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Neither approach is likely to be easy. They each face the challenge of developing a feminist praxis in the midst of a sexist society. But where one vision imagines that the authors of that praxis must be individuals free of the taint of patriarchy, the latter begins by acknowledging that we are all shaped by the forces we struggle against and that we are implicated in the systems of power that oppress us. The first seeks to defeat patriarchy chiefly through exclusion; the latter, through transformation.

The question we face, in other words, is this: Do our politics aim at purity or change?

tools, we rely––far too often––on ideological purity tests, friend-group tribalism, peer pressure, shaming and ostracism, as well as general shit-talking and internet flame wars. Such behavior has been part of our political culture for a long time.

It is unsurprising, then, that our tendency is to push people out, rather than draw them in; but when we do that, our capacity for meaningful action diminishes. A cycle of suspicion and exclusion takes hold. As we grow less able, and even less interested, in having an effect on the larger society, we become increasingly focused on the ideas and identities of those inside our own circle. We scrutinize one another mercilessly, and when we discover an offense––or merely take offense––we push out those who have lost favor. As our circle grows ever smaller, minor differences take on increasing significance, leading to further suspicion, condemnation, and exclusion––shrinking the circle further still.

We behave, in other words, not like a movement but like a scene––and a particularly cliquish, insular, and unfriendly scene at that.

Visions

At issue here are strikingly different visions of what a political movement ought to be.

In one vision, a movement and the people who make it up should be in every respect beyond reproach, standing as an example, a shining city on a hill, apart from all the faults of our existing society. To achieve this perfection, we have to separate the sheep from the goats, the good people from the bad, the true feminists from everyone else. This outlook produces, almost automatically, a tendency to defer to the dogma of one's in-group. It is not enough simply to do the right things; one must also think the right thoughts and find favor with the right people.

In contrast, in the other vision, a movement should attract people to it, including damaged people, people who have done bad things, and those who are still in the process of figuring out their politics. It will require us, therefore, to address sexual assault and other abuse by actually engaging with the people who do such things. We have to struggle with them as much as we struggle against oppression.

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Implications

The ideology at work here is self-defeating, producing a movement that is less, rather than more, capable of handling the issues surrounding sexual assault, domestic violence, and other effects of patriarchy. Barring questions from discussion does not encourage learning or improvement. And an atmosphere of public shaming provides strong incentives for people who have done wrong not to admit to it or try to atone. The charged environment makes things harder for those who take on accountability and support work; it stigmatizes individuals who willingly enter into accountability processes; and it may reduce survivors of abuse, their experiences, and their needs to political symbols used by others to advance some specific ideological line.

The politics involved are also deeply authoritarian, barring from consideration a range of questions concerning authority, accountability, punishment, and exclusion. Its advocates effectively claim a monopoly on feminist praxis and exclude other feminist perspectives. And so they silence those who disagree––literally, in the "Patriarchy and the Movement" episode.

In the situation I've described here, these moves are being made in the name of feminism, but there is no reason to believe the pattern will stop there. The same tactics are available to any identity politics camp, or any ideological sect seeking to rid itself of bourgeois influences, or pacifists wishing to make a total break from the culture of violence, or environmentalists looking to escape from civilization, or really anyone whose radicalism consists of decrying other people's purported shortcomings. The obsessive need for political conformity, the mutual fault-finding that animates it, and the sense of embattled isolation that results––combined with a kind of self-righteous competitiveness (on the one hand) and a masochistic guilt complex (on the other)–– practically guarantees the sort of internecine squabbling we've seen emerge, not only in Portland, but in Oakland, Minneapolis, and New York as well.

The totalitarian impulse has found its expression, and it has proven so destructive, in part because we have consistently failed to find the means for handling disagreements, for resolving disputes, for responding to violence, and (yes) for holding each other accountable. Without those

Naturally, no past victimization can justify or excuse present abuse, but the strict dichotomy implied here too neatly defines the past away; by the same reasoning, it also forestalls the potential for future healing or growth.

What it offers, instead, is a reassuring dualism in which survivors and abusers exist, not only as roles we sometimes fill or positions we sometimes hold, but as particular types of people who are essentially those things, locked forever into one or the other of these categories, and (not incidentally) gendered in a conventional, stereotyped binary. Each person is assigned a role and, to some degree, reduced to their position in this story. One is only a perpetrator/abuser; the other is only a victim/survivor. They are each defined by the suffering they have caused, or the suffering they have endured––but never by both.

A double transformation occurs. Patriarchy ceases to be a mode of power and system of social stratification and becomes, instead, identified with the behavior of an individual man and is even thought to be personified by him. At the same time, both perpetrator and survivor are depersonalized, abstracted from the context and the narratives of their lives, and cast instead as symbolic figures in a kind of morality play.

Our scrutiny shifts, then, from the abuse to the abuser, from the act to the actor. Instead of seeking out ways to heal the harm that has been done, we invest our collective energy in judging the character of the man responsible. Support for the survivor is equated with, and then replaced by, castigation of the perpetrator. These displays of moral outrage serve above all as pronouncements of the innocence and testaments to the virtue of those who issue them. And as such, they have a way of becoming weirdly obligatory. Since we are not asking whether some particular person committed some identifiable act, but instead whether he is fucked up, then it makes a certain kind of sense to think that anyone who "coddles," or "defends," or "supports," or even just likes him–– or who merely fails to denounce him––must take a share of the blame. So there is a powerful impulse to line up on the "right" side, to join in the denunciation before one finds oneself called out as well.

A year ago, on February 28, 2013, at an event titled "Patriarchy and the Movement," I watched as a friend of mine attempted to pose several questions based on her experience trying to address domestic violence and other abuse in the context of radical organizing.

"Why have the forms of accountability processes that we've seen in radical subcultures so regularly failed?" she asked. "Is there a tension between supporting a survivor's healing and holding perpetrators accountable?"

At that point she was, quite literally, shouted down. An angry roar came up from the crowd, from both the audience and the panelists. It quickly became impossible to hear her and, after a few seconds, she simply stopped trying to speak.

The weeks that followed produced an atmosphere of distrust and recrimination unlike anything I had experienced in more than twenty years of radical organizing. A few people were blamed for specific transgressions. (My friend was one: she was accused of violating the venue's "Safer Space" policy, "triggering" audience members, and employing "patriarchal mechanisms" in her statement.) Others were called out for unspecified abusive or sexist behavior. And a great many more were alleged to have supported or defended or coddled those guilty of such offenses.

The ensuing controversy destroyed at least one political organization, and an astonishing number of activists––many with more than a decade of experience––talked about quitting politics altogether. I know people who lost friends and lovers, often not because of anything they had done, but because of how they felt about the situation. Several people––mostly women, interestingly––told me they were afraid to say anything about the controversy, lest they go "off-script" and find themselves denounced as bad feminists.

Questioning

One might expect that in the midst of conflict questions about how we address abusive behavior and hold each other accountable would seem particularly relevant. Instead, in a statement released after the event, the

unnamed "Patriarchy and the Movement" organizers tried to bar such questions from being raised at all. They wrote:

We also feel that framing the discourse around survivor's needs as 'political disagreements' or 'political arguments' is in of itself sexist––as it pretends that this conversation should be emptied of subjective narrative, or that there is an equal playing ground in the conversation because the conversation itself isn't about real power, or that this conversation itself isn't already racialized and gendered. It is also problematic, in that it suggests that there is a neutral or objective rationality in this debate, rather than the possibility that the debate itself and the content of the debate is a socially contingent result of prevailing power dynamics.

If political framing does all that––assumes objectivity, equality, ahistoriocity, race and gender neutrality, and an absence of power––then it becomes hard to see how political discussion is possible, not only about gender, but at all. On the other hand, if political discussion relies on those conditions, then not only would it be impossible, it would also be unnecessary. For it is precisely the disputes over truth, the contested facts of history, identity, inequality, and power that give politics its shape, its content, and its significance. The second sentence of the above quotation contradicts the first: the argument runs that this discussion cannot be political, because it is necessarily political.

Their statement continues:

There are direct consequences to these 'debates', and there [are] physical bodies involved. As survivors and feminists, we must become cautious when our bodies[,] our safety, and our well-being, as well as our needs around our bodies, safety, and well beings, become the subject of 'political debate'. For us, there is more at stake here than just the merits of a 'debate'. Our bodies, safety, health, personal autonomy, and well-beings are at stake. We do not agree with people having a 'political argument' at our expense. The outcome could be life or death for us.

That is true: There are serious consequences to the debate about accountability. There are lives, and not merely principles, at stake. But rather than being a reason not to argue these issues, that is precisely the reason that we must.

If politics means anything, it means that there are consequences––sometimes, literally, life or death consequences––to the decisions we make.

When it comes to war, climate change, immigration, policing, health care, working conditions––in all of these areas, as with gender, "bodies, safety, health, personal autonomy, and well-beings are at stake." That is why politics matters.

Fallacies

While attempting to elevate feminism to a place above politics, the organizers' statement in fact advances a very specific kind of politics. Speaking authoritatively but anonymously, the "Patriarchy and the Movement" organizers declare certain questions off-limits, not only (retroactively) for their own event, but seemingly altogether. These questions cannot be asked because, it is assumed, there is only one answer, and the answer is already known. The answer is, in practice, whatever the survivor says that it is.

Under this theory, the survivor, and the survivor alone, has the right to make demands, while the rest of us are duty-bound to enact sanctions without question. One obvious implication is that all allegations are treated as fact. And often, specific allegations are not even necessary. It may be enough to characterize someone's behavior ––or even his fundamental character––as "sexist," "misogynist," "patriarchal," "silencing," "triggering," "unsafe," or "abusive." And on the principle that bad does not allow for better or worse, all of these terms can be used more or less interchangeably. After all, the point is not really to make an accusation, which could be proved or disproved; the point is to offer a judgment. Thus it is possible for large groups of people to dislike and even punish some maligned person without even pretending to know what it is, specifically, he is supposed to have done. He has been "called out" as a perpetrator; nothing else matters.

This approach occludes––and herein, perhaps, lies its appeal––the complexities of real people's lives, the multiple roles we all occupy, the tensions we all embody and live out, and the ways we all participate in upholding systems of power even as they oppress us.

Under this schema, it is taken for granted that no survivor is ever also an abuser, and no abuser is the survivor of someone else's violence.