



Exploding The Phone

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Abstract	Review of, and commentary on, the Phone Phreak Convention at the Hotel Diplomat in New York. Author was unimpressed. Telephone numbers for Captain Crunch and Joe Engressia are listed at the end of the article.
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The GIMLET EYE

D. KEITH MANO

Sorry, Wrong Revolution

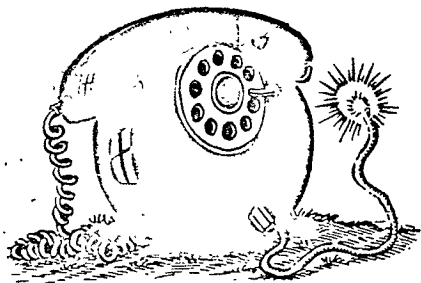
The Phone Phreaks. My God, they look like some paradigmatic Bronx High School of Science class on the lam. Their sweat is acrid, unc cosmetized: It reeks of shorted wires and ozone. Ungainly at the hip. Holsters there: a slide rule, a pair of pliers, wrenches from crayfish to lobster size. It's a wonder the weight doesn't ring them like doomed trees. Maybe it does: They don't walk, they shuffle. Knee joints calcified. Bright, promising young men. Except for one thing: They wear masks. It's a hot day to be incognito; there's no airconditioning in the Hotel Diplomat Grand Ballroom.

A handout says, "You will learn many techniques that people are using to retaliate upon Pa Bell and other Giant Corporations. Many of these techniques are illegal, while others are not. We do not advocate the illegal activities." Yes. Right. And when an (alleged) mugger traps me, he'll say, "This is not a holdup, hand over your money." In two hours I didn't see one damned legal technique at the Phone Phreak Convention. Unless the First Amendment guarantees free long-distance speech. And, baby, it was all advocated.

They teach seminar style, by closed circuit TV. Over here, learn how to perform a complete hysterectomy on your Con Ed meter. Over there, build a Red Box, Blue Box, Black Box. Center stage: Counterfeit slugs from #4 washers; trepan a parking meter; baste epoxy resin into a pay phone slot. It's as if Sesame Street were teaching the ABCs of fraud. The idea sounds catchy: a revolution by technology

against the technological society. Only trouble is, you better have a graduate degree in electrical engineering. Not the revolution for me: I need four-color diagrams to set my alarm clock. "Loosen the RR screw and remove the green wire. Then wrap the other shrdlu . . ." The closed-circuit audio has loose bridgework. People watch, but they don't take notes. Workers of the world unite, all you've got to lose is your sanity. This isn't what I'd call an exportable revolution. It isn't meant to be: It's a shout of postpubic defiance, nothing more than that.

THERE ARE eerie moments. Hand in hand, five sightless young people snake through the packed ballroom. Their



mouths are open: Perhaps another sense, a bat's sonar, has developed in compensation. I recall Brueghel's painting, *The Blind Leading the Blind*. They have perfect pitch, get toll-free calls by whistling fake phone frequencies. Heartening to think: Handicaps won't keep really determined men from a life of deceit. There's one youth dressed as a gigantic pay phone. His partner indicates vulnerable spots in the cardboard torso. "Take an electric drill. It's like hitting three cherries in Reno. Next time you make a call to Amsterdam, just drill here and here and here—you'll get your money back." Of course, you'd never take anyone else's money. That'd be a crime. Must be fun, jamming into a phone booth with

two nickels and forty pounds of drill equipment.

The credit-card dodge is recommended. A fat man explains; his beard is rabbinical; his black suit so shiny it stuns like flash bulbs. I see the outline of a tire tread along one lapel; maybe he sleeps in a parking lot. "The idea is to make someone else pay the bills. Someone you don't like. A big corporation. Republican National Headquarters. You can get area codes and numbers at the 42nd Street Library. Just call the operator and follow our Phone Phreak chart—give the credit-card billing code that matches the area code. It's foolproof. In New York they can't check you out: too much volume. I haven't paid for a call in five years. I don't even own a phone." I see why. His fingernails are two inches long. They curve down like potato peelings. He couldn't get close enough to dial.

For two bits they sell back issues of YIPL—the *Youth International Party Line*. No. 15 gives it away: "Why are they ripping off the phone company? YIPL members are actors in a play and the world is watching. And we're having a lot of fun." Masks continue the theme. It's a voyeur's revolution: secret, cheap, riskless. Ripped-off phone calls come in at the level of a water bag dropped from a tenth floor apartment window. The phone co. may take it seriously; I can't. There are no pranks in guerrilla warfare. Phreak ingenuity self-defeats. The convention had a pathetic publicness. One petition stated, "Be it resolved. That telephone security agents assigned to the convention ought to receive at least time-and-a-half." Boys who, at age two, used to recite a precocious "Three Little Piggies Went To Market" for their parents' early dinner guests. They haven't had attention since. Naturally the surrogate antagonist is called Ma or Pa Bell.

THEIR propaganda would give Mao gas. The inconsistencies are thunderous. Hell, with their epoxy squirt guns, they have the gall to complain of bad service. "It's not just the rate increases that burn me up about Bell. It's that lousy Bell service. Lousy service comes from rotten equipment [sic] and asinine employees." Problem: Telephone operators are grunts in the people's revolutionary army. You don't convert by calling prospective disciples asinine. Half the time YIPL feels sorry for operators. "The telephone company offers

its operators two kinds of harassment. [One] has a comfortable earmount which is cushioned . . . would you believe that, you have to pay them for this . . . if you are an operator?" That's the idea: Harass employees, then prescribe for their earaches.

Illogicality comes with the phran-chise. While shorting Ma Bell somewhat, phreak strategy inconveniences people a lot. This tends to cause laughable retroflexions in the radical hard line. After giving the recipe for an epoxy enema, YIPL gets nervous about begummed emergency pay-phone calls. And listen to this, "Check the obituaries in the local papers for dead single people . . . then call like crazy giving the deceased's phone number. Make sure the stiff doesn't have a family. They have enough to worry about without being bugged by the phone company." A scrupulous failure of nerve. The Phone Phreaks alienate Americans in direct ratio to their success. No way around it. And imagine: All that effort to put through an illicit call and what do they say? Probably, "Pick up a couple pounds ground chuck on your way home." It's a life of anticlimax.

YIPL prints noted establishment phone numbers as a harassment tactic. Nixon's law firm, for instance. As conservative counterinsurgency, I print the numbers of Captain Crunch and Joe Engressia, Phone Phreak field marshals. That's 408-255-2977 and 901-452-2102 respectively. Call them up the next time you get in at 4 A.M. Tell them they're stupid. Collect. □

AUGURIES

NOEL PERRIN

Reflections After Reading a Sex Manual

Birth, copulation, and death. Central to life, and also to the publishing industry. Every age has its birth books, its sex books, and its death books. (Though, because birth is an event more or less wasted on its central character, birth books tend to be mere directives for the supporting cast: clinical works for doctors and midwives, advice to expectant mothers.) Sex and death dominate. Tragedy for death, comedy for sex. Murder mysteries, war

erature, pornography, and the new novel of violence for sex. Poetry for both.

In our culture, though not in all, this trinity has been closely followed by another: class, money, and power. Silver-spoon novels in the eighteenth century. Rags-to-riches stories and true lives of millionaires in the nineteenth. The making of presidents and studies of global politics now. Jane Austen wrote about money; John O'Hara specialized in class. Herman Kahn and Theodore White deal in power.

EVERY age naturally writes about these things differently. Sometimes it defines itself by the ones it places first, like the eighteenth century giving prec-



edence to class and money. A man is a gentleman, or he is not. He has five thousand pounds a year, or he is a needy younger son. The first requirement of even the most romantic heroine, two hundred years ago, was that she be an heiress. Next that she be wellborn. Not that the other themes were absent. Usually she was also young (far from death) and beautiful (ripe for sex). But first she had money and class.

Sometimes the definition comes through what is glossed over. The Victorian age is justly famous for attempting to gloss over sex. Most things our great-grandfathers could and did look at with level eyes. Kipling was unembarrassed by power. Dickens wrote death scenes in almost lurid detail. James Fenimore Cooper seems actually obscene to modern college students because of his frank interest in members of the upper class. But from sex Victorians carefully looked away. It generally appeared dressed in white and calling itself a love story.

An age comes clearest in its manuals. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the question of how to die was universally interesting, and death manuals abound. That ancient work *Ars Bene Moriendi* was indeed already

new ones proliferated. Erasmus wrote one called simply *Preparation to Deathe*. Jeremy Taylor wrote a very famous one called *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*. A man named Thomas Lupset offered a kind of Masters and Johnson thoroughness with his *A Compendious and a Very Fruteful Treatyse, Teachynge the Way of Dyenge Well*.

Manuals seem especially revealing in our own age. Consider what you find in an American bookstore now. There are no death manuals at all. Or, rather, they exist only in reverse form: manuals on how not to die, otherwise known as health books. Jeremy Taylor, writing now, would have to retitile his book *Live Longer, Feel Better*, or possibly

Pray Your Way to Ninety. Class manuals, alias etiquette books, are still around, but clearly in a diminished form. Almost no one now studies how to write a "correct" love letter or letter of condolence (that is, high-class sex letters and death letters). People do consult Emily Post or Gloria Vanderbilt on what bridesmaids should wear. But often surreptitiously. There are families in which being caught in the act of reading an etiquette book would be a cause of horrible embarrassment, on the grounds that it is indecent to care about such things, in the same way that a bride a century ago would have been mortified to be caught reading a book on what to expect at Niagara Falls.

MONEY manuals are present and thriving, but they, too, seem less respectable than they once did. Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald's representative in *The Great Gatsby*, cited his possession of money manuals as proof that he was a really nice and serious young man.

Noel Perrin, chairman of the Dept. of English at Dartmouth, wrote *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy*. . . Nika Hazelton is writing a children's cookbook.