

Moderate economists unite!

Eric Blair

26 April 2004

Yesterday, I handed out copies of this essay at a protest against the Bretton Woods institutions (the IMF, World Bank, and WTO). The look on the face of the average black-clad protester, when I put an eight-page, single-spaced document in front of them and said, ‘Have an essay!’, was always a fun surprise. Ms. JATMM of Mount Vernon, VA, and I handed out sixty copies. Yes, 240 pages is a lot of paper and staples, and the majority will certainly not get read, but it felt worth it, especially compared to the sound bytes I got in return.

For example, here is a flier for the World Bank Bonds Boycott. As a form of protest, the boycott is on par with not voting. Yeah, not buying bonds and not voting sends a signal, but one which is entirely indistinguishable from apathy. Back to the pamphlet: “The World Bank’s voting structure is based on a system of one dollar, one vote. The G-7 governments control 43% of the voting rights”, it reads. But no, that’s the IMF, a linked but very distinct organization. [The WB gets its money from bonds; the IMF directly from governments (mostly the G-7 govts, as described above). If the World Bank were one dollar=one vote, wouldn’t it make sense to buy all the bonds you could to gain that much more control over the organization?]

One person gave me a t-shirt in exchange for my essay. Thanks, I wore it all weekend. It has the WB logo on the front, with ‘Billions served?’ underneath; on the back, it lists some facts (wait, I have to take off the t-shirt—topless blogging, ladies):

Of the 4.7 billion ‘satisfied’ World Bank Customers:

- 3 Billion live on less than \$2 a day
- 1.5 billion do not have clean water to drink
- Nearly 3 million die each year from vaccine-preventable diseases

Yup, that’s right: the World Bank works in the most impoverished places on Earth. Those bastards—we have to stop their evildoing now! The shirt also has a URL for A World Connected, a site I haven’t looked at enough to comment. Its cover stories at the moment include one about protecting U.S. jobs and one about a guy who won awards from libertarians, so I dunno.

These protests

leave me feeling lonely and isolated. The preparatory rally is necessarily short, and short on facts. There's a lot of repetition, in which the leader prepares the crowd with a few vaguely witty chants (which I won't bother repeating here). Chanting leaves me so cold.

When I was living in Chicago, and the Bulls had won, I went up to Clark & Belmont, knowing that a crowd would be there, and indeed, a crowd was there, and everyone was happily whooping. A poor guy in a pickup happened by the intersection, and while he was idling at the red light, a bunch of us jumped in the back. It was fun. We whooped. The guy, bemused, drove for a while. Meanwhile, we whooped. Eventually, we got tired of whooping, and all fell silent, facing each other in close quarters, as if to say, 'OK, um, now what?' Bemused driver eventually turned around and dropped us off, and we half-enthusiastically got out.

So I have a lot to write about the IMF, but couldn't chant much. In fact, as a firm believer in shades of grey and qualifying all sound bites, I don't think I'll ever find myself in a crowd I can totally believe in, which is somewhat disheartening. When you're in the majority—at least among the people in the room—you don't have to defend much of anything. In a world where there are only two sides, you've got a better than fifty-fifty chance of being in the majority among your pals. But in a world where there are a hundred different beliefs about a hundred subquestions, there is no solidarity to be had.

[Poole and Rosenthal [1984] helped with this, by the way. They found that two dimensions, economic and social, explain about 90% of the variation in voting patterns among Congressman. E.g., somebody who supports abortion rights is very likely to want to dissolve the World Bank and Israel. Whether there's a consistent logical thread connecting these things is left as an exercise to the reader, but the Congressional stats and the turnout at the protests certainly back this correlation up.

You could take this in two directions. One is that there are consistent points of view which lead those with those points of view to all agree on a dozen different issues at the same time. The other is to say that it's all-but-haphazard, a question of what your pals wound up thinking. For example, at last night's punk rock rally, some punks buzzed the event chanting 'You can't be vegan and pro-choice!', but I'm told that at today's march, the 'Vegans for choice' contingent was in full force.]

So it feels good to join the crowd and not have to think. I do not think that this is a bad thing. There are a three reasons for this: the first is that, for the most part, the protesters on the street probably won't have much of a direct influence on things, so the rally is all about its side-benefits. Foremost, it's fun. It also allows you to hear opinions on issues that are tangential to the issues at hand, such as the guy who was handing out fliers about halting the embargo on Cuba at the WB protest. It allows networking in the traditional sense, getting people connected to work on more effective campaigns involving cash, attempts to influence the non-converted, and attempts to influence people

who write laws. Finally, it's not all groupthink, so the rally allows people who meet there to debate a bit about the details of the issue.

Second, consider the alternative to such mass, ideologically watered-down action, which was sort of revealed by the people who canceled their memberships at N.O.W. in a previous entry: "I agree with everything you say, except your endorsement of Carol Mosley Braun was inane. Cancel my membership and don't ever talk to me again!" If everybody thought like this, micromanaging group ideology, no organization large enough to do anything would ever exist, and bickering would rule the day over actual action.

The third reason why these crowds are a good thing is the effect of radicalism on others, a subject which I'm going to put off until next episode.

References

Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal. US presidential elections 1968-1980: A spatial analysis. 28:283-312, 1984.