

An Appeal for Constructive Dialogue

Since its inception, Latin American Perspectives has encouraged the exchange of views and debate. The following letter adds another perspective to a recent exchange.

Dear Editor,

I write with reference to Issue 56 (Vol. 15, No.1) from the Winter of 1988. This issue includes a colloquium by Petras/Fitzgerald and Haynes on authoritarianism and the transition to socialism in Latin America. I consider this topic very important, but reading the articles heightened my awareness of another serious issue. This is the problem of factionalism among the left.

As Petras/Fitzgerald and Haynes debated one another in their articles, they peppered their discussion of authoritarianism with thinly veiled personal attacks. The authors displayed a clear lack of respect for one another, unwilling to carefully and thoughtfully interpret many of each other's arguments. They also chose to use language which, in many cases, mixed reasoned refutation with unduly harsh rebuttals.

It is essential that those who are morally committed to progressive and revolutionary politics engage in constructive dialogue. Ideological and empirical debates will cause us to endorse different theories and engage in different practices. This is inevitable and beneficial. However, it is neither necessary nor constructive to confuse these differences with more personal, emotional conflicts.

When conversing with each other on topics as grave as authoritarianism, we will respond on an emotional level, because these issues relate to basic moral questions. If we deny or ignore these emotions, they will unconsciously undermine our conversations as well as our academic writings. If we consciously acknowledge and identify these emotions, they will offer insight into ourselves and the issues we discuss.

The essays by Petras/Fitzgerald and Haynes suggest to me that the left is divided on both political and personal grounds. If we can interact with both intellectual respect and emotional forthrightness, potential political allies may be able to acknowledge—if not resolve—personal differences. If our goal is to develop a more humane world, we must begin by humanizing ourselves.

Sincerely,
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