

A Libertarian Critique of Mao's "Combat Liberalism"

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Contents

A Review 3
Synthesis 6
Living Radical Democracy 7

One of the biggest criticisms of Anarchism, or specifically, Anarchist Communism, is how it is “ineffective,” lacks coherence and discipline, and use that to justify support for more authoritarian forms of organizing in leftist circles.

Being in the archipelago known as the Philippines, one of works most cited by socialists in building discipline among their ranks is Mao’s “Combat Liberalism.” The contributions of the National Democratic movement spearheaded by the Maoist CPP-NPA-NDF cannot be understated when it comes to issues of worker’s rights and land reform, especially in the countryside. But, like all hierarchical organizations, we see that they have their own shortcomings. However, that doesn’t mean we can’t learn anything from them. We just need to pick out the truly liberatory ideas or those that strengthen our resolve in pursuing them and apply them in ways that mirror the better and fairer society we want to build.

A Review

Mao opens the discussion by describing what “Liberalism” is in general:

... liberalism rejects ideological struggle and stands for unprincipled peace, thus giving rise to a decadent, Philistine attitude and bringing about political degeneration in certain units and individuals in the Party and the revolutionary organizations.

Right off the bat we can see that Mao’s use of the word “Liberalism” here is completely different from how people with academic backgrounds use them, and this is important: “Liberalism” in here refers to the attitude that comes from the values upon which Classical Liberalism is built on- best summarized as “Vulgar Individualism.” That same term, “Vulgar Individualism,” I reckon, is a better term to use than “Liberalism” in this context for reasons which we’ll be discussing later, and we’ll be using that term as opposed to “Liberalism” throughout the rest of this work.

Mao continues by then describing eleven types of Vulgar Individualism, the first being:

To let things slide for the sake of peace and friendship when a person has clearly gone wrong, and refrain from principled argument because he is an old acquaintance, a fellow townsman, a schoolmate, a close friend, a loved one, an old colleague or old subordinate. Or to touch on the matter lightly instead of going into it thoroughly, so as to keep on good terms. The result is that both the organization and the individual are harmed.

In more contemporary terms, we would call this “enabling” someone’s wrongdoing. That by allowing someone to continue doing the damage they are doing to themselves or others, they are jeopardizing not only the functioning of the organization, in Mao’s case, the Party, but also of the entire revolutionary project. As Anarchists, we are for prefigurative politics, a politics in which we emulate the kind of society we want to bring about. Certainly, we don’t want the kinds of prejudices and crimes our own comrades commit continue within our own struggles as we don’t want that to live on in a post-revolutionary society.

However, being too harsh in the methods of holding others, society at large as well as our own comrades both, can lead to what’s called “Cancel Culture” here in the 21st century. It leads to the kinds of performative displays of purity which many, myself included, mistake for praxis from time to time to the expense of actually going out and organizing resistance and struggle. We’ll have to come back to this as we go on.

To indulge in irresponsible criticism in private instead of actively putting forward one’s suggestions to the organization. To say nothing to people to their faces but to gossip behind their backs, or to say nothing at a meeting but to gossip afterwards. To show no regard at all for the principles of collective life but to follow one’s own inclination. This is a second type.

This is something that is concerning as in the context of a Libertarian organization. “To indulge in irresponsible criticism in private instead of actively putting forward one’s suggestions” sounds like enforced participation. It is also curious what is meant by “irresponsible criticism” as well.

That being said, forced participation would alienate those comrades who have anxieties involving social interactions as well as those who don't have confidence in their own words, or both. We must take great care in facilitating meetings that are able to encourage free exchange of ideas and build the confidence of our newer companions in the struggle while ensuring that the ideas and experiences of more experienced comrades are shared and developed in a collective manner. Your experiences only have value when shared with others, after all.

The choice of the term "Vulgar Individualism" becomes clearer as we see how the neglect or apathy towards the collective aspects of class struggle is detrimental to the cause.

To let things drift if they do not affect one personally; to say as little as possible while knowing perfectly well what is wrong, to be worldly wise and play safe and seek only to avoid blame. This is a third type.

In the context of Especifismo and its principles of self-management, letting things go as long as they do not affect oneself is encouraged. You after all, only get a vote when you are either directly participating in an action or is affected by the potential consequences of an action.

In context however, this third type relates closely to the first, of enabling another person's crimes, but on an organizational scale. We could see this kind of "looking out for number one" in corporate and state bureaucracies the world over. Should we allow that type of attitude remain in our formations? No, of course not. The better question is how to prevent it from happening and to work through it if it does.

Not to obey orders but to give pride of place to one's own opinions. To demand special consideration from the organization but to reject its discipline.

For the sake of coherence and effectiveness and general human decency, it's of course best to not break the picket line or to snitch on your comrades when performing sensitive actions. Plus, it's just being a prick and no one wants to work with an asshole.

Here we can see the "Vulgar" in "Vulgar Individualism." Let me be clear in saying that the "Individual vs. Collective" dichotomy is a false one. As anarchists, we engage in class struggle in order to protect our individual freedoms. However, we also recognize that those very same freedoms are linked with each other's freedoms. So many revolutionary movements crushed because they lacked the help of a large part of the oppressed classes. But more than that, also because it's simply wrong to allow any form of injustice to remain within the societies we are giving our lives to bring about, right?

The only thing to question, then, is "to obey orders." Who gives out these orders? How are these decisions made? Perhaps this is not a question of comrades going their own way, but rather their voices not being heard. There is a reason that the CPP-NPA-NDF keeps spawning offshoots, problems with dissension, that ultimately lead to the purges that lead them murdering hundreds of their own partisans and cadres back in the 80's. It's also worth noting that the Party has only ever had two Congresses in its entire history, with no delegates younger than 33 years old.

When you teach someone to struggle against oppression and the lack of agency created by Capital, why would you be surprised when they struggle against you when you take away *their* agency and make their decisions for them?

To indulge in personal attacks, pick quarrels, vent personal spite or seek revenge instead of entering into an argument and struggling against incorrect views for the sake of unity or progress or getting the work done properly.

This loops back with what was mentioned in the previous form of "Vulgar Individualism." Toxic people who value their own vendettas over the collective goals of the revolutionary organization are detrimental to the cause. *However*, let's give the disruptive person the benefit of the doubt. Because, who *seriously* wants to be *that* person everyone is disappointed to see show up at the meeting?

Going to the root of the issue, more often than not, we find some unheard grievances left to fester. But of course, the fact those concerns weren't heard speaks volumes about how the organization is structured. People who are naturally divisive and disruptive, based on reports from people in their immediate social circle are different from those previously quiet comrades who suddenly began making a scene. The latter represents a collective failure of the organization in being a safe space as well as an open environment for the development of ideas. These things must be kept in mind for the sake of the cause.

To hear incorrect views without rebutting them and even to hear counter-revolutionary remarks without reporting them, but instead to take them calmly as if nothing had happened.

The question of authority again comes up in reference to the use of “incorrect” as an adjective here. Whether it’s determined by a small group of people, an ideologue or the majority of the members of the organization, it still implies some sort of coercive system of enforcing what is “correct.” We’ll have to admit that if someone starts using slurs in a meeting to describe people or argue that capitalism has a place in anarchist society, we’re gonna need to have a *really intense* conversation. But apart from the fundamentals, what else is there to be “correct” about? Does a “Party Line” have a place in an anarchist organization?

That discussion deserves it’s own article, but here we’re just gonna have to say that when working within an Anarchist framework of direct action and self-management, you would only have a vote if you participate in a certain action, or if its result will affect you in some way. And if you have a vote on a certain action, it is in your interest to come up to a conclusion that satisfies the concerns of everyone involved before a certain action is ratified and executed. If you go out there, your comrades will depend on you to do your part as it was discussed, or have their backs when things go bad. As mentioned earlier, “Vulgar Individualism” is when self-serving individuals disregard the needs of their organization, and by extension, their other comrades. In other words, being a prick.

My Egoist comrades would be quick to point out that such “Vulgar Individualists” would be sabotaging their own long-term rational self interests in doing the shit they do. Mentioned above, one’s true individual freedoms are dependent on the well-being and support of the collective, and vice-versa. True Individualists, in the Egoist formulation, understand how positive group dynamics can aid in fulfilling individual goals, most especially if you are all doing it with shared and individual goals in mind.

To be among the masses and fail to conduct propaganda and agitation or speak at meetings or conduct investigations and inquiries among them, and instead to be indifferent to them and show no concern for their well-being, forgetting that one is a Communist and behaving as if one were an ordinary non-Communist. This is a seventh type.

To see someone harming the interests of the masses and yet not feel indignant, or dissuade or stop him or reason with him, but to allow him to continue.

“Be indifferent to them and show no concern for their well-being,” is something that Libertarian Communists must avoid at all costs. We all have different ways of doing this and different ways of agitating the people into action, or at the very least, spread awareness. However, there are those comrades that feel the need to hold others by stringent and strict tests of purity by either ideological or practical standards. This has been the case because of known infiltration of Law Enforcement as well as other reactionary elements in some circles, and have become more vigilant as a result. This same attitude, however, leads to others getting discouraged in the movement as they may be asked, implicitly or otherwise, to engage in shows of how radical they are. Not everyone wants to wear their ideology on a sleeve. There are also times when it will place themselves or others in distress and worse, material harm.

Better to show people that you are for a world free of masters by your actions towards that world, and not by making a spectacle of oneself. Unless your collective action includes making a spectacle, in which case by all means, release the giant, papier-mache float of Duterte’s hideous mug.

To work half-heartedly without a definite plan or direction; to work perfunctorily and muddle along

This emphasizes the need for organization. Revolutionary spontaneity only becomes effective when it is organized. That is, people gathered around common goals and committed to common tactics. And not having numbers and a plan not only makes you and your comrades look crude, but also place each other at risk when things go south.

Take for example an expropriation action where a cell of 6-7 comrades quietly slip into the a big-box supermarket in order to secure food and other materials for the cause. If for example they decide to do this before they’ve done any sort of prep work, or if they have no experience in doing something similar and thus have contingencies and backup plans, it is likely they get tracked down and caught. If they lose trust in each other for one reason or another, that would also open them up to unnecessary risks.

To regard oneself as having rendered great service to the revolution, to pride oneself on being a veteran, to disdain minor assignments while being quite unequal to major tasks, to be slipshod in work and slack in study.

A given, obviously. This, along with the last one:

To be aware of one's own mistakes and yet make no attempt to correct them, taking a liberal attitude towards oneself.

Are just patently horrible attitudes for any radical, but most especially for Libertarian Communists in that we are against all authority and centralized power. What's described here sounds like clout-chasing posturing from future politicians who would sooner see themselves rise above others than see the revolution succeed.

More than that we can see how the above tendencies are toxic to revolutionary organizations, as Mao has so described in "Combat Liberalism": "It is a corrosive which eats away unity, undermines cohesion, causes apathy and creates dissension."

Synthesis

If you've read up to this point, I hope you've begun to see a common thread running throughout this work:

1. Mao's concerns about "Vulgar Individualism" are valid, but at the same time,
2. The framing of his condemnation here, as well as a severe lack of practical advice on how to avoid this on an organizational level, leads to an individualized performance of radical politics. Not unlike how wider social issues are reduced to individual failings by both the Church and mainstream society.
3. "Individual vs. Collective" is a false dichotomy.
4. The previous two leads to a weaker and less internally-cohesive revolutionary organization, but for different reasons than the kind created by "vulgar individualism."

Parson Young, writing for the Trotskyite organization International Marxist Tendency in his essay "Does Mao's 'Combat Liberalism' actually combat liberalism?," writes:

In the final analysis, Mao's 'Combat Liberalism' falls into mere moralising—the desire to discipline individual behaviors based on whether they are 'right' or 'wrong' in the abstract.

While I won't go so far as to call it "mere moralizing," I do agree that there is a level of essentialism being done here. Essentialism, being the assignment of an ahistorical "essence" to something rooted in historical circumstances. Mao presents "Liberalism" here as a great "Other." Which is quite ironic since Mao himself mentions that Liberalism "look upon the principles of Marxism as abstract dogma." Mao failed to take into consideration how member-group dynamics shape the entire revolutionary organization and instead left us with what is basically a Code of Conduct. But then again, this was written as a response to what he perceives as failures in how his political rivals organize their sections of the Party.

Like what was mentioned at the beginning, we're trying to see which ideas are applicable to a libertarian socialist organization. Some of these things definitely belong in any radical space, some of these not so much. At least, not if their goal is a truly free society.

So what would an anarchist version of this look like?

Living Radical Democracy

We stand for active principled struggle because it is the tool with which to build the revolutionary movement in the interests of all those participating in the struggle and their own. Every Anarchist should take this tool up and learn to use it well.

Radical Democracy requires of us consistent principled struggle and stands for freedom, thus giving rise to a refined Cosmopolitan attitude bringing about growth in all units and individuals in the collective.

Radical Democracy manifests itself in various ways:

To be consistent in our criticism of injustice and inequity. Most importantly in our loved ones, colleagues and fellow townspeople, for they are the foundation of the free and just society that we want to build. Discussing things in depth, even if it means temporarily creating disagreements. This results in the collective and the individual growing.

To actively put forward one's suggestions and criticisms to the organization for the rest of the collective's reflection.

To be honest and open with one's thoughts and opinion of people, especially their comrades. To seek to better one's ability to express and open up their ideas to the rest of their peers.

To clearly and firmly speak up once one knows that something is wrong, and take responsibility for resolution, regardless of the result.

To fully commit to decisions made collectively, those born out of discussions taking in the voices of all concerned.

To render as much to the collective as one is given to the best of their ability.

To engage in levelheaded discussion of current events and views for the sake of unity and progress.

To engage with incorrect views, or in serious cases, to report them to the rest of the collective.

To engage with diverse groupings of people, those at the margins, one's own family and friends and bring them into awareness of how the profound lack of Democracy in our politics and workplace is harming us collectively. To show them, when the opportunity presents itself, how the Spectacle of modern life makes us passive to our own lives and reduces us into images that help perpetuate oppression.

To be mindful of our own mistakes and take great lengths to correct them.

There are many more types, but these are the principal types.

They are all manifestations of Radical Democracy.

Radical Democracy is extremely useful in a revolutionary collective, it creates cohesion and unity, development in one's own understanding, consciousness and expressiveness. Within the revolutionary ranks, it creates compact and disciplined organization, a discipline borne out of understanding and care as opposed to a discipline carried by fear.

Radical Democracy, informed by a historical reading of society's material conditions, sees the individual's interests and well-being in the freedom and development of society at large. Towards this, we seek to constantly instill in our communities a sense of openness that would allow for a harmonious, but passionate, discussion of difficult topics without threat of the kind of nearly-religious purity-testing found in more hierarchical and regimented groupings. Committed Libertarians must always show a great amount of patience and openness to criticism, but as well as know when they are stretched thin and need to take care of themselves. They must always strengthen their ties to their communities both locally and in the revolutionary collective. Their concern for themselves must be reflected in their actions towards bettering their community. They must avoid sabotaging their own self-interest by placing their own short-term wants over their long-term needs which are tied up with their collective well-being.

All loyal, active and dedicated Libertarians must unite to live these tendencies of Radical Democracy in their daily lives and become examples for others to do the same and set them on the right path. This is among the most important tasks in our continued struggle, but it can only be done together.

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