

DEAR MISS DEMEANOR

Dear Miss Demeanor:

My boyfriend insists that it is “bad form” and unsophisticated to be a strong anti-Communist. He says that really smart people consider it vulgar to apply one’s own standards to other countries and regimes, and that the mark of a cultured person is the ability to recognize that all values and what we call “truth” are relative. So, he maintains, it is provincial and naive to condemn such things as the Gulag, the denial of what Westerners consider “basic human rights,” and the invasion of Afghanistan; one should instead try to understand them from a Soviet perspective and in terms of Russian history.

This worries me because, despite myself, I cannot help feeling that right is right and wrong is wrong. But as my boyfriend has a Harvard Ph.D. while I am only a graduate of Marymount College, I feel that he knows best. Besides, he says that he feels embarrassed about taking me to smart parties as long as there is a likelihood that I might interrupt a discussion about, say, Soviet paranoia or conservative versus liberal factions in the Politburo with tasteless and irrelevant remarks about “good” and “evil.”

As this threatens my social life and the viability of our relationship, I am very worried. What should I do?

Uncultured

Dear Uncultured:

You have every right to be worried. You are at odds not merely with your boyfriend but with what one refers to as the “Zeitgeist” or “the spirit of the age”—as that spirit is interpreted by accepted thinkers and opinion leaders such as Dan Rather and Anthony Lewis.

In terms of the future of your relationship with a young man who seems clearly destined to succeed, as well as your own upward mobility in what is sometimes termed the

lumpen-intelligentsia, you should think seriously about the wisdom of persevering.

But if your background and education make it impossible for you to change, Miss Demeanor has a few suggestions which should help. First, from long experience she believes very firmly that if you cannot conform, you should not apologize or whine, but should take the offensive. Try putting the following questions both to your boyfriend and, if you have the chance, to Messrs. Rather and Lewis:

(1) What is the point of having values and standards if you do not apply them?

(2) Why should you apply other people’s standards rather than your own when the judgments you are making are, after all, yours?

(3) If everything is relative, what is the status of the absolute statement that all things are relative? Is it not, so to speak, unspeakable?

(4) Do the rules of relativity and historical understanding apply to South Africa, Israel, and right-wing South American dictators, or are they restricted to the discussion of leftist regimes?

Of course, putting these questions is unlikely to lead to a happier social life, but it may lead to a more interesting time. Contempt will quickly change to genuine hatred, which is a kind of respect, and much to be preferred.

Dear Miss Demeanor:

I was recently severely embarrassed at a dinner table discussion when my host (who is a liberal professor of political science and thus spoke with some authority) rebuked me for defending U.S. alliances with and support for right-wing governments in Latin America. I admit that I spoke from instinct and when attacked had no effective reply. What is the correct form of response in a case like this?

Defensive

Dear Defensive:

First of all, anyone who accepts dinner invitations from liberal professors should not be dismayed by the inevitable consequences, but prepared to respond to them.

As with all good rules of etiquette, the correct response is simple. First you should point out that there is a fundamental distinction between approving of a regime and approving of an alliance with a regime. The proper test for the former is the character of the regime in question, as measured against your values. The proper test for the latter is quite different: whether the alliance (or support) serves the interests of your country.

There is nothing inconsistent about disapproving of a regime while recognizing that sometimes it is in one’s interest to enter into an alliance with it (for example, to defend against an even more pernicious regime).

Miss Demeanor considers that in a situation like this an *ad hominem* argument is both appropriate and illuminating.

If your liberal professor is old enough, ask him if he is on record as having opposed the alliance with Stalinist Russia in World War II—or whether he approved of it as necessary to defend U.S. interests against Hitler’s Germany. As no liberals opposed that alliance, he will then have to concede your general point, or admit that at the time he did not realize that Stalinist Russia was a bloody tyranny, or attempt to distinguish between the Soviet alliance and contemporary ones with Latin American states. (Actually there *are* some valid distinctions, but they all work against his position.) In any case he will be busy for the next half-hour defending himself rather than attacking you. And he will, if he is not a complete fool (which he might be), treat you with greater respect in the future. 

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