

Interview with Peter Werbe, Fifth Estate, Detroit, MI

Peter Werbe

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Rich: In our interviews, we've found some anarchists in the upper Midwest (the Rust Belt area) who are using the leftover resources in urban areas. We'd like to see this as a positive thing, people are making use of somewhat abandoned stuff-buildings, land.

Peter: Those of us at the Fifth Estate aren't doing too much of that. For the most part, our living patterns are fairly conventional. The best example in Detroit is the two-house project at the Trumbull Theatre. There is a benefit to living in an old Rust Belt city like Detroit. It's much easier to establish what Hakim Bey calls "Permanent Autonomous Zones," because of cheap rent and low property values. The Fifth Estate office, for instance, only pays \$200 a month including all utilities, and the Trumbull property which includes the two houses and a theater for about \$30,000.

Mark: Do you think the situation where people are buying and rehabbing houses, such as ones marginalized anarchists have access to, has potential within the Fifth Estate's concept of "abolishing civilization" and your critique of technology?

Peter: I don't think I would put such grandiose pronouncements on communal living. However, historically, people have had convivial, communal living arrangements within the context of radical movements, particularly younger people before they establish families. The larger the movement, the more people are involved in such activities such as in the 1960s. If its only attraction is cheaper rent than conventional forms of housing then it's only like co-op housing at universities. Anything that steps outside the normal definitions of capitalist society (and the whole idea of communal living flies in the face of that), I think is positive. Capitalism depends on atomization.

Widespread communal living generally comes about when a movement has reached a certain level of coherence. In certain areas, often adjacent to universities or historically bohemian districts, some people say, "Hey, we all have similar ideas, we like the same music, go to the same demos, we ought to have a communal household that expresses in day-to-day life our values-sharing, the economy of the gift rather than the commodity (although this is usually implied rather than explicitly stated), consensus decision-making." These living arrangements then easily become the locus of political action because of the number of revolutionaries grouped together.

Activism becomes integrated into life from the moment of awakening rather than going to it like a job.

Mark: From a theoretical perspective, what are some ideas that you've been considering lately?

Peter: The last few years have been sobering. A certain humility has crept into our thinking and way of life. It doesn't look like much of what we advocate is on the agenda. The machine rules everywhere. We are in a period of the total domination of capital where even the pseudo-opposition of socialism has left the scene—capital's major 20th century rival. There is no more terra incognita. There is no longer any significant area, geography and thought that technology and capital hasn't extended itself into.

Calls, such as the one which appears on the masthead of the Green Anarchist saying, "For the Destruction of Civilization," sound shrill and incoherent at best, and, I'm sure nihilistic to most readers not steeped in their ideology. I'm not saying we should step away from radical critiques of capital and technology, but increasingly we're being forced into rearguard actions whose demands step away from the totality and sound more like, Please don't kill everything so fast."

The idea that because we at the Fifth Estate make critiques of technologized capital doesn't mean that we can escape the consequences we describe. We are at a critical point now trying to preserve those ideas which are at risk from being pushed from human consciousness. The Appendix to Orwell's wonderful dystopian novel, 1984, is instructive. The idea of Newspeak was to remove words from language and thus the ideas they represent. I see our projects and journals as repositories of anti-authoritarian ideas that include an understanding that technology as manifested under industrial capitalism is a major factor in the domination of the human spirit.

Mark: When you say "humility" do you mean that you have opened up or softened your views?

Peter: It doesn't mean I'm going to buy an electric steak knife! At one level, the world is as depressing as it always has been, but that's not to say we can't find elements of joy in our resistance and within an alternative culture we build around it.

At the same time, we have to recognize we are in a precarious position. We are in a biological, social and spiritual (and I don't mean religious which I don't care about) decline. There's nothing left to hang our hats on that has substance. But people retain something in spite of this, even those immersed in the spectacle and commodity society. An inherent sociobiology rooted in our basic humanity manifests itself in our wanting to be communal figures like we were for 90 percent of human existence on the planet, even in things that may appear as dumb as a bowling league or a Star Trek convention. People want to do things together that are affirming and convivial no matter how much the culture of capital tries to domesticate us. We've been domesticated by the state; we've been domesticated by capital; we've been domesticated by technology, but there's a million instances where people act contrary to that. But people could forget how to do it. As it is, the Star Trek convention holds no capacity to effectively confront our domestication. Worse examples, such as rooting for sports teams or worse, wars, take the impulses of communality and manipulates them for commodity consumption or the needs of the imperial state.

That's why it's critically important for us to continue our projects on the margins of this society, even if it looks absolutely hopeless. For one thing, if we want to live out our lives as distant as possible from the dominant society, we better work hard to create an alternative culture and communities, hopefully ones that have the potential to eventually confront the dominant paradigms that currently rule us.

Mark: So, there is some ray of hope?

Peter: I don't think we can live without it. We continue to fight against the worst excesses of technology and the empire and we hope that something will occur—some incident or some sense of what the futility and harm of this world does to everything and everybody will impel people to move in a direction that reasserts human community and our own humanity. Maybe it will happen; maybe it won't. A Leninist will scoff at what they would consider this lack of vision for how to achieve revolution, and will propose any number of strategies for the "people" or the "workers," but won't end up any better than we do.

Mark: Does distant human history offer any guidance?

Peter: "Anarchy is natural; everything else is learned," I've heard said; and the cooperative forms that nurtured every form of pre-historical, pre-state, pre-technological society gave them the capacity to exist. In that sense, you can "prove" that anarchism is a clumsy way of enunciating the 'Old Ways' as poet Gary Snyder calls them ancient wisdom and sensibilities about how to live on the planet and with each other. This doesn't mean, as dishonest opponents of this perspective have charged (and that includes not only Murray Bookchin, but Noam Chomsky, as well), that I or we or the Fifth Estate are advocating "going back to the caves."

It means looking at the ideas that were operative in societies that did much better than us in living their lives. I think for our bioregion, the Ottawas, for instance, had a society where the major aspects of social and personal relationships were worthy of emulation. The culture brought here by the European invaders was a disaster for both the carriers of it as well as their victims. Unfortunately, we are the inheritors of that culture which is a planet eater and not the one which knew how to live in harmony with the earth.

The task of resurrecting the Old Ways as a basis for a new world is challenging, but also rewarding. Actually, we have no other choice if we have any hopes for our children and the future of the planet.

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