

What is Anarchist Feminism?

Do we need a Feminist Consciousness?

by Anna Aniston

The way to strengthen class solidarity is to strengthen the relationships between men and women within the class, and this means an end to oppression of women as women by working class men. Historically, anarcha-feminism was when anarchist women realized that anarchist men weren't dealing with their patriarchal conditioning towards privilege. The women needed something in addition to anarchist theory and practice because it was getting them nowhere. They realized that they needed feminist consciousness - but that feminist consciousness had to reject privilege, and had to be based in class politics because, without class politics, working class women would merely be awarded gains for ruling and middle class women.

Anarchism assumes that we're all equal, but we're not. Our cultural conditioning makes it impossible for us to come to the table as equals in struggle. I've heard people (and even myself) give an analysis of privilege as though we were all positioned on a ladder - all white ruling class men are at the top, black women in poverty are at the bottom, and everyone else jumbles into the middle somewhere. But that's just so simplistic and unrealistic. It totally ignores all the different factors that contribute to create hierarchies of privilege, and all the other complex factors that contribute to maintaining those hierarchies on a day-to-day basis.

Once you say you're an anarchist, you're meant to give up hierarchy and become equal to everyone else. But it's not that simple. You can't simply leave your privilege at the door, especially when you don't analyse and understand how that privilege came to you in the first place. Pretending that the problem will go away, or doesn't exist won't work to dispatch global capitalism, it won't save our environment from destruction, and it won't work to eliminate sexism or racism from anarchist communities.

There's a current of thought circulating at the moment that is based on 5 points of observation about anarchism and feminism:

1. Its not men's fault that they were born men, so they can't be expected to do any-

thing about their male privilege

2. If women feel uncomfortable about a particular man's particular actions, then the woman needs to deal with that particular man by pointing out how his particular actions weren't OK

3. Feminism is just a bourgeois attempt to shame working class men, get power over them, and when working class women take up feminism, it is divisive of the working class as a revolutionary agent

4. When a man has other forms of dis-privilege (like class, knowledge, race, access to money) then this automatically dissolves his gender privilege.

5. Women already have gender equality in many countries today

(This approach consists of things I have 'heard around the traps'. It is the sum of excuses and reasoning I have heard from several sources while talking about men, women and privilege. I'm not trying to refute a stated position - but I am trying to crystallize several 'reasonings' so that they can be refuted. Part of the difficulty I find in feminist theorizing is the liquidity afforded to feminism's critics - they aren't easily pinned down).

I think this approach denies the overall political importance of the collective oppression of women, by men, at every level in society. It's important to realize that just because a woman is oppressed by other women (hip hip hooray for the middle classes!), that this doesn't invalidate that oppression of women, as women. A woman can take the place of oppressor, but if she acts like a patriarch, she enforces the patriarchy, if she gains power like a patriarch and she uses the oppressive tools of a patriarch, then she is a patriarch. She doesn't need a penis to enforce a system of values that privilege men and maleness.

In response to these 5 elements of current anarchist thought and practice, I would like to say:

1. Its not men's fault that they were born men, so they can't be expected to do anything about their male privilege.

By this logic, there can be no stopping those born into the monied classes either. In a liberal-demoncratic society, of course oppressors will give the excuse that they don't mean to be oppressive. What's more, I would accept that excuse, provided that the privilege stops. As women, we are taught to subject ourselves to shame about our bodies, our thoughts and feelings (and if we lapse, there's always someone there to help us feel more shame). As anarchists, we don't want to reverse the relationship of privilege by shaming men when they dominate as men. No! We want an end to the domination. Anarchist women want anarchist men to discontinue engaging in male privilege. No more, no less.



2. If women feel uncomfortable about a particular man's particular actions, then the woman needs to deal with that particular man by pointing out how his particular actions weren't OK

This denies that there is a broad political basis for the exclusion of women from participating in their own lives in any meaningful way. Individuals do perpetuate hierarchy when it benefits them to do so; so individual men are the proponents of patriarchy. And individual women are the victims. This 'individual man' approach pits the victim against the oppressor, alone, unsupported, and unable to access a political case against her oppressor (because he is an individual man, not a representative of an oppressive system). This is so alien to anarchist politics (especially those of us who are into workerism and anarcho-syndicalism) that it barely warrants refutation. As anarchists, we strive to organise collectively against those oppressive relationships that fuck up our lives, but as women anarchists, we're expected to go it alone against the most complex, intimate and oppressive relationships.

In anarchist thought, it's up to the oppressed to organise and overthrow the oppressor. But when you're talking about insidious, hidden relationships of power that disrupt even the most intimate relationships (of partnership, voluntary union, love, child raising, co-working) in subtle ways; you can't simply overthrow the oppressors. They are our partners in the species, if nothing else. Valerie Solanas in her "SCUM Manifesto" suggested eliminating men from the planet as a sure-fire way to combat male oppression. People called her crazy (and let's face it, she probably was), but this course of action is pretty much what is expected of anarchist women - to rise up against their oppressors in the same way that the working class will rise up against the ruling class to purge them from this earth, because men don't really want to deal with the issue of themselves as oppressor. Anarchism seems to give women the choice of either eliminating men, or bearing the cross of women's oppression. Even that language is so insidious! "Women's oppression" as though we own and perpetuate the oppression of ourselves as women! Ha. It's "oppression of women by a system which privileges men". The only way to disrupt male privilege is for men to consciously cease to engage in male privilege.

3. Feminism is just about shaming men to get power over them, and this is divisive of the working class as a revolutionary agent

It is the power that men wield over women that divides working class men

from working class women. The only way in which working class women anarchists are divisive is by demanding an end to the privilege held over us. The way to strengthen class solidarity is to strengthen the relationships between men and women within the class, and this means an end to oppression of women, as women, by working class men. This will mean an appraisal of the roles that men and women play within class struggle, an appraisal of the gender balance in anarchist organising, an appraisal of how often we all clean the toilet or take out the garbage, and on and on until the class is actually united in struggle for a better life for all (not just male revolutionaries united and supported by unpaid female domestic labour) ... Power to the sisters and therefore to the class.

4. When a man has other forms of dis-privilege (like class, knowledge, race, access to money) then this automatically dissolves his gender privilege.

I'm Caucasian. I went to uni (but didn't finish). I was a gifted child (but not very). I was born into the arse-end of the working class (but didn't fit in there because I was fairly clever, and hated for it). My job pays me well, for what I do, but I'll probably never own my own house - not even in cessnock. I'm not in a lesbian relationship, and never have been. I buy new clothes, but I don't dress like a corporate woman. What is the sum total of my privilege? My privilege can't be weighted and summed to a round number, and then compared against everyone else (if nothing else, that's a hierarchy, and we're against those).

The myth that privileges can be balanced does media miracles for white liberals (and those wanting to appear so). Take the Bush administration in the 'states: Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell - 2 Black people (one a woman) in very high positions in the government, so Bush must be a tolerant, anti-racist, all-round good guy. No! Two millionaires who have no trouble developing and enacting racist, anti-woman, anti-worker policies to further their own aims. They've got no sympathy with the working class because their blackness is only skin-deep. They've been excused from the negative connotations of blackness and womanhood in exchange for selling their image as symbols of tolerance AND participation in dominance over others.

Anarchists should know better. Blackness, or womanhood, or being working class doesn't excuse you from responsibility over your own daily relationships with other people. This includes relationships of co-operation and of dominance. When men are being oppressors as men, over women as women, then their privilege should be apparent to all.

5. Women already have gender equality in many countries today.

Women do not even have gender parity in lots of trades, professions and positions of trust today. Lots of middle class women appear to have an equality of opportunity, but that isn't nearly the same as an end to gender-based oppression.

A note on men and maleness

I've talked here about "men", "men's privilege", "patriarchy" etc. I want to make clear that this is by no means all men that I'm talking about. This has parallels with class - not all ruling class people are evil. Lots of them just go to work, do their jobs and it never crosses their minds that thousands of people can lose their jobs and livelihoods at a stroke of their pen. Some of them would even think that they truly deserve their six-figure pay cheques (after all, it's only enough for a house in the country and a flat in the town). Only a few really live like kings, and most of them have a genuine job that they do which lets them explain away their privilege as something they've earned.

Not all men hate all women. Only a few would actually hate them all, and most might only have slight feelings of disharmony with specific women they didn't get along with. Men are still socialised to be aggressive (and women to be passive), they have a myriad of reasons to explain their behaviour as natural and normal. BUT this doesn't mean that their behaviour is natural and normal or a neutral way to behave.

If you're a man, and you've got to the end, woo. Maybe your behaviour is really cool and good, and you're not a sexist dickhead at all. But, what do you do when your women anarchist friends need to stand up to someone who is being a sexist dickhead, who is exercising his power and privilege over them because they are women?



Text taken from <http://annaaniston.blogspot.com/>

Distributed by:

More copies can be downloaded from www.zabalaza.net/zababooks