

**There is strength in numbers.
But is there truth in
numbers, as Communists and
Islamists think?**



When it comes to the tasks requiring brute force, we can all agree that strength is in numbers. A block of stone will not move until a sufficient force has been applied to it; so

without a critical mass of slaves and animals of burden, an ancient temple or pyramid could not be built. Ditto military affairs: insufficient number of the attackers won't be able to break the defense.

But consider intellectual tasks – like understanding the nature of physical phenomena. Of course, the number of those discussing it matters, since the greater the team, the more likely it is that someone on it will be able to come up with a solution. Besides, discussion stimulates thinking and sends the thought along unexpected, yet potentially helpful tangents. Yet, discoveries tend to be made not by teams, but by individuals. The answer to a problem usually dawns on just one person – and the rest become convinced by following that pioneer's footsteps, by checking the validity of initial premises, by verifying the soundness of logical steps that lead to the solution – and whenever possible, by a direct experiment. In science, we see this happening time and again, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Einstein developing their insights largely in solitude, and sharing them via published works for others to catch up.

If history is any guide, the “strength of numbers” seems to come into play not so much in the process of discovery, as in opposing new ideas. Often, the claims of incomprehensibility are used as a counter-argument. Since it is obvious that the Earth is stationary and the Sun moves around it (we all witness that daily), Copernican ideas hit enough headwind from the “numbers” in the camps of both the papacy and Luther, to be condemned as contradicting both the common sense and the Scriptures; and Galileo's troubles with Inquisition are well-known. Newton's work received wide acclaim, but was not understood by many. Einstein's relativity, though cautiously embraced by the cream of scientists, was mocked by others, with vivid anecdotes like that of an engineering professor overheard muttering “madman's ravings” when leaving a courtesy lecture Einstein gave to a college faculty, or of a public

letter signed by a hundred professors denying validity to Einstein's theory. (Asked about it, Einstein was unimpressed by the numerical superiority of the opposition, placidly observing that if relativity were wrong, just one person pointing out to the error would be sufficient.) While the "numbers" can be overwhelming – a hundred to one in this instance – they don't seem to matter much in the pursuit of scientific fact.

When it comes to the less disinterested pursuits like politics, where truth matters little, and the outcome is all-important, determining as it does who will be making the laws and distributing public funds, the decibel level of one's voice matters greatly. Since political advertising has to be purchased and funds for purchasing it raised, the strength of numbers in fundraising and voting becomes all in all; this is how democracies operate. Non-democratic, ideological regimes found an even greater role for the "numbers" – to Communist or Islamist regimes they are, unlike in hard sciences, the very gateway to the ultimate factual truth, no less.

Having been raised in the former USSR, I can attest to a culture shock when encountering a multi-party system. Why is the notion so shocking? Because, to a Soviet, the Communist Party was the Truth incarnated. The Party could not err. People could go wrong; the Party, could not. That was impossible. That was unthinkable. What was decided by the Party was the ultimate truth, period, end of debate. Hence, the notion that there could be two parties made zero sense to a true-blue Soviet – and for a very good, highly logical reason: obviously, there can be no two truths. Hence, having two parties is plain wrong. It is schizophrenic, it is an insult to human reason. It is as mind-boggling as the notion that the Party can be wrong.

To someone living in the West, this line of thinking makes zero sense – because, after all, what is a Party? Isn't it just a label attached to a bunch of guys? So isn't a Party,

ultimately, just a bunch of people? Given that voting is not a vehicle for ascertaining truth – but only for finding out what the majority thinks is true – there can be nothing infallible about any party’s decision. A Party is just as liable to err as any individual member. In fact, the Communist Party, with its “party discipline” that frowns upon dissent and turns the voting procedure into a loud acclamation for whatever the leadership decided, is even more prone to error. The “will of the Party” is the will of its Politburo that, in turn is the will of the Secretary General – it is mere human opinion, not truth. That’s all there is to it – or at least should be. But no – being highly philosophical, and taking to heart “the fundamental law of philosophy” according to which “quantity turns into quality” (I don’t remember who said it – may be Marx, may be Hegel, may be the Greeks – I confess I hated those classes with a passion and forgot that part) – to Communists, the accumulated social “quantity” turns into a new social “quality:” the “numbers” (or “masses”) morph into an infallible Party; the opinion, into the ultimate Truth.

Hiding behind the numbers and labels is also the hallmark of another bunch of ideologues, the Islamists. To them, the “ummah” – the collective community of Moslems – is very much what the Party is to Communists: the infallible source of Truth. I recently had an interesting exchange on Twitter, pointing out to the necessity of stating loudly and clearly that, by the natural restraints placed upon humanity, it is simply impossible for anyone to know whether God spoke to Mohammed, whether the Koran was God’s word, just as it is impossible for anyone to square a circle. Islamists of all stripes and nations, Sunni and Shia, Arab and Persian, Indonesian and Pakistani, base their lives and their actions on the unspoken assumption that in following the Koran (whatever way they understand it) they follow God’s will – without realizing that they cannot possibly know whether this is true or not, the end-result of their religious reliance on the ability they don’t have resulting in what is called

“idolatry.”

I noticed that Moslems avoid that conversation. On Twitter, they simply fall silent when that question is raised. I read somewhere that a Moslem who attempts to disprove an infidel may become stained by non-Moslem thinking, and should not engage in a dispute at all to keep his faith pure. But once, someone did reply – and the argument was, in essence, that “strength in numbers” translates into “Truth in numbers”: 1.9 billion people are Moslem – so can they all be wrong? The answer, needless to say, is “of course!” (and they are certainly wrong insofar as their assumed ability to know the divine status of the Koran). Contrary to the Communist/Islamist method of ascertaining what’s true and what’s not by popular acclaim, truth is not determined by voting, whether free or not. Truth is what it is, not what was decided by the Party or the Ummah, or the Ulema (this latter is the other form of hiding behind “numbers” and labels – it stands for the body of Islamic scholars, as if they can know the status of the Koran, or of what – if anything – transpired between God and Mohammed).

Of course 1.9 billion people can all be wrong: 1.9 billion clones of one person who is wrong will all be wrong, replicating his mistake 1.9 billion times. Just as the initial followers of Mohammed – Abu Bakr, or Ali (who is revered by Shiites) could not possibly know whether God spoke to Mohammed, the 1.9 billion people who carbon-copied their erroneous assurance are just as wrong, despite their huge number. Nor does adding the great-sounding labels like “ayatollahs,” “imams,” “secretaries general” turn one into what he is not – while it may help elevate them in their own, and other’s eyes, this labeling does not erase the limitations God placed on their ability to know. Whatever the label, they still don’t know, because they can’t know what they are talking about.

When it comes to ascertaining the truth, the mere “numbers” do

not matter, nor does getting bunched into a “Party” or an “Ummah” matters one bit. The habit of hiding behind numbers is cowardly, as is pointing to the other’s view as the reason for adopting one’s own. While physical strength is indeed in numbers, intellectual strength isn’t. The horrors of the last century and of 9/11 came about precisely because we could not muster the courage to deny validity to mere “numbers” – be those “numbers” labeled Communist or Nazi Party, or the Islamist Ummah or Ulema. No matter how called, the “numbers” have no ability, and therefore no right, to define and declare what’s true.

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