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Sectarianism and Vanguardism: Debating a Problem on the Left

Anarchist Federation of Rio de Janeiro

2014

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“Sectarismo e vanguardismo: debatendo um problema na
esquerda” (Anarchist Federation of Rio de Janeiro, FARJ).
Firstly published at Libera newspaper, num. 163 (Rio de
Janeiro, Brazil, 2014).

Original article: “Sectarismo e vanguardismo: debatendo um
problema na esquerda” (Anarchist Federation of Rio de
Janeiro, FARJ). Firstly published at Libera newspaper, num.
163 (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2014). Translated by Enrique
Guerrero-López.

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Sectarianism is intolerance towards the positions, opinions, ideologies or practices that are different from one’s own or those of the movement, organization or group to which one belongs.

It is usually accompanied by arrogance, vanity and opportunism and ends up superimposing itself on the fight for social transformation. A sectarian practice will guide a politics of difference, which is established through denial and continuous denunciation of the other, in pursuit of conflict instead of collective consensus and fraternal debate.

When it manifests itself among sectors of the left, sectarianism is even more damaging, since many times the shared struggle against class enemies is undermined by an inflexible, fanatical and unattractive vision of the world, which ends up frightening more people than it attracts to the revolutionary cause. The sectarian cares more about what other political groups are doing than about the class enemies of the workers.

Political, ideological and strategic differences exist on the left, but no social movement or ideology will advance alone in the process of social transformation. It is part of the struggle to know how to build alliances, formations and organizations, with ethics and without having to set aside principles and the strategic program, but seeking collective consensus through points and demands that are shared and help to strengthen the people and thereby achieve revolutionary objectives. An ethical political practice that respects political differences and always seeks the strengthening of the working class is what differentiates a liberating proposal from an authoritarian process, a democratic goal from a method of imposition. The practices of informal organization and poorly structured groups are also obstacles on the way to popular power, because they can reproduce vanguardism in other ways, creating a “hidden leadership” and discouraging spaces for collective construction.

It is necessary to pay attention, since relationships of oppression can also be embedded in our membership and must be combatted. All forms of indoctrination that impose established systems of ideas and actions on the people that are not in dialogue with their reality should be avoided. The process of building popular power cannot take place through indoctrination or authoritarian forms of politics that assumes an “enlightened vanguard” that knows, speaks and teaches while the other, the people, the ignorant, listens, learns and obeys.

It will not be beautiful speeches that convince the people of their strength and fighting ability. It will be their concrete and effective participation in grassroots organizing, strikes, demonstrations in the street, community tasks, etc. that does it; in sum, their participation in collective practices that generate accumulation and popular power. Nor will it be through beautiful rhetoric that we will publicize popular demands, on the contrary, it will be through direct political participation with organized people acting in their daily life: it will be in concrete practice with the support of a theory that embraces reality and is

nourished by it. This is about moving forward with the people without “idealizations,” “ideologizations” or sticking with simple “maximum programs” that do not establish any dialogue at all with the daily life of the people. Objectives should be set and minimum programs and action plans developed that are proportional to the demands of reality and of practice.

Any desire to artificially accelerate organizational processes, even in the name of the most “revolutionary” causes, leads to dangerous imbalances and sterile forms of radicalism. This means to love more than the people, and we already know not to “bite off more than you can chew.”¹ This means to project ideological points of view onto reality, from top to bottom, so that only what you want to see is seen and the people are forced to do what you think they should do. This is often accompanied by the exaltation of “militant martyrdom” or “revolutionary theoretical authority” and promotes political vanguards.

Another common sectarian practice is to carry out actions that are detached from reality or not collectively constructed and accuse those who do not participate in them as “reformists” or other things along those lines. In the end, these are actions with no other objective than to strengthen political vanguards, rather than the popular struggle. This type of authoritarian practice that forces “radicalization” or imposes external guidelines that have not been collectively constructed can be counterproductive and lead to setbacks. In this way, what seems “revolutionary” has reactionary effects, since it has no sensitivity to the people and shows that it does not want to walk alongside them.

This contributes to the arrogance of not correctly analyzing the possibilities of the conjuncture and the concrete conditions of struggle. Always wanting to dogmatically “push” the people towards situations in which the correlation of forces is unequal

¹ “Dar o passo maior que a perna” in the original Portuguese.

is to act irresponsibly, since it can cause losses in less privileged sectors. Forcing the step only leads to sectarianism and division of the masses. A revolutionary action is not expressed by its “radical aesthetics,” but by the objectives it seeks and by the method with which it is built and directed. To wish for popular commitment to occur immediately in a political process, from one moment to another, is to squander the work of base building. “It is better to take a step with a thousand than a thousand steps with one.”²

The real processes of popular power begin with modesty, since the struggle of those from below grows from small felt problems and their possibilities for solution, where all action must be assumed by the people as an active subject. The place of political organizations is neither behind nor in front, since they are formed by the people and must be there in the middle to agitate, propose policies and organization and advance the struggle. It requires great sensitivity to accompany and respect the living dynamics of popular action the moment that it presents itself in the day to day, in demonstrations or mobilizations, for example.

A willingness to fight for social transformation, yes! But a certain conception of the work and daily political practice are the differences that will determine the character of the new world we seek to build. There are other methods that help to effectively and consistently accelerate that journey of the people, such as conjunctural analysis, promotion of organization, progress in internal organization and contact with other groups and experiences, encouragement of political (self) education, and the construction of an ethical social and political environment with the direct participation of and respect for the people. These are all methods and practices endowed with popular principles such as direct action, self-

² “É melhor dar um passo com mil do que mil passos com um,” in the original Portuguese.

management, ethics, mutual aid and class struggle. Values that must be present in the process of building popular power and social transformation.