Letter from the Black Flag Editors:

More Thoughts on Anti-Oppression Politics

I. Invisible knapsacks all the way down.

Imagine a group of elementary school students in which boys consistently outperform girls in tests of math and science skills. You test them again, but this time you send their tests to a group of teachers who must grade them “blindly”—the teachers don’t know which tests were taken by boys and which were taken by girls. Suddenly, the gender disparity in test results vanishes.

No surprise there. We know that the institutionalized education system systematically discriminates against women and girls in math and science disciplines.

But one fact does jump out as startling and unexpected: the original group of teachers, the ones who routinely gave the girls unfairly low grades, were themselves mostly women.

A study just like this was performed by Edith Sand and Victor Lavy at Tel Aviv University in Israel; Shanker Vedantam reported on the study on the Sept 1st episode of NPR’s Morning Edition: http://www.npr.org/2015/09/01/436525758/how-teachers-unconscious-bias-play-into-the-hands-ofgender-disparity

The study’s authors speculate that these teachers were not consciously “self-loathing” or biased against their own group (i.e. women); rather, they were acting out unconscious biases in their grading efforts. This fact isn’t really surprising either. Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s famous “doll study,” for example, was an early inquiry into how over-arching social systems can lead to subconscious bias against one’s own group. In fact, the latest annual report by the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, “State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review 2014,” cites an impressive body of research demonstrating that “Everyone is
Beyond Identity Politics 2015
By Michael Novick

In response to the revolutionary struggles of the ’60s and ’70s, a counter-revolutionary critique emerged within the left. It raised two dismissive slogans—“politically correct” and “identity politics”—to oppose self-critical struggle raised against racism and sexism within the left. People struggling for awareness of the dangers of national, racial, and sexual chauvinism were attacked as being so-called “PC language police.” Struggles for self-determination and sovereignty by colonized people were put down as “identity politics” that created unnecessary division among supposed progressives.

The reactionary nature of those put-downs have been demonstrated, as they were taken up as rallying cries by the establishment right and even racist forces. The first President Bush made "politically correct" a slogan in national politics, putting down student activists and sympathetic members of college faculty as he launched a campaign to purge the left from the academy. And to this day, the bombastic media racists who seem to have taken control of the Republican Party dismiss struggles by African or indigenous people and opposition to anti-immigrant or anti-Mexican hysteria as "identity politics" or "the race card."

The reduction of revolutionary anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist initiatives to language games or so-called "identity politics" is a manifestation of inadequate attempts by people of European descent to distance ourselves from the Empire and model ourselves on the liberation struggles of colonized people. In response to the Black liberation struggle, the Puerto Rican independence movement, the American Indian Movement for Native sovereignty, and the Chicano-Mexicano liberation movement, European-descent radicals started using the same terminology, such as women's liberation, gay liberation, and later earth and animal liberation. On the one hand, this impulse was a positive one—a movement towards resistance to the Empire. But it sidestepped the need for a self-critical examination of identification with the oppressor among people of European descent. It also undercut the anti-colonial nature of the struggles among oppressed people, reducing it to a question of personal identity and cultural differentiation. So this impulse to call all movements "liberation movements" took on a negative aspect. It liquidated the national and anti-colonial content of African, Asian, and indigenous struggles.

It's not merely a question of "identity"—and certainly not racial identity. It’s a question of identification with the oppressed and exploited rather than with the oppressor.
We Need Your Support! - Skid Row Clothes Drive 2015

The Free Association of Anarchists (F@@) is organizing for our 6th annual Xmas Day Clothing Drive. The Clothing Give-away will be, as in the past 6 years, on Xmas Day, Friday, December 25th, beginning around 8:30 am on the corner of San Pedro and 6th Street in downtown Los Angeles.

We need your help! We welcome volunteers and appreciate donations of warm clothing along with donated hygiene and food items. Please, do not donate soiled, ripped, burned, stained, or otherwise-unusable apparel. Please, help us show love and respect to one of LA's most abused and ignored, yet most diverse, resilient, creative, and unique, communities—Skid Row.

Also, you are all invited to a Fundraiser for the Clothing Giveaway on Saturday, December 12th, 6 pm, at 3 World's Cafe hosted by F@@ comrades. Join us for coffee, open mic, chess, great conversation, and fun with friendly activists. Mark your calendars!

To Donate
Just place your donations in a plastic bag and:

- Contact us to arrange a pick-up or drop-off (faacollective@gmail.com or faacollective@riseup.net). Or...
- Drop donations off at The Fundraiser @ 3 Worlds Café, 3310 S. Central Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90011.
- Drop off donations at the radical community space located @ 2515 W. 7th Street, 90057, any Sunday in November from noon to 4 pm.

Mark Your Calendars

Fundraiser for Our Annual Skid Row Clothing Giveaway
WHERE: 3 World's Cafe
3310 S. Central Ave
Los Angeles, CA 90011
WHEN: Saturday, December 12th, 2015 at 6 pm.
WHY: Because "direct action is the logical, consistent method of anarchism." – Emma Goldman, Anarchism: What it really stands for.

6th Annual Clothing Give-away
WHERE: SW corner of 6th St and San Pedro St intersection, downtown.
WHEN: X-Mas Day, Friday, 12/25, at 8:30 am.
WHY: Because "it is really not so repulsive to see the poor asking for money as to see the rich asking for more money. And advertisement is the rich asking for more money." — G.K. Chesterton, The New Jerusalem

Baby Emma Needs Your Help! - Fund Kitten Rescue
By Omar Hussein

This fundraiser is to help my good friends and comrades Doug and Erica adopt an abandoned baby kitty I rescued off the streets of South LA. They need help paying a $500 pet deposit required by their apartment complex along with Baby Emma's initial veterinary bills (like vaccinations).

There are two ways to help:
1. Donate - even small donations raise our popularity and give us more visibility on the site.
2. Post to Facebook - in the end, the more people hear about us, the more likely we are to meet our target.

LINK: https://life.indiegogo.com/fundraisers/baby-emma-needs-your-help-fund-kitten-rescue

Indiegogo Life has no fees, so anything we raise goes directly to our goal.
Rants: Fuck Safe Space!

Rant: Definition 2.a. An extravagant, bombastic, or declamatory speech or utterance; a long, angry, or impassioned speech; a tirade. –The Oxford English Dictionary

The following rant—the third installment of our “Rants” feature—was adapted from an Oct 11, 2012 Tumblr post by eshusplayground: http://eshusplayground.tumblr.com/post/1132771692

—Black Flag Editors

If you’ve been involved with online social justice for a while, you’re probably familiar with the idea of “safe space.” Ideally, a “safe space” is supposed to be a place (in person or virtually) where people can come and not have to worry about being unduly distressed by oppressive language. But lately it seems that safe space has become synonymous with a space where making the wrong persons uncomfortable is to be avoided at all costs.

For those of you who’ve experienced the unsafety of these safe spaces, you may notice that they have a few traits in common:

1. They exist primarily online.
2. They are run and populated primarily by White feminists.
3. Their policies and behaviors are geared toward protecting the interests and sensibilities of this constituency.
4. Their primary activity is generating and expressing outrage at mundane bullshit.

Needless to say, if you’re not part of the assumed audience, this environment isn’t very safe at all. As a matter of fact, these “safe spaces” are often more oppressive because, despite their stated intentions, their actions embody the same gas-lighting, goalpost shifting, tone arguments, bullying, and harassment that you get at the most oppressive spaces. They wrap themselves in the fabric of social justice, using the vocabulary and rhetoric (especially from anti-racism) only for their own self-aggrandizement, all the while eschewing the most basic [social] behaviors. If this sounds familiar, there’s a reason why. A word you might be more familiar with for what I’m talking about is appropriation…

…I’m a big fan of snark, sarcasm, and otherwise giving people a tongue-lashing when they show their ass, and I fully support people doing that when someone is fucking up something fierce. But that’s not what happens in these “safe spaces.” Instead, they go out of their way to generate “shock! horror! outrage!” as opposed to, oh, providing analysis* or community organizing. As someone for whom social justice is more than a hobby, analysis and organizing have taken on a larger role in what I want to do.

(*By analysis, I am not talking about “let’s exchange our opinions about this calmly and rationally like adults” but “let’s dig deeper into this and figure out what’s really going on – and maybe have a laugh and vent a little bit too.”)

But I know I’m not going to see stuff like that in “safe spaces” because the truth of the matter is that “safe space” is bullshit. It’s not about creating a safe space for everyone, but making the appearance of caring about social justice even as the words and deeds don’t match up.

“Safe space” is bullshit because social justice is inherently unsafe. There is nothing safe about dismantling systems of oppression. There is nothing safe about challenging the underlying principles that keep these systems in place. There is nothing safe about speaking out when the system trains you to keep your head down. There is nothing safe about the real work of social justice.

Don’t get me wrong, I do believe in the idea of sanctuary, which is where people can go to regroup, recharge, heal, and otherwise take care of themselves and each other without dealing with the same oppressive bullshit they face everywhere else. Unlike a “safe space,” a sanctuary emerges from the needs and ways of a particular group of people. In a sanctuary, we can take our shoes off, say what we really feel, and deal with our shit outside the gaze of (to name a few) Whiteness, manhood, heterosexuality, etc. This can be healing and therapeutic, but it is not therapy. The women of color anti-racist organizing group I’m a part of in real life is an example of sanctuary.

So I’m moving away from this “safe space” bullshit. I’m moving toward what I call a liberated space.

A liberated space is not about saying the Right Words or avoiding the Wrong Words. It’s about creating a

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Every safe space is dripping in someone else’s blood. We will not accept drones, deportation, displacement, and incarceration as safety. This is not a safe space to be queer.

ThereIsNoSafeSpace. TubmLR.com
place where we can work against systems that seek to annihilate or utterly subjugate us because of who we are.

A liberated space:
- demands that we claim for ourselves the authority over our own lives
- compels us to work to free ourselves from the lies we’ve been told about ourselves and the world we live in
- is dedicated to concrete action - political, economic, artistic, environmental, etc.
- requires us to build solidarity with people who share similar goals, principles, and methods
- focuses its physical, mental, and spiritual resources on transforming institutions and organizations
- does not get caught up in personal bullshit and drama
- starts right here, right now.

— eshusplayground

"Fuck Safe Space" con’t

THIS IS NOT
A SAFE SPACE
TO BE QUEER
#ThereIsNoSafeSpace
THEREISNOSAFESPACETUMBLR.COM
susceptible to implicit biases… [they are] an ‘equal opportunity virus’ that everyone possesses, regardless of his/her own group membership” (read the full report here: http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2014-implicit-bias.pdf).

For anarchists, this fact may be the most important take-away from these findings. If we all potentially act on unconscious biases against oppressed groups, including groups to which we belong, then the dominant variety of anti-oppression organizing in today’s movement—the variety that holds individuals from certain “privileged” groups (men, white people, the “middle class,” heterosexuals, the able-bodied, the formally-educated) personally responsible for inequity through their oppressive behaviors, which can be “checked” through public “call-outs”—is dead wrong.

This claim leads to why we assembled this Special Issue on the Politics of Oppression. We had several reasons:

1. We have more to say on the topic of anti-oppression than covered in “Building an anti-oppression politics that works” from the previous issue. Specifically, we wanted to go into more detail about effective alternatives to countering identity-based oppression and bias (as opposed to the ineffective methods commonly adopted in the movement).

2. We wanted to further highlight why such effective alternatives are desperately needed in today’s political climate.

3. We wanted to give both critics and supporters of our arguments in the last issue a chance to respond.

4. We’ve found Special Issues to be fun and exciting in the past because they tend to elicit more submissions.

That number 4 didn’t prove true this time (i.e. we received very few submissions) may relate to an implication we made in the last issue: that the currently-dominant form of anti-oppression politics can be demoralizing and exhausting for all parties, even its defenders. It would make sense, then, if nobody wanted to write about the politics of oppression.

But, whether or not it’s fun or enjoyable, we’re continuing our discussion of oppression. We’re attempting to figure out how we can most effectively resist both identity-based oppression and the destructive global paradigm of neoliberal capitalism simultaneously. Not that these two can be separated. On the contrary, that global capitalism—with its excesses of militarism, neo-colonialism, austerity, and environmental devastation—is intricately intertwined with identity-based oppression is undeniable. Yet, we also worry that this connection is actually obscured, rather than emphasized, by the privilege-checking and calling-out that defines most anti-oppression work. For these reasons, and others we’ll explain below, we think that this difficult conversation is among the most important ones anyone can have right now.

II. Will the real white supremacists please stand up?

One reason why this topic is so important is that, while the Left squabbles and in-fights over perceptions of privilege and oppression internal to its own organizing spaces, the radical Right—white supremacists, neo-Nazis, “national-anarchists,” and other dangerous fascist elements—are growing in power and numbers.

Some troubling highlights:

- Evan Osnos, a reporter who has done investigative work on white extremist groups, recently stated in an interview that white nationalist groups have been “going through a period of great energy this summer. They were feeling organized and galvanized in a way that they hadn’t been before. And then into that moment dropped Donald Trump, who was a national figure with an existing celebrity. People already knew who he was. And to their astonishment, frankly, he was talking about the—as they would put it—the threat posed by immigration not only to the American economy, but also to this much vaguer sense of American culture” (NPR, “Fresh Air,” Sept. 3, 2015).

- In his related New Yorker piece,
Osnos warns that “when Trump leaped to the head of the Republican field, he delivered the appearance of legitimacy to a moral vision once confined to the fevered fringe, elevating fantasies from the message boards and campgrounds to the center stage of American life. In doing so, he pulled America into a current that is coursing through other Western democracies—Britain, France, Spain, Greece, Scandinavia—where xenophobic, nationalist parties have emerged since the 2008 economic crisis to besiege middle-ground politicians. In country after country, voters beset by inequality and scarcity have reached past the sober promises of the center-left and the center-right to the specter of a transcendent solution, no matter how cruel” (The New Yorker, “The Fearful and the Frustrated,” Aug. 31, 2015).

- Fascists like Matthew Heimbach, a charismatic white supremacist in his mid-20s, are building networks of like-minded Right-radicals reaching across the US and abroad. “Heimbach organized and headed a variety of white nationalist groups before founding the Traditionalist Youth Network (TYN) and its political wing, the Traditionalist Workers Party (TWP). Currently, the party is in the process of running their first candidate, while Heimbach is busy trying to put together a network of white nationalists across the United States based upon the lessons learned from Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Czech, and other European Neo-Nazi and openly fascist parties, which Heimbach has visited with and has ties to” (“The New Neo-Nazis: How Matthew Heimbach is Building a Racist Network Across the US,” September 13, 2015 https://itsgoingdown.org/the-new-neo-nazis-how-matthew-heimbach-is-building-a-racist-network-across-the-us/).

- According to an "Action Report" from the Traditionalist Youth Network, they have successfully launched a new chapter right here in Southern California stating that “in one summer we have gone from an idea held by three men, to an effective committee of a dozen” (http://www.tradyouth.org/2015/09/socal-action-report/). Indiana Antifa warns that “Care should be used in dealing with Trad Youth. A favorite tactic is to bait anti-racist activists into engaging them in inopportune settings where they then take an ass-beating in order to provoke an arrest by the state. Members have ready access to firearms and are known to carry personal protection such as stun guns, knives, and mace on their persons” (http://indianaantifa.org/?page_id=459).

No doubt, unconscious implicit biases held by consciously well-meaning activists are a real problem that should not be ignored; however, they pale in comparison to the threat of a rapidly growing, explicitly racist, proudly patriarchal fascist movement. The extremely disturbing developments listed above highlight the absolutely critical need for the Left to resolve its internal problems, develop strength and unity in spite of differences, and grow via recruitment and organizing. If we fail in these endeavors, we will be paving the way for fascist victories in the not-so-distant future.

As we discussed last issue, anti-oppression organizing tends to “blame and shame” individual activists for systemic problems beyond their personal control. Such tactics create stress, conflicts, and divisions which threaten the strength, unity, and long-term stability of the movement. These flaws—along with its reliance on technical jargon from queer theory, disability studies, ethnic studies, and academic feminism—makes anti-oppression politics inaccessible and unappealing to most poor and working people—the very people we need to attract and organize.

It also must be said that in America (although not in LA), the majority of the poor are ethnically white. A reductive
analysis claiming simply that “whiteness = wealth and privilege,” or a politics that excludes the white working class, will be unable to organize a mass resistance movement (although we recognize that the topic is complicated; see “We shouldn’t work with white people” in the previous issue for a more nuanced discussion). Unfortunately, reductive analyses and white-baiting/white-exclusion are common in anti-oppression circles. A better, more subtle analysis will be needed to out-organize the white supremacists and to create a successful movement for economic and political justice for all.

III. You say you want a revolution, baby…

On the topic of building mass movements for general social justice, it might be useful to consider why such a movement doesn’t already exist. Social psychologist Clay Routledge considers this question in his piece “Why Haven’t the Pitchforks Come Yet?” (Psychology Today, Sept. 18, 2014):

“Americans are not ignorant. They know that the gap between the rich and everyone else is growing. They know that CEO salaries are out of control and that wages for everyone else are standing still, barely moving, or in some cases going down. They know that they have less money to spend, that prices for just about everything are going up. They know that the job market is still very tough and that many people are settling for less than ideal positions or have given up entirely. So where are the pitchforks? Knowledge is power, right? And since people have the knowledge they should be stepping up to take the power, to demand change.”

(https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/more-mortai/201409/why-haven-t-the-pitchforks-come-yet)

The answer that Routledge offers is very relevant to our concerns here. He cites research showing that when people are faced with distressing situations, they tend to cling ever more strongly to their deepest-held beliefs—their “worldviews”—because these beliefs provide comfort, a feeling that the world, however troubled, ultimately makes sense. A key piece of the capitalism worldview into which most Americans have been inculcated is meritocracy, the belief that the rich deserve to be rich (they’ve earned it through personal merit, including intelligence and hard work) and the poor deserve to be poor (they’re stupid or lazy). Incidentally, this belief is also promoted by many sects of Christianity (i.e. God rewards goodness with material prosperity), another worldview near and dear to millions of Americans.

Routledge’s argument accords with a recent body of neuroscience research showing that people tend to form beliefs based on emotions—“a feeling of rightness”—more often than they do based on rigorous logical reasoning (see “I believe: Your personal guidebook to reality” in New Scientist, March 31, 2015). Neuroscientist Kathleen Taylor of Oxford University likens belief formation to the way in which memories form—through repeated exposure and repetition, rather than through conscious decision-making (“Where belief is born,” The Guardian, June 30, 2005). In addition, research by Dr. Dan Kahan of Yale Law School shows, rather predictably, that people tend to react negatively when confronted directly with aggressive argumentation. On the other hand, people are more likely to “accept new evidence” when it’s presented “to them in a context that doesn’t trigger a defensive, emotional reaction” (“The Science of Why We Don’t Believe Science,” Mother Jones, April 18, 2011).

There are two key conclusions that anti-authoritarian activists can draw from this discussion:

(1) In order for a mass resistance movement to grow, activists will have to offer an alternative worldview to those that most people currently hold dear. It’s on us to replace Christian-Capitalist meritocracy with radical economics; replace “white supremacy” with radical equality and autonomy; replace sexism and heteronormativity with radical diversity, queer empowerment, and multi-gender community.

Whether we’re talking about complete social revolution or a more modest anti-oppression project, these conclusions hold; we’ll never build a mass social movement on the basis of denunciatory personal “call-outs” and accusatory reprimands over “un-checked” individual “privileges.” But a diverse, collaborative movement involving coalitions of autonomous groups (“affinity

(2) People will not be open to having their worldview challenged if we approach them with anger, aggression, criticism, and guilt. New ideas are inherently hard to accept. We can get people to think differently if we approach them in ways that are non-threatening and based on shared values. For example, “We both believe that people should be able to ‘make it’ if they work hard, right? Does this economic system actually allow people to do that?” Or “none of us wants people prying into our personal love lives, right? So why is it OK for lawmakers to deny people rights based on who they love?”
groups)—socialist, anarchist, progressive, identity-based—working together to pursue common goals while respectfully and symbiotically maintaining their differences (in other words, a “united front”) might succeed.

In fact, such a movement is exactly what the elites fear. Documents leaked by Anonymous reveal that the private security firm Stratfor has advised corporate plutocrats in a “divide and conquer” strategy that aims to break social movements by turning four broad groups of movement people against each other: radicals (like us), progressives (like Green Partiers and “Sander-nistas”), realists (pragmatists who want change to happen in the least disruptive manner), and opportunists (those in it for the glory). If our enemies want us divided, it’s time to stop doing their work for them. It’s time to build a revolutionary movement.

IV. Towards a revolutionary anti-oppression: moving out of the master’s house

Now we come full circle to the problem that started this discussion—how to synthesize the fight against identity-based oppression with the revolutionary struggle against capitalism and the state.

Jamie Heckert’s piece “Maintaining the Borders,” reprinted in this issue, provides a helpful basis, summed up under the labels “systematic analyses and compassionate strategies.” The “Who is Oakland” zine by Escalating Identity, cited extensively in the previous issue, describes a vision of “autonomous organizing” marked by “the formation of independent groups of people who face specific forms of exploitation and oppression – including but not limited to people of color, women, queers, trans* people, gender nonconforming people, QPOC [queer people of color]” along with “organizing in ways which try to cross racial, gender, and sexual divisions.”


We support these ideas (and below we’ll build on them), but in order to explain why, we need to consider further the revolutionary lessons we can draw from the social sciences.

The type of anti-oppression politics that we’re critiquing is based on suspicion—no matter how well-meaning an activist may claim to be, no matter how radical her ideology may seem, she is likely to behave under the influence of her own unconscious “implicit” biases. These biases, the theory goes, are implanted in our minds by the social ideologies that define our capitalist-statist society—sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism. No one can be assumed immune from these all-pervasive, pernicious influences.

So far, so good. It’s undeniable that implicit bias is real; social scientists have studied it extensively (see the Kirwan Institute report mentioned above for an impressive bibliography on the topic).

The problem comes when the “no one is immune” part is forgotten, and we choose to divide people into the “privileged” (who are “biased,” and therefore singled out for personal call-outs and privilege checking) and the “oppressed” (who are the victims of bias, and therefore beyond reproach—regardless of their behavior—as a result of their marginalized status). As noted earlier, social science research has revealed that anyone can exhibit implicit bias—not just the “privileged,” but even those who are most victimized by bias—for example, black people may exhibit implicit bias toward other black people, or even toward themselves (in the form of self-doubt, self-loathing, low self-esteem). Given this deeply-saddening fact, we need to look beyond
call-out culture and privileged checking toward a more comprehensive and effective approach for fighting oppression.

What does social science have to offer in this regard? The Kirwan Institute report lists the following research-based suggestions for countering implicit bias (“debiasing”):

- “Counter-stereotypic training in which efforts focus on training individuals to develop new associations that contrast with the associations they already hold through visual or verbal cues (see, e.g., Blair, et al., 2001; Kang, et al., 2012; Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, & Russin, 2000; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 2001)

- Another way to build new associations is to expose people to counter-stereotypic individuals. Much like debiasing agents, these counterstereotypic exemplars possess traits that contrast with the stereotypes typically associated with particular categories, such as male nurses, elderly athletes, or female scientists (see, e.g., Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Kang & Banaji, 2006).

- Intergroup contact generally reduces intergroup prejudice (Peruche & Plant, 2006; Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Allport stipulates that several key conditions are necessary for positive effects to emerge from intergroup contact, including individuals sharing equal status and common goals, a cooperative rather than competitive environment, and the presence of support from authority figures, laws, or customs (Allport, 1954).

- Education efforts aimed at raising awareness about implicit bias can help debias individuals. The criminal justice context has provided several examples of this technique, including the education of judges (Kang, et al., 2012; Sajjani, 2003) and prospective jurors (Bennett, 2010; Roberts, 2012). These education efforts have also been embraced by the health care realm (Hannah & Carpenter-Song, 2013; Hernandez, Haidet, Gill, & Teal, 2013; Teal, Gill, Green, & Crandall, 2012).

- Having a sense of accountability, that is, “the implicit or explicit expectation that one may be called on to justify one’s beliefs, feelings, and actions to others,” can decrease the influence of bias (T. K. Green & Kalev, 2008; Kang, et al., 2012; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999, p. 255; Reskin, 2000, 2005).

- Taking the perspective of others has shown promise as a debiasing strategy, because considering contrasting viewpoints and recognizing multiple perspectives can reduce automatic biases (Benforado & Hanson, 2008; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011).
Engaging in deliberative processing can help counter implicit biases, particularly during situations in which decision-makers may face time constraints or a weighty cognitive load (Beattie, et al., 2013; D. J. Burgess, 2010; Kang, et al., 2012; Richards-Yellen, 2013). Medical professionals, in particular, are encouraged to constantly self-monitor in an effort to offset implicit biases and stereotypes (Betancourt, 2004; Stone & Moskowitz, 2011) (see the full report for a complete list of references: http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2014-implicit-bias.pdf).

Obviously, the highly formal report from which we excerpted this passage was not written with an anarchist audience in mind (e.g. the discussion of law enforcement); nevertheless, it contains some important truths.

The first is that there are numerous ways to counter oppression, including through “inter-group contact” (anarchist translation: diverse groups of activists working together), “educational efforts” (anarchist translation: movement education, like study groups), “counter-stereotype training” (anarchist translation: workshops) and “taking the perspective of others” (anarchist translation: empathy, reflection, and dialogue). There isn’t one grand, all-encompassing, unquestionable paradigm for fighting oppression, as some anti-oppression activists seem to believe. Questioning such closed-minded, totalizing views doesn’t make someone a bigot—it makes them a critical thinker.

The second is that “accountability”—related to call-out-culture—is just one part of an anti-oppression approach. And the research does not necessarily endorse personal call-outs; the Reskin (2005) reference, for example, talks about having formal rules in place to ensure fairness, and holding people accountable for enforcing those rules. Surprisingly, this idea isn’t very different from what anarchists often do (except that anarchist “rules” are usually agreed-upon collectively, rather than imposed from above by “management,” as Reskin discusses). In the F@#, we have several collectively-agreed-upon standards for meetings—“one-person, one-vote,” no interruptions of other speakers, each person called on to speak—and we all take part in collectively enforcing them. Such standards, social science suggests, can help foster equality and counter oppression.

No doubt, some will argue that the research cited above is the product of bourgeois, liberal, mainstream scientists, and therefore can’t be trusted. However, we don’t believe in cherry-picking the information we agree with and discarding what’s inconvenient (a bad habit called “confirmation bias”). As anarchists, we believe in drawing on all disciplines to further our struggle.

In that vein, we reject the anti-oppression camp’s selective misinterpretation of the evidence on implicit bias. Their focus on “privileged” individuals and personal solutions is not only out of step with social science. Much more disturbingly, it distracts from the revolutionary task of dismantling oppressive systems. As Jamie Heckert points out, personal solutions are another form of what Audre Lorde calls the “master’s tools”: they lend themselves to “interest group” lobbying and appeals for inclusion in the current system—not revolutionary social change.
In the next section, we’ll summarize some key elements of an anarchist approach to anti-oppression. Drawing on Escalating Identity’s “Who is Oakland” zine, we’ll call this approach “autonomous organizing.”

V. Fragments of an anarchist anti-oppression theory: autonomous organizing

As anarchists, we oppose all forms of oppression. The following bullet points summarize an anarchist model of autonomous organizing as an alternative to anti-oppression politics.

- **Autonomous Organizing — the overarching concept**
  Autonomous organizing means people independently organizing themselves in ways that they see fit. Sometimes this means “members-only,” identity-based groups—e.g. women-only, transgender only, black only, and other such formations—working together on the basis of shared oppression. Other times, it means diversely “mixed” groups of people—white and black, queer and “straight,” old and young, abled and disabled—working together on the basis of shared political vision. Both types of formation are needed, and both should be afforded solidarity and respect. The two types will never make progress by attacking each other, and neither type should try to impose its model on the other type. The best outcome would be simultaneous parallel organizing by both types, and collaboration between the two types, when possible, in the pursuit of shared goals.

- **Mutual Aid**
  Mutual aid means helping each other in ways that are mutually beneficial—the old “you scratch my back, I scratch yours.” In anti-oppression terms, mutual aid means returning the kindness and goodwill of those you have voluntarily chosen to work with and/or accept aid from, regardless of their identity (real or perceived). In LA, we’ve witnessed anti-oppression activists of color invite white activists to donate labor, time, and money to a cause, and then respond by excluding these white activists, verbally abusing them, or asking them to leave—not because the white activists committed transgressions, but simply on the basis of their white identity. As anarchists, we find such actions to be unethical, destructive to the movement, and insulting to the concept of mutual aid.

- **Voluntarism**
  Not to be confused with “volunteerism,” voluntarism means that, as much as we are able to, we only undertake tasks that we choose voluntarily. Related to the previous bullet point, voluntarism means you are never compelled to work with people you don’t want to, just as it is perfectly acceptable to break off relations with people who have wronged you. However, it is not ethical or productive to voluntarily accept people’s aid, and then exclude those same people simply on the basis of their identity (e.g. “Thanks for the money and labor, white guy. We accept them. Now please leave because your whiteness and maleness make me uncomfortable”). Voluntarism is a deep anarchist concept, and is related to the idea of consent. It also leads to the uncomfortable truth that some people will choose to avoid each other, and may never get along. And that’s OK, as long as the terms of voluntary cooperation or non-cooperation are discussed clearly and openly on an ongoing basis (this last point—ongoing and open communication—is also relevant to all forms of consent, including sexual consent).

- **Systemic and Systematic Analyses**
  Anarchists realize oppression is created by, and flows from, systems and institutions—not merely the opinions of individuals. White supremacy, for example, is rooted in societal systems like corporate power, the media, the government, the police, the military-industrial complex, the prison-industrial complex—and even capitalism itself. Historically, white supremacy did not and could not achieve its present ubiquity simply because some whites distrusted or disliked non-whites; personal feelings, however ugly, do not dictate history (see the Lexicon series of pamphlets for brief and lucid introductions to anarchist analyses of systemic oppression: [http://anarchiststudies.org/lexicon-pamphlet-series/](http://anarchiststudies.org/lexicon-pamphlet-series/)). Knowing these facts, anarchists (and many Marxists) emphasize struggle against these systems, rather than focusing most of our efforts on criticizing and reforming individuals. Of course, the personal is political; you can’t call yourself an anarchist and then expect to be allowed to abuse your sex partners or to use offensive slurs. At the same time, identity does not equal politics—just being white doesn’t automatically make you incapable of resisting racism and white supremacy; simply being male.
doesn’t preclude you from fighting patriarchy. And since research shows that everyone is capable of implicit bias, we are all potentially compromised. Likewise, we are all equally responsible for bettering ourselves and for fighting systems of oppression. How we choose to act on this responsibility depends on many factors, including political vision, personal identities, and individual capabilities.

- **Diversity of tactics**

  There is no single, universally-applicable, fool-proof method for fighting oppression(s). Anarchists respect the rights of individuals and groups to choose for themselves how and when to resist. Until all systems of oppression have been successfully dismantled and replaced with egalitarian alternatives, no one can claim to have all the answers. Generally, anarchists refuse to condemn the actions of those struggling for liberation, even when we don’t support these actions (in which case, we adopt a “we neither support nor condemn…” position or offer constructive critique, as we are attempting to do here). We do not have the right to dictate to others how to resist, and we reject the attempts of others to dictate to us (whether from an anti-oppression standpoint or otherwise).

- **Solidarity**

  Solidarity can be verbal or material, and, as anarchists, we believe that actions speak louder than words. Donating labor, time, and funds; refusing to cross picket lines and joining in protest; physically defending oppressed people from attack—all of these actions should be recognized and encouraged as acts of material solidarity. In LA, we have witnessed anti-oppression activists accepting donations from “privileged” people (whites, men, “middle class” people) and then later refusing to acknowledge these donations as acts of solidarity, claiming them to be some kind of mandatory “reparations” owed as a consequence of “privilege.” Reparations are a societal debt, not an individual one. We reject this distorted notion of reparations, and commend those who demonstrate solidarity. Further, we call for mutual relations of verbal and material solidarity between all individuals and groups struggling for liberation.

- **Revolution**

  All forms of oppression are ultimately sustained by institutions of power, namely capitalism (especially its global neoliberal form) and states (with their law codes, police forces, courts, prisons, intelligence agencies, militaries, borders, treaties, and trade agreements)—and the powerful lobbies and cartels that benefit from, and defend, these institutions. Therefore, oppression will never be completely eliminated until these exploitative institutions are dismantled and replaced by anti-authoritarian alternatives. Of course, overthrowing a government, or even an economic system, will not make patriarchy, racism, and white supremacy magically “wither away.” At the same time, the owners and (mis)leaders survive by keeping us divided along race, ethnicity, age, ability, nationality, culture, and gender lines—rather than united by mutual interest. As long as they stay in power, they will never allow us to overcome the oppressive social forces that divide us and empower them. That’s why anarchists insist on struggling for revolution (whether through gradual social evolution or singular..."

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a perfect paragon of liberation, decolonization, and anti-oppression. Therefore, none of us has the right to belittle, demean, dictate to, or piously judge other liberationists—especially on the basis of identity—from an arrogant position of assumed superiority. Anarchists believe in listening to people, hearing their needs and concerns, and offering help when possible and appropriate. We also believe in respectful compassionate dialogue and mutual education between people acting as equals.

Anarchism is not an orthodoxy, but an open-minded and ever-evolving orientation against all forms of illegitimate power, authority, hierarchy, exploitation, and oppression (including, but not limited to, wage slavery, top-down representational politics, racism, white supremacy, and gender-and-sexuality-based oppression). Anarchism is also a positive orientation toward autonomy, horizontalism, direct action, mutual aid, voluntarism, revolution, and self-liberation. In pursuit of these ideals, we call for collective organizing against the oppressive institutions and systems that restrict and define us. We also call for the collaborative and creative pursuit of collective solutions to humanity’s problems—including, but not limited to, identity-based oppression. We come with a spirit of solidarity, hoping to form coalitions, united fronts, and networks of affinity and federation to build movement(s) for change. We don’t have a perfect blueprint—that would be impossible—but we want to work together to find a way forward.

What we don’t accept are single-issue politics, personal attacks substituting for systemic change, and opportunistic attempts to use personal identity to silence discussion or debate. We respect autonomous organizing by oppressed groups, but we reject identity-based attempts to fragment or destroy multi-racial or multi-gender groups, just as we reject white-bashing and other forms of identity-based baiting within such multi-identity groups.

These destructive behaviors can only weaken the movement, prevent growth, and pave the way for further victories by Capital, the State, and the radical Right. At this critical, and dangerous time, we can’t afford such mistakes.

For a movement of many movements, and a world of many worlds—

For Anarchism. –The Black Flag Editors.

Post-script addendum: Throughout this piece, for simplicity, we’ve used the terms “black” and “white” without questioning whether or not these terms represent real categories that people can be grouped into. The truth is more complicated; we know that “whiteness” and “blackness” are social constructs with no reality in genetics and no fixity with regard to history. For more information on this idea, we recommend “How Racism Invented Race in America” by Ta-Nehisi Coates (reprinted in this issue—see also Coates’s “Further Reading”), as well as “Who Invented White People?” by Gregory Jay (https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/whitepeople.pdf) and “Drawing the Color Line” (Chapter 2 of A People’s History of the United States (http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinncolorline.html) by Howard Zinn.

Attention
For the record I am an Anarchist. I don’t believe in a piece of paper that supposedly grants me “rights”. I’m not a constitutionalist nor a minarchist. I don’t believe that because I was born in a geographical location your social contract applies to me, and my family. I own myself. I don’t vote, nor will I ever “Stand with Rand”. I believe there are no “good” Statesmen, and never will be. If this bothers you feel free to show yourselves to the door.
and exploiter. This is not a static matter determined by skin color, gender, sexual orientation, or economic status. It is a matter of dynamic struggle against the Empire, against capitalism, colonialism, racism and the class system, and for international solidarity. Identities are created through economic and political struggle, class struggle. The so-called white identity or white nationalism in the US, for example, was created by liquidating the pre-existing national identities and class consciousness of working people of European descent. The Irish, Italians, Poles, Swedes and Bohemians, even the eastern European Jews and Slavs, were made "white" by obliterating their true histories and cultures. Those were replaced by an identification with the imperialist project of settler colonialism; the white supremacist doctrine of manifest destiny, land theft and genocide; and with the wages of whiteness created by an economic system built on the racial chattel slavery of Africans. We must reject this project not by creating a new cultural variant of white identity that is somehow "anti-racist," but by deepening our understanding of our true histories, our recognition of class contradiction and class struggle as splitting issues among so-called “white” people, and by strengthening our identification with all who resist colonialism, imperialism and capitalism.

Trying to appropriate Black or Native cultural identity, as many white folks uncomfortable with whiteness try to do, only worsens divisions. Instead, we need to question the cultural appropriation involved in the propaganda employed to make us to identify with the Pilgrims. Conscious and conscientious people of European descent need to identify with Native resisters—John Brown, who 150 years ago launched, with Black and white allies, an armed struggle against slavery; with Fred Hampton, a Black revolutionary who was assassinated for inspiring a revolutionary rainbow coalition 40 years ago; with the LA Panthers who learned from his murder to defend themselves against the LAPD. The way to cement that identification is by fighting back against the Empire.

Similarly, focusing on white privilege can be a way to discount or deny the harsher, material realities of Euro-American settler colonialism and white nationalism. The bourgeois system constantly tries to defuse and de-fang nascent and potential threats to its hegemony and control. It understands the tremendous strength it has because the ruling or dominant ideas are the ideas of the ruling or dominant class, but also the vulnerability this exposes when ideas emerge from the practice and reality of the people it oppresses and exploits that represent a liberatory, and therefore antagonistic, way of thinking that may spread. They are aware that people can free their minds and set out on the road to free ourselves entirely, thus expropriating the expropriators, so they constantly study—more and more efficiently in the age of social media—new thinking, thought processes, "memes" that arise from social struggle, and seek by various means to control, contain and redirect those challenges into actually becoming reinforcers of the system. They are aided in this cooptation by the material basis in settler colonial capitalist patriarchal society for an identification with the oppressor.

You might think it’s a good thing, for instance, a sign of the times, that an avowed socialist is making a credible run for the presidency and drawing big crowds and thousands of small donations wherever he goes. And indeed it is a testament to the fact that, 25 years after the end of “Cold War I” and the “Red Menace,” the idea of socialism is quite popular with young people, for whom capitalism appears as organized greed, theft, and planetary destruction.

But dig a little deeper. Ask yourself why this system spends hundreds of millions of dollars on selling presidential candidates to you (and hundreds of millions more on the rest of the “ticket”—governors, Senators, legislators)? This is a gigantic propaganda spectacle designed to maintain at all costs the fraying consent of the governed to a charade of democracy, where millions cannot vote because they are imprisoned, or undocumented, or too young, and millions more have turned off and tuned out.

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The rulers face a huge contradiction. They can only continue their rule by conceding formal democracy, but the evidence of everyone’s senses is that democracy has been hollowed out by corporate power expressed through NAFTA, the TPP, and the military and surveillance systems that enforce them. The upsurge of struggles around the world is beginning to percolate inside the “Homeland,” the internal, domestic front of the empire.

And so, as the Old Mole of desire for social control of production and wealth begins to make itself felt in the body politic, the system turns to its tried-and-true methods, a one-two punch, also known as the carrot-and-the-stick or coercion and cooption.

On the one hand, the system tries to convey that resistance is futile, that disruptive dissidence in the streets will be met with massive retaliation, targeted repression, and an escalation of the very tactics and practices being protested. This is the “iron fist” that greets #BlackLivesMatter protesters and their allies—brutal arrests, selective prosecution, and no let-up—indeed, an INCREASE—in the number of police killings with impunity.

On the other hand, the system wears a velvet glove belying the steel beneath. This is the effort to inoculate the population against a spreading “virus” of dissent and desire for a different and better world that shivers the timbers of the glorified pirates who run this system for their own benefit. The system always performs this ideological “vaccination,” by substituting a “killed virus” for the system for their own benefit. The system always performs this ideological “vaccination,” by substituting a “killed virus” for the system for their own benefit.

Just as the system pulled a “bait and switch”—swapping bourgeois feminism for women’s liberation, diverting gay liberation into gay rights, substituting “gangsta rap” for hip-hop, promoting “pork-chop” nationalism to undermine revolutionary efforts at decolonization—so now we find bourgeois forms of socialism, accepting of the empire, gaining political currency.

This should be a signal to us that the system is more aware of its own vulnerabilities and contradictions than we are. Now is not the time for polite half-measures; haven’t Obama’s betrayals on Guantanamo, war, single payer, NSA surveillance, drones, “clean” coal, and Arctic drilling taught us anything? We need to break with illusions, break our identification with the oppressors and exploiters. It’s time to withdraw the consent of the governed; time to become ungovernable.

Similarly, having been unable to totally eliminate the academic left with their earlier attacks on "political correctness," the system is happy to subsidize and reinforce approaches that personalize and individualize the issue and any potential solution. This is akin to defining racism as more or less synonymous with "prejudice," and is based on dissociating "oppression" (and therefore "privilege," which is the corollary of oppression) from exploitation, or from institutionalized material and systemic realities, from land and Empire.

A key to this has been a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of privilege. On the one hand, it is true that the material reality of privilege is both corrupting and blinding to the person who possesses the privilege. On the other hand, it is vital to understand that privilege is a mechanism of social and ideological control. Parents use privileges to control the behavior of their children. Teachers and principals use privileges to control the behavior of students. Prison guards and wardens use privileges to divide and control the behavior of prisoners. Privilege exists throughout class society, patriarchy, and colonialism. Privilege divides different strata of workers from each other, skilled from unskilled, proletarians from peasants.

Privilege, for example, has been used very effectively to divide immigrants from each other, first by Reagan with the aptly-named Immigration Reform and Control Act, or so-called "amnesty," which divided people by their status (whether documented, undocumented), possession of a green card (or the possibility of getting one), or citizenship (or the path to it). The same thing is happening today with Obama and the DACA and DAPA programs. Privilege always goes hand in hand with repression (the carrot and the stick reinforcing each other in producing the desired behaviors). So Obama has simultaneously authorized massive deportations, sweeps, and detention, just as Reagan inaugurated a new era of border control and workplace surveillance.

What is vital to understand is that anything you possess as a privilege is not yours by right or by fruit of struggle. Privileges can always be taken away or adjusted by those who confer them for misbehavior. They are not entirely self-policing and self-reinforcing; they depend on continued subservience and obedience, on complacency, compliance, and complicity. There is always a threat behind and embedded in every privilege.
Imagining that what you have as a privilege is a reflection of your rights or your merit is therefore a potentially fatal error of magical thinking. Being unconscious of privilege is a manifestation of the complicity or compliance through which one "earns" the privilege.

But recognizing that privilege is a mechanism of social control, domination, and integration into an identification with the oppressors and exploiters is key to breaking out of that paradigm and struggling to exercise one's rights and to seek collective, social solutions. Privilege is not unique to white, straight, cis males. Privilege is an inescapable part of the nature of capitalism/colonialism/racism/patriarchy and affects, in varying ways, everyone within that system. Urban workers in Batista's Cuba were privileged as compared to rural peasants. A pecking order exists among people who make their living picking through trash in the Philippines. Japanese were privileged over other Asians in apartheid South Africa. Taller and stereotypically-attractive people are privileged over shorter, less "good-looking" people in the competition for jobs. Recognizing this, we can begin to understand that privilege is neither a blessing nor a curse, but a mechanism of division and domination that must be overcome. Its pervasive presence within all the intersectional aspects of class society means that we can begin to treat it not as a way to create a hierarchy or competition over who is more oppressed, but as a manifestation of oppression and exploitation the experience of which any of us may share in some respects relative to others. Marx said that capitalism rests on competition among the workers. Privilege is a key mechanism of inducing and sustaining that competition.

The antidote to the poisonous effects of privilege is solidarity. We must begin to break down the divisions (and therefore the conquest or control of the rulers) by building a unity based on
self-determination, self-sacrifice, self-criticism, egalitarianism, an end to oppressive hierarchies, and a commitment to seeing the struggle through to the end.

**About the Author**

Michael Novick is a retired school teacher (previously a rank and file UTLA shop steward for adult ed teachers in LAUSD), editor of "Turning the Tide: Journal of Inter-communal Solidarity," and has been active for many years in a variety of anti-racist and anti-colonial coalitions and organizing efforts in southern CA. He's currently working on, among other projects, hosting Brazilian MST (Movimento Sem Terra) militants in L.A, the Hewlett Packard Boycott, White People for Racial Justice, and the Grassroots Community Radio Coalition, with which he is running for re-election to the KPFK local station board. His piece “Decolonization and Liberation” was featured in the Winter 2014 issue of Black Flag.
Science is Eurocentric, racist, and imperialist, and should be rejected in favor of “traditional ways of knowing” – Problematic idea #2

--Black Flag staff writers

In the previous issue, we launched a series of pieces on “Problematic Ideas” that are destructive to anti-authoritarian/ anarchist politics but are nonetheless widely-circulated within anti-authoritarian/anarchist movements and spaces. By calling these ideas “destructive,” we mean that they actually contradict and undermine our politics, while also weakening and dividing our social movements.

Last issue, we tackled the notion that anarchist people of color should not organize with similar-minded “white” people.

This piece takes on the following claim:

Modern “Western” Science—including its institutions, practices, and bodies of knowledge—is racist, Eurocentric, and colonialist, and should therefore be replaced by more spiritual, Earth-friendly, and egalitarian Traditionalist/Indigenous ways of knowing.

To start, we should offer a disclaimer. The philosophical questions surrounding the nature of scientific knowledge, for example—

—What exactly is science, as opposed to other forms of inquiry (e.g. philosophy, art, spirituality, mysticism)?

What are the limitations of scientific knowledge and methods?

Is science “superior” to other ways of attaining knowledge?—

—are deep and complex. Our discussion here is simply a basic overview, focused on the political aspects of the topic. For a more thorough discussion of the philosophy of science, A. F. Chalmers’s What is this thing called Science? (Hacket, 1976) and Samir Okasha’s Philosophy of Science: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford, 2002) both provide excellent, accessible entry points for lay people.

Returning to the topic of discussion, why would anti-authoritarian activists (or anyone, for that matter), reject scientific knowledge in the 21st century? Several reasons are often given:

1. Science produces destructive technologies like the atom bomb (and other weapons of mass destruction) and fossil-fuel-powered combustion engines that threaten all life on the planet and outweigh any good science has accomplished.

2. Science as a socio-cultural practice is closely tied to the neoliberal military industrial complex, and is incapable of acting for interests other than Big-Business-Capital, the State, and the “Washington Consensus” (the WTO, IMF, World Bank, UN, and NATO).

3. Science has been employed for openly-racist, colonialist, and patriarchal-misogynist purposes, such as 19th-century racial “science,” eugenics, the Tuskegee experiments, Nazi experimentation, forced sterilizations, female genital disfigurement, mutilations of intersex people, and the designation of Queer-ness as deviance and mental illness.

4. Traditional indigenous societies and cultures offer an alternative worldview to modern science, a worldview based on the unity and equality of all life, the one-ness of the Cosmos, responsible and reciprocal relations between humans and Nature, a cradle-to-cradle stewardship of natural resources, and a satisfying engagement with spiritual realities.

After reading these points, it might seem at first glance that the radical critics of science are undeniably correct. How could the war, imperialism, oppression, environmental devastation, greed, and overconsumption engendered by modern science-dominated techno-capitalist society ever be squared with the peace, equality, community, conservation, coexistence, and non-hierarchical relations between and among living things envisioned by anarchists and allied anti-authoritarians?

However, as it almost always is, the truth of the matter is far more complex.

Let’s unpack some of the problems with the criticisms of science outlined above. For simplicity, we’ll label it the “anti-science position” or “AS.”

I. The AS camp confuses “science” with “how science is sometimes used” (or mis-used).

When a white cop shoots an unarmed person of color, we contend that the cop is racist (or is enacting institutionalized racism); we don’t insist that guns are
Science is Eurocentric” con’t

humanity before the rise of global systems and caste structures that generated a great deal of inequality and oppression. Arguing against the myth of a single “primitive” utopian state of humanity before the rise of global capitalism, he states:

“There were hunter-gatherer societies with nobles and slaves, there are agrarian societies that are fiercely egalitarian. Even in… Amazonia, one finds some groups who can justly be described as anarchists, like the Piaroa, living alongside others (say, the warlike Sherente) who are clearly anything but. And ‘societies’ are constantly reforming, skipping back and forth between what we think of as different evolutionary stages.” (p. 54)

In fact, the idea of the “natural” state of humanity was one of blissful utopian communism is intimately tied up with the “Noble Savage” myth, which seems to spiritually elevate indigenous peoples but actually serves to reinforce notions of European specialness, uniqueness, modernity and superiority—in other words, Eurocentrism. In *Fragments*, and more systematically in *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Melville, 2011), Graeber goes further by showing that much of the debt-based models of exchange that define capitalism were present in most pre-capitalist societies as well.

AS advocates seem to agree with the Eurocentric notion that an abrupt historical break divides pre-capitalist indigenous civilization from “modern,” Western, capitalist civilization—with its destructive science and technology—but Graeber’s work exposes this notion as a myth.

V. Rejection of science is nearly impossible in practice.

Science is so intimately tied up in all of our lives, and so necessary for daily survival, that it would be impossible to reject it in practice even if we wanted to. Rejecting science would mean giving up antibiotics, pain killers, antiseptics, and anti-inflammatories, relegating millions to pain, disease, and death. Rejecting science would mean giving up fertilizers and irrigation, leaving billions to starve. Giving up birth control, communications satellites, power-lines, X-rays, refrigeration, and all the other fruits of modern science would only be possible if we were willing to allow the vast majority of currently-living people to perish.

Inevitably, some will view these arguments as deriving from a “privileged,” “First World” perspective. However, ask people suffering in the most impoverished regions of the world, enduring war, famine, and other disasters, what they think about primitivism and science rejectionism. Such people don’t call for a return to Stone-Age models of living; they seek peace, respite, rebuilding, and development—all of which are impossible in the modern world without science.

Rejecting scientific thought might be a refuge for the...
intellectually lazy, but it offers nothing of merit to a serious anarchist thinker striving to make the world better for the 99%.

Science is a tool that belongs to the entire human species. Just as art can be uplifting or dull, or can be used to promote liberating or oppressive ideas, so too can science be directed toward liberation or enslavement, depending on who’s doing the directing. Perhaps the ambiguity of science is best exemplified by the career of the German chemist Fritz Haber, known as the “father of chemical” warfare for his development of weaponized chlorine gas in WWI, but also for his development of the “Haber process” which allowed for the easy production of nitrogen-based fertilizers without which the population booms of the early 20th century would have led to global famines.

As anarchists, it is up to us to fight for a better, freer world. Science is one of the indispensable tools we will need to get there.

Further reading

In addition to the sources mentioned above, the following articles go deeper into some of the science-related debates among anarchists:

“Fuck Science” by Anonymous (09/02/2015)
https://anarchistnews.org/content/fuck-science

“Science” by Alex Gorrion (05/29, 2015)
http://theanvilreview.org/print/science/

“Science as Radicalism” by rechelon (08/18/2015)
https://anarchistnews.org/content/science-radicalism

“The Revolutionary Importance of Science: A Response to Alex Gorrion” by John Jacobi (06/10/2015)
https://www.thewildernist.org/2015/06/revolutionary-importance-of-science/
Radical Thoughts on Elections

Selected and lightly-edited for clarity by your Black Flag editors.

Jolasmo: This Is Not Our Victory

(From a Sept. 11, 2015 blog post:
https://wearetherabl.wordpress.com/2015/09/11/this-is-not-our-victory/)

Today saw the election of North Islington MP Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the UK Labour Party. His remarkable leadership campaign attracted a storm of near-hysterical criticism from both established Labour figures and the right-wing press, but gained considerable support from across the UK left. From major trade-unions to Trotskyist sects, Corbyn succeeded in uniting a broad swathe of the established left, as well as many ordinary Labour Party members and supporters, behind his bid to lead the party following its worst election defeat in 30 years. In spite of a vicious propaganda campaign from right-wing papers like the Telegraph, the Daily Mail, and the Express, alongside former Labour Prime Ministers and other high-ranking members of the Labour establishment (not to mention an attempted purge of his supporters by the current Labour leadership), Corbyn now looks set to lead the Labour Party into the next UK general election in 2020. For most of the British left, this will doubtless be a cause for considerable celebration.

We’re not celebrating.

In spite of the hype surrounding his ascension, we find precious little cause for optimism in his victory. It isn’t simply that he’s unelectable, as those on the right of the Labour Party claim, though it’s true that the prospect of him actually becoming Prime Minister in 2020 seems pretty remote without seismic changes to the political landscape of the UK. It isn’t that his left-leaning policies don’t go far enough, though it’s true that by the standards of the pre-1990s Labour Party he’s really more of a centrist. It’s not even that the party he leads has a track record of warmongering, austerity, and strike-breaking going back to 1945. Rather, our skepticism toward Corbyn’s politics comes from the fact that his vision of an end to austerity, of an end to wars and bloodshed abroad, of well-funded state-run public services, of a more just and equal society, is based on a lie: that if we elect better politicians, they will build us a better world without us having to do the hard work of struggling together to improve our lives. The truth is that if we want to see meaningful change, we have to fight for it ourselves.

The strategy of electing left-wing and socialist politicians to fight our battles for us has failed time and time again. Corbyn is just the latest in a long line of failures, inside and outside the Labour Party. Just a few months ago, leftists across Europe and beyond were singing the praises of SYRIZA, a coalition of socialists and revolutionaries who rose to power in Greece in January this year, claiming they would put an end to the misery doled out to the Greek people by years of savage spending cuts. Today their promises are in tatters, their supporters disappointed in yet another Greek government capitulating in the face of international pressure to implement still more austerity. Three years earlier another socialist party in France rose to power offering similar promises of an end to austerity and a fairer society. Three years on, their promises remain unfulfilled. The list goes on.

From an anarchist perspective, none of this is surprising. It is not just that left-wing politicians are liars, cowards and sell-outs, although of course they often are. Nor is it simply that forces outside of and beyond the reach of national parliaments, from international bureaucracies like the EU to centers of financial power like the City of London, make the aspirations of socialist governments impossible. The real issue is more fundamental. Governments, of any political stripe, can act only by wielding the power of the state. To maintain a powerful state, governments need a strong economy, and that means managing capitalism and maintaining a capitalist social order. Different governments can try to do this in different ways, but they’re all bound by the same basic logic, and none of them offer any real hope of a way out of the cycle of capitalist domination and human misery. That’s why left-wing and socialist governments routinely disappoint us.

Nonetheless, the allure of Corbyn’s politics is easy to understand. He offers hope when other politicians offer only different flavors of despair, different degrees of capitulation in the face of the self-destructive forces of 21st-century capitalism. And hope is important. For those of us who still dream of a better world, who still believe we can overcome the myriad forces of oppression and exploitation and build a more humane society, it sometimes feels like hope is all we have. But if we want to see real change, if we want to make our dreams come to life, we need more than hope: we need power. Not in parliament, but in the streets, in the workplace, in our neighborhoods, in every aspect of our daily lives. That power can only come from self-organization and direct action, working

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together cooperatively to use our own collective strength against those who profit from the current state of things.

So rather than place our faith in politicians to make things better for us, we choose instead to find hope in one another. It is not grand speeches by would-be leaders that inspire us, but the words and actions of ordinary people coming together, whether in the form of strikes and occupations or the many smaller acts of resistance and solidarity that make our day-to-day lives bearable. The false hope offered by Jeremy Corbyn and the like leads only to disappointment, disillusionment, and despair. Real hope is sometimes hard to find, and real change is harder still, but we have to be honest with ourselves and one another, and face up to the realities of our collective situation. We have a long way to go to bring about revolutionary change, but the struggle starts in the here and now.

**John A. Imani: On Sanders—And Electoral Politics in General**
(from a listserve-based email exchange Sept. 14, 2015)

I think the important thing is not this or that person and her political qualifications or lack thereof.

The important phenomenon that we are observing in these times, in many places, is the rise in working class consciousness. It is such a rise that bubbles to the fore as Tsipras or Sanders or Corbyn. It makes them possible.

And what are we, as Leftists, to make of this and make with it?

The notion of participation in elections is not bourgeois in itself. Elections as now are bourgeois in nature. However, the distinguishing characteristic dividing the two (electoral politics and bourgeois politics) is the nature of the electoral pursuit.

As done now, the electoral goal is power. Specifically, political power-in-itself. Power to govern.

The sole purpose of a truly radical thrust into the electoral realm would be political power-through-itself. Power that is not only to be used for change but power that in itself is change. That is the placing on the public agenda and in the public thought (through elections) of real solutions and the enlisting of all the members of our class into the positing, planning, and production of solutions to the problems that now beset humankind. Problems that can be solved.

A well-spoken spokesperson (not “leader”) for working class issues then would refuse to play by the bourgeoisie’s rules in only discussing the “art” of the possible.

To the public he would present our demands. Demands that would fire our imaginations and help break us out of the box that is the prison that is capitalism: full employment at living wages, open borders, free education and health care, the right to housing, an end to military and policing forces. Many of these interrelate, e.g. full employment, in large part, could be obtained by the training, and then employment, of the many of our class without work into the efforts to house all. And so on.

All of those reforms ought to be seen and ought to be presented by such left spokespeople as transitional while a fully socialized economy is constructed.

"Socialism or Barbarism" has been used many times. But now, more than ever, it is so. Walk through Skid Row, see on TV migrants in the hundreds of thousands fleeing wars that US wars gave birth to and nurtured along; see, in our streets, how it has come to be necessary to say "Black Lives Matter."

This is a cold cruel world. And this, and even worse, is and will exist until we drastically change the rights to, the planning of, the methods of, work and the distribution of the products thereof.

**Neil C.: Bern, baby, Bern?**
(From a listserve-based email exchange Sept. 13, 2015)

The election circuses are not about one man or woman only. Believing so is a quasi-religious view of politics. Elections, even in the modern "democratic" state, are about power, running a political State for (exploitative) social relations, using (false) promises, and keeping the working people politically tied to a system that tricks people into staying passive, rather than building their own political voices and industrial-cultural organs in opposition to wage slavery, racism, and militarism.

Calling Leftists with decent principles “spoiled children” for not bowing to and saluting a veteran US senator for Capital, who for many years has backed wars of US and allied aggression, especially in the Middle East, speaks volumes about the real
deception and dishonesty of this sly charlatan Sanders’s campaign.

Finally, this is not about “personalistic” games of “picking” and supporting “lesser” Evils. Even those who gamble on horse races are smarter than that. When the fields of horses are really bad, the wise back off, and go on to another race (course). In the case of politics, for workers and allies, their real contest is their ability to combine, study, and plan courses of action that possibly can and might re-build conscious social forces to oppose the vicious austerity blitzes of capital against working families—blitzes pushed by both the Democratic and Republican parties in power.

It’s long past the time to look to politically worshiping “lesser evil” stars promoted by the bosses’ media. Both parties in power are Evil and so is the system they are so ardently loyal to—a system Senator B. Sanders and billionaire D. Trump (albeit with differing tactics) both support to the hilt.

To the famous slogan “let my people go” how about adding for clarity “and let the working people escape” from the control of the bosses’ film flam: liberals’ and CON-servatives’ false prophets for profits.

Suggestions for real solidarity
By Peter Gelderloos

This short excerpt, written in 2010, is from “Suggestions for Real Solidarity” a stand-alone piece in a longer zine by Gelderloos called “Lines in Sand” which includes many important observations about the conflict between two groups that Gelderloos calls, respectively, “insurrection or social war” anarchists and “identity politics or anti-oppression” anarchists. The current selection is our choice for this issue, but we recommend the entire zine, available here: http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/peter-gelderloos-lines-in-sand —Black Flag Editors

…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 behaviors 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 are 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 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…

…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.

How Racism Invented Race in America

By Ta-Nehisi Coates


..Recently, a young woman told me that this generation of Americans was "the most diverse in American history." The assumption was that across the span of that history, there was some immutable group of racial categories whose numbers we could compare. I am not sure this holds up. “Biracial” is a new category for America, but it is not clear to me that today there are relatively more children of black and white unions than there were in the past. We certainly are more apt to acknowledge them as such, and that is a good thing. Nevertheless, the assumption of that "something new" is happening "racially," that these terms are somehow constant, is one of the great, and underestimated, barriers to understanding the case for reparations.

The myth of any such constant was exposed to me at Howard University. I was a history major—and yes, I am bragging about this, and not at all humbly. In all my history classes we were treated to the dizzying taxonomy of race—mulatto and Italian, creole and quadroon, Jew and mestizo. This terminology would change quickly, change back, and then change again. And borders would change with it. Not even continents were constant. "Africa begins at the Pyrenees," we read in The Races of Europe.

No work more influenced my own thinking on this than St. Clair Drake's two-volume work Black Folk Here and There. Drake is better known for his study of Chicago, Black Metropolis, a
book that informed the profile I wrote of Michelle Obama and, to some extent, my work on reparations. But *Black Folk* was the first book that made the argument that sticks with me to this day—that there is nothing particularly "natural" about viewing people with darker skin and curly hair as inferior. Drake surveys all perceptions of people with darker skin, curly hair, or both, across history. He finds very little consistency and concludes that racism, as we know it, is basically a product of the slave trade, which is to say the seizure of power.

Other books confirmed Drake's basic insight to me—Allison Blakely's *Blacks in the Dutch World*, Nell Irvin Painter's *The History of White People*. If you can get your hands on it I also would recommend *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, which is both expensive and priceless. It's fascinating to see how black people were viewed before we decided that African ancestry made you, by God or science, property. For an energetic rebuttal (which I find ultimately unconvincing) see Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black*.

The import of this all came home for me many years later in Barbara and Karen Fields's *Racecraft*. The book is a collection of essays, and is sometimes hard to follow, but its basic insight is brilliant. Basically, Americans talk about "race" but not "racism," and in doing that they turn a series of "actions" into a "state." This is basically true of all our conversations of this sort, left and right. You can see this in all our terminology—racial justice, racial quotas, racial discrimination, etc. But this language is ahistorical, and it obscures the current conflict. Affirmative action, for instance, is not intended to remedy plunder (action) but to aid "women and people of color" (state) or produce "diversity" (another state). And the benefits of affirmative action are not people who have been plundered, but "the black race."

But American notions of race are the product of racism, not the other way around. We know this because we can see the formation of "race" in American law and policy, and we also see how formations differ across time and space. So what is "black" in the United States is not "black" in Brazil. More significantly, the relevance and import of "blackness" is not constant across American history. Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* helped me a lot on this. At the start of the book the English are allying with the rebellious Cimarrons against the hated and demonic Spanish. By the end of the book the great-grandchildren of the English are convinced that blacks are a singular blight upon the Earth. The change is not mysterious. Morgan traces the nexus of law, policy, and financial interest to show how current notions of "blackness" and "whiteness" were formed.

It is important to remember that American racism is a thing that was done, and a world where American racism is beaten back is not a world of "racial diversity" but a world without such terminology. Perhaps we can never actually get to that world. Perhaps we are just too far gone. But we should never forget that this world was "made." Whiteness and blackness are not a fact of providence, but of policy—of slave codes, black codes, Jim Crow, redlining, GI Bills, housing covenants, New Deals, and mass incarcerations.

I did not understand it at the time, but this way of thinking pushed me toward reparations. In the popular mind, reparations is seen as a "race-based" scheme, i.e., giving money to people solely because they are black or have direct African ancestry. But if you understand racism as the headwaters of the problem, as injury, as plunder, you can reorient and focus not on the ancestry but on the injury.

For me it goes back to *Black Folks Here and There*. I came to St. Clair Drake feeling a deep need to prove that the Ancient Egyptians were "black." (The whole first volume is a consideration of "race" and Ancient Egypt.) I was dogged by Saul Bellow's challenge: "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?" I left feeling like Ralph Wiley—Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus. Wiley's point was that the entire exercise of attempting to prove the worth of humans through monuments and walls was morally flawed. This was radicalizing. It warned me away from beginning an argument with racist reasoning, by accepting its premises. The argument for racism is corrupt at its root, and must be confronted there. You can understand how such thinking might inevitably lead you toward reparations…

Con't on p27
Further Reading

If I were starting out and trying to grapple with the relationship between "race" and "racism," here is how I would proceed. It is not the only—and perhaps not even the best—path. It's simply the one I'd suggest.

1.) *American Slavery, American Freedom*, by Edmund Morgan
Essential to understanding your country and how it came to see "blacks" in one light and "whites" in another.

2.) *White Over Black*, by Winthrop Jordan
I don't agree with this book, but it's important to confront the counterargument—that Anglo-American culture is racist at its very root and predisposed toward hatred of black people.

3.) *The History of White People*, by Nell Irvin Painter
A deeply amusing book that finds great minds—chiefly Ralph Waldo Emerson—arguing that race explains why "Celts" are Catholic and "Saxons" Protestant. It also reveals how poorly racist thinking ages. The book is an eminently readable guide through the evolution and conception of white people. Again, nothing inevitable here.

4.) *Black Folks Here and There*, by St. Clair Drake
The source for me. This book changed my life. I've listed it so low because at the time I read it, I had nothing else to do, really. I didn't do much homework. I skipped a lot of class. I just soaked stuff like this up.

5.) "On Being White ... and Other Lies," by James Baldwin
No one is better on the idea of "race," and particularly whiteness, and its import than Baldwin: "No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations and a vast amount of coercion ..." In this essay, he brings together all the history and wastes no words dumbing down its likely import:

"... in this debasement and definition of black people, they have debased and defined themselves. And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white. Because they think they are white, they dare not confront the ravage and lie of their history. Because they think they are white, they cannot allow themselves to be tormented by the suspicion that all men are brothers... Because they think they are white, they believe, as even no child believes, in the dream of safety."

This, to me, is the deepest significance of reparations. People who think this is just a matter of giving black people things vastly underestimate the challenge. Reparations may seem impractical. Living without history, I suspect, will—in the long term—prove to be suicidal.
"There is no Hierarchy of Oppressions"
By Audre Lorde

I was born Black and a woman. I am trying to become the strongest person I can become to live the life I have been given and to help effect change toward a livable future for this earth and for my children. As a Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother of two including one boy and member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself part of some group in which the majority defines me as deviant, difficult, inferior or just plain "wrong".

From my membership in all of these groups I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sizes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression. I have learned that sexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over all others and thereby its right to dominance) and heterosexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving over all others and thereby its right to dominance) both arise from the same source as racism - a belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby its right to dominance.

"Oh," says a voice from the Black community, “but being Black is normal!” Well, I and many Black people of my age can remember grimly the days when it didn't used to be!

I simply do not believe that one aspect of myself can possibly profit from the oppression of any other part of my identity. I know that my people cannot possibly profit from the oppression of any other group which seeks the right to peaceful existence. Rather, we diminish ourselves by denying to others what we have shed blood to obtain for our children. And those children need to learn that they do not have to become like each other in order to work together for a future they will all share.

The increasing attacks upon lesbians and gay men are only an introduction to the increasing attacks upon all Black people, for wherever oppression manifests itself in this country, Black people are potential victims. And it is a standard of right-wing cynicism to encourage members of oppressed groups to act against each other, and so long as we are divided because of our particular identities we cannot join together in effective political action.

Within the lesbian community I am Black, and within the Black community I am a lesbian. Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black. There is no hierarchy of oppression.

It is not accidental that the Family Protection Act, which is virulently anti-woman and anti-Black, is also anti-gay. As a Black person, I know who my enemies are, and when the Ku Klux Klan goes to court in Detroit to try and force the Board of Education to remove books the Klan believes "hint at homosexuality," then I know I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination, wherever they appear to destroy me. And when they appear to destroy me, it will not be long before they appear to destroy you. — Originally published in Bulletin: Homophobia and Education, 1983.
Now and then, we like to introduce important anarchist thinkers that our readers should know about. This issue’s important thinker is a living, breathing contemporary: the brilliant and badass queer-anarchist and scholar-activist Jamie Heckert. He has a PhD in sociology from the University of Edinburgh, and has published on topics like anarchism, gender & sexuality, education, queer theory, ethics, ecology, psychology, and identity politics. He is also the author of the Lexicon series pamphlet “Gender,” which the F@@ has used in our study group on Anarchist Theory.

In appreciation of his important work on anarchism, sexuality, and identity, we reprint below the following piece in its entirety. –Black Flag Editors

Original URL: http://theanarchistlibr.org/library/jamie-heckert-maintaining-the-borders-identity-politics

Maintaining the Borders: identity & politics
By Jamie Heckert

Identity is the process of creating and maintaining borders, creating different kinds of people. This keeps the world packaged in tidy little boxes. These boxes, in turn, are necessary for the violence and domination of hierarchical societies. There cannot be masters or slaves, bosses or workers, men or women, whites or blacks, leaders or followers, heterosexuals or queers, without identity.

Social movement [1], both past and present, often attempts to use identity as a tool of liberation. Movement based on gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnic and ability identities all have some success in challenging hierarchy and oppression. By no means do I mean to diminish the impact of past and present activism. Personally, my life would have been much more difficult before the feminist and gay liberation/equality movement arose. I argue that identity politics is inherently limited in its ability to challenge hierarchy because it depends upon the same roots as the system it aims to overthrow. “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” [2]

Does that mean we should all be the same?

Identity is also the answer to the question, “who am I?” This is different from answering, “what kind of person am I?” Labels like “woman”, “white” and “heterosexual” tell us about someone’s position in various hierarchies. These positions, these identities, are significant to how a person thinks of themselves. But, they don’t answer the question, “who am I?” Each of us is unique, both similar and different to everyone else in various ways. Working to eliminate identity in the hierarchical sense (e.g. some animals are more equal than others) isn’t the same as eliminating identity in the individual sense (e.g. I’ll still be Jamie). When I talk about the problems with identity, I mean the “boxes” rather than individuals.

Let me use “sexual orientation” as an example. Supposedly people can be put into three boxes, depending on whether they fancy women, men, or both. While this is a popular idea, it seems to cause an awful lot of suffering. People worry a lot about their image, and try very hard to make sure that others realize “what” they are. We also worry about “what” other people are — are they like me or are they different? Some people are so unhappy and anxious about these things that they attack others, either physically or verbally. Even people who think of themselves as heterosexual can be attacked. Finally, people suffer when they desire others of the “wrong” gender, or if they worry that others think they do. One alternative is that we all try to be “equal opportunity lovers” and fancy everyone. Those who succeed could then feel superior to those whose desires are less politically correct.

Another alternative is that we try to give up thinking of people (including ourselves) in terms of sexual orientation and instead recognize that everyone’s sexual desires are complex and unique. This would mean being yourself rather than a heterosexual, a queer or whatever, and to recognize people as people instead of members of categories. We could never all be the same, even if we tried!

What is wrong with political identity?

Identity separates people. It encourages us to believe that “we” are different from “others”. Identity can also encourage conformity. How else do I show that I am one of us other than conforming to the accepted codes prescribed to that identity? This construction of similarity and difference exists whether we are talking about traditional identity politics groups like “disabled people” or political identities like “environmentalists.” This separation of us from them has serious consequences for political movement.

Identity encourages isolation. Political ghettos cannot exist without political identity, and their existence reinforces it. Not only are the “activists” separated from the “non-activists,” but within a broad political ghetto, anarchists, feminists, and environmentalists (amongst others)
often see themselves as involved in separate struggles. People who consider themselves politically active are separated both from each other and from others who do not share an "activist" identity. Effective movement for radical social change cannot be based on such divisions.

*Identity reduces social phenomena to individuals.* Concepts like anarchism and racism are social. They are not embodied by individuals as terms like "anarchist" and "racist" suggest. Rather, they exist as ideas, practices and relationships. In most societies, racism is inherent in our institutionalized relationships and ways of thinking. We can and should be critical of racism, but to attack people as "racists" can only further alienate them from our efforts. [3] Besides, it is a dangerous fantasy to believe that "racists" can be separated from those of us who are non-racist. Likewise, anarchism exists throughout every society. Every time people co-operate without coercion to achieve shared goals, that is anarchism. Every time someone thinks that people should be able to get along with each other without domination, that is anarchism. If we only see racism in "racists," we will never effectively challenge racism. If we only see anarchism in "anarchists," we will miss out on so many desperately needed sources of inspiration.

*Identity encourages purity.* If we believe that concepts like feminism can be embodied in individuals, then some people can be more feminist than others. This leads to debates about "real feminists" and how feminists should act (e.g. debates regarding feminism and heterosexuality). Feminist purity allows for hierarchy (e.g. more or less and thus better or worse feminists) and encourages guilt (e.g. asking yourself "should real feminists think/act like this?").

*Political identity simplifies personal identity.* A related problem for feminist identity, for example, is that it demands we focus on one aspect of our complex lives. Feminist movement has often been dominated by white middle-class women who have a particular perspective on what is a "women's issue." Many women have had to choose between involvement in a woman's movement that fails to recognize ethnicity and class issues, or in black or working class politics that did not acknowledge gender. But, the alternative of specialized identity politics could get very silly (e.g. a group for disabled, transgender, lesbian, working-class women of color). Likewise, if I describe myself as a feminist, an anarchist, and a sex radical, I am suddenly three different people. However, if I say I advocate feminism, anarchism, and radical sexual politics, I am one person with a variety of beliefs. [4]

*Identity often imagines easily defined interests.* Feminism is often presented as for women only; men are perceived to entirely benefit from the gender system. Many men do clearly benefit from the gender system in terms of institutionalized domination. If we perceive interests as inherently stemming from current systems, we fail to recognize how people would benefit from alternative systems. If we want to encourage and inspire people to create a very different form of society, we should share with each other what we see as beneficial. We must recognize that different value systems (e.g. domination versus compassion) result in very different interests.

*Identity discourages participation.* If people are worried that they might be excluded through labelling (e.g. racist or homophobic), they won't feel welcomed and won't get involved. Likewise, people do not get involved if they believe that it is not in their interests. If we perpetuate the idea that feminism is for women, men will never see how it could also be in their interests to support feminism. Or they might support feminism, but feel guilty for their male privilege. Either way, men are not encouraged to be active in feminist movements.

Radical social change requires mass social movement. Identity politics, by definition, can never achieve this. Political identities, like "environmentalist," can likewise become a basis for minority politics.

*Identity creates opposition.* By dividing the world up into opposing pairs (e.g. men/women, heterosexuals/queers, ruling class/working-class, whites/blacks), identity creates opposite types of people who perceive themselves as having opposing interests. This opposition means that people fail to recognize their common interests as human beings. The opposition of two forces pushing against each other means that very little changes.

*Identity freezes the fluid.* Neither individual identity (the "who am I?" kind) nor social organization are fixed, but are in constant motion. Political identities require that these fluid processes are frozen realities with particular characteristics and inherent interests. In failing to recognize the nature of both identity and society, political identity can only inhibit radical social change.

*It may not be perfect, but can't it still be a useful strategy?* It is a very good strategy if you don’t want to change things very much. Identity politics fits in nicely within the dominant neo-liberal ideology. Groups created around oppressed identities can lobby the state for civil rights. This idea of trying to protect individuals without changing relationships or systems of organization is compatible with the individualistic basis of capitalism and representative “democracy.”

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I would never argue that a strategy has to be “perfect” to be useful, but it must be consistent with its aims. Ends and means can only be separated in our minds. If the aim is to reduce or eliminate hierarchical social divisions (e.g. gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, class), a strategy which depends upon those very divisions can never be successful.

If political identity is such a poor strategy, why is it so common?

On a personal level, political identity makes us feel part of something larger at the same time that it makes us feel special because we’re different. In the short-term, this can be very successful defense mechanism. For example, I’m sure I would have been a lot more damaged by the sexist and homophobic environment in which I grew up if I had not been able to convert stigma into pride. However, feeling yourself to be different and separate from other people is not a successful long-term strategy, either psychologically or politically.

What’s the alternative to political identity?

If borders are the problem, then we must support and encourage each other to tear down the fences. Two crucial tools for dismantling borders are systematic analyses and compassionate strategies.

We should recognize that oppression is not simply a practice of individuals who have power over those who do not. Instead, we could see how forms of organization (including institutions and relationships) systematically produce hierarchies and borders. People will only see an interest in getting more involved if they realize that their individual problems — anxiety, depression, exhaustion, anger, poverty, meaningless work, unsatisfying sex lives, etc.— are not unique, but are systematically produced. Furthermore, their action will only be effective if they work to reduce all forms of hierarchy and domination. Constructs including gender, sexuality, capitalism, race, and the nation state are interdependent systems. Each system of domination serves to reinforce the others. This doesn’t mean we have to solve every problem instantly, but we must recognize that all issues are human issues. At the same time, we must not imagine that a particular system of domination (not even capitalism!) is the source of all others.

Radical politics is rarely appealing because it focuses on the evils of the world. This offers little that is hopeful or constructive in people’s daily lives. If we want to see widespread social movement for radical change, we have to offer people something they value. Listening to people’s concerns, caring about their problems, and encouraging and supporting them to develop systemic solutions requires compassion. Offer people a better quality of life instead of focusing so much on depressing aspects of our current society.

We should also recognize that people positioned in more privileged categories may in some ways suffer. At the very least, people who feel a strong need to dominate and control must suffer deep insecurities, the results of competition and hierarchy. Insecurity, domination and control are not conducive to fulfilling and meaningful relationships with other people. Attacking people in “privileged” positions does little to dismantle these systems. It also gives entirely too much credit to people in those positions — they are both products and producers of systems, just like the rest of us.

To radically reorganize our society, we should aim to both diminish systematic domination and suffering and encourage systematic compassion. Just as apparently disconnected and often incoherent forms of domination can reinforce and maintain each other, so too can a compassionate organization of society become systematic and self-sustaining.

Encouraging people to be more comfortable with sexuality in general has been a key focus of my own political efforts. But, sexuality is only one area in which a compassionate and systematic approach has much more radical potential than politicizing identity.

Find sources of suffering, whatever they are, and support and encourage people to find ways of relating to themselves and others that reduce that suffering. Help build compassionate, co-operative institutions (e.g. social centers, support/discussion groups, mediation services, childcare support, Food Not Bombs). Tell people when you admire or appreciate their efforts. Support people trying to change their environments (e.g. workplace resistance). Offer alternatives to people who are involved in or considering authoritarian positions (e.g. military, police, business management).

Demonstrating the pleasures and benefits of co-operative, compassionate organization offers a strong threat to the world of borders and guards. I suspect that fragmented groups, anti-whatever demonstrations, unfriendly and exclusive meetings, and utopian “after the revolution” lectures will never be quite as enticing to people outside the activist ghetto.

Further Reading


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