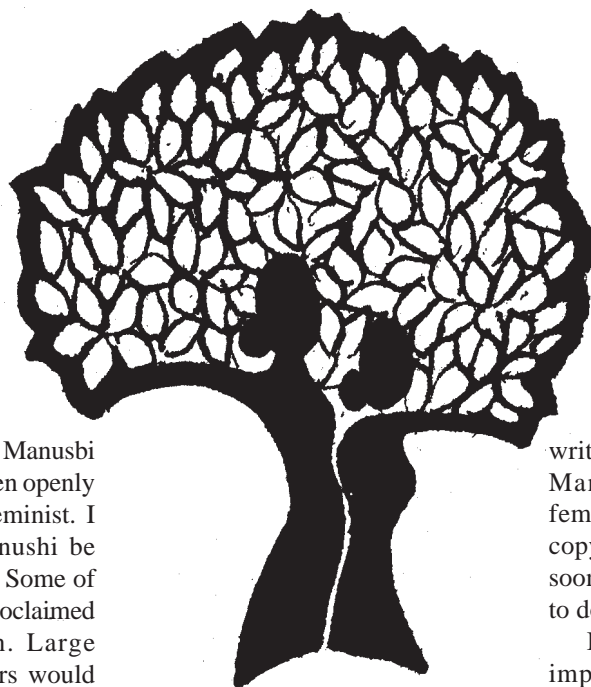


Why I do not Call Myself a Feminist

by
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"I have a horror of 'isms', especially when they are attached to proper names."

M.K. Gandhi, March 12, 1940
Collected Works, Vol LXXI, p.323.



AT the time we launched Manushi in 1978, though I did not then openly challenge being labelled feminist. I resisted pressure that Manushi be called a feminist magazine. Some of us felt that if the magazine proclaimed that *as* its identification. Large sections of potential readers would be alienated, since the term was abject to the vocabulary of women in India and inadequate to Manushi's purposes. It would inevitably evoke associations with the women's movement in the west, which was known in India mostly through simplistic stereotypes. These stereotypes would then become an unnecessary burden and people would base their response to the magazine on their prejudices concerning the current popular notions of feminism. We deliberately chose the subtitle "a journal about women and society", which, along

with the word Manushi, with its emphasis on the word "humane", we felt would indicate that Manushi is concerned not just with women's equality, as the term "feminist" would imply, but with the protection of the human rights of all the disadvantaged or discriminated groups in our society, while having a special emphasis on women's rights.

The avoidance of the label was not restricted to the title or subtitle of the magazine. The term "feminism" almost never appeared in any of my

writings even in the early days of Manushi. For a while, a popular feminist symbol appeared in each copy, but that too was dropped as soon as we could arrange for artists to do special graphics for us.

Ideologies and isms can play an important role in binding people together for bringing about and hastening social change; provide inspirational symbols for organised expression of discontent; and help make individual struggles collective. Today, when I refuse to be labelled a feminist, this is not because I prefer to be identified with some other ism. It is because I find currently dominant isms inadequate, some even harmful. Let me try to delineate the issues involved.

Time-Specific Isms

A distinction must first be made between two different kinds of ideologies which operate in political



theory and practice. The first kind of ideology evolves under the pressure of the specific challenges in a given society at a particular point of time. Often, it comes to be identified with the name of a particular thinker or political leader, such as the ideologies of Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism. However when the movement dies down, or once it achieves some of its immediate aims, and usually after the leader's death, the ism ossifies. It is then used more as a ritual chant, reduced to a set of deadening formulae by its votaries to justify their own actions, though these may or may not be logical outcomes of the original ideology. A good example is the manner in which the Indian Communists defined their relationship of hostility to the Mahatma Gandhi led freedom movement, attacking Gandhi and his colleagues with the vocabulary and critique borrowed wholesale from Marx, Lenin and Stalin fighting a totally different set of opponents.

My problem with this kind of ism is that while in its origination it may play an important role in a creative upsurge of ideas and action, it becomes moribund once it is institutionalised at a later point as the final truth, and then applied in changed circumstances. What may have been a very creative idea or strategy in the course of a movement, as enunciated by its leaders in response to the immediate situation, becomes a bizarre parody when used in a completely changed context.

Another effect of such ossification of an ideology is that it furthers the common tendency to approach reality with a preconception of what it should be, and to justify one's own actions on that basis, by manipulating the ideological jargon. For instance, the section of Marxist-

Leninists which used to lend support to the politics of the terrorist brigades inspired by Bhindrawale in Punjab justified their approach on the grounds that this was a class struggle of poor and middle class peasantry against the kulak farmers represented by the Akalis. Likewise, Marxists who opposed the Bhindrawale type of politics dismissed the urgent significance of the ethnic and political strife in Punjab and considered it merely as a sign of false consciousness which was being promoted to destroy the potential of real class struggle. Similarly, some of those leftists who wish to climb on the bandwagon of the new peasant movements are trying to bestow Marxist credentials on these movements, portraying them as anticapitalist even though these movements make no such claim. There is little attempt made to grapple with these movements on their own terms.

It is also apparent that isms which are founded by individuals who defined certain tenets in response to a specific situation in a particular society at a particular time - like Marxism-Leninism and Maoism - are in crucial ways both time-specific and culture-specific. While certain elements of these isms may be relevant at other times and places, while they may provide inspiration or warning and one may learn much from them, applying them as formulae in other societies at different points in time most often proves counterproductive.

Culture-Specific Isms

The second kind of ism does not arise from one movement or one individual leader or thinker, but often pervades many different movements in the form of a structuring idea or tendency. Some examples of this second kind of ism are anarchism, humanism and feminism. Feminism was an outgrowth of eighteenth century humanist thought in Europe

and the USA, reinforced by thinkers from many other schools of thought, such as utilitarianism and Marxism. This second type of ism may not be as time-specific as the first, but it is as culture-specific.

As I mentioned at the start, though I stand committed to pro-women politics, I resist the label of feminism because of its over-close association with the western women's movement. I have no quarrel with western feminist movements in their own context, and feel strengthened by the existence of women's movements in western as in eastern countries. Manushi has received a lot of love and support from all over the world from women who take pride in their feminist ideology and solidarity and there are many feminists in India whose work and ideas I respect.

However, given our situation today, where the general flow of ideas and of labels is one way, from West to East; in this overall context of a highly imbalanced power relation, feminism, as appropriated and defined by the West, has too often become a tool of cultural imperialism. The definitions, the terminology, the assumptions, even the issues, the forms of struggle and institutions are exported from West to East, and too often we are expected to be the echo of what are assumed to be more advanced women's movements in the West.

Importance of an Independent Self-View

Anyone working for women's rights in India is automatically assumed to be a feminist, no matter what form their work takes. Yet people working for peace and disarmament in the West are not assumed to be Gandhians, even though Gandhi is the most outstanding leader of modern times to have provided a philosophy and politics of non-violence, and led the most noteworthy mass movement based on non-violent principles. The Green Movement in Germany, and the peace movement in the West in



general, do not need to display more than a mild and patronising interest in Gandhi, because westerners assume that they have the right to define a self-image and choose their own terminology to describe themselves. But the same right is not granted to us, the hitherto colonised. We are labelled “feminists” without so much as a by-your-leave, not only by western feminists but also by their counterparts in India. Many view our refusal to accept the label either as an act of betrayal or as a sign of insufficient ideological growth. I believe that accepting or rejecting labels is not a meaningless ado about nothing. Being able to choose an appropriate name and definition for one’s politics is an important aspect of evolving an independent self-view, provided the exercise is not merely restricted to ritual debates about words.

Imported Labels

Sections of the women’s movement in India have picked up not just the term “feminist” from the West but also all of the norms, assumptions and debates that emerged from it, as well as to some extent those that emerged from the polemics of the Russian revolutionaries. The most blatant example of the movement here being compelled to act as an echo of the supposedly more advanced movements in the West is the way divisions were assumed to exist before they had taken shape. When, in the late seventies, **Manushi** and a number of new women’s groups began to emerge, certain self-appointed theoreticians immediately went about labelling different groups and individuals as belonging to one of three trends: bourgeois feminist, socialist feminist or radical feminist. Some of these self-appointed certificate givers descended directly

from the West; others, although “natives” like us, were better grounded in the western women’s movement debates than in the reality of women’s lives here. I remember my bewilderment at that time at the ferocity of the label warfare. From where did it descend? Certainly not from any split in India on ideological lines. There were a handful of groups and individuals at that time working on women’s issues. Most of the groups had not crystallized organisationally or theoretically. No political action on any significant scale had yet been undertaken, and so hardly any meaningful dialogue over strategy and tactics had taken place. Yet, those mesmerised by the rhetoric of other movements tried to force us to assume the existence at that time not only of a major women’s movement here, but also of major divisions within it. We were supposed to have split even before we got a real opportunity to get together, to see or hear one another, let alone carry out a debate among ourselves.

These labels were not used as descriptions of the positions taken by individuals or groups or the work being done by them, but as epithets to condemn people you did not like, that is, as good or bad character certificates. Label givers assumed that the most respectable term was “socialist feminist.” This was usually reserved for oneself and one’s friends, as proof of one’s correct political credentials. Those one did not like were sought to be condemned as “bourgeois feminists” or “radical feminists”. The utter absurdity of these ism labels was evident. They have been used as sticks to beat up people, to stifle intellectual growth and enquiry, to frighten people from thinking things out for themselves, to bully them into blindly accepting formula-ridden politics and repeating meaningless mantras, and to subject them to slander if they resist.

Therefore, I found it difficult to identify with them emotionally or intellectually.

Interestingly, **Manushi** was honoured often, at one and the same time, with all three epithets. We were called everything from radical feminist man-haters to bourgeois feminists to leftist extremists, even though we steadfastly refused to adhere to any of the labels. Those using these labels to describe **Manushi** were clearly not describing our politics. Those who imagined themselves socialists called us bourgeois, those who were also Marxist called us naxalites and radicals. Realising that this ideological ism warfare was an unreal one, we chose not to enter into it. Instead, whenever accused of being bourgeois feminists or whatever else, we would ask the persons concerned to define the term and then to point out what in the magazine conformed to their definition. Not one of the label givers we spoke to actually ended up completing the exercise.

The labelling requirement distorts not only the present but even the past. I remembered being attacked at a seminar organized by a group of feminists at a women’s college in Delhi University for presenting in a positive light the protest poetry of women like Mahadeviakka or Mirabai. Their argument was that these women did not talk of women’s independence and equality as they ought to have, that they merely chose to substitute for slavery to a husband slavery to a god. In short, that they were inadequate as historical sources of inspiration for women because they could not be called feminist. Expecting Mirabai to be a feminist is as inappropriate as calling Gautam Buddha a Gandhian or Jesus Christ a civil libertarian.

This approach to evaluating our past is as inappropriate as the one that looks for feminists everywhere at all times. We need to understand the aspirations and nature of women’s



stirrings and protest in different epochs in the context of the dilemmas of their age, rather than imposing our own

aspirations on the past. The past ought not to be studied either to seek justifications for, nor faulted for, not having lived up to our present day political inclinations, but viewed on its own terms, while acknowledging it as our inherited legacy.

Expected To Be A Mirror Image

The use of the term “feminism” and the resultant ism warfare brought with it a host of other problems. Even in forms of organisation, we were expected to live up to the standards, patterns or mythologies evolved by western feminists, and to mimic all the stances taken within the movement there. You had to predecide, for instance, whether you were going to walk hand in hand with, ahead of, or behind men. We were bullied to take a position on separatism simply because the issue had been the cause of a major controversy in the West and in certain left movements in other countries.

In the early years there were occasions when certain feminists from the West who believed in totally excluding men from participating in women’s movements threatened to launch a boycott against **Manushi** since it included a few articles and letters by men. At the other end of the spectrum a section of those who considered themselves socialist feminists in India accused **Manushi** of being anti-men and also attempted to organise a boycott against it. During all these years, despite these pressures and attacks on us, we studiously avoided duplicating the postures and responses of factions within the western feminist movement on the issue of men’s participation in

the women’s movement. It seemed as foolish to take an *a priori* position against men, as some separatist feminists insisted on doing, as it would be to insist, as a cardinal principle, on an unconditional alliance with men, as those who called themselves socialist feminists required of everyone. It made no sense to expect an undifferentiated response from all men - or from women for that matter. We felt that the actual responses of people, men and women, to the issues we advocated would provide a better indicator of whom to build meaningful alliances with. Thus neither did we shun men on the basis of theoretically postulated confrontation, nor woo them insisting on a preconceived alliance. Partly as a consequence, **Manushi** has over the years received an unusual amount of support from numerous men with a variety of ideological orientations.

Likewise, it was assumed that we must work through what western feminists call “non-hierarchical self collectives” even if the experiment had not really worked in the West. I have always opposed authoritarian structures. However, the particular notion of a “collective” common at that time, and the unrealistic expectations that it created, proved to be a mistaken import from the West. In the early phase of **Manushi**’s existence, we unwittingly used the term without being aware of its history in the western women’s movement. We were then confronted with the task of putting together a loose heterogeneous group of volunteers whose work commitment was often not sustained. With fluctuating attendance and very unequal work contributions, it was hard to say who among the volunteers would actually persevere and take responsibility in a continuing way. We could not announce a fixed set of names as a core group, since none existed. Though we provisionally chose the term “collective”, we were eventually

compelled to drop it because it became a liability. Nevertheless, the entire set of controversies aroused by the terms in the West descended on us lock, stock and barrel. We were besieged by any number of self-appointed inspectors out to examine the health of our collective. The idea of collectives was poorly thought out even in the West. Attempts to import a structure that in actuality functions only rarely and temporarily created even more bizarre results among Indian women’s groups.

Another example of the importation of institutional forms in the name of feminism is that of homes for battered women. Over the last decade, innumerable western feminists have asked us: “Do you have homes for battered women in India?” The assumption is that not to have such homes is to be at a lower stage of development in the struggle against violence against women, and that such homes will be one inevitable outcome of the movement’s development. The psychological pressure exerted on us when the question is repeatedly asked should not be underestimated because many activists begin to wonder whether all organisations in any way related to women should in fact be creating battered women’s homes. Some may ask what is wrong with having a common international response to the common problem of wife battering. My answer would be that the completely different socio-economic and cultural contexts should be studied before we accept any predetermined response.

Homes for battered women in the West seemed to act as a useful type of short-term intervention because of (a) the existence of a welfare system which includes some, even though inadequate, provisions for public assistance, unemployment benefits, subsidized housing, and free schooling for children; (b) a national employment situation which is



certainly very different from that in India; (c) the lower stigma on women living on their own and moving around on their own; and (d) the existence of certain avenues of employment there that are not considered permissible for middle class women here, for instance, in domestic service. Most feminist groups in the West who run homes for battered women aim primarily to offer the moral support required by a woman making the transition from dependence on a husband to self-dependence, in a context where natal families are not usually available to offer this support. In India, hardly any women require simple moral support - they are in dire need of economic and social support. So a home for battered women, like a home for widows, inevitably turns into a few token charitable establishments which provide a subsistence level survival. Charity, by itself, cannot be said to further women's equality. The battered women's homes run by women's organisations most often end up trying to persuade the marital families of these women to accept them back on slightly improved terms. Only rarely have we been able to help women carve out independent lives.

Yet, such is the hypnotic power of feminist ideology that comes from the West that, despite our different experience of dealing with women in distress, setting up refuges and shelters continues to be presented as one of the key components in resolving problems of battering and maltreatment. This is so even though the movement in the West for setting up shelters and refuges has lost much of its steam because even there it is not proving to be as effective a remedy against domestic violence as the movement originally hoped.

It is unfortunate that the import of

ideology follows a pattern similar to that of other imports, for example, that of certain technologies and drugs. Many things known to be obsolete or unworkable and therefore discarded in the West continue to be dumped in third world countries. Likewise, ideas and institutions which have been discarded by major elements in the feminist movement in the West continue to be advocated here as appropriate feminist responses.

It is not just that issues and campaigns have been imported. There has also been an attempt to emotionally live through the responses of the women's movement in the West, even though the situations women face have been different in India. For example, while the feminist movement in the West did experience ridicule, and even outright hostility, especially in the mass media, feminists in India (as distinguished from the oppressed women they try to represent) have, by and large, not been rudely treated. Sometimes they even get disproportionate attention. The mainstream mass media has gone out of its way to give favourable publicity to feminists and their work. The media created this space for feminists without resistance. Their support has been fairly uncritical on the whole. Yet, the vocabulary used by feminists in India is nevertheless often one that is used by a persecuted movement, and India's mass media are often portrayed as though they have responded as critically toward Indian feminists as have many sections of the western media.

All these factors seriously inhibit and stunt the process of understanding the reality of women's lives in India. Women's struggles in India have followed quite a different course. However, feminist scholarship has often failed to provide an appropriate means of analysis. Its literature is subject to wide swings

with every change in fashion in the West: structuralism yesterday, deconstruction or postmodernism today.

The International Bandwagon

In the West, feminism undoubtedly played a liberating role for women. The differences in impact there and here are due to the channels through which this ideology is today reaching third world countries. In the West, feminism evolved from women's own struggles against oppressive power structures which excluded them from equal participation in many aspects of the economic, social and political life of their society - for example, denial of the right to vote or exclusion from universities and other professional institutions. As a result, an important component of western feminism has been a radical and anti-authoritarian thrust.

However, the bulk of third world women who got exposed to the ideology of western feminism did so at a stage when western feminists, after years of struggle, began succeeding in occupying a few positions of power and influence in various institutions, especially universities and international funding agencies. Through Western feminist pressure and influence more money began to be made available for what came to be called women's projects as well as for women's studies programs in universities, first in the West and later in the third world countries.

Thus, in India, new opportunities were made available for a small number of western educated women who gravitated towards feminism. Being absorbed in international feminist circles brought upward mobility in jobs and careers, and invitations to international conferences and study programs. This access to jobs and grants, especially in universities, came



relatively easy for those calling themselves feminists as compared to those unversed in feminist

rhetoric. This was contrary to the experiences of western feminists who had to struggle hard to find acceptance in professions for themselves. Since feminism brought with it a certain amount of easy international mobility for many third world feminists, the ideological domination of western feminism and the resultant importation of frequently inappropriate issues was absorbed uncritically. In this context, the use of radical anti-establishment rhetoric borrowed by Indian feminists from the early stages of the western feminist movement appears especially inappropriate.

The process of mindless import of issues is most evident in many of the international conferences. Third world feminists are invited to such conferences with the expectation that they will join the campaign on whatever issues are currently fashionable in the West. Those who have resisted or expressed reservations are usually excluded. To give just one example: some years ago I was invited to attend a conference on reproductive technologies to be held in Germany. However, since the invitation letter mentioned that those who attended the conference would be expected to campaign against the use of certain new forms of contraception and reproductive technologies being developed in the West, I wrote back saying that while I was willing to discuss these issues, I was not prepared to commit myself in advance because, on the basis of available information, I had not yet been convinced about the need to oppose all these reproductive technologies. I was summarily told

that in that case they would cancel the invitation they had extended.

In most cases, third world feminists end up becoming part of so-called international campaigns on the basis of materials that present only a partial picture of the issues. They are often without access to any sources of independent research and investigation, even when the issue requires careful study, interpretation and evaluation of specialized technical data. The campaign against injectable contraceptives, launched through newspaper articles about a decade ago, is one of many examples of how many third world feminists end up taking up cudgels on this or that issue without doing proper homework. This campaign was launched without even finding out whether these methods were being used in India and if so, how widespread their use was, leave alone conducting careful evaluations within India to assess the negative side effects of these contraceptives in comparison to other available options. The opposition was based on campaign material prepared in the West using data from some of the inconclusive studies available at that time. It seemed foolish for us to set such a high priority on a campaign here against something we were not even sure was being used in India, while we had not paid sufficient attention to higher priority issues such as the millions of deaths being caused in India due to lack of availability of safe contraceptives for the majority of women, and the government pushing sterilization operations as the preferred method of contraception, performing them under extremely unsafe and unhygienic conditions, causing serious health problems for millions of poor women. Nevertheless, a whole spate of articles by Indian feminists continue to be written on the subject, based mostly on data provided by their western

counterparts rather than any independent investigations within this country. Often issues are picked up simply because funds are available to work on these issues while they are not available for other more pressing priorities. Thus the dependence on funding agencies causes an undue emulation of the changing fashions in the West.

Agreements and Differences

Apart from serious ideological reservations, there are more practical reasons for refusing to call **Manushi** a feminist magazine.

The use of the term "feminist" does not tell me enough about those who use the term to describe themselves. It, of course, tells me that in some way they believe in women's equality, but so do many non-"feminists". It is possible to be a Gandhian, a liberal, a Marxist, and believe in women's equality with men. Experience has shown that those who call themselves feminists may disagree with each other on almost all possible issues, including the definition of women's rights and freedoms.

I have often been asked reproachfully by feminists: "How can you refuse to join the campaign on such and such issue if you are a feminist?" But, on many important issues concerning women, I often find myself differing more with current feminist opinion than with other political groups not claiming to be feminist. One way of resisting being dragged into issues taken up by some feminists on which I hold a differing position was to learn to say: "I do not call myself a feminist, though I am committed to the struggle for women's rights. Let us discuss the concrete facts of the case and consider the pros and cons of the approach being proposed and find out if we share any common ground, instead of starting out by assuming an overall solidarity or agreement just because



we all assume we are feminists.”

Let me illustrate the point. Some feminists have campaigned and

lobbied for more stringent legislation and tougher implementation of laws to deal with obscenity or the degrading portrayal of women. I have had serious reservations regarding their approach and could not make common cause with them on this issue, despite my abhorrence of insulting images of women. My reservations were not related to a lack of commitment to women’s equality but to my mistrust of the State machinery and of attempts to arm the State with even more repressive powers than it already has, in the name of curbing pornography. I find this a risky and unacceptable way of fighting for women’s dignity. In this case, my commitment to freedom of expression assumed primacy.

Similarly, a number of feminists welcomed the death penalty for wife murderers, as they did in the Sudha Goel murder case or when it was included as part of the anti-sati law after the protests about the killing of Roop Kanwar. I continue to demand an end to capital punishment, no matter what the crime, based on my objection to the legitimation of killing by the State machinery, even when the pretext may be protection of women. A similar conflict arose over the Muslim Women’s Bill of 1986, where a supposedly feminist position became the pretext for a large section of opinion-makers to stir up anti-Muslim hysteria. This could only work to the detriment of Muslim women. For this reason, even Shah Bano decided to withdraw her case challenging provisions of Muslim personal law. Thus, the position one

takes on various issues is not guided solely by considerations of women’s equality - other considerations do come in, whether or not they are acknowledged.

Therefore, I find that the use of feminism as a label does not guarantee anything. It does not provide sufficiently significant information about people’s perspective. Someone calling herself or himself a feminist need not necessarily have better insights into women’s predicament than those who do not call themselves feminists. Over the last 10 years of editing **Manushi**, we have often received articles from women who called themselves feminist. Often, the writers assumed that merely by labelling their articles “feminist” they were guaranteed not only ideological correctness but also superior grasp of the issues. However, in judging the worth of a piece of writing we have never tried to ascertain whether or not the writer is a feminist or an adherent of any other ism. When judging the worth of our own writing or that of others, we find it more useful to ask: Does it make sense? Has it got the facts of the situation right? Does it take into account the many sided versions of a situation or does it oversimplify reality to fit it into a preconceived notion of what the situation ought to be? Will the solution proposed lead society towards more humane and egalitarian norms, and expand the horizons of people’s freedom rather than further restricting them? Does it aid oppressed people to survive and make greater efforts to throw off their oppression?

An important reason for **Manushi’s** survival has been its ability to keep a deliberate distance from many of the preoccupations of western and Indian feminists as well as from the wars between various other isms in India. Paradoxically, this

has enabled us to have a genuine, mutually beneficial interaction with many western feminists and believers in other isms. It has enabled us to reach a much wider cross section of concerned people as well as to keep our minds less fettered.

Finally, all this does not mean I do not have an ideology. I do, although it does not have a name. I would like to see a world in which the means for a dignified life are available to all human beings equally, where the polity and economy are decentralised so that people have greater control over their own lives, where the diversity of groups and individuals is respected and non-discrimination and equality are institutionalised at all levels.

I believe in a non-authoritarian politics of consensus and non-violence and my immediate political goals include: working to ensure the survival needs of all, especially of vulnerable groups; working for the accountability of governments to the citizens with minimal State control over people’s lives; ensuring social and political space to minority groups for the evolution of their identities; and moving towards the lessening of economic disparities. A primary motive in my life is working for women’s equality and freedom in all areas of life.

I do not rule out the possibility that if in the future any ism arises that seems to me to be sufficiently specific to our culture and our times in a way that it can creatively further the goals listed above, among others, I may choose to accept it. However, I do not feel any sense of loss or disadvantage in working without the support of an ism. In fact, it gives me a much greater sense of freedom in trying to work out meaningful responses to our specific social situation, for I have to assume full responsibility for my political ideas. I cannot blame any ism or others for the mistakes I make. □