Reading the opinion columns by economic journalists in the Sydney Morning Herald I can’t help feeling that it is all written by communists. It may seem absurd to suggest that Max Walsh, Robert Haupt, Michael Denholm et al are communists, and before the aforementioned start reaching for the phone to speed-dial their defamation lawyers, let me explain what I mean. Neither these economic-communists nor old style stalinist-communists were ever very big on theoretical specification - and this is not the least thing they have in common.

Both are long on remarkably similar rhetorical devices; both offer a cure-all ideology which explains everything. In stalinist dogma, there is supposed to be a difference between utopian and scientific theories about communism, the latter being superior to the former. A closer peek at stalinist rhetoric uncovers the fact that the utopian blueprint has merely been hidden away inside the scientistic jargon. The outer surface of this ideology, too, is all hard algebra and tough logic, while the soft-hearted innards contain a vision splendid of the good life.

The structure of these two ideologies is thus pretty much the same. Where they differ is in the masters they serve and the enemies they denounce. In its stalinoid version, communism is an ideology which serves the state. In its quirky new economistic version, this communist rhetoric of the good life, with pop-up toasters for all, serves capital. The demonology of stalinism naturally picked on the market as the source of all evil; for the market is ideologically linked to capital. Economism as an ideology can think of nothing more original to do than turn this on its head and denounce regulation. Regulation is the business of the state. Both these ideologies concur in claiming to be on the side of us poor folk with neither state power nor the money power to stand by us, when in reality neither is in our interests at all. This, after all, is what communist ideology is for: to delude otherwise sensible people into thinking that all is well, that acquiescing with the dominant view of things will benefit us and not just the powers that be. The communist promise either way is a good life of more and better things for us to buy and have.

Both the economists and the communists are prepared to make great sacrifices to reach this promised land. They are further prepared to sacrifice us. We all have to chip in for the good of production, be it for the five-year plan or micro-reform. Both want to abolish any complex and messy social relations, cultural hang-overs from the past, safeguards of traditional patterns of life, all in the name of a rational model of the future, the future of the plan or the market — take your pick.

Both have a vision of communist man. The stalinists saw him as a collective entity, a model of perfect altruism. The Herald’s economists have completely flipped this on its ear. Their model of communist man is a pure atom of individualism, motivated only by self interest. Whether he be homo economicus or homo faber, this model is a reductive one. On the one-dimensional model of man, economists and stalinists build a one-dimensional model of the good life. As we well know, therein lies its terror. The dark satanic mills of old laissez faire England could be found just as readily in Stalin’s Russia. Needless to say, there is no place for minority cultures in this vision splendid. All will be reduced to equal but opposite norms.

Lest one become critical of these high minded ideals, both stalinists and walshist economists have a
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