

TOWARDS A FAMILY-FRIENDLY RADICAL MOVEMENT:

INTERGENERATIONAL

LIBERATION FOR ALL

"Making children is the most anti-revolutionary thing you can do. We should not subsidise other people's lifestyles. If you breeders want childcare, then organise it amongst yourselves."

- Anonymous comment
on Infoshop.org



ZABALAZA BOOKS

WWW.ZABALAZA.NET

TOWARDS A
FAMILY-FRIENDLY
RADICAL MOVEMENT:
INTERGENERATIONAL
LIBERATION FOR ALL

Text found at:

<http://elevenoclockalchemy.wordpress.com/2010/11/02/towards-a-family-friendly-radical-movement-intergenerational-liberation-for-all/>



Footnotes:

1. This essay is generally intended for the predominantly white activist community, especially the anarchist community. This includes people that consider themselves post-left, autonomist, progressive, radical, insurrectionist, and revolutionary, as well as any formulation of 'anarchist'. This is due to my observation (and gross generalisation) that white communities and White Culture often have difficulty seeing the value of intergenerationality, although this is often less true of subsegments of white culture. I write from my perspective as a white, Southern/Gaelic, queer, middle-class raised, poor-for-almost-two-decades, food-stampin' mama.
2. M/others: (self-identified single, teen and welfare mamaz) definition from the Allied Media Conference 2010
3. Comments after article: <http://honeymoons.about.com/b/2007/01/07/screaming-3-year-old-ejected-from-plane.htm>
4. 1995 UN Human Development Report, Ch. 4.
See http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr_1995_en_chap4.pdf
5. Crittenden, Ann; *The Price of Motherhood*, 2001; Henry Holt and Co.; p. 6
6. *Don't Leave Your Friends Behind* zine is a great resource for allies and those who need help planning rad childcare. There's a world beyond childcare, too - if you are planning a conference, you might consider a "kids track". If you publicize it, chances are, a whole new group will come to partake of your event.
See <http://dontleaveyourfriendsbehind.blogspot.com/>
7. <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/810>

10 Towards a Family-Friendly Radical Movement

war. These young people have a political, technical and cultural training that we who began the Zapatista movement did not have. This youth is now, more and more, sustaining our troops as well as leadership positions in the organisation.”

A culture that does not embrace children, and our elders, is a culture of death. A revolutionary movement that is intolerant of children will always be stuck in an adolescent, easily co-opted phase, bubbling up and then fading into irrelevance. Whether you are a parent or an ally, helping to pass on our culture of resistance to the next generation is one of the most powerful ways of saying, “We’re here! Get ready, because soon it’s going to be OUR TURN!”

“Making children is the most anti-revolutionary thing you can do. We should not subsidise other people’s lifestyles. If you breeders want childcare, then organise it amongst yourselves.”

- Anonymous comment on Infoshop.org

There’s more where that came from.

While many revolutionary and radical communities embrace families, intolerance of parents and children is a stance that still has a foothold in many circles. Scorn towards mothers, children and families is hardly a revolutionary mentality. In fact, this position is a direct holdover from capitalist, authoritarian ideology. Unfortunately, instead of challenging this rhetoric as reactionary, anarchists and other radicals often accept it in our midst.¹

Mainstream culture generates a steady stream of contempt towards mamas and kids. Any parent can tell you how common it is to hear statements like, “Some people just shouldn’t be allowed to procreate,” or complaints about how the Worst Thing Ever is to sit down for a flight next to a young child, or a baby. How strollers are forever in the way. How breastfeeding is disgusting and offensive. How the unruly child in the checkout line or the coffee shop is obviously the product of a lazy mother whose incompetence is assumed after only a few moments’ familiarity. How mamas on welfare and teen mamas should, basically, eat shit and die (but have a Happy Mother’s Day!). This judgment, eye-rolling and hatred flows freely in our society. Interestingly, as it becomes less and less generally acceptable to express a blanket intolerance towards women, mothers—and by association, their children—are still a “safe” repository for cultural scorn. Any m/other can tell you—it’s always open season on her and her sisters.²

To offer an illustration of this dynamic: a couple of years ago, there was an incident on an Air Tran flight. The crew ejected a mother with a screaming 3-year-old child from the flight before the plane took off. Similar occurrences are relatively common and women often organise around them—mothers kicked out of restaurants for breastfeeding (its legality notwithstanding), cafes declared kid-free zones, et cetera. There is often media coverage, complete with the peanut gallery, which usually weighs in on the mothers in question as if witch burnings might be an option. If on-line comments are any measure, plenty of people were in agreement with the Air Tran decision. Here’s one: “Good to see that at least some airlines throw out the inconsiderate parents with their brats. Seriously, that should happen more often. If

Special thanks to Vikki, China, Rahula, Jen, Erik, Tomas, Talia, Sienna and everyone on the A-parenting list for the continuous collective discussion over the years that helped me to develop this work.

your damn kid can't shut up, stay off of airplanes. I don't see why anyone else, be it crew or passengers, should have to put up with unruly brats. It's about time that entitlement-ridden parents learn their lesson." Here's another comment from a different website: "Parents of small children should except [sic] the responsibilities [sic] of their [sic] decision to have these mewling brats and let those of us who were smart enough not to make the asinine [sic] mistake of parenthood, have the peace we so richly deserve." ³ The point should be made that this blanket intolerance of parents lands disproportionately, and squarely, on the backs of women.

This is a value system clearly dictated by capitalism. While giving lip service to the sanctity of motherhood and putting social pressure on women to procreate – alas, soldiers and workers do not come from thin air—in actuality, a capitalist framework places a very low value on child rearing and penalizes all women (some far more than others) economically and socially for becoming mothers. This is particularly true in the US version of capitalism. Mothers on the low-end of this totem pole (whether single, of colour, receiving government assistance, poor, young, or undocumented) are the recipients of increasingly complicated layers of discrimination, intolerance, and exploitation.

Unpaid caregiving (for children, the disabled and the elderly) is not measured in the gross domestic product of the US, or any other nation-state. If unpaid family-based labour were calculated as part of the world GDP, it would amount to over 1/3 of the gross domestic product of the entire world.⁴ One conclusion to be drawn from this information is that the exploitation of the unpaid work of women is a precondition for the success of global capitalism. Capitalism, as a system, depends on this uncompensated family-centred labour, meanwhile penalizing women—the very people whose labour makes the system possible—for doing this work. Put another way, we can say that global capitalism is erected on the backs of women (then, adding insult to injury, women are often scapegoated for capitalism's woes: see "welfare mothers are ruining the fabric of our society" rhetoric).

In the US, motherhood is the single biggest risk factor for poverty in old age.⁵ Though mothers are the most impacted, this effect is not confined to gender. Anyone choosing to devote their time to the unpaid caregiving of children, people with disabilities, or our elders is subject to economic and social hardship and isolation. This family work is simply invisible and uncompensated under capitalism. It's also worth noting that children themselves embody much that capitalism discourages and devalues: they are not productive in the traditional sense. They are often disorderly, reluctant to be controlled, and naturally distrustful of authority.

A hyper-individualist society takes no collective responsibility for children. It says that your choice to become a parent is yours alone; therefore an expectation of help from non-parents is unreasonable. This idea gets plenty of play in radical and anarchist circles, as another comment on Infoshop.org, in response to an article (penned by myself), advocating for the inclusion of families in the anarchist community, demonstrates: "Get this homegirl – I'm a woman and I don't care about your fucking kid. Clearly I must be internalising patriarchy if I don't drop everything I CARE ABOUT TO DEAL WITH YOUR CHILD. Does this mean I think you or your

against the nuclear [family] situation I find so isolating. I've lived collectively for the last five years (2 with a baby) and I wouldn't change it for the world. It helps that we've developed our relationships with each other and that our community is small and so we're able to better support each other."

Jacob says, "Our 16 month old loves a lot of our community members and runs laughing to hug them whenever we stop by or they stop by. At first it wasn't quite this way and we did have to have a community meeting about the breeder/non-breeder divide, and now some friends of ours defend us parents really furiously when they hitch and travel around."

Jason says, "Santa Cruz, CA has an enormously strong radical movement that is effective and beautiful, and they LOVE babies, they seriously love babies, you've never seen so many families at an infoshop. During the 2009 Santa Cruz Anarchist convergence which included a book fair and freeschool conference, they set up childcare throughout the entire 4 day event and prior to the event they did their best to help people get set up with places to stay, they had specific kid friendlier houses set up for incoming families. AND I went to multiple workshops that dealt with baby/family/youth AND older generation issues, every workshop I went to had babies in the crowd and never once did I see anyone be less than welcoming to families, it's already part of the culture in the rad scene there."

Roberto says: "What people don't realize about children is, in an indigenous world, they are our teachers and angels sent to straighten our li'l childish asses up. Children Are Important, they are the next generation, they are US."

Children are a joy to have around. Yes, they're also a pain in the ass, but so are adults. Children tend to lighten the atmosphere of any given event. I've been to meetings which were stuck in intransigent bickering and petty-minded back and forth fighting, and seen the presence of a child alone make people realize their shoddy behaviour.

Kids offer simple and straightforward ideas for change. They are solution-oriented people who are still young enough not to have been completely disempowered and brainwashed by our culture. A world where everyone is free is easily within the realm of a child's imagination. Kids are powerful allies to have in your camp. They understand the logic of direct action more than most adults. A child's opinion can give you a fresh take on a problematic situation and often bring more wisdom than a whole roomful of adults put together.

A mature and effective radical and revolutionary movement has nothing to lose and everything to gain by creating multigenerational communities of resistance. A powerful example of the strength that can come from a generation raised in struggle and freedom is mentioned in the Zapatista's Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona: "It so happens that our insurgents, insurgentas, militants, local and regional responsables, as well as support bases, who were youngsters at the beginning of the uprising, are now mature men and women, combat veterans and natural leaders in their units and communities. And those who were children in that January of '94 are now young people who have grown up in the resistance, and they have been trained in the rebel dignity lifted up by their elders throughout these 12 years of

must pair off and form a household unit in order to experience parenthood). The more we can raise our children in an accepting community where each child has many adults who commit to an ongoing caregiving role, the less every individual who wants a close relationship with a child will feel compelled to become a parent. When children find belonging in a larger, low-resource community, less people will feel the need to have their own biological children.

The population control argument is tone deaf to freedom struggles around the world. Many communities and cultures identify a form of resistance as creating the next generation of fighters—their children. This includes tribal groups, Palestinians, and other cultures whose right to bear children/exist has been contested by the corporate state. “Breeder” is also a word with a continuous history of racist use, used (both historically, and to this day) by white supremacists to describe slaves and poor women of colour. Population control rhetoric (see the Sierra Club) often uses the same arguments that many ultra right wing groups/white power groups are making about the world’s oppressed populations. Let’s stop using the vocabulary of fascists.

A community committed to revolutionary liberation can agree—we should be free to decide to procreate or not procreate. Women should not be under political pressure to get pregnant or stay childless, whether under the rubric of population reduction, in the name of God and Country, or by any other coercive ideology. Being a mother should not be viewed as a centrality for women, or the pinnacle of womanhood, but a choice to be freely made without experiencing political coercion.

Finally, let’s speak pragmatically. In a revolutionary struggle that needs all the support we can get, why cut off the most powerful source of support possible – new generations? Taking the long view: in twenty years, you, me, and our comrades will be the older generation in the struggle (unless we’re living in a post-revolutionary society). If our liberation struggle has gained the reputation of being child-haters, why should youth feel any attachment to us, or choose to join our ranks as they grow older? If we insist on insulting parents and children, we will ensure that anarchism remains an insular, irrelevant movement of twenty-somethings who eventually drop out, rather than a multi-generational tidal wave of resistance that will meet our objectives.



This brings us to the question: what do intergenerational communities of resistance look like?

Connie says, “Everyone in our community is very supportive and has developed relationships with my children separate of me. I get to live vicariously through them in raising a girl, since I have two boys. I’d say this came out of necessity (financial, help in childcare) as well as a desire to share my life with folks. It’s a direct stand

child should be treated badly? No. But I don’t want kids and I don’t want to help you take care of yours.”

Milton Friedman would be proud.



Why do we allow anti-parent and kid rhetoric in spaces devoted to liberation? What are some of the various ways that anti-family attitudes manifest in anarchist/radical communities?

First of all, the dominant practice in the US is to segregate people by age, so many of us raised unquestioningly in dominant, white, US culture are not socialised to spend time around children or include them in conversations – much less consider their needs in a space, or provide a space explicitly devoted to children’s liberation. People unused to the company of kids are often wary of them because they can be painfully honest, direct and may not hide their disinterest in you. Elements of unfamiliarity and discomfort are often at play, and many of our gatherings, spaces and communities habitually take the default form of “adult-only”, indirectly (but repeatedly) excluding children and their caregivers.

This is simple enough to solve, given awareness of the problem and a collective willingness to expand our comfort zones. But actively exclusionary attitudes towards families and caregivers are less easily remedied. When spaces are unwelcome to children and parents, over and over again, regardless of any attempts on the parts of parents and allies to create a space of inclusion, we must assume that there is resistance to the presence of families. Or, as event organisers may have discovered, childcare is difficult work that requires tight planning, starting months beforehand, in order to come off without a hitch. Sometimes it’s easier to “forget” about it or claim that insurance won’t cover it. Word to the wise, event planners: two weeks before the conference, when interested parents start asking you about childcare arrangements, it is far too late to try to whip something up. At this tardy point, attempts to create childcare often fall short and may result in chaos and an unsafe atmosphere (not to mention that this last-minute responsibility often falls to burnt out women organisers or parents themselves). In my opinion, it’s better to chalk it up to experience, create a family hang-out spot, and put childcare on the list for the next event (starting on logistics from Day 1 of general planning). Good intentions are not enough—if you offer childcare, safety is a top concern, and you can’t afford to make big mistakes.⁶

Perhaps I’m alone, but I believe that every event, unless inappropriate for children, should be accessible for kids of all ages (and their mothers, and fathers, and caregivers). Within many circles, this is often not the case. Saying a meeting is welcome to children, and then tolerating eye rolls and penetrating glances towards mothers and kids when little ones vocalize or run around (because they have not perfected

the art of sitting still for a three-hour meeting) is not true accessibility. Caregivers often leave these events early, with the grim frustration that comes from knowing that our world truly is not set up with parents and young children in mind, and being reminded of this, rudely and repeatedly. In our society, life as the parent of a small child can be socially isolating, and many public places become “de facto” inaccessible. Scenarios such as these, in which children and parents are treated as an intrusion, are part of the problem, not the solution.

If you are hosting an event, it is helpful and kind to make a point of publicly welcoming the children there – both so the children feel welcome, and so the participants know that caregivers are not “out of place” for bringing a kid around. Yes, children can be disruptive or distracting—so it’s up to us as a revolutionary community to figure out the best ways of fitting them in, and empowering them, so that good work gets done and everyone goes home happy.

La Luby, a labour activist, describes the “meeting culture” she has experienced as a mother: “Why am I barred from your feminist meeting, your environmental meeting, your political meetings, or your slow/local food/support farmers gathering, or... whatever? Why are those spaces considered ‘inappropriate’ for children? And why do you sigh and complain about public apathy when you have this arbitrary rule about ‘appropriateness’? Why is it so ‘inappropriate’ to raise a child with political consciousness and knowledge of power dynamics? Especially when she is already encountering this stuff in her own life, and needs a framework to put it in? It boggles my mind. It especially boggles my mind because I remember when it was not like this in the US. I grew up going to political gatherings of all stripes.... and protests, and picket lines. When and why did left-leaning people buy into right-wing ideas of parenting and the role of mothers? Why are left-leaning people participating in the backlash against women’s growing political strength?”

One common assumption is that parents no longer have what it takes to be a successful activist. When Rahula became pregnant, she had this experience: “A ‘comrade’ (someone I had done a lot of running in the streets and food-not-bombing with) said, ‘Oh well, there go two good activists,’ as though surely my partner and I would no longer be active in any way, now that we were procreating.” The notion that parents have nothing of value to offer (and stale politics to boot) can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as many revolutionaries and radicals with children find spaces less and less tolerant of them and eventually tire of doing work or seeking community in an unwelcome and alienating atmosphere. Additionally, the expectation that a parent have the exact same level of activity as a childless activist is eerily similar to the capitalist boss expecting a mother of a newborn to come straight back to work to resume productivity. Parents may not be able to do as much as they could prior to having children (although some may do more) but being a parent often builds our resolve, focuses our commitment to change and makes us more valuable, accountable and responsible. In my case, becoming a mother was the event that cemented my ties to anarchism and anti-capitalism. It’s best not to assume that parents are post-radical or post-militant – we lose too many comrades this way. Some of the most effective militant activity that I am aware of is undertaken by

mothers. Some of us mindfully continue the high-risk activity that we did before we had children. This is as it should be if we want to create a revolutionary trajectory.

Anarchists often voice the opinion that all parents are capitalist sell-outs, as if parenting is just one more institution to be demolished. Those that make this assumption fail to have an appreciation for the culture of revolutionary, anti-authoritarian parenting. They don’t recognize that the problem is not parents themselves as a universal entity, but the cultural style of parenting that many of us have grown up in.

Possibly the most divisive issue in many communities is the question of population. The idea that humans should decrease our numbers or procreate less often can devolve into contempt for kids who are already here, and their mothers, who then get slapped with the unfriendly label “breeders”. Anarchist parents and their allies have plenty of feedback about this:

Brad says: “The fact that hating on parents has become so widespread and fashionable is troubling. The fact that elderly folks are just about as ‘welcome’ as kids is also problematic. I don’t think anyone needs to hear that our industrial-civilization social structure is fucked, and I’d suggest that the fucked-ness wrapped up in calling someone a ‘breeder’ comes the detritus of an atomised human experience, as opposed to a reasoned ideal to be strived towards.”

Dave says: “There may be ‘too many of us’, but what is far more significant is the consumption levels of the population. A far better tactic would be to massively reduce the average consumption level – which of course is already far lower than ‘average’ in many parts of the world. Activists condemning other people for having children are already on the wrong page. It’s an inherently anti-human standpoint, demonstrating incredible negativity about one’s own capability for positive impact. My advice: lead by example! Go and create sustainable communities, and learn the skills to help others make the transition to living in them.”

Adam says: “It is very easy for a white male from an industrialized country to say, ‘No one should have children’. When the main impact of a policy like this is on women and particularly women in non-industrialized countries... over population is just one of the things that is causing the destruction of the ecosystem. Consumption, particularly that of industrialized countries is another. These all have to be looked at and debated.”

The 12 percent of the world’s population that lives in North America and Western Europe accounts for 60 percent of private consumption spending, while the one-third living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa accounts for only 3.2 percent.⁷ This over-consumption is, in effect, force-fed to the population by the powers that be. Let’s stop needlessly targeting parents and kids as the “problem” and keep the heat on the enemy—the most egregious polluters and consumers by far—the military and corporate industrial complexes.

Although I do not advocate for any ideology that advances population control as a realistic consideration, one point that may not be immediately apparent to zero-population growth promoters is: a culture that accepts and embraces families can have the indirect effect of lowering birth rates. A child-inclusive community helps us break away from the nuclear family expectation (those that wish to procreate