

Avoiding sectarianism

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Recently, in some of the political work and activism I have been doing, I have come into contact with some people from the Revolutionary Communist Party USA, a Maoist organisation. About some things, we are on the same page, and we can work together towards common goals.

On the other hand, there are things we are not on the same page about. Sectarianism is a bad thing and can be very self-destructive on the left, but I have a lot of problems with Maoism. This is not a reflexive anti-communist or jingoist flinch — it is a considered opinion. On broad principles of economic democracy, meaningful work, egalitarian distribution of wealth, and so on, there is nothing objectionable. But with vanguard strategies and cults of personality (now apparently called “appreciation”) and so on, I think the risks of authoritarianism growing out of such strategies are overwhelming. I also have problems with economic systems involving central (as opposed to democratic or participatory) planning. In any hypothetical upheaval, I would be fighting against any vanguard party or central planning apparatus.

Sadly I see no indication of any socialist revolution breaking out just this next day or two, so we can probably be friends for now. However, I think this is a serious difference, and one that can’t be simply papered over. In the near term, I think it is possible to work together for common goals such as stopping the war. Of course, that’s just me personally; I can’t speak for any group or organisation.

In general, it is of great importance and urgency to debate and discuss visions of a better world — envisioning, refining, and debating such goals and visions is the first step to achieving them; and today there is a distinct lack of this urgently necessary conversation. But the conversation is not merely urgent — it is also a practical step to defeat defeatism, to inspire, to encourage, and to become active.

I have greatly appreciated the work of Michael Albert and others on participatory economics, and the work on vision associated with people on ZNet and so on. That’s just economics, and there is more to life than economics, but it’s an important vision. Even on pure economics, however, I think there’s a lot more to be done. What would a just economy look like? Is there really no alternative to capitalism? Are we doomed to capitalism forever? Giving and

developing a vision of a better world is an important part of turning wishful thinking into action. Utopian thinking, in the positive (not quixotic) sense, even a scientific/rationalist/critical sense, is absolutely necessary and strategically clear.

It is still the case, however, that in my own experience what interests and excites me is different from what interests and excites others. Even after many many years of trying to figure out how things work — how the universe works, how mathematics works, how society works — and what people think, I still feel like I don't really understand people. On the one hand, perhaps you can't expect too much in this regard from a mathematician, but no, I actually don't get it, I have no intuition for it, and I'm open to suggestions about how to do it. On the other hand, I do get it, on a purely rational level, and I think that the only way to proceed is the same way everything else in history has proceeded, by the usual activist methods.

Revealing injustice, inspiring people, giving people hope, giving people vision, acting virtuously, living out our ideals and our considered judgments on social morality and justice. These are all we can do; these are all we need to do. We are the state, we construct social reality and institutions and expectations every day with every action; we must build new institutions with our actions, with our thoughts, with our habits, with our interactions, until the world arises from its slumber, shakes its head incredulously, rocks its conscience, realises that achieving a new world is no more than returning to sanity, and and human civilization is finally worth the name.

Or something like that.