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June 5, 2020

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Deconstructing the Token Minority Defense

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“I can’t be racist, I have black friends!” We have all heard this mantra used in defense of bigotry and poor behavior, from people across the entire political spectrum, with infinite variations to justify queerphobia, xenophobia, religious intolerance, and more. We all know it’s a load of bullshit, but just how bullshit is it? Simply put, it flattens the incredibly complex issue of systematic bigotry into a reductive binary of in-group and out-group, and argues that it’s impossible for members of the in-group to commit discrimination against other members of the in-group, which is plainly untrue.

Let’s consider an equivalent but much more obviously absurd statement: “the fox knows the hen for it spent a night in the hen house”. It is true that the fox spent a night in the hen house...to kill and eat the hen! Much like the token minority argument, this statement ignored the inherent imbalance of power between the two; the fox may indeed know the hen – as delicious food, which has nothing to do with the feeling of the hen when it’s being eaten by the fox. Equivalently, just because someone is an ally of minority groups does not mean they know what it feels like to be marginalized and oppressed.

Obviously, the above is an argument by absurdity, since allies aren't preying upon marginalized people, but it's a visceral reminder of entrenched power structures: minority groups are often fearful of contradicting our privileged allies, for fear of losing what little support these allies had deemed fit to grace us with. This is why tone-policing is so toxic and arguably do more to perpetrate systematic oppression than the odd violent bigot: when the privileged tells the marginalized to shut the fuck up and be nicer, often the minority feels as if we have no choice but to subject to the bullying of our "allies."

There's also the matter of boot-lickers, members of minority groups who had bought their way into the power structure of the privileged groups by selling out their own people. There's nothing that a Nazi likes more than a Jewish corroborator like Ben Shapiro, for they can claim that such a boot-licker speaks as a marginalized person when they say they are not oppressed. And it's true: that particular person is not oppressed, they are one of the oppressors, using their token status to help stomping the down-trodden into the ground to maintain their status among the powerful.

Remember, dividing people into groups based on essential attributes like sex or race is an inherently reactionary concept; much of right-wing propaganda thrives on such false equivalence. This is why J. K. Rowling was flatly gaslighting people when she claimed that trans women are "the fox in the hen house"; the fact that she can say such bigoted things and not only get away with it, but even have people like Richard K. Morgan bending backwards to support her, shows that she and transphobes like her are the foxes with the power, while the trans people they abuse are the vulnerable hens.

And it goes beyond just people: a common talking point against Anti-Fascism is that all violence is inherently wrong, so Antifa who break windows or BLM who loot stores are the real Fascists, never mind that the real Fascists - white supremacists - have all the power and could literally get away

with murder. Property damage is not in any way comparable to human death and suffering, and using violence to stop violence is completely different from using violence to maintain power. Nevertheless, the Liberal's love of endless discourse and hand-wringing makes them easy prey for such lies.

We as leftists and especially Anarchists must never fall prey to the beautiful flower of simplicity, for its fruit of false equivalence is a poison to human minds and souls. The real world is messy, complex, and filled with ambiguities; we must be vigilant and constant gardeners, rooting out the grass of preconception from our own minds before it can take roots. Otherwise we would be as easy a prey to right-wing propaganda and conspiracy theories as the Liberals, and become revolutionaries in name only.