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Interview about Liberated Guardian

James Herod

September 2014

Interview with James Herod, by the Italian Group, Yes Alternative Press, September 2014, about his Participation in the *Liberated Guardian*.

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1. We would like to start by asking some personal information: name, age, place of birth, where are you based right now?

My name is James Herod. I was born in Pryor, Oklahoma, USA on September 28, 1935. I will be 79 years old this month. I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

2. What did it mean to work in the underground press scene and how did you get close to it? Which magazine did you work for/in? What was the relation with the other underground newspapers?

I had a friend who had a friend who was involved in the split at the *Guardian* newspaper on April 12, 1970, a national left-wing paper based in New York City. He encouraged me to join

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the new group, which began publishing the *Liberated Guardian* on April 20, 1970. I joined the project in its early months and stayed with it until the end, with some absences. The paper ran for around forty issues, from April 1970 until February 1973. It ended when the *Liberated Guardian* itself suffered a split. I wrote up my interpretation of that second split in my book, *Coming to Terms with the New Left: The Split at the Liberated Guardian and Its Larger Significance*. I was always marginal to the paper. I was 35 years old when I joined. I was accepted into the collective probably only because I was still a student at Columbia University and was generally active in the radical movement. Nevertheless, I was 10-15 years older than most of the other members, especially the core members. It was something of a generation gap, although I didn't think of it that way at the time.

What did it mean? Well, for one thing it was tremendously exciting – politically, intellectually, socially. We published the paper from a loft in a dilapidated building in Manhattan's Lower East Side. We functioned as a "collective," an informal cooperative, based on direct democracy. Most of our meetings took place in the front room of the loft (the biggest) with everyone sitting in a circle on the floor. There were no bosses. We debated all the then currently raging issues. The movement of the sixties was still alive. Revolution was in the air. Although we didn't know it at the time, the paper had come into being at the very tail end of the uprisings of the sixties. By the time the paper ended 2-1/2 years later the revolutionary movement of the sixties had pretty much been destroyed and had dissipated.

In those days, most of the "underground" newspapers were on each other's mailing lists. So we got copies of a whole bunch of other papers regularly. There was also a lot of communication amongst some of them, based mostly on personal friendships, I think. There was an Underground Press Syndicate which facilitated these exchanges, but was in no sense a controlling national organization. Each paper was indepen-

capitalist consciousness. This consciousness is also rejecting representative government, insisting on direct democracy instead, and decentralization. It is against empire. It is environmentally aware, ecological. Many millions of people worldwide are beginning to connect the dots between global warming and capitalism. So in this sense, these are hopeful times.

A couple of things are dying, it's true. The global American Capitalist Empire is dying. And the Earth is dying, killed by capitalists. Some argue that capitalism itself is dying, and will be gone within forty years. I fear that this will be too late to save the earth, but let's hope not.

Consciousness altering drugs may find room for safe usage in a free society, but as used currently they hamper effective resistance to oppression (and, indeed, are frequently used by the ruling class to destroy opposition movements, like they did with the black liberation movement in the United States). In this sense I have always been at odds with the sixties.

7. *In our research, we specifically focus on the relation and influence between the European underground press scenario (starting from Provo) and the American one. How would you analyze this connection?*

I can't help you much here. Americans are an insular people. Most of us don't speak a foreign language. Living and publishing out of New York City as we did, we obviously had an opportunity to meet up with revolutionaries from all over the world, on a pretty regular basis, who were passing through the city. We did a long piece once on the Quebecois in Canada. We regularly featured articles on Palestine. We followed the Vietnamese English press of course. We had visitors from Italy, France, Germany, England, Cuba, Mexico, West Indies, and so forth. I think we did receive European papers from time to time. But as far as formal alliances with the European movement press, I don't think there were any, as far as I know. But as I explained above, I was always marginal to the project, so I might have missed them.

dent. It simply never occurred to anyone not to be. Because our paper was based in New York City, I guess, we got material to publish from people all over the United States and from other countries occasionally. In that sense the *Liberated Guardian* was perhaps more national and international than most other movement newspapers. *Liberation New Service* was also based in New York City. We used copy from them regularly, and I suppose some in our group had personal acquaintances among them.

Remarkably, a book had come out already in 1972 about the "underground" press, published by Simon and Schuster, called: *The Paper Revolutionaries: The Rise of the Underground Press*, by Laurence Leamer (220 pages).

Another such study has recently appeared, loaded with color reproductions, by PM Press, 2011, 203 pages, edited by Sean Stewart, preface by Paul Buhle, titled: *On The Ground: An Illustrated Anecdotal History of the Sixties Underground Press in the U.S.* This book is compiled from interviews with actual participants in various papers, so it is similar to the book you are putting together, it would seem. In the introduction to this book, the editor lists a few references to other books about the underground press (in addition to the two just mentioned). I will list them here for the benefit of your readers.

– John Birmingham, *Our Time is Now: Notes from the High School Underground*

– Roger Lewis, *Outlaws of America: The Underground Press and Its Context*

– John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*

– Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution*

– Robert Glessing, *The Underground Press in America*

– Abe Peck, *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press*

3. *When using the word "underground" we implicitly mean that there is an "overground." What was "overground" at that time? Is there a dialogue between what is underground and what is mainstream today?*

Sadly, and unfortunately, the term "underground" is a terrible misnomer. None of these papers were in any way underground, in the sense of being clandestine, secret, illegal. They were all published right out in the open, with known street addresses, and known participants. I don't know how the expression came to be, but it was a mistake. It gradually, over the years, gave way to, or was replaced by, the term "alternative." This was much better, but still inadequate. Finally, the term "independent" started to be used. Now we refer to the Independent Media. The only thing truly "underground" in the United States, or the only well-known thing, during those years, was the Weather Underground.

On the other side of the coin, the term "mainstream" is recently, and increasingly, starting to be replaced by "corporate." Corporate Media, not Mainstream Media. This is much more accurate. The expression "mainstream" was always an insult to opposition movements. Why should opposition media be defined as marginal, whereas government and corporate media is considered mainstream? Theirs is dominant, that's for sure, but it rarely reflects majority opinion. It is Establishment media, the media of the 1%.

During the '60s and '70s, at the time of the so-called underground press, there was only one other press, the regular press, the actually existing press. Each city or town had one or two newspapers. There were only a few national TV stations. The Left, of course, had always had its own press, with party newspapers, journals, and magazines, all of which were hardly known about by ordinary people. But the newspapers of the New Left were something else entirely, a new phenomenon – newspapers published by small autonomous groups not connected to any political party or union – hundreds of them,

By the way, it is not too useful, it seems to me, to frame the phenomenon of the movement newspapers of the '60s and '70s within the concept of culture alone. It was a cultural event, of course, but not essentially so. These newspapers were an expression of a revolutionary movement, a global systemic revolt against capitalism (although the anti-capitalism was not always, or even often, explicit). When that movement disappeared (it was crushed, mostly, but it also disintegrated from internal contradictions) so did the newspapers.

6. *Imagine a drug that could reanimate our dying culture: which one would it be?*

You are joking I hope. Or maybe you surmise that anyone involved in the revolts of the sixties would naturally think along these lines. The main function that marijuana (the obvious drug of choice in the sixties) has served these past forty years, at least in the United States, is to lock people up, to fill the prisons, to suppress dissent. Why would anyone think that a drug could fix things? Well, we could try Aldous Huxley's Soma, I guess, but that wouldn't reanimate anyone; it would further pacify us. Arthur Koestler, in his book *Janus*, pinned his hope for humanity on the invention of a drug that would neutralize the influence of the reptilian part of our brains over the higher, more civilized, consciousness-forming parts. He saw humans as deeply flawed biologically. His was a vain hope indeed. We probably are flawed biologically, but this can't be fixed with a drug. Rather than searching for a magical drug, we should be trying to break our addictions to stuporous practices which weaken us and render us defenseless, like alcoholism, internet abuse, drugs and medications, trivia, video games, spectator sports, junk news, junk food, junk movies, narcissism, nihilism, tourism, listening to ruling class media, and so forth.

Besides, one could argue that the culture is not dying, and that in fact we are in the beginning phases of the emergence of the first truly global culture and consciousness, which, fortunately, is a radical one, the first really world-wide anti-

mous powers that contemporary ruling classes have to control public consciousness resistance movements keep emerging. In fact, one of the most striking recent developments, is that the capitalist ruling classes have lost their ideological veneer. They can no longer plausibly justify themselves theoretically. They are standing naked, exposed. Their mendacity and brutality is no longer obscured by a propaganda smoke screen. People see through them. This is why they are having to rely more and more on brute force to maintain their dominance. This is very encouraging from the point of view of those hoping to get out of capitalism, and to rid the world of this 500-year-old pestilence.

In the short run, of course, all revolts still take place within commodified societies. The United States is surely the most thoroughly commodified capitalist society in the world. If revolts can happen here, they can happen anywhere. And this is a powerfully locked down society. That's why revolts here are less frequent and forceful than perhaps anywhere else. Yet they do happen. Commodification sets restraints, obviously. Most everyone needs money to live, equipment and material must be bought, bills must be paid. We can't do anything without using commodities. But within these confines, we can still find room to revolt, and attack our oppressors. There are cracks in the empire.

In the long run, the only way to get out of the capitalist commodified world (and now they are really commodifying every last thing on earth – water, wind, seeds, genes, feelings, illness, the ocean, rain forests, government functions, even war) is, most basically, to achieve a shift out of commodified labor (wage-slavery) into cooperative labor, and along with this to slowly extricated ourselves from the world of commodities which are bought and sold to a world of mutual aid, gift giving, and sharing. I have tried to spell out some of the steps we could take to accomplish this in my book *Getting Free: Creating an Association of Democratic Autonomous Neighborhoods*.

which received wide circulation, in many different social arenas – high schools, army bases, colleges and universities, minority communities, or simply whole towns or cities.

The New Left's movement newspapers were incredibly innovative, both in terms of content as well as design. As for content, if you take the whole output of these papers over the decade or so that they existed, there is hardly a topic or issue that didn't come in for critical analysis. Virtually everything came under scrutiny. Question everything, was the motto, and we did. Only a small part of this extraordinary outpouring of critical analysis has been mined and collected into book anthologies. I wish a lot more of it would be.

As for design, the movement newspapers really busted up the staid design characteristic of regular papers at the time. Printed newspapers have never been the same since.

As for now, on the relation between independent media and corporate media, there are shelves full of studies, about the concentration in ownership of corporate media, about how it has truly been turned into a propaganda arm for government and corporations, about how the internet and other social media has for the first time been able to make a dent in the ability of Establishment media to control public opinion (although less so in the United States than just about anywhere else). Opposition movements today don't rely much on newspapers. Even corporate newspapers are dying. But radicals still publish lots of magazines, journals, and books, and also posters, cds, dvds, and pamphlets, plus hundreds or thousands of web sites. Nevertheless, the power of corporate media is still hegemonic. I read just recently about how the relatively freer, more independent media of Europe has over the past ten years been brought largely under control to echo the Corporate Media in the United States. I hope this is not as true as the article seemed to suggest.

As for dialogue, I see some dialogue between today's independent media and its readers and viewers about the corporate

media, but virtually none with the corporate media itself. Capitalist media is impervious to criticism, from anyone, let alone from revolutionaries, or so it seems. The big change is that all of us are free from dependence on capitalist media for news and analysis. Anyone can get on the internet and read newspapers and websites from all over the world, from a wide range of political perspectives. You would think that this would enable us to hold corporate media accountable, but it doesn't, any more than it means we can hold governments accountable. They do what they want. It does mean though that they are "emperors without clothes," at least for us. And now there are more of us than ever before. They still control the narrative, but not nearly as totally as they did before.

However, the internet is a mixed blessing, to say the least. It is highly addictive, and it is a powerful atomizer, further breaking society down into isolated individuals, even more than it already is. I am aware of the intense debates within the radical community that have raged for years about the internet and the new social media, and their usefulness, or not, for revolution. It's complicated, and quite frankly, I'm not up on it sufficiently to argue the case one way or the other. I'm an old man. I hardly even know what Facebook is or how it works, even though it has been explained to me several times by young friends. I have a close friend, a brilliant young man in his early twenties, who is a computer whiz and incredibly media savvy. He has recently become quite disillusioned with the internet. The issue may become moot. The Establishment is trying desperately to control it, and to destroy net neutrality, and otherwise neutralize its usefulness to social forces hostile to the status quo. I can't judge whether they will succeed or not.

4. In our contemporary society, is it still possible to stay "underground?" How have contents and containers changed? (from paper to digital, advancing of technology, social network, social media, etc.)

The media environment today is markedly different than what existed in the sixties. The movement newspapers then were made possible, technologically, by the invention of web offset printing, which meant that commercial printers could do short runs of a few thousand copies. And they were cheap. So any group could scrape together the cash. Beyond that you just needed a stand-alone IBM selectric typesetter (a glorified typewriter), some paste-up materials, and lots of volunteer labor. Then you were set to go.

As I explained above, I don't believe that movement newspapers were ever underground, so I can't respond to that part of your question. But today's independent media, as far as the printed word goes, is substantially the same, with the difference being that there aren't that many newspapers. The bulk of print production today goes into magazines, journals, pamphlets, and books. There is also (or was) a huge "zine" production, i.e., short texts, usually self-illustrated, which were self-written, designed, and produced. Photocopying is much changed from the sixties. Now, someone can write a zine, type and lay it out, then run off a hundred copies on a photocopier, without much expense. There are also groups which do nothing but distribution, so the zines get out, and get preserved in zine libraries.

On a larger scale, we have independent radio and television stations, independent film makers, independent book publishers, book fairs, and book stores, all on a much grander scale than existed in the sixties, as well as web sites galore. Somehow, though, it still doesn't add up to a serious threat to capitalist hegemony. This is a real downer.

5. Does alternative culture necessarily need a commodity nowadays, or is it able to stand by itself without profits and rewards?

I take it by this you mean to ask whether it is possible to have an alternative culture outside the hegemonic capitalist commodified culture? This is a good question. It obviously is possible because revolts keep breaking out. In spite of the enor-