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Letter to the Editor

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

February 9, 1991

Dear Editor,

Bas Wielenga's criticism of my editorial is partly correct: I do believe that Marx had a profoundly romantic element in his communitarianism and that this accounts in some degree for the attraction he holds for ecology buffs and those fugitives from the 1960s who are nostalgic for the peasant spirituality and "small is beautiful" technology.

But it is silly to think that I confuse Marx with Gandhi in this. The fact that they were both critical of commercial development, corporations, voluntary associations, and democratic pluralism at certain points does not mean they agreed on their vision of collectivity. Wielenga should know that Gandhi's communitarian vision is drawn in substantive measure from Tilak's commentary on the Gita and from Tolstoy, while Marx' is drawn from Rousseau and the French Revolution on the one hand, and from the primitivist anthropology of Morgan on the other. These motifs in their thought mean that they both have reactionary elements in their attitudes toward modernization, development, and technology, even if they are reactionary in different ways.

As to Martin Buber, that is another matter--recent work on the Kibbutzim by Mott suggests that the successful "utopian communities" are becoming increasingly high-tech corporative enclaves. Further the efforts in Sri Lanka, for example, to try models somewhat like that have proven to be disastrous. No one expects them to become the dominant role model of any national or international economy. We would be better off consulting developments in the booming economies of East and South-East Asia if we were seeking directions for a country like India, which both Wielenga and I love.

Wielenga is also correct when he suggests that the situations in Tanzania and Bangladesh differ greatly from those in Vietnam and Cuba. I agree; it would be foolish not to. But they are still a mess, and the jury is still out on whether the "guided democracy," as he calls the totalitarianism of Cuba and China, will be able to generate sustainable economies--including adequate health services. The best recent data I have seen (in the New York Review of Books) suggests that these systems are failing badly and that those who live in them do not believe in them any more. More anti-socialist revolutions are yet to come.

Wielenga says that what angered him most was my judgement that many anti-anti-communists would be viewed as unprincipled compromisers. That is, in fact, what is happening in the West and the East. I had two sessions this week with trusted friends from what is now "eastern Germany," who related specific stories about who is now viewed as having been too comfortable with the regime, whether or not they had anything to do with the regime, whether or not they had anything to do with Stasi. None of the strong anti-anti-communists was equally anti-anti-democratic, or anti-anti-human rights, let alone anti-anti-capitalist. Their wall of prophetic opposition had only one side.

Finally, I find it a matter of touching loyalty, where it is not a matter of left fundamentalism, for Wielenga to join the chorus of Marxist liberationists who claim that it is only Stalinism which fell, and not true Marxism or true Leninism (others say Stalin and Lenin fell, but not Marx). He would be better served to follow part of his own advice at the end of his Marxist Views on India... where he says "It makes no sense to invoke 'orthodox Marxism' or 'Marxism-Leninism' in one or the other form. Marxism is a critical theory. The problem is to avoid the simplifications of easy schemes and models . . .".

The failure to follow this advice means that many radicals are today, like Wielenga, trapped in an ideological eddy on the sidelines of history that will have devastating consequences for the people. They are blinded by their loyalty to Marxist modes of the analysis to the fact that best hope for the masses is found today in a globalized economy, with strong accents on technology, pluralistic democracy, human rights, the organization of indigenous corporations, and, above all, theological conversion. Thus, they do not prepare the people to participate in and shape these realities, but raise their resistance to them. It is tragic. The suffering will be enormous.

Sincerely yours,

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