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Letter: Problem with anarchists

Joe Cohen

1995

Dear Love and Rage:

The following is a letter addressing a problem that I have with parts of the anarchist movement. In a sense, I am trying to sort out some thoughts of my own by engaging in dialogue with you, because I respect your work and have read the paper sporadically for a few years.

The problem is this: The basic opposition of anarchists to Marxists and vice-versa. I am coming from years of activity within the Israeli Communist Party, most of that time without actually buying the whole program. In other words, I have remained on the CP path for what I consider to be pragmatic, logical reasons, and not because I am ready or able to defend every aspect of Stalinist history. I used to think that this made me a minority within the communist or revolutionary socialist tradition, but that may not be true anymore.

I find that I am more comfortable with organizations that have recognized leaders and hierarchies, because the kind of leaders that don't have official recognition can't be officially replaced either. I like to have a say by voting, without always

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having to agree with the majority, or forcing the minority to agree with me. As long as the group agrees to work together while tolerating disagreements, it is good, honest political practice. I also find that most anarchist groups have as many rules, explicit and implicit as the various left grouplets in this country. The uniforms may be different, but the lack of openness and tolerance feels the same. The Marxist left does seem to be more successful at retaining members past the time when they have children. Why do you think that is?

In a perfect world the boundaries between red and black would be permeable, with groups across the spectrum recognizing the possibility of change over time, and understanding that dogmatism and holier-than-thou attitudes tend to defeat the purpose. As a revolutionary, I am trying to change the world so that it suits me better. By convincing anarchists that ideological pedigrees are less important than practice, and labels least important of all, maybe I'll be able to find a home for myself, politically. I hope you have figured out that if I am approaching the Love and Rage Network, it is because I think you will be more receptive to such as myself than the left groups I am familiar with.

A few years ago, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Israel, Meir Vilner, called for my expulsion from the CPI because, according to him, I was an anarchist. In fact, I had merely called for using the tactics of direct action while speaking at a congress of the Young Communist League. He did not succeed, thankfully. It amuses me to joke about the day when an anarchist group I belong to decides to expel me because I have suggested something akin to democratic centralism, a sure sign of Stalinism. As a whole, I suspect that anarchists would be far less tolerant of me than my CP is back in Israel. In the words of Rodney King, can't we all get along?

Respectfully yours,
Joe Cohen