

APPINITY

issue #1: privilege



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This here is the first issue of Affinity, an irregular zine providing space for critical reflection and analysis of strategies for resisting the dominant culture.

We want the words presented here to form part of a conversation, not a one-way communication, and therefore strongly encourage people to respond to what's written, or contribute articles of their own, which can be published in future issues.

Contact: blackirispress@riseup.net

have to get out of our comfort zones and face up to what those less privileged than us are telling us about how our privilege affects them. If we aren't attracting certain kinds of people into our groups and communities we need to find out why and do something about it. Sometimes the solution is as easy as actually listening to what members of an excluded group are saying about your community rather than assuming that you know what that is. This doesn't mean being filled with a paralysing guilt; it means actually working out what the problems are and doing something about them. We need to be open about our ideas and why we are opposed to hierarchical systems that favour some people and some cultures over others, and why they must be changed. Rather than putting people off getting involved by telling them how bad they are for being privileged, we need to empower them to get more deeply involved in the movement against privilege.

Guilt never changes people – it lets them off the hook. Guilt gives the privileged a small punishment that they feel absolves them for having privileged status. If we are going to change the world for the better we need to feel good about what we are doing, without having to claim a special position over others or wallow in meaningless angst. It is the privilege that needs to be attacked, not the person.

Some personal reflections on privilege and resistance.....

The words below are an attempt to communicate some personal thoughts and reflections on the role of privilege when it comes to engaging in acts of resistance against the dominant culture. Whilst much of what follows emanates from considerations of my own privileged position within varied and overlapping hierarchical relationships and structures, this has been written in the hope that some of it may resonate with the experience of others and therefore contribute to a conversation about the tensions that arise from the benefits and advantages a minority of us receive from the dominant culture we are (hopefully) trying to destroy.

So, from the beginning.....

Born white, male and middle class, and growing up in an affluent small town, my childhood was secure, sheltered, and decidedly non-precarious. I was aware as I was growing up that there were considerable amounts of violence and suffering in the world, but this awareness was cultivated almost exclusively through the dominant culture's media, and so for a long time was tainted and skewed by its inherent bias. The misery and deprivation caused by poverty, war, famine etc. were made to feel distant and somewhat unreal, news of which was filtered through the limited

spaces created for it within a culture industry that largely succeeded in fostering high levels of passivity in its audience. For the most part, these instances of suffering were presented as unfortunate aberrations in the normal course of things, accidents in the usually peaceful functioning of the global political and economic system. This was an easy trick to pull on people who, like me, inhabited a privileged bubble in which such violence was very rarely directly experienced. When this façade was impossible to maintain, the suffering of the exploited became a necessary evil, an unfortunate yet inevitable reality. Some people were poor. Others were rich. Innocent people die in war. That's just the way things were. There was no alternative.

Whilst the structural violence of society remained somewhat hidden and unknown to me, I experienced my own forms of deprivation at the hands of the dominant culture by way of prolonged struggles with feelings of isolation and alienation, feelings I now realise were very much a consequence of the individuated way in which the current system forces people to live. Situated within institutions including the family and the school system that were highly ordered and controlled, there was not only very little room for any sense of autonomy or freedom, but there was also a constant struggle to find meaning in a way of life that seemed strangely devoid of authentic experience. The paths offered to me had already been

it. I see very little attempt being made to broaden involvement in the movement and a lot of lying back on rather undeserved laurels. Even within our ghetto, inequalities fail to be addressed. There are many people who treat 'the scene' as a holiday resort where they can live in a more permissive environment without challenging the hierarchies that underpin it.

But to reduce all these ills to the 'original sin' of privilege is just to fall into the trap of resentment – of feeling that if we can just make the privileged feel bad enough about it we will change things. We create a moralistic system where the privileged have to work out of this sinful state through showing a commitment to vigorous activism (probably accompanied by continual confessions of their worthlessness). You can't overcome hierarchy by inverting it. However good it might feel to try to make the rich feel shit about themselves it's not going to do anything about the system that produces rich people and poor people. Moralism is, at best, a distraction from actually changing society for the better, and, at worst, a sure way of demonstrating that your revolution is just another path to bullying and unfreedom.

So how can we actually change things so that privilege is made to disappear and people get to be as free as they want to be? For a start we

Neither tolerance nor resentment

It seems only honest to start a discussion about privilege by saying where I'm coming from. I'm a white, middle-class male, enjoying a large number of privileges in the hierarchical society in which we live. However, through listening to and reading the words of those who battle against the interlocking systems of privilege, I try to make myself aware of these privileges and work to undermine them to create a more equal society.

Privilege is a short-hand, not a set of absolutes. It is straightforward to talk about white, middle-class male privilege because most members of that group are advantaged in society due to the conceptual hierarchies that benefit them. That does not mean that there aren't plenty of authoritarians who are working-class, who are female or who are non-white or that those groups are somehow mystically immune from dominating others. Privilege is not an excuse to be abusive. A serious examination of privilege does not just look at simple classifications and try to work out who trumps who, but examines the interactions between different social values and implicit hierarchies.

This is not a call to tolerate the unwillingness to change of many within our circles. There is no doubt that the anarchist milieu suffers from a chronic lack of diversity, and that elitism and snobbery are rampant within

set beforehand, and the dissonance between those prescribed paths and as of then unarticulated but insurgent desires significantly contributed to feelings of depression and loneliness. The desire to escape was at times unbearable, but at all times unfulfilled because of a sense of dependency on those very same oppressive institutions that quickly crushed any emergent confidence of being able to survive outside those structures. There was no alternative. And so the only possible escape was retreat into isolation, non-participation as a means of salvaging some sense of dignity or authenticity, borne of frustration over the inability to engage in meaningful communication with those around me (communication that was not mediated by pre-determined social roles).

Eventually, via some of the cracks that open up from time to time in the desert of mainstream culture that let out something meaningful, I began to develop a political consciousness of the reasons behind these experiences. Concurrent to this was a gradual erosion of the façade that had existed up until then in relation to my relationship with the violence and suffering I was aware of, a disturbing but illuminating understanding of the extent to which the privilege I had experienced up to that point was predicated on unimaginable amounts of structural violence and oppression, both historical and contemporary. One of the immediate reactions to this realisation was a feeling of responsibility that I had to do something to

help those below me on the hierarchy for whose suffering I was partly responsible. Combined with at times quite intense feelings of guilt, this was a principal motivation in regard to my initial forays into political activism.

Thankfully, after some time I began to recognise the problematic assumptions that permeated this relationship between feelings of guilt and the responsibility to do something, the principal one being the adoption of a logic of representation, an attitude of acting on behalf of the oppressed and exploited; I was partly responsible for their suffering, and materially benefited from it, and therefore it was my job to sort it out. By adopting such a position, I was (unknowingly at the time) reflecting the very same attitudes that keep such hierarchies in place, accepting the pretence that the oppressed and exploited were also powerless, or somehow incapable of helping themselves.

In order to avoid adopting the superiority complexes of the class I was a part of, I realised that I had to come to an awareness of how those in a position of privilege, like me, must understand and reflect upon the different forms of oppression they themselves face from the dominant culture. True, the forms of oppression I faced don't compare to those who find themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy, but then it's not a

shy about using this confidence to further their own ends within the communities they now leech off.

The discourse around U.K anarchist circles is often one which emphasises sustainability, the necessity of being tolerant to those who may not have the capacity to always be working towards radical social change, that burn out happens to us all, that we should take care of each other, be tolerant of one another abilities, capacities and tendencies. This all sounds great. However, I don't believe that it should be acted upon uncritically, the notions expressed here have broad parameters which enables them to be taken advantage of whether deliberately or not. We can briefly ignore the fact that the majority of people in the world who are taking part in struggles to radically change society do not have the choice as to whether their efforts are sustainable, or whether they have the capacity, and abilities, capacities and tendencies have to be developed, grown and broadened whilst in the midst of a struggle without a tranquillity tent. These notions often seem to me to be ones suffused in middle class self-protectionism, the obsession with finding the inner self, the true "me", and more than anything else desperate to protect the comforts, status and pleasures that they have for themselves. They act not in solidarity with a community or a struggle, but instead focus on what is the most they can give which requires them spending as little effort or energy as possible.

social capital as they encourage others to become reliant on them for that particular skill. I am talking about many different people, whose one primary characteristic is their selfishness, which they may or may not acknowledge, a selfishness which says that a humane and fair society is one in which I can do whatever makes me feel the best. That they are only able to do this due to the hard work and energy of those around them who have spent many years creating a community of support which encourages individual liberty. Their actions ignore the efforts that are made to sustain the community. What creases me most about this group of individuals is that as I mentioned they do tend to be white, middle class, males, most of whom in mainstream communities would be considered weak, pathetic outsiders, in fact most of them probably had their dinner money taken from them by school bullies, they're essentially consumers of alternative cultures, because their main view of mainstream culture was from the inside of a toilet bowl as they had their heads flushed down it. Yet, they don't for a second pause when using their social position and privilege in order to dominate and subordinate others within the community who do not have the same position or privilege. Through their class, gender and race position they have been given a confidence by a society which situates maleness, whiteness and financial wealth as superior traits to others, and they are not

competition in any case. Only by coming to a deep understanding of how capitalism and the state, the whole dominant culture, are fucking us all over in varied and infinite ways can we build affinities between different communities that cut across the privilege divide.

Another important result of developing such an awareness is that it creates fertile ground in which to confront and hopefully overcome fear. Namely, the fear of what we think we've got to lose. When we realise that what we're afraid of losing isn't actually worth saving, we are much more likely to put more at risk in our struggles against the dominant system. Moreover, to be in any way effective, or to have any claim to authenticity, our actions must put this privilege at risk, in fact actively attempt to destroy the system that has made it possible. Strategies that don't put this privilege at risk are inherently ineffective, because by definition they pose no threat to the system that perpetuates them.

It is only by putting this privilege at risk that we can begin to build meaningful affinities with those who, due to their position within the hierarchy, find themselves more vulnerable to the structural violence perpetuated by the dominant system. In building these affinities, however, the burden of responsibility falls on those who find themselves in positions of privilege to understand the ways in which their race, age, gender, class

etc. have concrete and tangible effects on their interactions with those lower down on the hierarchy. This is often difficult as it requires the unlearning of thousands of internalised and socialized ways of being and relating to people that have become second nature. Take the question of violence for example. The dominant culture inculcates a notion that violence (or indeed any kind of eruption or meaningful intervention in life) is always illegitimate, illegal, immoral etc. unless performed by the state (or occasionally some other agent, but only if the direction of violence is down the hierarchy rather than up). The internalisation of this principle by those who have been sheltered from the everyday violence of society creates a potent obstacle when it comes to engaging in acts of resistance that transcend the dominant culture's codes of legitimacy. It is exactly these kind of internal barriers that we (the privileged) must deconstruct if we are to successfully join others who, having been forced to bear the brunt of the everyday violence of the state and capital, are engaged in a struggle to defend themselves against the forces that threaten their lives.

Other perspectives.....

Against Tolerance

This article intends to question the current discourse that suggests that in order to work towards a humane society in which hierarchies are dismantled, and no person is oppressed by another, then we must act now as if we already lived in that society. Thus, the discourse goes we must be show tolerance towards those who may not feel able to take part in the struggle to create that society, those who feel that their skills may lay in other areas, such as putting on parties for us to celebrate our achievements or forget our failures. This article wishes to question whether the feelings that these people have rest not on their capabilities, but in their relationship with contemporary society and the powers and privileges which it affords them.

During this article I will reference an almost abstract "they", so maybe a little clarification is necessary. I am predominantly (although not exclusively) talking about white, middle class, young men, who prescribe to a non-violent position without acknowledging the violence inherent of their own social position. I am also talking about those who lack a diversity of strategy and tactics, who position themselves as specialists or experts in one particular area, which enables them to strengthen their