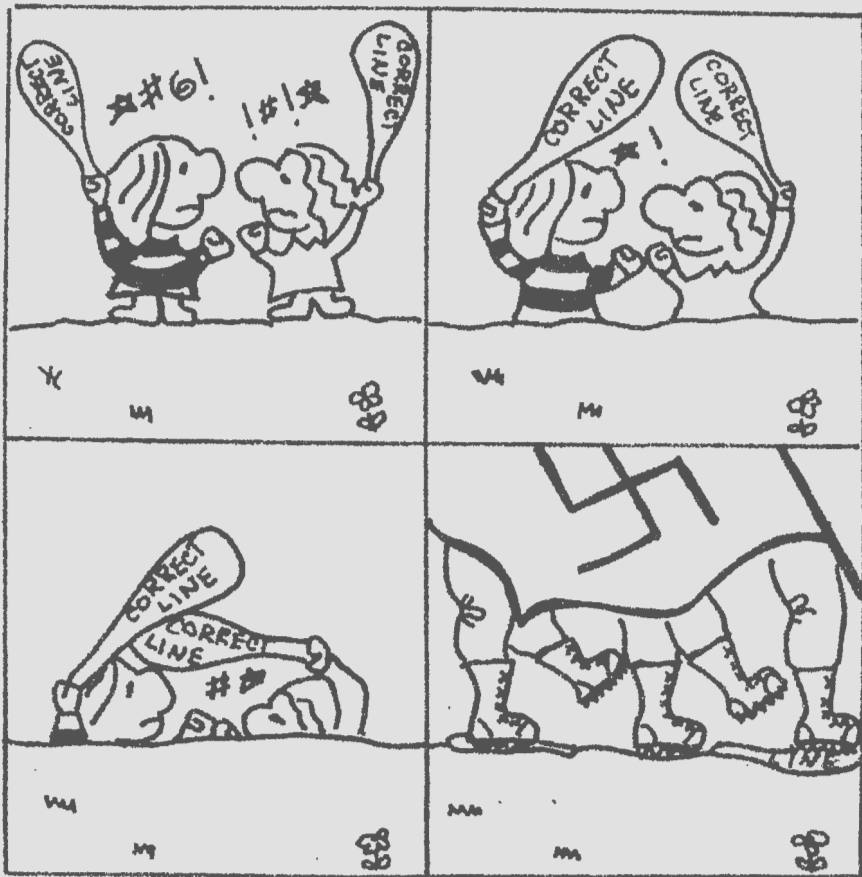


constructive criticism



I feel both excited and scared when I think about the state of the Left in our country right now. I feel hopeful because I see a lot of political people beginning to re-group for study and action. I feel scared because I see a pattern of absolutistic thinking re-occurring that I think contributed to the fragmentation of the Left a few years back. The women's movement and our experience pushed us into some fruitful struggling against our competitive upbringing, but the old ways are hard dying. Correct-lining, snap judgments, and labeling make us lose the exploration of real differences in a haze of rhetoric, personal attack and counterattack. When we're preoccupied with our fear of being labeled, our ability to think critically gets suspended. We end up wasting the collective energy that might be going into a fresh study of American conditions and into organizing. In the vacuum, we end up trying to mechanically adopt a strategy designed by revolutionaries thousands of miles or a hundred years away.

Our purpose in writing this pamphlet is to add to our understanding of the ways "how we do it" can help or hurt what we do. Part One is a discussion of why we fall into categorical thinking. Part Two analyzes the ways we sometimes defeat ourselves by the process we use. Those who are already familiar with this chamber of horrors may want to skip to Part Three, which is our specific suggestion for ways to think and communicate non-absolutistically.

"Radicals would quickly perceive their authoritarian, coercive and competitive ways of dealing with people if they were observing them in a business context but they fail to observe them in their own radical movement."

Edith Hashino Altbach

why we fall into categorical thinking:

Here are some examples of categorical thinking that I've run into in the last few weeks:

In a large meeting of leftists, a tall blonde man asks a question of the speaker. "That question is irrelevant," the speaker replies. The issue is dropped, the discussion moves along--but at a heavy price. The questioner slumps down in his chair, looking visibly upset. A current of tension runs through the room. "Will he say that my question is irrelevant?" people ask themselves. "I better keep quiet. It would probably sound dumb anyway."

Dennis, an apolitical friend, told me that he's decided to just stay away from talking with most leftists. "Nobody's going to convince me by letting me know that I'm stupid and they're not," he said.

People in collective # 1 hear that collective # 2 said that they "weren't socialist enough." People in Collective # 1 do a lot of upset talking about "the heavies." Everyone recalls incidents that prove that collective # 2 was never trustworthy anyway. A studious coolness follows. Silence, but no criticism going either way.

As people who are committed to building a cooperative society, why is it that we relate to each other in such narrow and competitive ways? For one thing, most of us had "right/wrong thinking" drilled into our heads all the while we grew up. In my childhood, it seemed that each time I said or did something that was the least bit

different from the norm, someone was around to

call me "sick", "bad," "stupid," or "inappropriate." It became habitual for me to evaluate myself or other people by calling names. In school, the kind of discussion that was valued was really a form of debate. In order to succeed (or even survive) in these kinds of discussions, I learned the lesson that recently appeared in a Miss Peach cartoon: "It is not enough just to make points for oneself; one must also take points away from somebody else." I internalized a set of skills for thinking and talking that suit me fine for scrambling and hustling. It is a long hard process to find non-competitive ways of giving critical feedback.

A second cause I see for "trench-warfare" style discussions is that what we are talking about is very important to us. Somehow I think that the way to show the strength of my beliefs is to dig myself in to my position. When the world is collapsing around my ears, I desperately want to believe that something is true once and for all. Given the isolation of the left, my political line seems like my only refuge. I must protect it at all costs from doubts and questions.

Sometimes I even find myself exaggerating the differences I have with another person. Polarizing discussion becomes a way to prove to myself that I am responding courageously to the world situation. (I'm convinced that the revolution will be won by my winning the argument. When I'm locked into this "win/lose" mentality, opening myself to hear another person is tantamount to "giving in.") It becomes easy to classify anyone who disagrees as The Enemy.

"Patience is essential. It is wrong lightly to label people... or lightly begin 'waging struggles' against them."

Chairman Mao

ways we defeat ourselves:

There are several ways in which destructive styles of criticism are self-defeating for the left.

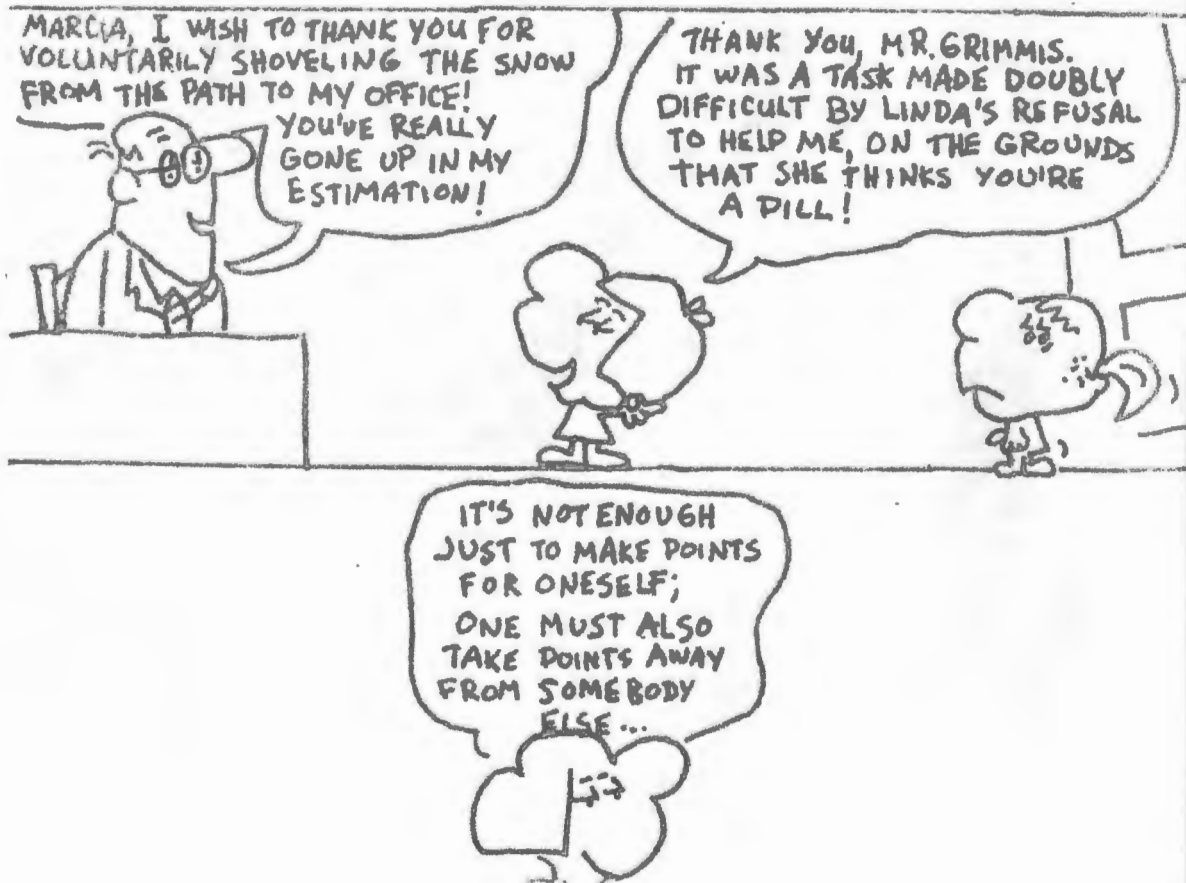
1. Right/wrong thinking prevents us from taking initiatives. To the extent that I believe that I should not take action until I'm 100% sure that the action is "correct," I am likely to avoid action. [In my striving for purity, the only safe activities are reading and talking with those who are likely to agree with me. This form of paralysis is aggravated by my fear of being labeled by other leftists who might write me off.] "You're wrong..." "You're too liberal..." "You're reactionary." (Even to write this leaflet, Betty and I had to confront our fear of being labeled. "Maybe we could just sign it with our first names," I said to Betty, envisioning the acid comments some people might direct at us. "How about just our initials?" Betty asked.)

2. Right/wrong thinking stops criticism. When people know how to give criticism only in a way that is likely to provoke defensiveness and counterattacks, they are likely to avoid giving or seeking out criticism at all. If a showdown appears to be the only alternative to letting it slide, it's easier to let it slide. Little resentments snowball into bigger resentments, a hairy confrontation occurs, and people have all the more reason to let it slide the next time.

"I am the core' thinking... leads to arrogance, isolation, and finally to crimes against the people - all dressed in the most noble "left" rhetoric."

William Hinton

Right/wrong thinking also makes it hard to learn from the criticism that does go on. If someone tells me I am "domineering," for example, the vagueness of the label makes it difficult for me to know what it is that the person wants me to change. Do they want me to talk less? Do they want me to ask for other people's reactions more? Do they want me to make fewer suggestions, or what?



4. Right/wrong thinking impedes critical thinking and creativity. I am sad at how often I have seen this dynamic play itself out in discussions: (1) Marx, or Third World revolutionaries, or the Panthers, or some other authority is defined as "Right." (2) Anyone who questions what that authority says is at best "Wrong" and at worst, counterrevolutionary. The discussion degenerates into a biblical exegesis, with different sides swapping quotes and impressions. Facts and experiences that don't fit "the line" are ignored. Real differences are obscured in barrages of rhetoric, while new events are jammed into old categories. So much for our ability to respond creatively to changing conditions.

5. (Right/wrong thinking defeats our ability to share our beliefs with people who do not already agree with us.) I have a very uncomfortable memory of how I opened up a dialog (?) with my mother on the subject of women's liberation: "So, Mom, what have you done with the last twentyfive years of your life?" Then we wonder why we're isolated.

6. Right/wrong thinking drives away people who have substantial agreement with socialist politics. One friend, who renounced political activism for a "back-to-the-country/individual-salvation" approach, said, "Look,

"People who lack humility (or who have lost it) cannot come to the people, cannot be their partners in naming the world. At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know."

Paolo Freire

the Left is as authoritarian as the Catholic Church. I don't need anybody telling me how to dress, how to talk, and what to think. If you can stand the correct-lining, more power to you, but I'm not going to subject myself to that."

7. Right/wrong thinking keeps people who have nearly identical political viewpoints from working together. Recently, I found myself in the following contradictory position: on the one hand, I was eager to become part of an organization whose politics I agreed with and whose efforts I could get strength from. On the other hand, I had a repugnant fantasy of what the meetings would be like: "There'll be The Heavies and The Featherweights. I'll either have to prove how heavy I am or resign myself to being invisible." When I asked other friends if they had checked out the organization, I found that they had similar fears. The prospect of facing competitive scenes keeps us unorganized and powerless.

"(During the first phase of the Cultural Revolution) we developed three interlocking mistaken viewpoints," said Tsu. "First, we misjudged ourselves. We thought 'We are perfect flowers and the others are garbage.' Second, we misjudged the masses who held different views. We cursed them either as loyalists or ultra-leftists. Third we liked those cadres who agreed with us and disliked those who disagreed -- whoever disagrees with me is bad. The result? Each side tried to crush the other."
quoted by William Hinton



specific suggestions:

Here are some ideas on how to give constructive criticism:

1. Rather than categorizing a person or her views (as in "that's fucked up," "incorrect," "ridiculous," etc. etc.) try expressing the emotion you have, for example: "I'm upset about the implications of what you just said," or "I'm hurt and angry with that."
2. Experiment with deleting these words from your vocabulary: should, ought, can't, must, hafta.
3. Try to describe the behavior you are criticizing, keeping your observations separate from your inferences or judgments. Rather than saying, "You're acting like a chauvinist," for instance, specify exactly what you're reacting to: "That's the third time you started talking before I finished my sentence, and I'm fed up." You can be this specific even about a whole pattern of behaviors. By giving observations, you increase the chances that someone will understand exactly what you are talking about and change accordingly. You'll decrease the chances that they'll

tune you out.

4. Instead of just wiping out someone else's alternative, ("You're wrong") spell out what you'd like in its place: "I'd rather that you do X, for these reasons..."

Here are suggestions on how to receive criticism that comes in the form of an absolutistic judgment:

1. When you hear a judgment, try to guess at the feelings and wants behind the label. For example, when someone says, "That's really a fucked-up attitude," you might guess, "Are you upset about what I just said, and would you like me to do such-and-such instead?" Paraphrasing like this has three advantages: First, it lets you check out the accuracy of what you heard. Second, it allows you to defuse absolutistic judgments by translating the label into an expression of the speaker's feelings and wants. Third, it can work to counteract a punitive dynamic—when someone feels heard, they are less likely to escalate their attack; they're more likely to listen in return.
2. You can help prevent someone from unintentionally wiping you out if you spell out in advance the kind of response you'd find most helpful. For example: "I want to get your reactions to this idea, and I'm also feeling a little scared about bringing it up. I'd really dig you to say what you like about the idea, along with any suggestions for what you want changed."

Here are some thoughts on helping another person hear your feelings and wants without misinterpreting you:

1. If you're worried that someone may distort your criticism and take it as a personal put-down, you can ask them in advance to paraphrase. "I've got some feedback that I'm nervous about giving you. I want some reassurance that I'm coming across the way I mean to, so I'd like you to run back what you heard when I'm done."

2. You can acknowledge that you're not blaming the other person for being the sole cause of your feelings. I do this by recognizing that I filter someone else's actions through my own goggles, and that both the other person's action and my filter go into producing my emotions. I fix blame and give away my power when I say or think, "You hurt me a lot when you say things like that." I own my power when I say or think (for example) "I'm hurt because I'm taking what you said as meaning that I'm a bad person." Another way to say this is, "When you realize that it takes two, the power is in you."
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If you have feedback on this leaflet, we'd love to hear from you. Also, we've gathered a lot of information on ways to interact non-competitively in relationships and groups. We'd be glad to share it with you. We're Betty Doerr and Vicki Legion, 824-7188, 107 Ellsworth, SF 94110.

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