

A Reconsideration of “The Personal Is Political”

“The personal is political” is a slogan that has been around for a long time, used especially though not exclusively by radical feminists. In practice it has served as an exhortation that people make ideology the sole dimension of their personal identity, that they set aside all other bases on which to evaluate their relations with other people and order their conduct even in their most intimate dealings with others. (Here is a recent example so perfect it seems like a caricature.)

To carry on one’s life in accordance with such an exhortation is a recipe for endless misery. The misery comes from the entailed sacrifice of the countless opportunities for connecting fruitfully with others through, for example, family relations, friendships, comradeship, and partnerships based on non-ideological commonalities such as neighborhood, shared artistic appreciation, and participation in team efforts in sports and other activities.

The permanence of the misery comes from the nature of politics, which is an endless struggle that, as many mad ideologists in power have demonstrated all too well, can be terminated only by death. Politics is, among other things, a war that cannot be won unless all one’s ideological opponents are slaughtered and their ideas somehow suppressed so deeply that they too have been destroyed. This latter, however, is a result that even the most ruthless ideologue in the political saddle is unlikely to achieve. As the saying goes, you can’t kill an idea. Even if you kill everyone who now embraces an idea, the idea itself lies dormant, waiting for someone to rediscover and embrace it in the future.

“The personal is political,” if taken in the sense that everything about a person must be forced into the Procrustean Bed of an ideology, guarantees a life of bleak, endless, and futile struggle, which is all the more tragic because it was never necessary or wise in the first place.