Peter Gelderloos
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2010

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Those who are participating in less combative forms of struggle can help end this divide by more vocally supporting combative actions. Repression works by dividing the struggle, and those who focus on more creative or short-term organizing often help this process of isolation occur. On the other hand, those who focus on the more destructive side of the struggle often ensure their own isolation by disrespecting the work of their potential allies.

The work of supporting prisoners, supporting other people in struggle, communicating and building relationships with other groups, and making anarchist critiques and projects visible is as important and as heroic as sabotage and street fights. Insurrections themselves consist of all of these, not just the latter, more obvious acts.

People who work in the community can help build a real culture of struggle if they do not fall into the trap of pragmatism, if they risk frightening some potential allies by vocally and visibly valuing revolutionary struggles. People who fight in the streets can undermine alienation by building relationships with those who do not participate in such forms of struggle, and by more vocally appreciating and honoring support work and creative forms of struggle. And those who feel inclined can engage in both creative and destructive forms of struggle, erasing a line that should never have been drawn.

With all this in mind, here are some suggestions for developing real solidarity:

- Study your situation, to understand in what ways the system oppresses you, in what ways it tries to buy you off, and how other people around you may face a different situation.
- Make alliances with those you can work best with based on your own goals, and be upfront about those goals.
- Maintain connections with people who think and struggle differently.
- Especially for white people and men, actively subvert the alliances that induce privileged people to be loyal to the system.
- For those with more access to resources, spread those resources to people in struggle who have less access.

There is a line that divides many people whose struggles I respect. I won't name this line or define either camp, to avoid entrenching them, and I don't know of any fair definitions that have been put forward by any of those involved in this antagonism. Most of us are familiar with the strawmen that litter this battlefield, though. Those on one side are guilty of "identity politics," those on the other are "privileged" or "dogmatic."

In some cases I think the different practices can complement each other, each having their own shortcomings. But in other cases they are merely different; I know of people on either side who seem to me to have a complete revolutionary practice, with its own particular advantages, but no failing that could be addressed by the other side. Simultaneously, there are those on both sides who I do not consider allies. Among those who speak of social war are some who want a homogenous front that struggles only for freedom in the abstract, who stifle any talk of oppressions they do not personally experience. And among those who speak of privilege and oppression are some who are just politicians and guilt-mongerers.

Between those who speak of privilege and oppression, and those who speak of social war, I come largely from the former, and now find myself closer to the latter. While I want to direct these criticisms in multiple directions, I don't want to create a false balance between two fictive positions. I hope these criticisms aid not in the development of a better anarchist practice, a peace or synthesis between those who have not seen eye to eye, but in the development of better anarchist practices that need not ever come to terms.

However, recognizing that we'll never all agree on anything, and this is good, I want to argue nonetheless that a needed common ground is an understanding and embrace of social war. I'm afraid that those who speak of oppression without acknowledging the war we are a part of, not as metaphor but as a real and current practice, will only succeed in turning a battlefield into a garden, decorating this cemetery of a society with flowers, ensuring equality of access to a graveyard. I don't care to argue that one side or another is more correct, only that revolution becomes impossible when we start believing in civil society and stop noticing that the guns are pointed at us too.

It is vital to have connections with people we don't share affinity with, people who are different from us, but it can be difficult to work with people whose desires are reformist without also adopting reformist modes of struggle. Lacking a specific and foregrounded critique of recuperation, as do many who focus on privilege and oppression, coalition politics are almost certain to end up in Popular Fronts that stifle anarchist critiques, prop up Authority, and hoodwink anti-authoritarians into being the shock troops or grunt workers for the leftwing of the system, whether in the guise of NGOs, progressive politicians, or Stalinist parties.

Under democratic government, recuperation is far more common than repression as a tool for counterinsurgency. They prefer the carrot over the stick. Those who talk about exclusion more than exploitation, and who focus on getting more carrots for everyone, are sure to defeat themselves.

"You Have to Do It My Way" was written in the summer of 2009, and "So Fucked Up" and "Some Suggestions" were written in the summer of 2010.

to get our riot on. But we have no hope of subverting the control of the institutionalized Left and forming real relationships of solidarity with a broad network of people in struggle if we hold on to this arrogant, utilitarian view.

In the protest I mention above, not only the black bloc but all the people present deserved direct support for the type of involvement they chose. The less militant were not simply the bottom of a pyramid holding up the more militant. As someone who works at a drop-in center with those homeless youth put it, for some people present it was revolutionary to take the streets or attack the police; and for the homeless youth it was revolutionary to take a public stand against the police and yell at them, because of how different this power dynamic is from their everyday experience. Risk is different for every person involved, based on their standing in various social hierarchies. Oppressed people are not fragile, vulnerable, or unable to participate in dangerous, violent resistance, as many spokespeople of anti-oppression politics have claimed, again and again, implicitly and explicitly. However, different people do face different choices in the exact same situations, and we all need to be aware of that.

I want to go back to the idea that it was "revolutionary" for those folks to simply yell at the police. This is true insofar as it gives them a sense of their own power. Many people might scoff at the limited scope of this "revolutionary" victory, but we should consider that riots are often claimed as minor victories on the basis of how they make people feel. This should not be underestimated: if we feel weak and demoralized, we will never win.

No single tactic should ever be expected, on repetition, to lead to revolution. Every successful tactic simply opens new doors, that require other tactics in order to walk through. Homeless kids yelling at the police undoubtedly open a door that leads in the right direction. Being able to fight the police and beat them in the streets is a subsequent door through which all revolutionary struggles must be able to pass. The simple act of yelling at police can be claimed as revolutionary, but only if we are willing to build off of what is won and look for the next steps that lead to a social transformation that actually deserves the name "revolution."

Two well known games make communication impossible: the privilege game, and the more-militant-than-thou game. In the first, any unorthodox idea about how to confront oppression is said to be a product of privilege, and an attempt to preserve oppressive dynamics. In the second, any criticism of a militant or illegal action is said to be a move towards reformism and pacification.

It seems clear that these boxes and arguments exist primarily to rescue us from complicated situations: confronting disrespectful behaviours rather than just denouncing them, or feeling judged by those carrying out more risky actions, on the one hand; and on the other, taking criticisms seriously and humbly, and understanding and supporting other people's tactics.

I think everyone is tired of the dichotomy between negation and creation. It's cliché for anti-authoritarians these days to admit that we need to tear some shit down and build other stuff up. We're not all on the same page, and there's still worthwhile debates to be had around nihilism; the idea of alternatives, blueprints, and processes versus communes, visions, and capacities; but hopefully we can all see that there are plenty of people on the other side of these debates who, even if they are making a real strategic mistake, are struggling sincerely and have their hearts in the same place as ours, which is often more important, because it's much easier to see a strategic mistake than to actually be right about it; therefore excommunicating everyone we believe to be guilty of strategic mistakes is more likely to result in hyper-fragmented sectarianism than in good, effective strategies put into practice.

It should also be easy to see that so much of these arguments is a question of temperament. Some people prefer acts of creation, healing, and support; others prefer acts of negation, destruction, and attack. This is great, because we need it all.

So what would real solidarity, and a real diversity of tactics look like? The first step is to abolish any hierarchy of tactics. The riskier and more exciting tactics are not the most important ones, and not the only ones deserving direct support.

We've had to put up with authoritarian, reformist pacifists controlling protest marches for so long, that it becomes easy to view a protest march or some other manifestation of a social movement as just a tool, a cover

You Have to Do It My Way

Ideological identity, experienced identity, and arrogance among anarchists

One of the most loaded terms I see in the critiques of certain anarchists is "identity politics." What exactly are identity politics? I can't deduce a coherent definition from its usage; given how the term is thrown around it seems only to imply that the speaker is annoyed by someone else focusing on racism or sexism. I thought identity politics meant the process of creating a homogenous identity within a certain population to serve as a political constituency and power base for a group of politicians, whose role as exploiters sitting atop that population is hidden by the shared use of that singular identity. In other words it calls up the likes of Gloria Steinem, Adolf Hitler, David Ben-Gurion, or Ron Karenga.

Yet when anarchists use this term, frequently they're using it against people involved in the construction of fluid, heterogenous, and complex identities, who extend solidarity to people with different identities and develop holistic critiques of power, and adoption of this identity does not also mean the adoption of a preformulated and unquestionable dogma. For example, the group Anarchist People of Color includes people who identify as black, latina, indigenous, Asian, Palestinian, biracial; immigrants and citizens; queer and trans people. From what I know from the outside, they engage in discussions regarding these multiple identities rather than suppressing internal difference. Their published writings reflect a diversity of thought rather than a single political line. I've read things by APOC members I disagree with, and other things that have really challenged or developed my thinking regarding imperialism, race, gender, anarchist struggle, and other themes. I know of people of color who are critical of the way the group operates and don't feel included, and I know white people who strongly dislike generalizations regarding themselves that often appear in writings by APOC. I don't let these bother me because I know that without exception, someone's definition

of an Other can be useful, but never valid. Beyond this I've read one or two things from members of this group that were purposeful manipulations of white guilt. [This essay was written before Smack a White Boy 2].

All this goes to show that this group is not a singular entity and they express a range of perspectives in a number of different manners. However in disregard for this diversity there has been a certain singularity of response from white anarchists: whenever writings from the group are posted on other anarchist websites the charge of "identity politics" inevitably appears in the comments section, regardless of whether the writing being critiqued posits essential differences or homogenous, unchanging categories.

Perhaps for many anarchists, identity politics have come to mean the construction of identities within political projects? But this doesn't pan out either. You have the more old-fashioned white anarchists claiming that there is only the working class, and that emphasis on race or gender divides the working class, thus aiding the capitalists. Others don't go in much for the workers and identify strictly as anarchists. One typical internet harangue of Anarchist People of Color bristled at their support for Mumia abu-Jamal, who is "not an anarchist." Does this mean we should be concerned about what happens to other anarchists, but what happens to other people in the same social category as us doesn't affect us? In the end it's not a coherent criticism, it's just white people telling people of color how they should identify. This is true identity politics, in the Mobutu Sese Seko sense of the term, that only regards one identity as natural or at least unquestionable in the common project (nationhood, the struggle against capitalism, what have you), and any other identity as superfluous or harmful.

A common argument made by these critics of a poorly identified identity politics seems to be that the speaker pays lipservice to the evils of racism or sexism but claims that the basis of racism and sexism is the division of people into categories along lines of race or sex, thus people who include these divisions in their political work are guilty of reinforcing rather than attacking the oppression itself. How valid is this hypothesis? First I want to analyze the logic a little more. An assumption

Suggestions for real solidarity

Let's pick a real life situation. A US city, a protest against the police in the wake of yet another shooting. Among the small crowd, there's a group of homeless youth, some anarchists in a black bloc, and others. There are no politicians here, no counterrevolutionaries, just various people with differing reasons to participate, all of them sincere. Many of the people don't know one another, however; it's something like the coincidence of separate islands, and when they go their separate ways, few if anyone has met a stranger or made a new friend.

At one point, someone tries to pull at least two of the homeless youth into the street, where the black bloc are blocking traffic. Many if not most of the people do not notice this incident. This upsets the homeless youth, as they have decided to stay on the sidewalks for their own safety; they have no shortage of opportunities to confront the police. Despite this show of disrespect, at the end of the protest they talk about having had an overwhelmingly positive experience standing up to the police and starting long-lasting conversations about police violence.

Later, an argument develops between anarchists or anti-authoritarians, some of whom who identify more closely with a practice of identity politics or anti-oppression, others who identify more closely with a practice of insurrection or social war. The same old arguments come out. "The black bloc tried to force people into the streets, they endangered people with their tactics." "They were being fucked up." "They're just privileged," "straight white men" etc. Even though not the black bloc but one person was involved in pulling, and the black bloc was neither all white nor all male, and possibly did not include any straight people at all. And even though some people who later made these arguments saw the pulling going on and didn't intervene, they just blamed others for it.

And on the other side: "I call bullshit," "that's just identity politics," "they're just trying to pacify our response," "they claimed the black bloc was endangering people just by taking the streets," even though it wasn't about taking the streets but someone trying to force others to do so, and someone within their friendship circle reported hearing about the pulling incident directly from the mouths of two of the homeless youth.

of guilt, reform, recuperation, and identification with the very system that makes living impossible for all of us.

underlying this argument is that the first apparent feature, chronologically, of a phenomenon will become the basis of that phenomenon, and thus its generative feature. In other words, a distinction of gender is a prerequisite for sexism, thus gender distinctions generate sexism and by destroying gender distinctions we destroy sexism. What was that video game where the boss of a certain level is this evil bug that flies around and suddenly multiplies into a dozen copies of itself, but if you can kill the original, then they all die? Anyways I think I make my point: if identity itself is the basis for oppression then we can destroy oppression by destroying identity. A further assumption of this line of reasoning is that history is mechanical, progressive, and unilineal, because if the first feature of a phenomenon automatically leads to the development of the entire phenomenon, then there is no possibility for multiple outcomes or even for stasis or reversal. A always leads to B always leads to C.

There. The idea has lost its clothes. It reveals itself to be Historical Materialist at best, and Social Darwinist at worst.

In this sense it bears similarity to the worst excesses of primitivism (which, don't get me wrong, I believe has had a number of good influences on anarchist theory and practice), namely that the development of agriculture led inevitably to the development of authority, which is historically untrue, unless we redefine authority to mean, well, agriculture.

I can't argue hard enough that history is neither mechanical, progressive, nor unilineal. These characterizations are a fundament of Western dogma, and God help us if they are true because that would mean that unless anarchy has been preordained by the machines of history then there is nothing we can do to bring it about.

Revealing the cultural assumptions hiding behind this particular understanding of identity is far from enough to disprove it. So let's take it at face value: do identity categories in themselves recreate the oppressions that operate on those identities? I don't think there's any evidence of this. For every example that occurs to me of some authoritarian group that used identity to suppress difference or create prejudice, even as they were fighting against oppression, I can think of another group of oppressed people who used identity as a means of survival and who maintained relationships with people and groups with other identities to jointly attack the power structure itself.

One might argue that when it comes to indigenous people, it is not at all the category that oppresses them, it's the people who came and stole their land and continue to colonize them, and in this case the identity of being indigenous may be a vital tool in surviving cultural genocide. Losing that category may be tantamount to disappearing as a people and allowing the genocide to run its full course. One might also say that anthropologists and philosophers who look at identities as tools are only reflecting their own manipulative and mechanical way of looking at the world, and that an indigenous identity is a history, a culture, a community, and an inseperable part of who one is. I don't know. In any case, many active indigenous people have already expressed that white people's denial of their identity and nationhood is one reason they don't work with white people, and as a generalization white people didn't listen.

But this vague critique of identity politics rejects such an argument. It's a posture that bears much in common with the postmodern rejection of Grand Narratives. This rejection is highly useful in denying the racial myths of European nationhood and refusing the stories that give us a shared history with our rulers. This is great. On the other hand such a posture prevents one from acknowledging legacies and histories of resistance and oppression, which is useful for the rulers. For example, if one can only connect oneself to 500 years of brutal colonial oppression and also 500 years of impressive resistance, by identifying oneself within a certain category of people, and we hold such categorization to be oppressive and undesirable, then how is one to make sense of her position in society if she grows up in highly marginalized circumstances and is treated a certain way by ruling institutions and a great many people on the street? This is just coincidence? And when she finds out that the other people in her family, and certain other people all across the country, have experiences that are remarkably similar, while the dominant culture talks nothing of these experiences, this is just meaningless? Or is it a legitimate basis for a shared identity, and a point of departure for struggle?

I have to say that the example I'm giving is miles away from my personal experience. All the identities that society tried to stitch me into don't fit, and the fabric is coarse: man, American, white person,

border, are we offering any more than charity by taking part in a campaign to soften it? And what are we admitting about the depth of our alliances when we don't talk openly about the need for a world with no borders? How much do we truly respect the people we are working with if we're hiding our actual dreams and motivations from them?

Experience in other places has shown that by being an uncompromising force, saying the things no one else would say, and militantly pushing the envelope, after the initial conflicts and arguments other people will come to appreciate anarchist solidarity because our presence gives strength to a struggle, much the same way that most of Martin Luther King. Jr.'s reformist victories can be chalked up to those who fought more forcefully for something more radical.

In other words, the pragmatic arguments about the immediacy of human suffering in certain struggles, and the need to approach those timidly, fall short, because by silencing our radical critique, we ensure that reformism and recuperation will maintain the problem indefinitely, and by not manifesting a threatening force we ensure that the system will have little motivation to decrease the human suffering in the short term.

It deserves to be mentioned that one of the largest amnesties for illegal immigrants in recent decades, that was not lobbied for by business interests, happened in Greece, after anarchists and others violently and uncompromisingly rose up against all aspects of the system of domination, and immigrants took part in that uprising. Despite being the most vulnerable or at risk, they were frequently the most violent and reckless, once the humanitarian, reformist leadership who generally mediated their rage was proven obsolete.

By coming out of the closet, anarchists can discover who our real allies are. Among the leftists, we can distinguish the politicians from the sincere ones, and we can set a tone of radical direct action that makes it easier for people in more precarious positions to come out in support of that approach. By speaking about the abolition of borders and prisons and the State and creating a material force in society, with its creative/supportive and negative/destructive aspects, we make those radical ideas a real possibility and create an exit from the timeless cycles

By seeing race not as essential categories or forms of socialization we have to own up to, but as counterrevolutionary alliances that never succeed in negating our own agency, the Phoenix Class War Council achieved a victory of a magnitude I've never seen come out of privilege workshops. They approached white libertarians who generally remained within right wing coalitions, and called on them to honor their own principles by joining them in a protest against neo-nazis who were capitalizing on anti-immigrant racism with a xenophobic rally. The libertarians showed up, and helped drive the nazis out of town. Subsequently, the Phoenix anarchists intervened again, and called on the white libertarians to stand true to their opposition to big government by joining them in a protest against the militarization of the borders, which was also an immigrant solidarity protest. Many of them came out, mutinying against the alliances of white supremacy. (One might argue that this momentum was largely destroyed by the leftist Boycott Arizona campaign, which had a watered down politics, was based on shaming and guilt, and gave all Arizona citizens, i.e. from the nazis to the libertarians, cause to unite).

With this different nuancing, being a good ally means fighting for your own reasons, unapologetically, and familiarizing yourself with your capabilities as compared with the capabilities of your allies, looking for ways to acknowledge these differences but make them complementary. What's required, above all, is finding allies who actually share affinity with you, while breaking up the alliances that protect the system. This means working in broader campaigns, without a haughty and insular disdain for "leftists," but also without the dishonest and hypocritical suppression of one's own political identity, one's own reasons for struggling (which has become second nature for the hundreds of anarchists who work in other people's campaigns and parrot social democratic rhetoric rather than openly expressing their own ideas and radical critiques).

Too many anti-authoritarians serve as the supporters and shock troops for reformist campaigns that can only humanize the prison system, the borders, the War on Terror, when what we must do is speak openly about the need to abolish these things, and look for ways that our participation in these campaigns can open revolutionary paths rather than following reformist dead-ends. If we don't have our own reasons for hating the

member of the middle class, or more recently, outcast, failure, criminal, terrorist. To varying degrees I have peeled these identities off my body. The common experience I find with other people is our shared alienation, our desire to destroy what created us. It would be unfair to call this a white experience, or a middle class experience, because of all the other people I have met who also share this experience. On the other hand it would be tokenistic to assert that this identity-free identity is one-size-fits-all just because I've seen it fit so many different types of people. I might tie this experience to growing up in the suburbs, and in most cases I might be right, but to declare this a suburban identity would be unfair to all the people who grew up in the same categories as me but had different experiences, or all the people who had similar experiences despite growing up in different categories.

Even though a negative identity is still an identity, it doesn't feel like one, so building a politics around that particular experience of the world, as CrimethInc. has done quite effectively, I would argue, doesn't seem to have any commonality with identity politics, though in fact it does. In fact it is typical to the category that I grew up in that I have generally never wanted to belong to an identity group, and I always felt awkward and pretentious when I tried one on.

Until I met anarchy. I don't mean anarchism, or the anarchist movement, I mean the shared experience of struggle with people who have my back, who comprise my material and emotional community, who share my history, and who learn and grow within a very real continuity of struggle that goes all the way back to the Spanish Civil War, the Russian Revolution, the Paris Commune (a continuity that doesn't exist in the United States, in my experience). People who will invite you into their home and feed you because they share the same dream, people who will risk themselves for you in the street when they don't even know you, because they can look at you and know you're on the same side. It was when I met the grandparents of the struggle, who fought in mythical 1936, met them as friends, and doing so realized that one day I or my friends, if we survived, would be the grandpas and grandmas telling stories of a struggle equally distant in time; it was when my friend took me on a tour of Moscow (or Barcelona, or Berlin, or that little village in Friesland) and showed me — this is where they killed our friends Stas

and Nastya a few months ago, and here is where the Bolsheviks executed some anarchists in 1921 — and I realized that these places had the same meaning; that's when history became demystified and I discovered that the anarchists are my people.

This is not an identity I want to ideologize or spread beyond my own personal experience. But it's something I feel very real in my bones. And it's something that shows me that my discomfort with identity was in part an alienation from the history of struggle.

But the identity of anarchist does not say much to my starting position in society or the forms of privilege and exploitation the various ruling institutions have designated for me. What about an identity imposed on me by racism and sexism, by the nation? At this level my identity tells me of my descent from a long line of poor farmers who over the years consciously decided to cooperate with a capitalistic, religious, and racial project that ultimately left me with an inheritance stripped of anything I value. My living relatives no longer even farm or work with their hands; in the end their farming was the first rung on a professional ladder. They did not fight for their land and resist the enclosures or the industrialization of farming, and they cooperated fully in the various forms of active racism white people engaged in to create the United States. And in their eagerness to control each other and stay within their complementary reproductive roles, they created patterns of abuse that almost destroyed me before I was old enough to understand what the hell was going on. The bad choices of my ancestors help explain the well fed misery I was born into, and give my struggle more meaning. And this part of my identity bears overwhelming similarities with the identities of many other people, and overwhelming differences with the identities of even more people.

To get theoretical again, the discomfort with identity also seems to me to be a symptom of postmodern society. Oh God, not that dreaded label (even worse than "identity politics"). But no, patient reader, I mean something very concrete by that. I mean the postmodern recognition that identity is constructed and performative, and its association of identity with the ironic and insincere, consequential to the unprecedented bombardment of the individual with the basest forms of marketing and chicanery to manipulate the formation of an identity that has become

we are strong enough to fight back. In order to be effective, we have to acquaint ourselves intimately with the social terrain on which we struggle, which will lead to a similar awareness of history, socialization, and power dynamics, but without the guilt that accompanies the anti-oppression practice.

We recognize that the system privileges some of us, but this is something that is imposed, and something we reject, rather than something we view as inhering to us for the rest of our lives. Here's an important distinction: you fight something imposed on you. You take responsibility for something that belongs to you. We did not create this system, and from now on we do not accept its claims to us. Precisely because privilege is not something voluntary, it is not something we can simply dismiss, but we recognize this as a result of historical struggles, and a tactical reality on the battlefield.

It is no coincidence that whiteness was created at a time of major social revolts in Europe and anti-colonial revolts in the Americas, at a time when the ruling class needed ever greater participation in its project of domination. Neither is it a coincidence that patriarchy experienced a qualitative leap forward in that era. Much like higher wages, privileges of gender and skin color are in fact concessions that have been won by past struggles, but like all concessions, they were designed to weaken rebellion, in this case by dividing it and encouraging greater portions of society to identify with their rulers. But also like all concessions, they offer new possibilities if we refuse to see them as a gift given to us, and instead view them as weapons we have stolen.

People who are privileged by the system can feel guilty about this, or we can use these privileges to attack the system. Those of us with white skin don't face as much attention from the police or store security. We could say, therefore, that it's a privilege to shoplift. Or we could rob those stores blind, sell the merch, and donate the proceeds to our own struggles and the struggles of people who can't shoplift so easily. By using privilege as a weapon rather than obsessing over it, we actually undermine it, because stores that intentionally conduct racial profiling or more passively give in to the common prejudices will be hurt economically. If they shift surveillance to well dressed white shoppers, then white privilege, which helps prevent rebellion, erodes a little.

On the other hand I think building a culture of respect, solidarity, and sensitivity is vital. In some ways, freedom exists more in the details than in the abstract, and the details are different from one person to the next. This is a truth that anti-oppression activists have helped to foreground. I don't at all want talking about micro power dynamics to go out of vogue, nor discussion of our socialization and our personal experiences within social settings. But maybe we should base our idea of freedom on an expectation of constant confrontation which we are strong enough to deal with on our own and with friends, rather than on an expectation of perfected norms that must be upheld by the entire group.

Freedom is not a fragile thing. It is also not lacking in discomfort or conflict, but these unpleasantries are exactly what we need to grow stronger, and strength is what we need to create and defend freedom.

Strategic Alliances

To talk primarily about social war rather than about privilege and oppression is to acknowledge that capitalism, the State, patriarchy — all of these interconnected systems — constitute a war against all of us, and each and every one of us have a reason to fight this system. Our reasons and capabilities are not the same, so we will never have a unified front. But we have the possibility to seek alliances with nearly everyone else around us, to undermine the consent and participation this system rests upon and shields itself with, and to attack its exposed structures and symbols.

An analysis that focuses on privilege and oppression will encourage a primary response, among oppressed people, that aims at challenging their exclusion from the system more than their exploitation by it. Among privileged people, the primary response is likely to be contemplative or educational.

An analysis that foregrounds social war will encourage a primary response of offensive or defensive action from one's unique position in society, coupled with the seeking of subversive alliances. To start with, this is a far more empowered and realistic practice, because each of us are the primary agents in our own struggles, and each of us are declaring

nothing more than an interface with commodities and political categories. How the hell can we take identity seriously when it is so evidently produced for us by clothing commercials, sports teams, and talk radio?

But moving beyond the historical moment in which, for many people, identity has become an absurdity, what is identity if it is not inherently a product of manipulative outside factors? I would argue that even though identity is a project and it is historical, it is nonetheless natural, in the sense that it arises from the nature of human consciousness. Identity is a function of the way humans understand ourselves and recognize others; and I would make the Chomskian argument that the epistemological movement to and beyond categories is universal to the human brain itself. In other words, I think that we always have and always will label ourselves and others, challenge these labels, reinforce them, abandon them and integrate the fragments into new labels, and there is nothing wrong with this project except where it intersects with an authoritarian society that uses a discourse and a regulation of identities, among many other means, to not let people be who they want to be. Thus, using or not using identities is not as important as addressing the very real social structures and power dynamics that lie behind these identities.

It seems to me that addressing our personal relationship to these power structures entails the creation of identity if it includes any talk of a collective response, i.e. struggle. This is true even if we adopt as broad an identity as "the exploited." Our identity becomes more specific the more specifically we examine those power structures and how they affect us. If we try to understand patriarchy and colonialism and migrant labor and liquor stores, something as vague as "the exploited" is no longer a useful identity to help us understand our place in all of this. Such a broad identity can be useful in preventing an atomized understanding of the system — it is a wholesale rejection of the system on the part of everyone who can consider themselves exploited by it (which is basically everybody). But this need not entail a rejection of a specific approach that looks at one or several parts of the system in detail, in tandem with a more specific identity, as long as that approach does not lose a holistic analysis of the system and thus give birth to a partial struggle.

After all, identities need not be singular or mutually exclusive. In examining patriarchy it becomes apparent that different people have

different categorical relationships with that power structure, but just because someone understands herself to be a woman does not at all prevent her from understanding herself as an enemy of the entire system, together with all the other enemies of the system.

Here I want to quote from a thought-provoking article by Craig Calhoun about identity politics. He provides a succinct definition of essentialism in identity which is similar to the one Lawrence Jarach uses in his article "Essentialism and Identity Politics," although I find the Calhoun article to be better developed, much more precise, and less loaded. He defines essentialism as the "[notion] that individual persons can have singular, integral, altogether harmonious and unproblematic identities." Further along:

> Bosnian Muslim feminists and other advocates of Bosnian women faced in 1993 a horrific version of the way nationalism and gender can collide. Serbian men raped thousands of Bosnian women [. . .]. This was a specifically gendered violation equally specifically deployed against a nationally defined group. Yet Bosnian men added to the calamity by treating the women who were raped as defiled and impure. They were defiled not only in the general sexist discourse of female purity, but in a specifically nationalist discourse in which they had been inscribed in proper roles as daughters, wives and mothers. To think of themselves as either women rather than Bosnian Muslims or Bosnian Muslims rather than women made no sense. They were raped because they were both, and to condemn the Bosnian Muslim culture equally with the Serbian project of ethnic cleansing (as some American feminists have done) is to condemn those very women. Yet the obvious claim to be both women and Bosnian Muslims was available only as a political project (however implicit) to refigure the discourses of gender, religion and nation within which their identities were inscribed and on the bases of which their bodies and their honor alike were violated.
>
> [. . .] But the puzzles lie not just in invocations of strong collective identity claims. They lie also in the extent to which people [. . .] are not moved by any strong claims of identity — or communality — with others and respond instead to individualistic appeals to

That anarchist group, according to the APOCer, was comprised of majority men and only one person of color (when in reality, the group doesn't exist, but the circle or scene he was confusing it with includes multiple people of color, multiple women, and no majorities). In other words, to defend the orthodox form of anti-racism, this person had to create the category half-latino, turn several people of color into white people, and turn women comrades into a sort of silenced minority. From his description, you'd think the white male majority of this non-existent anarchist group had forced the powerless, oppressed members of their group to publicly denounce identity politics so they could stop thinking about privilege and get back to ruling the movement. In the words of one of the workshop presenters, "I don't feel tokenized by the white anarchists in [my city] but I do feel it from you in this caricature you portray."

Suppression

An emphasis on micro dynamics can be helpful within the framework I'm about to elaborate, as an attentiveness to tactical details that can facilitate or hinder our attacks on the system. But given how they're nuanced by anti-oppression activists, micro dynamics become a laundry list of behaviours that are oppressive, or incompatible with freedom, which is to cast freedom as a pure state that is banished by impure behaviours.

Within this framework for social change, the primary activity for creating freedom is in fact suppression.

Because of this reliance on suppression and belief in the fragility of freedom, women who talk loudly and don't want to be put on a stack, don't want men to step back to make room for them, are called "manarchists." Individual personalities disappear under categorical generalizations, and such women are told they are simply adopting masculine characteristics as a coping strategy. Not being oppressive is boiled down to adopting a certain personality type that, perhaps, is not so suited to revolutionary struggle: being soft spoken, having thin skin, learning and following group norms, and submitting to group process.

this covertly academic framework, someone from the outside can't even properly be engaged with until they are brought up to the appropriate level.

More recently, I witnessed a disgusting exchange that struck me and other people as typical of other experiences we'd had. At the aforementioned workshop at the Seattle bookfair, the presenters explicitly stated, multiple times, that they think it is important to fight against racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression, and that they see nothing wrong with people focusing on sexism, for example, or coming together as queer people to fight against heterosexism. However, they criticized a number of features of what they labeled "identity politics." While they did not successfully clarify what they meant by that, they gave precise criticisms of specific analyses or paradigms during every step of their presentation.

Because they criticised the dominant paradigm for how to confront oppression, the talk was highly controversial. Anti-oppression activists who were there summarized the presentation thusly: "They said focusing on racism and sexism or things like that only gets in the way of the struggle." This is such an inaccurate representation, if I didn't know the people responsible for it I would assume it was an intentional or malicious lie. The only other possibility I can see is that the orthodoxy of anti-oppression politics makes practitioners incapable of hearing criticism without assuming that their critic is being oppressive.

One area APOC member, capitalizing on a racist police shooting that happened around then to foreground the importance of identity, attacked the two presenters, whom he characterized as a white woman and a half-latino man (thus undermining the latter's status as a person of color and thus reducing their legitimacy within the anti-oppression paradigm, as part of the sadly common game, Darker Than Thou). It would have been much easier if the two presenters had been white males, but since they belonged to some oppressed categories (never mind their class backgrounds), they had to be linked to white males in some other way in order to ignore their actual critiques. So, these two were turned into representatives of the anarchist group to which they supposedly belonged. (Incidentally, its preference for representation was one of the criticisms the two had of identity politics.)

> self-realization. Moreover, these two are not altogether mutually exclusive in practice. The same unwillingness to work in complex struggles for social transformation may lie behind both a preference for individualistic, psychologistic solutions to problems and a tendency to accept the illusory solutions offered by strong, simplistic identity claims on behalf of nations, races and other putatively undifferentiated categories.[1]

How can emphasizing collective identities actually be helpful in an anarchist struggle? I can think of plenty of examples. Here's a good one. One of my best friends in the place where I live now was, when I met her, a lesbian separatist feminist. She is an anarchist and we had plenty of affinity, but in the majority of her political projects and personal relationships she chose to only have contact with other women. She lived in a women-only house, worked with a women-only self-defense group as well as a couple women-only political collectives, and she only had romantic relationships with women. She chose this strategy because of her personal experience with sexual and sexist violence, because it seemed to her that only women really understood and could support her in these experiences, because she notices a different dynamic in these women-only groups that feels safer and also more enabling of effective communication and action, and because she's sick of always having to justify her experiences or argue with men and with anti-feminist women that the sexist violence experienced by her and her friends actually exists.

It would be arrogant to tell her that these experiences are invalid, and moreover, her effectiveness as an anarchist seems to validate her strategy. From what I have seen, she has made important contributions to the struggle against sexism that include direct action against rapists, counterinformation, and participation in theoretical debates that most anarchists here have deemed important, regardless of what side they take. And she has made important contributions to the anarchist movement, beyond its feminist aspects. Of course I can't say what these have been,

[1] Craig Calhoun (1994), Social Theory and the Politics of Identity, p.13, pp.28–29. The Jarach article I refer to is "Essentialism and Identity Politics" in Anarchy 26 Magazine no.58, 2004.

but I would wager that nearly all anarchists, regardless of how they feel about so-called identity politics, would find her work to be worthwhile and even impressive. And the base for much of this work is the safe space she has created for herself in women-only groups.

The whole time I have known her, she never imposed an identity on me or made me feel devalued or excluded. All it took was for me to listen to her, accept her experiences as valid, and respect her choices regarding whom she wanted to work with and when, even if it meant that sometimes she didn't want to work with me, not so much because of my gender, but because of her gender experiences. As a Catalan anarchist pointed out, separatism is only separatism if we accept the authority that bound the two together in the first place. Otherwise, it's voluntary association.

This constitutes one of several stories I am familiar with that contradict the hypothesis that anarchist strategies emphasizing identity will divide the struggle or recreate oppression. But this example is especially interesting because this friend of mine is no longer a lesbian separatist. She now works in mixed groups and has relations with boys. She does not reject her old strategy, she has just moved beyond it. It was a necessary part of her process. Other anarcha-feminists here remain more permanently in that mode of action and although we have less common ground to struggle together, I respect that they are doing important work, which I can see, as just one example, by how much they helped my friend. For me to set some sort of timetable for them, to demand that they pass through separatism as a phase, would be the height of arrogance. As long as I respect their work and they respect mine, the struggle is not divided. The division occurs when we invalidate the struggle of people who have chosen to focus on a different part of the system.

What I wish all those snooty bastards who tout the term "identity politics" would understand is that anarchist theories and practices exist to serve our needs. This is not to say that anything goes, that I'm okay and you're okay, but that the basis for our criticisms should be how well our practices serve us in our struggle for liberation rather than how well our practices fit a clear blueprint derived from a pure anarchist ideology. Yet so often I hear the formula: anarchism is opposed to involuntary categories, so organizing as women or as people of color or reinforcing

and norms outside of our cliques, and we make it increasingly difficult for outsiders to come in, or for allies to work with us. What we are left with are a series of fortresses, that are no less plagued by gender violence for all our emphasis on new rules and processes, in which we can either hide, fearing the days when we have to deal with outsiders who will assign us to a gender category we don't fit in, or from which we can make violent forays, a lá Bash Back, to assault the fortresses of the normal.

I want to mention that I love the theoretical and tactical developments represented by Bash Back; however one of their possible future trajectories is a detente, a war of attrition, in which the bitterness of surrender is blunted with the sweetness of vengeful attacks directed from an ideally oppression-free internal space that can never expand or explode to include all of society in a revolutionary way. A militant refusal to be assimilated, an inability to sabotage assimilation in the rest of society, an admirable dedication to the contiunation of this contradiction through attacks on church services and gay businesses. I bring up Bash Back because within it are those who are more closely aligned with a practice of social war and those more closely aligned with an anti-oppression practice, and so which future trajectory they follow is undecided. It is not a question of specific tactics so much as projectuality. If our actions can facilitate revolutionary social change only if more and more people join the in-group we have created, we will never win.

Fight Oppression, Burn the Witch

I first started to seriously doubt anti-oppression politics when I witnessed what I realized was a typical response to criticism. Someone from outside the movement was respectfully questioning whether there weren't better ways to fight sexism than using gendered speakers' lists in meetings (ensuring that no more than half of those who speak are men), and a white man well versed in anti-oppression rhetoric responded dismissively and rudely, calling the skeptic a sexist and giving him a list of recommended readings to study up on so he could understand sexism better. "Read these first, then we'll talk," was the tone of the reply. In

socialization and has been irrevocably imprinted. In fact there is no body without history, without relationships, with imprints from society. Because the body is not and cannot be on a trajectory ideally towards, and therefore practically away from, perfection, but is already imperfected, oppressive socialization becomes just one stain among many, and we as persons become mosaics of scars that, in sum, are really quite beautiful, and hella tough.

My privileged position in society notwithstanding, I've had more than theoretical encounters with trauma, and I've found that I healed best when I did not identify with the trauma or make an identity out of it. The most dramatic reversal of a traumatic event came when I used violence against someone who had successfully victimized me. This experience helped me to see that it is not blaming the victim, but rather, good therapy, to focus on how disempowerment is something we choose or reject, and how it can be reversed through our own personal agency in a traumatic situation. Friends of mine who have also healed from traumatic experiences have had similar observations.

Fragile Freedom

One aspect of anti-oppression politics I find hardest to forgive is the idea it has implicitly promoted that freedom is a fragile thing that we create first in our own internal spaces. At a recent talk on identity politics at the Seattle Anarchist Bookfair, one of the presenters told of a consent workshop at an activist or anarchist space. He said it was a good, important workshop, but he was struck by how limited that safe space was after they left, when a female-bodied friend was harassed and threatened by a passing motorist as they walked away.

Freedom has to go armed. Our notion of freedom can't be something that falls apart if every single person involved does not follow perfected norms of consent. Such a notion, more than any of our fashions or specialized vocabulary, will imprison us in a political ghetto. By trying to banish sexism and heterosexism on the micro level, by perfecting behaviours and norms in our circles of friends, we have made ourselves incapable of actually engaging with and transforming those behaviours

those categories in any way is contrary to anarchism. This reminds me of debating pacifists. "We want a peaceful world, so you can't use violence to get there."

Not only are there many examples of struggles that are aided by the development or defense of identity, I would argue that the rejection of identity implicit in a rejection of political contestations of identity is a throwback to times when social struggles willingly adopted institutional forms — to when the anarchist movement hadn't yet learned what anarchism really was. A rejection of identity differentiation and the concomitant homogeneity of an implicit identity (whether that be "the exploited" or "the workers") makes more sense within the "one big union" form of organizing that has largely been retired by the struggle, than it does within the networks that are more common today. A fundamental feature of networks as I understand them is the autonomy of their constituent parts, and this autonomy and the ability of distinct parts to recognize and relate to one another is developed precisely in the continuous project of identity formation.

Yes, identity can be misused. So can culture, or individuality. Rejecting identity is revealed to be as absurd as rejecting culture or individuality when we recognize that forming identities is a part of being human. What we should reject is borders, purity, and control within the formation of identities.

It is not enough to dismiss racism and sexism. Yes, race and gender are socially constructed, but that does not make them any less real (moreover gender arguably has not been oppressive in every society in which it has existed). Racism and sexism require specific attention and prolonged struggle in order to be destroyed, just the same as how capital is a social construct, yet capitalism will not be destroyed without specific attention and prolonged struggle. In a criticism of sexism within the movement there, a Greek insurrectionist, who was also an anarchist and a feminist, said that freedom is not theoretical, it is practical. Freedom exists not on being declared but when we figure out how to make it work on the ground, and when we fight for it. I agree wholeheartedly: this is the difference between the liberal notion of freedom and the anarchist one.

In working out these practical details we will start from our own experiences and we will develop our own strategies. But anarchy can only benefit from a diversity of experiences and strategies.

and lacking confidence in their own political analysis, they latched on to the most visible figureheads from the black community (who, considering we live in a media-driven society, were the most reformist) and parroted their line. The media, perceptive to the effectiveness of this tactic, adopted it to preempt riots when the verdict of Oscar Grant's killer was announced, using guilt-laden language to portray all the potential rioters as anarchists, and all the anarchists as white outsiders. It worked. In order to be good allies, many white anarchists in the Bay stayed home during the riots.

By privileging someone's skin color over an affinity with their political analysis when choosing alliances, anarchists are more likely to defend racism rather than to challenge it, because at this point most people, regardless of their color, have been trained to behave in a way that perpetuates the system.

Trauma and Victimization

I am not heading towards the insulting and insensitive conclusion some proponents of social war have made when I say that American anarchists are those who talk most about trauma, and are also the most traumatized. Let's not go back to the days of stoic, emotionless revolutionary sacrifice. But let's also not ignore the massive failure represented by our trauma. Talking about it, in the way we've been talking about it, just isn't working.

A friend of mine hit the nail on the head when she said, "to heal from trauma, you need to feel empowered." The US anarchist movement exists within one of the most disempowered political cultures in the world. It would be nothing less than a narcissistic vanity of that very political culture to suggest the all-too-common explanation that the State, the Spectacle, is simply stronger in this country, and society simply weaker. In fact, the forces of order are only stronger here because we've been losing for so long, and that losing streak has long since manifested as analysis, as practice.

Seeing our socialization as more powerful than our wills leads to a number of errors. The first is the belief in a pure body that exists before

of the people who back off from anarchy for this reason still use the term "democracy" in a good way, even though way more proponents of democracy are bastards than anarchists who are bastards. Evidently they're more comfortable associating themselves with good politicians than with bad revolutionaries.)

I think in many cases the true reason for this disavowal is fear of failure, lack of confidence in one's own ideas, the need for affirmation through working with those who are more oppressed and whose experiences thus seem more real. The feeling of sophistication built into anti-oppression politics is an effective shield against self-criticism. One can give up hope in the struggle, which is a painful thing to carry around, without having to admit to personal weakness or failure, by clinging on to and supporting struggles carried out by people who one sees, in a hyper-alienated way, as more real.

It's true enough that outside of certain cultural groups, not many people in struggle identify as anarchists. However, those who insist on being allies tend overwhelmingly to ally only with a certain portion of those others who struggle: the portion that is most recognizable to an activist practice. Gangs and prison rebels are usually ignored, while leftist organizations and NGOs need never go wanting for volunteers. In other words, while justifying this disavowal of or distancing from anarchy on the grounds of leaving comfort zones, this is exactly what many anti-oppression activists refuse to do. After all, visible activist organizations are the easiest form of resistance in oppressed communities for activists with college degreees to find.

The fact that the job of these reformist allies is to recuperate resistance leads to interesting contradictions. When black youth in Oakland rioted a few days after the killing of Oscar Grant, aided and encouraged by an embarrassingly small number of anarchists (black and white), the professional activists in the black community working explicitly for the forces of order denounced the uprising as the work of outside white anarchists. It was these black leaders who were being racist, by silencing and erasing the black anarchists who helped kick things off, and portraying the black youth as misguided sheep manipulated by white people. By extension, the anti-oppression activists who took up this rallying call for retreat were complicit in this racist operation. Concerned with appearances

So Fucked Up

Guilt, Disempowerment, and Other Mistakes of an Anti-Oppression practice

Many folks who were learning how to be good anarchists between 2000–2005 on the East Coast were influenced by what I'm going to call an "anti-oppression practice." The phenomenon is broader than this; I'm simply speaking from experience. The term is not precise, and I want to keep it that way, so no one feels pigeon-holed, and so everyone can consider whether these criticisms apply to them or not; and at the same time so no one can ignore these criticisms if they do not fit within the precisely defined target.

An anti-oppression practice posits a list of different forms of oppression at work in society on a macro and micro level, that reproduce themselves through socialization at the micro level and through continuing political and economic restructuration carried out by elite institutions at the macro level. This practice has cultivated a number of strengths in the anarchists who passed through it — an awareness of one's socialization, a sensitivity to situations and group power dynamics, the challenging of traditional identities, an abandonment of the monolithic politics of the now extinct revolutionary Left, which could not fathom forms of oppression that were not primarily economic.

But anti-oppression politics, though not homogenous, has a number of common weaknesses built into it thanks to the academic culture out of which it largely grew; the guilt, blame, and victimization that run especially intense in the Anglo-Saxon colonial society of the US; and the leftism and reformism of many formulators of this practice with whom anti-oppression anarchists uncritically allied themselves. I think the practice has blocked off its own path to revolution, and needs to be junked. A few key parts can be salvaged. The rest should be left to the desert.

Guilt

The second lesson new acolytes learn in an anti-oppression practice is that feeling guilty for privilege is also "fucked up." The Calvinists couldn't have done it better. Guilt is intentionally built into anti-oppression politics, firmly rooted in its syllabus. Anyone who has a heart is going to feel guilty when they are assigned the label of "privileged," when they are pressured to acknowledge that "all white people are racist" or "all men are sexist" (both of these statements are tenets of anti-oppression politics). Dogmatically insisting that guilt on the part of privileged people is unhelpful and burdensome for oppressed people only ensures that their guilt is permanent and self-perpetuating, because there are no tools in this toolbox for righting the wrongs that are the source of the guilt; only for acknowledging them. It is an original sin practitioners are powerless to change.

Quickly, a division becomes apparent in the mobilization of guilt within an anti-oppression practice. Because of the laundry list of oppressions that require equal consideration, nearly every individual is privileged in some way, and oppressed in others. However, anti-oppression activists refuse to use "privilege" and "oppress" as situational verbs, with the obvious connotation that these are things imposed by a larger social structure. Instead, the commonly upheld norm is to use these terms as labels that inhere to individuals and qualify *who they are*. This means that most individuals can choose what is, according to the theory, not something we have an ability to choose: which category we belong to. Theoretically this comes with an awareness of an intersectionality of different oppressions, but in practice people end up identifying and being identified with one camp or the other. Skin color tends to be the prime determinant in whether someone can get away with identifying as privileged or oppressed.

Because revolution or "social change" is reformulated as working against oppression, and because "those most directly affected by an oppression must lead their own struggle" (another common tenet), people in the oppressed category become the primary agents of social change. A system of rewards develops to encourage compliance with this practice. Privileged people gain power and legitimacy by being allies to oppressed

told to read the next few books on the reading list. I personally have no use for any theory or practice that leaves out human agency, because powerlessness is always a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Allies like these

I admire those who work with non-anarchists and participate in non-homogenous campaigns and struggles even though they don't agree with everyone else participating. But I think we all need to fiercely reject the Ally as a primary identity of struggle. You cannot give solidarity if you are not struggling first and foremost for your own reasons. To be only or primarily an ally is to be a parasite on others' struggles, with no hope greater than to be a benign parasite; it is to refuse to acknowledge our interests and place in the world out of a dogmatic insistence on identifying ourselves with the system we are supposed to be fighting. Being aware of relative oppression and privilege is vital, but emphasizing those differences over the fact that all of us have common enemies and all of us have reasons to destroy the entire system is deliberately missing opportunities to make ourselves stronger in this fight.

Many partisans of an anti-oppression practice, including people I respect, have simply stopped talking about revolution, and frequently no longer identify as anarchists, at least "not openly." They often characterize those who do as naïve, privileged, isolated, sheltered from the consequences of "real" revolutionary struggle. So talking about privilege has come, in many cases, into direct conflict with talking about revolution. What are the implications of this? Would this be an appropriate time to bring up that Nietzsche quote about staring into the abyss?

A frequent justification I have heard is that anarchism has no currency in their broader communities, and that so many anarchists they know are privileged and empty-headed. This reasoning baffles me. If you come to believe in total freedom, why would you abandon one of the only theoretical and practical frameworks that espouses total freedom, just because so many others don't live up to the ideal?

If you're for real, you don't abandon the ideal to the hypocrites, you call out the hypocrisy. (Speaking of hypocrisy, in my experience most

privileged people are equally tied into and socialized to identify with the functioning of the system, even though their median experiences as groups are vastly different. Oppressed people are not more outside of or less complicit in the present system — they simply face a different, more frequently violent set of inducements to participate. In other words, as an accurate generalization lesbians, gays, and women help perpetuate and identify with patriarchy; and people of color (with the possible exception of peoples still fighting against colonization) help perpetuate white supremacist capitalism. I hope this statement does not come off as insensitive to people whose struggles I respect. I could quote the many radical women or people of color who have argued the exact same thing, but this time I want to say it with my own voice, because it is a truth that is evident to my own eyes, too.

To return to the question of micro power-dynamics, by equating them to macro power-dynamics we acknowledge their prevalence but exaggerate their strength. If we view oppressive/privileged socialization as determinant, as extremely powerful over who we are, we risk making a mountain out of a mole hill. True, a person who enacts oppressive behaviours is perpetuating the same power dynamics as institutions like the media or the police, but by creating an equivalence we blind ourselves to the fact that we are strong enough to confront this person; in fact this should be relatively easy. We are currently not strong enough to overcome the media or the police in the day to day, except for a few fortuitous engagements, and it is this fact, this real — not imagined — weakness, that must illuminate the path of struggle ahead: how to build the collective force we need to attack and defeat these power structures. This struggle does not come at the expense of understanding interpersonal dynamics and relationships. In fact, fuck that dichotomy entirely. There is no inside and outside. There is building healthy, caring relationships, solid alliances, and networks of complicity and mutiny as we wage war against a social system we could not identify with in the least, because it is impossibly far away from who we want to be.

Looking at socialization with the old set of nuances, as a privileged person, the conclusion is that the system privileges us, it has trained us, and this will be the case for the rest of our natural lives. Someone who says she doesn't want to be privileged anymore is simply smiled at and

people. It is conceded that privileged people are also negatively affected by the system, but the appropriate response to their privilege is to educate themselves and call one another out on all the ways they are tied to and benefit from the system at the expense of others. (A friend of mine aptly calls this a zero sum economy of power). Privileged people who forcefully struggle against oppressive institutions are frequently called back into line for trying to lead other people's struggles, or endangering those who are more oppressed. In other words, their major opportunity for struggle as something other than self-improvement is as an ally in the struggles of others.

Here we see another contradiction; tokenization and paternalism are on any list of "fucked up" behaviors in an anti-oppression practice, thus the practice protects itself from open complicity with the very problems it creates. Human agency is a fundamental component of freedom, perhaps the most important one; therefore if someone is denied agency in their own struggle because the most legit thing they can do is be an ally to someone else's struggle, it is inevitable that they will exercise their agency in the course of supporting a struggle they view as someone else's. To do so, they will either look for any oppressed person who supports a form of struggle they feel inclined towards, and use them as a legitimating façade, or they will try to participate fully and affect the course of a broader campaign or coalition in which they are pretending to be mere allies. In other words, by presenting privilege as a good thing, anti-oppression politics creates privileged people who have nothing to fight for and inevitably tokenize or paternalize those whose struggles are deemed (more) legitimate.

White men within the anti-oppression practice gain legitimacy and influence by appearing hyper-sensitive and self-flagellating, and by visibly acknowledging their privilege. Because this inevitably creates guilt, and guilt is a crippling emotion, those white men who will be most effective as anti-oppression activists will be those who are least affected by their shows of guilt, in other words, the least sincere. White women, or others who generally have to identify as privileged but also visibly belong to some oppressed category, remain effective by shifting guilt up the pyramid. A frequent formulation is to acknowledge white privilege, but consistently talk about "white men" as the creators of patriarchy

and white supremacy, as though men of color or white women were powerless and uncompliant in these respective processes.

Those fully in the oppressed category face another power dynamic within the political space of anti-oppression activism. They either have to put up with allies like these, and, frustrated by the constant hypocrisy that they help perpetuate by ascribing to the political values of anti-oppression activism, face the choice of walling themselves off from those who are supposed to be their comrades or wasting all their time educating them out of contradictions that aren't going away.

Or, they are there because they specifically want allies like these, and want the forms of political power that accumulate to those who are categorized as oppressed within this practice. While I think most people who choose anti-oppression politics are sincere and do a lot of good, there can be no doubt that that political space attracts politicians who thrive on the power plays and office politics that infest anti-oppression groupings, organizations, and affiliated NGOs. Friends of mine who chose to work with respected organizations led by oppressed people have experienced such an extreme degree of manipulation and mindfucking that I find it completely fair to say that the leaders of those particular organizations, which I won't name, were not revolutionaries, but careerists.

Agency

As a generalization, anti-oppression politics primarily sees individuals as a node of intersecting oppressions, each of which generate common experiences among their subjects. The result is the sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit assumption that one's place in the hierarchy (differently abled queer female-bodied latina) can tell you more about them and their history than any individual differences. Some anti-oppression activists are more gung-ho than others in this minimization of personal experience, but I would argue that those who are less gung-ho and more sensitive are in fact more hypocritical or inconsistent, as such a minimization of the individual is an inevitable product of an analysis that foregrounds one's position in hierarchies of privilege and oppression.

I think this fact is not unrelated to the embarrassing, one might even say harmful, delay before anti-oppression activists acknowledged how frequently people socialized as men have experienced sexual violence. In fact, the denial of trauma with which men are socialized proved to be quite at home in anti-oppression politics precisely because those politics reinforced that socialization by encouraging men who have been intimately harmed by our society to view themselves as extraordinarily privileged by it and complicit in it.

In other words, by emphasizing how certain people are privileged, this practice has in some ways perpetuated rather than undermined a personal identification with the system, and prevented struggle against it, in the rubric of self-improvement or taking personal responsibility, an ethic that has already proven its counterrevolutionary effectiveness when in the hands of the Christians.

I think awareness of history and socialization is critically important. But the set of nuances and emphases that anti-oppression activists choose encourages personal identification with systems of oppression rather than mutiny, in the case of those in the privileged box, and victimization by systems of oppression that are perpetuated by allies as much as by enemies, in the case of those in the oppressed box.

By putting interpersonal or micro power-dynamics on par with structural or macro power-dynamics, these activists may be training themselves in weakness and victimization. I think it is necessary to understand how these behaviours filter upwards and downwards, but without making any facile equivalence between above and below. An individual who echoes oppressive behaviours he has been trained in shares very little in common with an institution that can both generate, model, and evolve those behaviours. Emphasizing that commonality can be useful, with an indispensable caveat, in understanding how the system works, but if we place our new understanding in a revolutionary framework — with the desire to actually abolish these institutions — then this knowledge points directly to the strategic necessity to undermine and sever this commonality or identification with power, not to reinforce it.

The caveat is this: I think an honest, critical look at how power and socialization work in this society makes it undeniable that, except in the case of armed colonization or chattel slavery, oppressed people and