

Letters

Lay off Helmut, Diane

NEEED SOMETHING TO MAKE your next party exciting? Then get hip to Diana Johnstone and tune in to the latest buzzword of the European avant garde, "Germanization" (ITT, Jan. 25).

What is it? Well, that's not entirely clear, since according to Johnstone it hasn't actually happened in Germany yet. But whatever it is, it bears a striking resemblance to that stalking horse of the '60s, "repressive tolerance," which was used to justify a multitude of follies.

In this case the folly is terrorism. Not that Johnstone is willing to make an overt justification of terrorism. She is hardly so gauche. Rather she confines herself to discussing political failings (moral considerations never enter into her critique), while providing a thinly veiled contextual justification. Terror, she suggests, is the product of a German cultural environment in which (her statistics) half the men beat their wives.

The logic of her connection may seem obscure, the barbarity of wife-beating being so wide-spread, but what is not obscure is Johnstone's concern with her political pedigree. She invokes jailed RAF lawyer Manier to tell us of the political failings of terrorism, as if those failings weren't long obvious to non-terrorists. Her approach is redolent of those who knew Stalin was a bad man only after '55 when he was denounced by Khrushchev.

Johnstone would have done better to come to grips with German civil society. Then she could have avoided giving the impression (which surely she knew to be false) that the lack of organized left opposition to Helmut Schmidt is simply a product of suppression aimed at stilling the moral outcries of the likes of Ulrike Meinhof—a woman whose moral chastity was vouched for by her compatriots, who fire-bombed a synagogue to show that they had gotten over "the Jewish thing" and were ready to do what had to be done. Like Johnstone, I don't doubt their "courage."

—Fred Siegel
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Pleasure into dismay

I WAS PLEASED TO SEE TWO full pages devoted to coverage of Puerto Rico (ITT, Jan. 25). But my pleasure turned to dismay and anger as I read the lead story which dismissed independence as an alternative for the island's future because "people ravaged by poverty" fear an "economic disaster."

James Dietz fails to show how inde-

pendence could bring a worse disaster than the present "commonwealth" (read colony) status or the statehood "solution." Dietz himself shows that the current 40 percent unemployment rate would climb drastically if federal taxes become applicable on the island. By reporting the comments of pro-commonwealth and statehood elements without discussing the views of *independistas* concerning the pro-statehood congressional report, Dietz appears to reject the latter group as insignificant. Nor did the two accompanying articles fill the gap.

The article on reverse migration back to Puerto Rico neglected to examine the impact of these returnees on the employment situation and political scene. Did unemployment and police repression in the Puerto Rican community in the States have anything to do with their return?

How did the discovery of a striking utility worker beneath a toppled transmission power post damage the union's position in the public eye?

The left press needs to cover Puerto Rico more. Your spread left more questions unresolved than it answered, and dismissed the most serious questions of all—indpendence as a political alternative!

—Elissa Janes
Madison, Wisc.

There are ways and ways

G. WILLIAM DOMHOFF MAY be right when he characterizes the Democratic party as "a coalition of blue-collar workers, middle-income liberals, and minorities" (ITT, Jan. 18), but I am amazed to find him characterizing the leadership as "more moderate and progressive elements of the capitalist class."

The Carter administration is showing us right now how "moderate and progressive elements" are used as window dressing for the blue collar workers and minorities but given no recognition on their programmatic demands.

Whatever happened to Domhoff's question, Who Rules America?

Domhoff remembers that Upton Sinclair, running as a Democrat, gave the election to a Republican but forced him left. He remembers that Henry Wallace, running third party, was a "disaster" to the left and also the trade union movement. Does he remember that Wallace forced Truman way to the left of where Truman started?

Indeed, there are ways of being Democrats that lead to a loss of socialist perspective.

—Maggie Feigin
Los Angeles

Close encounter with cultists

I'D LIKE TO REBUT BOBBY NELSON'S long ad for *Close Encounters* (ITT, Feb. 1).

The film may portray and dramatize, but it *doesn't* "explore questions of ex-

traterrestrial intelligence that merit serious discussion." Nor is it uniquely non-violent, peaceful, humanistic, exciting, or serious. What *is* unique is its connection with the UFO cult of believers who evidently get emotional kicks out of disregarding scientific objectivity.

Many, many, if not all science fiction stories make the assumption of extraterrestrial life—certainly *Star Wars* does! But we don't have to honor the peculiar prophets of extraterrestrial life made up by the UFO cult.

Even if it takes the form of "a 40-minute special effects spectacular portraying...a spirit of a cosmic UN."

—William J. Mechem
Chemical Engineering Division
Argonne National Laboratory

Nuclear war just won't work

SIDNEY LENS' ACCOUNT OF THE coming ability of the Pentagon to wipe out the Soviet Union by a first strike made credible by a guidance system that accurately seeks, finds and destroys Soviet nuclear submarines, presupposes that this would be to the advantage of American capitalism. But let's see:

- Has the Pentagon also found a secret way to isolate capitalist west Europe, the Mideast and Japan from effects of the incineration of Russia?

- Will the American people accept the blast-death of 20 million of their own people to say nothing of the poisons released on their crops and drinking water?

- How will the Pentagon control the panic situation resulting from the news of nuclear war?

- How will the rest of the world accept the destruction of such a large part of the world in order to save capitalism? Will they accept the results?

- Will the Pentagon be able to control world populations in the aftermath of this world tragedy?

It boils down to this then: Nuclear war is no war at all, and it benefits no one—not even the victor.

What a disappointment to militarists and their natural allies, the money-changers. The brave new world has outdated war, but the Pentagon hasn't come around to accepting it yet.

Oh, if the Soviet Union was on another planet. How jolly it would be!

—Haig Minasian
Miami, Fla.

Hey, good looking!

ITT IS A THOUGHTFUL, ALERT, responsive, objective—in its writing if not in its choice of coverage—interesting and stimulating. It is also the single best *looking* newspaper I have ever seen, and perhaps that's why I look forward to reading it cover to cover each week.

Who says a paper must write a lot about sex and violence to increase readership? Who besides Rupert Murdoch, that is.

—Robert Polner
Great Neck, N.Y.

Socialist baseball

IS IT REALLY SOCIALIST WHEN the city council of Visalia, Calif. (ITT, Jan. 18) agrees to pay travel and equipment expenses for a Minnesota Twins farm team? It sounds more like a good deal for a capitalist firm, the Minnesota Twins, who are now supplied with a pool of talent without having to pay for it. Socialism requires more than changing the paper ownership of the company or team.

But we need not despair. Baseball, being a capitalist industry, includes struggles against capitalism. For over three decades before the formation of the National League in 1876, players owned their own teams. In 1884, the reserve clause was instituted because players "leap-frogged" their salaries by jumping between the competing American and National Leagues. Later in the 19th century players formed the Brotherhood of Professional Players during a battle

with the owners over an attempt at Taylorism—the owners tried to set up an "A" through "E" pay scale. Finally we all know about the players' organizations of the 1970s that have succeeded in at least partially defeating the reserve clause.

These struggles are, to me, more indicative of the struggle for socialism than state "socialist" efforts to prop up a failing business.

Mark Maier
New York

Fager defends himself

IN THEIR RUSH TO BRAND ME AN unprincipled scab and the San Francisco *Bay Guardian* the "J.P. Stevens of alternative journalism" (ITT, Jan. 11), Eve Peil and Anita Frankel stumpled over several points of fact. Let me cite four: the strike they were "exposing" never involved a majority of the *Bay Guardian* staff; it lasted eight months, not 18; it occurred in 1976-77, not 1975-76; and the *Bay Guardian* has never attained even a modest financial prosperity—it has hung on for 11 years tenaciously, but not profitably.

These items are important not so much in themselves as for what they imply: The *Bay Guardian* strike was a complicated affair, easy to distort into a simplistic good-guys/bad-guys perspective. As I lived through it, however, the strike was a small-scale tragedy that pitted reasonable, progressive people against each other in a situation from which no one emerged unscathed.

I was one of those people. A freelancer ineligible for union membership, I nonetheless respected the picket lines for three weeks while weighing the issues involved. Despite all the barbs about the paper being rigidly anti-union, most basic items had been agreed to; the key difference was over the paper's use of freelancers. Here, I found to my initial chagrin that I agreed more with management than I did with the strikers. I hoped a settlement would relieve me of having to act on my convictions by crossing a picket line for the first time in my life. But no such luck; the time came soon enough to put up or shut up, and I put up.

In the end, the unions were decertified following a worker-initiated NLRB-supervised election in which strikers were eligible to vote, by a tally of 33 to zero which should speak for itself. I have no regrets about the stand I took.

I am now National Correspondent for the *Bay Guardian*. In 1972 I was president of the Phoenix Employees Union in Cambridge, Mass., when that union successfully struck against the newspaper's publisher.

—Chuck Fager
Arlington, Va.

Editor's Note: Please try to keep letters under 250 words in length. Otherwise we have to make drastic cuts, which may change what you want to say. Also, if possible, please type and double-space letters—or at least write clearly and with wide margins.

***** BE A MINI-DISTRIBUTOR OF ITT *****

Order bundles of 5 (10, 15, up to 25) copies of **IN THESE TIMES** to be mailed directly to you every week for three months. You pay us in advance, at 20¢ a copy, and help our circulation grow!

Are you a natural?

Then fill in the coupon below:

Name _____

Street _____

Town/State/Zip _____

Send me a bundle of _____ copies.
\$_____ enclosed is payment for 3 months, at 20¢ each copy.

Our Pig Bladder War OR The Way It Looks Through My Windshield

In the Vaudeville days it was always the craze
to beat one another with a dried pig's bladder,
For it made so much noise among all the boys,
That the audience roared as the actors got madder.

Soon our enemies found, a method so profound,
To break up and cleft all those of us on the Left,
Buying each of us a pig bladder, and getting us madder,
And encouraging us to beat one another to Death.

So today all the Left, from practices deft,
Still hammer away on each other and say,
"You're too far to the Right, get out o' my sight!"
Or, "Take that, you Commy! I'm twice as funny!"

So we strike and we hit, as we each do our bit,
To entertain those who laugh at our shit,
And divided we stand, each woman and man,
In a Pig Bladder War in our Capitalist Land!

—Frank, The Trucker
Denver, Colo.

Roberta Lynch

As much a matter of principles as of power

A socialist revolution is made not only by those who actually carry its banner. It is also the product of the small acts of hundreds of thousands multiplied many times over. It belongs to the perhaps millions of people who do not think of themselves as making a revolution, but simply as doing what is necessary to preserve a measure of human dignity. It is born not just in its slogans or its program, but also in its vision and its spirit. It is as much a matter of principles as of power.

The strength of any socialist movement depends on its ability to hold these elements—a moral ethos and political realism—in balance, sometimes emphasizing one over the other, but always seeking to unify them. Yet as we have moved through the 1970s—almost directly in proportion to its declining ability to have an impact on national policy or popular protest—the non-sectarian left has become increasingly preoccupied with questions of effectiveness, to the exclusion of all else.

Much of this concern with political power is valuable—a much-needed corrective to the lack of thoughtful and directed activity that characterized parts of the movements of the '60s. But in the process of seeking to overcome past errors, some of the elements most vital to our movement have been lost—or at least misplaced.

As *realpolitik* becomes the *sine qua non* of politics, important aspects of the positive heritage of the civil rights movement and the women's movement are in danger of being forgotten. The movement today is missing the kind of moral vision that enabled the early civil rights

efforts to inspire millions. And many of its members have yet to integrate the feminist perspective on the necessity of transforming human relationships, as well as economic ones.

Political purity or moral superiority are not at issue, but whether we can develop an alternative social vision that springs from the experiences of working class people, women, and minorities—that really has at its heart both material needs and the less tangible hunger for meaning that gnaws at us all.

I was reminded of this in reading Alice Walker's latest novel, *Meridian*. Walker has written several other books, and her writing is particularly important for us as a movement that has not yet found its heart. In order to maintain that essential balance, we need the insights into human beings and into American reality—in this case, particularly black American reality—that a writer of Walker's gifts provides.

In all of her works there is a certain facing down of that reality, a refusal to be intimidated by it. There is the commonplace of horror. It is the stuff of daily life: the dreams not simply deferred but distorted beyond recognition; the hatred of oppression that cannot be expressed twisted into hatred of sisters and brothers; the slow, imperceptible growth of malignancies that eat at the soul.

But Walker's writing shines with a fierce humanism as well—the conviction that in exposing the horror there is also brought to light the great courage that is required just to go on living one day after the other; the extraordinary resources possessed by the most "ordinary" of people;

the capacity not only for love (which is so often selfish) but for generosity in the meanest of situations.

Although she is not a polemical writer, Walker is in her own way intensely political. She demonstrates constantly and concretely the ways that racism shapes and deforms the lives of her characters, as when she writes of a father who murders his daughter: "In a world where innocence and guilt became further complicated by questions of color and race, he felt hesitant and weary as though all the world were out to trick him."

Nor does Walker need an intricate analysis to show that this oppression is systemic. It is all there in the day-to-day degradation of blacks, in the casual and even unspoken contempt from whites, and in the social and economic arrangements that encompass them.

Alice Walker writes as well of women—their oppression and their strength. *Meridian* puts to shame many of the "liberated women" novels of white writers that focus only on sexual gratification and self-fulfillment. It presents instead a woman whose identity grows from an insistence on her own integrity and from her deep commitment to others.

Walker understands painfully well the destructive interaction of racism and sexism—and the ways in which it particularly brutalizes black women. Here is one of the men in her novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*: "If he had done any of it himself, he might not have resisted the comfort...with all his heart. As it was, he could not seem to give up his bitterness against his wife, who had proved herself smarter...than he, and he com-

plained...often and loudly, secretly savoring thoughts of how his wife would 'come down' when he placed her once more in a shack."

Yet for all her grasp of the parameters set by oppression, Walker does not allow her characters to escape responsibility for their own actions. As Grange Copeland tells his son: "I know the danger of putting all the blame on somebody else for the mess that you make of your life... You gits just as weak as water, no feeling of doing nothing yourself. Then you begins to think up evil and begins to destroy everybody around you, and you blames it on the crackers. Shit! Nobody's as powerful as we make them out to be. We got our own souls don't we?"

It is this sense that "we got our own souls" that keeps hope alive. And it is Walker's ability to maintain this hope while looking the harshest realities in the eye that gives her work its best political sensibility. Near the novel's conclusion, *Meridian* sums up this refusal to succumb to despair: "Perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries...and sing...songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul."

I hope she's wrong about walking behind. Any socialist movement that grows up needs the Meridians in its ranks, because—like Alice Walker herself—they help it to discover its own soul.

Roberta Lynch is a member of the National Committee of the New American Movement.



Stanley Aronowitz

Art for art's sake is a plea to be free of the market

Hans Koning's admirable statement that politics and art are indissolubly linked (*ITT*, Dec. 21, 1977) sadly approaches the problem in a one-sided way. For Koning, the commitment of the writer to politics is a matter of moral responsibility rather than being a part of the very essence of the art. In condemning such doctrines as "art for art's sake" Koning has mistaken the *demand* for art's autonomy from politics for the reality. For literature cannot separate itself from political influences even if the writer disclaims interest in political issues.

Koning has failed to come to grips with the historical roots of the feigned indifference of the artist to political concerns. Most artists confront social and political determinations as a form of oppression, for politics intrudes as a limit on their ability to produce art freely.

At its most elementary level, the agony of the artist in capitalist society begins with the almost inevitable transformation of all cultural production into commodities. The literary, graphics and music marketplaces, dominated by big corporations and their charitable foundations impose a considerable censorship upon both the form and content of the arts. "Art for art's sake" is the plea of the controlled artist to be free of the commodity form which, beyond the debates within the art world itself, constitutes the social and political constraint upon artistic production.

But the demand for political freedom for the artist is opposed in the so-called socialist countries by an instrumental view of art. That is, the state requires the artist to serve, not as a matter of choice,

but as a matter of command. Of course, the artists may refuse political commitment that conforms, more or less, to the line of the party. But they are also free, under such circumstances, to abstain from the public sphere. For if the artist refuses to heed the political call of the party leadership, the alternatives boil down to other work besides art, or exile. Which is not to deny that many important works of art have been produced under the repressive conditions of Soviet conformity since 1930. Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Sholokov and, of course, Solzhenitsyn are among those who, despite frequent disputes with the party's cultural apparatus, managed to produce quite good art.

The problem with Koning's invocation of Brecht to support the argument that politically committed art is a duty, not just desirable, is that he forgets that Brecht kept his money in a Swiss bank even while living in East Germany and enjoying prestige and fame in the Socialist world. The relation of the intellectuals, including artists, to politics has always been uneasy. From the time of Galileo in modern times (brilliantly portrayed by Brecht himself) to the present, the intellectual has had to face the intrusion of politics as a repressive force as much as deciding whether to become committed to politics. For ruling classes and groups have never trusted intellectuals, even when they have been bought and paid for. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger has pointed out, both the U.S. and the eastern European countries have too often employed poets to write patriotic hymns

or, it may be added, to help sell war bonds. But the role of art as critique of society need not take the form of politically committed work. In some instances formal innovations may themselves constitute a critique of the demands of the majority of ruling classes and their retainers for maudlin, sentimental art that portrays the world as harmonious, that strictly excludes a suggestion of dissonance. Thus, Samuel Beckett, Arnold Schoenberg, the early Bob Dylan, some of the Rolling Stones and the Beatles have, at various moments, made their alienation from the dominant forms of artistic expression known in many ways that are not directly political.

Political art, despite its intentions, may be conformist if it does not address the problem of the narrowing of the universe of sensibility that has invaded most audiences. In modern capitalism, the tolerance for forms of artistic expression that are not familiar, especially in music and painting, is so low that those artists who dare to turn their backs on conventional art risk starvation if they persist.

John Updike and Norman Mailer may not be taken as representative writers among those who profess indifference to public events. Both are successful writers of the marketplace. The issue is better stated with reference to the mass of artists who never make it, who support themselves, at best, as copywriters and illustrators for ad agencies, or worse, by writing porno under assumed names hoping to get their more serious work published or performed by reputable organizations. Their attempt to escape the iron

laws of the literary fleshpots drives them toward a kind of protest that proclaims the private sphere to be sublime. Rather than admonishing these people to become politically engaged, it would be better to examine the role of the left with respect to the arts.

The history of left relations to artists is littered with dogmatism and self-righteous attacks on those who fail to sign petitions or to conform to Marxist codes. Only a few left critics, notably some like Georg Lukacs and Herbert Marcuse, have recognized that in a society marked by growing bureaucratization of the arts and by their degradation into canons determined by exchange value, the forms of protest against domination may be varied and deserve the support of the left, even if they do not take political expression. Further, it may be that the best art is produced, not only by those artists who see themselves as engaged, but also by those who refuse to engage themselves with the canon as determined by critics, parties and buyers.

I believe that it is only when the socialist left can come to terms with its own history in relation to the arts and with the multiple ways that artists seek to emancipate themselves from all forms of domination, including political domination, that it can successfully persuade artists that political commitment may not entail enslavement.

Stanley Aronowitz is Professor of Comparative Culture in the Social Studies School, University of California, Irvine, and author of *False Promises and Food, Shelter and the American Dream*.

