themselves to be herded like sheep in and out of the factory by their Communist trade union officials. In both cases, for Fredy, the central issue thus posed was how “to break down the indifference, the dependence, the passivity which characterize daily life in capitalist society” (*ibid*, 93).

In pamphlets written during the next few months, Fredy described and analyzed fetish worship by workers (*The Reproduction of Daily Life*) and academics (*The Incoherence of the Intellectual*) alike. Each group admires the institutionalized and reified objects of its own creation, while continuing the daily pretense that its thoughts, activities, and very life are truly its own. The second work- is actually a detailed analysis of C. Wright Mills’ search for a radical politics and a “historical agency of change.” Although clearly sympathetic to and partially inspired by Mills’ quest for an activist role for intellectuals, Fredy also portrays the tragic limits of Mills’ analysis and self-development, his ultimate elevation of intellectuals to a position detached from the field of concrete action. For Fredy, to unmask the theoretical claim of revolutionary leadership for specific social strata became as important as denouncing the pretenses of self-proclaimed liberation movements.

Fredy’s brilliant analytical abilities, creative imagination, and sheer delight at sophisticated satire emerged fully in the *Manual for Revolutionary Leaders* (by “Michael Velli”), which he and Lorraine Perlman wrote together and printed in 1972. The *Manual* is actually three books in one. First, it provides a solid analysis of the evolution of capitalist social relations up to their present stage of likely collapse. It also offers an intricately convincing guide for a “revolutionary leadership’s” appropriation of power in the midst of capitalism’s demise. And, it scathingly *indicts* the contradictory and absurd nature of precisely such vanguardist attempts. Unfortunately, as Fredy later wrote, “every exposure of the ravages of the dominant system, every critique of the system’s functioning,

becomes fodder for the horses of liberators, welding materials for builders of armies” (*The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, 49). It seems that at least half of the requests for the *Manual* came from “aspiring national liberators” who failed to grasp the third dimension of the work. Nevertheless; the valuable complexity of approach makes for a thoroughly unique work among contemporary critiques of political liberation. And, not the least of its accomplishments, as in Fredy’s other works, are the creative graphics and sensitive publishing methods themselves, skilled products of his own direct action as a self-publisher and printer.

In the mid 1970s, Fredy completed his most extensive statement yet. *Letters of Insurgents* is a fictionalized exchange of twenty letters between two veterans of the same Eastern European upheaval. Sophia Nachalo, a young girl at the time, emigrated to Detroit shortly afterwards. Her male friend Yarostan Vocheck remained behind, struggling for years in underground activity and prison before evolving to a more tired and cynical perspective by the time of the letter exchange 20 years later. Fredy’s ability to interweave several evolving levels of social analysis here again provides a highly successful, dramatic approach. Each letter interprets the shared political upheaval of two decades before, but with increasingly complex and sophisticated insight. As each writer challenges the previous account, the reciprocal critiques force the two to compare their experience with earlier revolutions and to reflect on their own and other militants’ life courses following their common political birth. A final dimension is the reciprocal impact of each writer on the other’s interpretation of the present, as well as the rapid development of the two present contexts toward new revolutionary upheavals.

The actual result of this intense and complicated exchange is no less than a brilliant and exciting analysis of radical and revolutionary contexts ranging from Spain and Eastern Europe to France and the United States in the late 1960s. It is

a rare and thoroughly credible account of the possibilities for and obstacles to genuine social revolution through the eyes of sophisticated participants.³ Fredy employs the full power of his theoretical critiques, but grounds them in concrete contexts, allowing the reader to feel the seething hopes and contradictions they contain. More convincingly than ever, he clearly defines the clash between vanguardist and genuinely anti-authoritarian socialism, as well as how capitalist social relations become internalized ‘within the minds of revolutionary protagonists themselves. It is truly one of the finest, most sensitive fictional accounts to emerge from the context of- the 1960s, and successfully and deservedly places that decade in the wider historical spectrum of Western radicalism.

Having encapsulated and critiqued the experiences of modern Western revolt, Fredy was prepared to explore the historical roots of domination itself, as well as past forms of nonhierarchical social relations. After several years of extensive reading and” travel, he began work on *The Strait*. More pressing priorities, however, soon emerged. In the early 1980s, he produced two pamphlets, *Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom* and *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, each work originally an article in the Detroit anti-authoritarian publication *Fifth Estate* (on which Fredy was a continuing and strong influence). Both writings explored the issue of “national liberation,” for Fredy merely a subset of revolutionary vanguardism of capitalist appropriation of individual lives. No doubt he was moved to such efforts by the nationalist appeals in those years from those defending Israel’s invasion of Lebanon and those promoting liberation fronts in Central America. Yet the two pamphlets clearly reflect the deeper historical research of the previous few years as well.

³ Among its accomplishments, the account is a startling anticipation of the Solidarity experience in Poland a few years later.