

A Letter to Intellectuals Who Hide Behind the Word “Purity”

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“I think we could really not just lose people but lose sight of our own goals if we get sucked into these purity tests.”
— Mayor Pete Buttigieg, 2019

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Ana Maldonado, Pilar Troya Fernández, and Vijay Prashad have a new essay in MR Online criticizing what they see as the purism of critics of some socialist states, parties, and leaders, particularly Morales in Bolivia and Chavez in Venezuela.

There’s a lot that raised my eyebrows in this essay, for example their claim that the White Army sustained its attacks on the Soviet Union for a full six years, from 1917 to 1923. The post-revolution civil war in Russia began in earnest starting mid-1918, and the last significant threat, the White Army under Wrangel, was defeated in November 1920. Indeed, by early 1921 half of the Red Army had been demobilized.

But what surprised me the most was that for all the purist critiques of Bolivia and Venezuela they imply are so ubiquitous — so much so that they felt compelled to collectively write this letter — not a single example of this purism on the part of intellectuals is mustered to support their case. No links, no quotes, no citations. It’s a shame, as it may suggest to some readers that either the writers’ critique could not sufficiently dispatch an example of the very thing they are warning against, or that they are simply shadowboxing.

Defending the Thin Skin of Socialists in the State

This passage near the end gave the game away:

No revolution is without its own mechanisms to correct itself, its own voices of dissent. But that does not mean that a revolutionary process should be deaf to criticisms; it should welcome them.

They don’t elaborate on this (what are those mechanisms? what is the role of dissent?) because it would force them to re-examine the very essay they were writing: for the last century, the norm for socialists in state power has been to brook no dissent, to cast it as unacceptable witting or unwitting support of the forces of imperialism and reaction.

We’ve seen this allergy to internal left dissent to widely varying degrees in nations like the USSR, China, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and in Bolivia too, but it’s always present. Other leftist parties and organizations are either forced to merge or were suppressed or outlawed. Socialists who dare to publicly break with official party lines find themselves denounced, unemployed, imprisoned or worse. The writers’ refusal to grapple with this unsettling tendency was brought in high relief when they approvingly quoted something Leon Trotsky wrote *while in exile*. (Surely the writers recall the reason why Trotsky was living in Turkey at the time and not, say, Moscow?)

Confusing Political Disagreement with Purism

The writers attempt to explain what they see as the disappointing trend of purism among left thinkers by pointing to the collapse of the USSR. In their eyes, these now-vogue intellectuals argued “that the ‘State’ was obsolete as a vehicle for social transformation, and that ‘Civil Society’

was the salvation. A combination of post-Marxism and anarchist theory adopted this line of argument to deride any experiments for socialism through state power.”

Again, no seminal books, tracts, or thinkers are provided. They continue:

The state was seen as merely an instrument of capitalism, rather than as an instrument for the class struggle. But if the people withdraw from the contest over the state, then it will – without challenge – serve the oligarchy, and deepened inequalities and discrimination.

It’s worth highlighting how far away the writers’ depiction of the state as “an instrument for the class struggle” is from Marx’s warning that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”

Not to mention that history is littered with popular movements of both workers and peasants winning reforms and staging revolutions without engaging in “the contest over the state.” They were better materialists than many Marxist intellectuals are: they knew exactly where their true power lay and how to wield it. By casting the bourgeois state in instrumental terms, the writers neglect the dynamic and always contingent role it plays in both maintaining capital accumulation and mediating class conflict, and the myriad ways the laboring classes can bend states to their will without attempting to seize it.

Privileging the idea of ‘social movements’ over political movements reflects the disillusionment with the heroic period of national liberation, including the indigenous peoples’ liberation movements. It also discards the actual history of people’s organisations in relation to political movements that have won state power.

To the contrary, it’s by not discarding but *honestly facing* “the actual history of people’s organisations in relation to political movements that have won state power” that so many come to anarchist conclusions. I do appreciate the writers at least give a nod to the damaging effect state power has on movements when they explain that members of social movements joining the state “fulfils the demands of the people, and at the same time it has a tendency to weaken independent organisations of various kinds.”

However a nod is not enough. When left forces can displace the bourgeoisie from the political realm but not from the economic realm, they are stepping out on a ledge unsupported by the class and social movements they claim to speak for. The ambitions of the working class in motion are of necessity halted by the very state apparatus allegedly being run on their behalf: one-time revolutionaries are required to become the stewards of a political economy perhaps only days earlier they were railing against. And so, predictably, the urgent requirements and internal logic of holding onto the state threaten to divert and exhaust social movement energy: those who remain on the outside must choose to either break with the state project or give themselves up fully to it, come what may; the former being eventually targeted by their erstwhile allies and the latter losing all connection to the life of the working class.

This is a significant analytical and strategic difference within left: the essay’s writers dismissing one side of this disagreement as “purism,” or later on as “revolutionary pessimism,” depicts an unwillingness to assess the arguments in the debate on their merits, a sad pose for an intellectual of any stripe to adopt.

Social Transformation is Indeed Hard

Most serious critics of the left in power *do* actually acknowledge the dire circumstances that leftists who hold the reins of state power face from the forces of imperialism abroad and reaction at home, and the often remarkable material gains for the poorest that those states end up providing under harsh conditions.

But the easy path for leftists in power is to quell and repress the diversity of views, debate and dissension among their fellow leftists. Given that the most the writers bother to mention about left dissenters in these countries are that “their criticisms are frequently weaponised by imperialist forces,” I fear these intellectuals are very comfortable taking the easy path.

Vibrant and energetic discourse among comrades and allies, a hallmark of almost every radical movement *before* it takes state power, is seen by those at the top as a luxury they simply cannot afford once they occupy the presidential palace. As we see time and time again, such vibrancy and healthy internal democracy is an essential ingredient to any successful revolutionary project: without it, left formations within the state either collapse or bureaucratize and glom onto a section of the formerly-hated ruling class (Ortega’s Nicaragua is an excellent example among many).

Given the late hour for human life itself on this planet, it’s important we look with clear eyes at the successes and failures — and contexts — of revolutionary struggles across the world. Otherwise we commit ourselves to the same errors and abuses that doomed so much of the 20th century left, feverishly papering over the mistakes made so that no one, not even ourselves, can see them, just in case they might be “weaponised by imperialist forces.”

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