

There is no such thing as the ideal

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A couple of weeks ago, my wife and I watched the 1995 film, 'Carrington'. Starring Emma Thompson and Jonathan Pryce. It tells the extraordinary relationship between artist Dora Carrington and Lytton Strachey, who was a member of the Bloomsbury group.

The film is, in my opinion, well worth watching. It has aged very well. It is available on Amazon.

One line stood out for me, placed by screenplay writer Christopher Hampton into the mouth of Lytton Strachey, who says this line:

Idealists are nothing but trouble. You can never convince them there's no such thing as the ideal.

That resonates with me.

When I look back on much I have done in my professional life, it has been to map big ideas. As a systems thinker (which I realised I was by the time I was forty), this is what I seek to do. But, a systems thinker cannot be an idealist because, in trying to map ideas onto a terrain - whatever that terrain might be (a company, an economy, a tax system, or whatever else) - the systems thinker has to appreciate two things.

The first is that the map is not the same as the terrain, and the idealist rarely appreciates that.

Second, we have to also appreciate that just because we map, this does not mean that we know exactly what the terrain is. In fact, most often we are, when mapping, trying to actually locate the terrain to which the map relates, and decide what it might mean. The process is, therefore, doubly uncertain. Neither the map nor the terrain is wholly identifiable or understood. That is why the map is needed. It seems to make sense of the confusion. However, there cannot, as a consequence, be an ideal. There is only a search for greater knowledge. That is the most we can aspire to.

This has a consequence for any understanding of reality. The relationship between our understanding, which is represented by the partial and incomplete map, and the terrain we seek to understand is always symbiotic and so mutable. It is impossible to view the map without both altering it and the perception of the terrain that it might represent, whilst the terrain, if that is our starting point, is changed by our understanding of the map. There is no way that these things are independent of each other.

That means that neither has, nor can have, an ideal form. Such a thing does not exist. Both are perceptions. One is just, necessarily, more extracted than the other. That is the inevitable consequence of the way in which we as humans understand what happens around and beyond us. Trump and his cohort might wish to deny that, but they reveal themselves as fools for doing so.

I do, therefore, agree with Lytton Strachey's reported words.