

Sober Spaces in the Punk and Anarchist Scenes

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October 2013

Within the punk and anarchist scenes there are many activities that are of interest to a broad spectrum of individuals- including people who drink/smoke/use drugs, people who never have, and people who are recovering addicts to certain substances. The problem is that many of these activities end up being organized in such a way that they are only accessible to people who drink, smoke, or do drugs – or are willing/able to tolerate those who do so. This means that there are significant sections of the populations who are either put in situations that are uncomfortable and lead to mental and physical health problems, even relapse, or are not able to attend at all. It splits our community and it limits our community. This is even a bad situation for people who do drink/smoke/do drugs. Because if they are not exposed to people who are sober they may not realize that they don't always have to get fucked up to have a good time.

At C.L.I.T. (Combating Latent Inequality Together) Fest in RVA in the Summer of 2007, there was a really important discussion about substance use and abuse within the punk scene. There was a combination of users, ex users, straight edgers, sub free folks etc. Basically, the full spectrum was there. Some of the ideas that were brought up were about how hard it is to be a recovering addict of any sort within the punk scene. Many people do not take other's addictions seriously, and spend more time goading them to return to substance abuse than they do supporting them. A lot of people spoke about how hard it was to not use when there was pressure to "be fun again" etc. An issue of venues was brought up. Many punk shows happen at bars and clubs with bars. Even house shows typically include alcohol. A lot of punks will decide not to go to a show if they know they cannot drink there. I went to a house show a year or two ago where money was being taken at the door for the keg, not the bands, so I didn't give any money. I was later chided by someone for not paying for beer I wouldn't drink. That kind of a situation is hella awkward for folks who want to stay sober.

There is a lot of work to be done within the punk scene to be supportive of people with drug addictions and who are in recovery. The creation of sober spaces would be a good start. If there were shows where there was not alcohol more people would be come. Not to mention that those shows would not have to be 21 + and so younger people could come too.

I'm doing a self- education thing right now of learning more about civil rights, because I know jack shit about that time period. I finally read the autobiography of Malcolm X. And I found that

while some parts really frustrated or confused me, other parts made perfect sense. For instance, there were some things that seemed relevant to the straight edge idea- because Malcolm X dealt with substance abuse issues and then stopped using after joining the Nation of Islam.

Here are some Quotes from Malcolm X that particularly struck me:

“One day, I remember, a dirty glass of water was on a counter and Mr. Muhammad put a clean glass of water beside it. ‘You want to know how to spread my teachings?’ he said, and he pointed to the glasses of water. ‘Don’t condemn if you see a person has a dirty glass of water,’ he said, ‘just show them the clean glass of water that you have. When they inspect it, you won’t have to say that yours is better.’” (The Autobiography of Malcolm X 209)

I know I have been guilty of being on the condemning side more often than I ought to have. And while probably none of us will be able to always set a good example and have that be enough (because the temptation to rag on others is too strong), it is a really good idea to keep in mind. Being all righteous does not make people want to be like you, it makes them more likely to rebel just to spite you. Straight Edge people in general could benefit from more leading by example. Be a fun, active, kind person, and others might start asking you about quitting and moving on. If they can see that being edge does not make you an asshole they might be more tempted to join in. And this certainly applies to more things than sobriety. Anarchists and organizers in general can gain a lot of positive energy out of creating new realities and better solutions- not just criticizing the dominant structures.

Another quote:

“I knew that our strict moral code and discipline was what repelled them most. I fired at this point, at the reason for our code. ‘The white man wants black men to stay immoral, unclean and ignorant. As long as we stay in these conditions we will keep on begging him and he will control us. We never can win freedom and justice and equality until we are doing something for ourselves!’” (The Autobiography of Malcolm X 225).

This for me is another strong reason why sobriety and anarchism go so well together. The idea that inebriation is a form of oppression has been brought up in other contexts too, but I still don’t think it is ever brought up enough or taken seriously enough. I don’t know the best way to approach this position- how do you talk to someone about the way that their inebriation contributes to their oppression. It can easily come out sounding so conspiracy theory-ish that people reject it offhand. For many radical anarchist type people, the idea of discipline is not well received.

But self serving discipline is a good thing. Being able to control oneself to one’s benefit is great. Being able to wake up when you want to, exercise, eat well, stay healthy, and not over imbibe are all positive ways of being. The easiest point to strike with anarchists and radicals is how as consumers of certain products they are supporting corporations and practices that they otherwise do not support. People who won’t drink soda but buy cigarettes- or drink beer but refuse to own a car. No one is perfect, and no one should be the hypocrisy cop, because they would first have to arrest themselves, but there are some very blatant ways that people’s substance use and abuse hurts them and is not consistent with everything else they stand for.

Drug abuse hurts our communities, hurts ourselves, and makes us weaker. We need to develop healthier ways of escape. Maybe even more permanent escape...like a better community, neighborhood, town, world?

Another group that I think confronts substance abuse in important ways are the Zapatistas in Chiapas Mexico. They have long had a policy, which is reflected in individual communities of a prohibition on drugs and alcohol. There are multiple reasons for this- the harm caused in their communities from alcohol (ie drunk and irresponsible men not taking care of their families, domestic abuse etc.). Also, if there are illegal drugs being grown, consumed, or trafficked through their regions that is just the excuse the government needs to severely crack down on the Zapatistas. Being intoxicated on any level greatly reduces the alertness of community members who may need to be ready for an attack at any time. I think that the Zapatistas set a good example along these lines of why a revolutionary or even just revolting group ought to not engage in the consumption of drugs or alcohol. There is too much to lose.

There are issues of patriarchy, child abuse, domestic abuse, rape culture, etc. that also stem or are exacerbated by drugs and alcohol and drug and alcohol culture. There are studies and essays and even songs about these correlations. And many valid reasons why drugs and alcohol contribute to making our communities less safe, and less inclusive than they could be and we deserve better.

There are some places where only sober folks go, however the reality of it is that sober people want to be able to hang out with people who sometimes use as well. Typically the sober-only population is pretty small. It would be cool if there could be some compromises by everyone so they could all hang out comfortably sometimes. This will probably look differently in different communities. But it needs to be addressed everywhere.

One thing that I really appreciate is when people go out of their way to check with me about whether or not it is ok for them to drink beer around me, smoke pot or a cigarette in a certain space or whatever. My friend Johnno does that when I'm hanging out with him in New Orleans and I really appreciate it. Asking people if it is ok for you to drink or smoke or blow some coke or eat meat or take your shirt off or kiss them etc. are all ways that we can make others more comfortable and show our respect for them. Because using consent to build healthier relationships has more to it than just sexual consent.

Right now at the Wingnut Anarchist Collective one thing we have been trying is Radical Recovery Support group meetings – a non-AA, non-NA approach to peer support for folks trying to get or stay sober. We also host sober events to make them accessible. But sober folks can't do it alone. There is definitely a real need in the punk and anarchist scenes for non-sober people to step up as allies and attend sober events, host sober events, and take an active role in calling out shitty behavior when it happens. Intoxication is never an excuse.

Here is a list of zines and books I've read that deal with some of these issues that I think are pretty helpful. If you have more or have heard of more please send me links and/or hard copies!

I Shouldn't Have to Explain Why I am Sober – [zinelibrary.info](https://web.archive.org/web/20140615023627/zinelibrary.info/)]

Towards a Less Fucked Up World – https://www.sproutdistro.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/towards_a_less_fucked_up_world.pdf

Anarchy and Alcohol – https://ia802707.us.archive.org/20/items/AnarchyAlcohol/anarchy_and_alcohol-SCREEN.pdf

Privilege and Radical Sobriety Vs. Straightedge – <http://mindovermatterzine.tumblr.com/post/7569644528/privilege-and-radical-sobriety-vs-straight-edge>

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Retrieved on August 21, 2014 from mokarnage.com

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