Notes towards an (anarchist? feminist?) critique of (anarchism? feminism?)

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2004

Contents

Every feminist march I have ever attended has been corralled by cops. And the organizers of these marches cooperate with them. Mind you, I am young, don't get out much, and haven't been to a lot of feminist marches — but maybe that's because in Guelph, feminist marches are rare. Take Back the Night and December 6th memorials occur annually, of course constrained by cops, small numbers, the fatigue of frontline workers and the hesitation of women who have never been in such a space before. Few organizations take on International Women's Day programming and limit themselves to small and do-able events.

One of the highlights of my uneventful feminist life was the World March of Women in October 2000 (also contained by cops). More people showed than at the FTAA protests at Quebec City. However, the march was held on Parliament Hill on a Sunday, when not a politician, bureaucrat or business person was in sight — and the organizers wondered why the March didn't get enough coverage. Public, vocal, visible, collective forms of women's resistance against oppression seem to generally happen three times a year at ritualistic and symbolic marches that do nothing to threaten the very system that is killing women through violence, poverty and exploitation.

Am I the only staunch feminist who finds dominant feminist organizing boring and sometimes downright offensive? I feel that my community of fellow activists can't compensate for this absence of connection with a vibrant women's movement, because anti-capitalist activists are often (but not always) plagued by an inability to account for how capitalism relies on sexism and racism. In more concrete terms, there is not enough activist talk about how US imperialism or the Tory war on the poor in Ontario affect the lives of women in very specific but often unspoken ways.

There is a plethora of writing available in zines, online, and in public and university libraries that examines the praxis of anarcha-feminism and the history of women anarchists. This article is not concerned with classical anarcha-feminism or with the Emma Goldman fetish — it is rather an attempt to briefly critique the dominant women's movement as well as the anarchist movement from the perspective of an activist involved in both. These comments are cursory, general points of departure for what I hope will become a longer article and an ongoing discussion with comrades.

From a divided movement to a homogenized institution?

The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s was rife with political divisions. In the US, for instance, the liberal feminists of the National Organization of Women focused on wining and dining with the likes of Jimmy Carter in order to win the Equal Rights Amendment. These liberal state-o-phile feminists butted heads with The Lavendar Menace, a NOW faction of militant lesbians who were sick and tired of the blatant homophobia of straight feminists. This is not to mention the anti-imperialist and anti-racist tendency of the women's movement that some feminists tried to snuff out (and still try to) with their insistence that the gender system is the one and only class system women ought to bother fighting. Today, however, it seems as though there is little political diversity and division within the feminist organizations that have become veritable institutions. Or at least, if there are divisions, I'm not convinced that most women who don't attend women's studies classes or who don't work as paid professionals within feminist social service agencies would know about them. I get the sense that there are so few and far between options for feminist action that feminists are often expected — by themselves and others — to rally behind whatever large-scale, visible feminist project takes centre stage, regardless of

whether or not we actually agree with its political content. I wouldn't argue against solidarity, but I also wouldn't argue against a vibrant political diversity that is honest about differences amongst women and feminists.

The World March of Women, a global organization that coordinates massive marches and lobbying efforts, promotes the demand to eliminate all poverty and all violence against women and children. These demands could potentially be carried out in ways that are empowering for women — more than just signing a petition or learning about how to vote in the interests of women. Read by an anarchist or socialist, the demand to eliminate poverty could translate into revolution, in the long-term — or at least into direct action casework around housing, disability, immigration and welfare in the short-term. However, the World March of Women, which has garnered the support of practically every major feminist organization many industrialized and newly industrialising countries, envisions the elimination of poverty and violence as a goal that is attainable through encouraging states to "harmonize" their legal apparatuses through the signing of various United Nations conventions. This is one example of how the prickly relationship between feminism and the state poses a problem and a unique opportunity to anti-statist feminists.

Our State, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...

Although exact dates and definitions are debatable, the "second wave" of the women's movement in North America started with consciousness raising groups in the early 1960s and ended with the sex wars of the early 1980s. Somewhere in between, courageous women performed safe but illegal abortions on each other, took battered women in to their homes, and set up haphazard, grassroots rape crisis lines. Services that many women take for granted today at one point never existed, and were started by over-worked but determined women to take matters into our own hands and to begin the transformative work of healing from and combating gendered violence.

This Do-It-Yourself tradition, which began with underground feminist organizing, in some ways continues today in the "third wave" of the women's movement, characterized by a superabundance of vibrators, strap-ons, and homemade riot grrrl zines and demo tapes. Like it or not, the state has supported us through granting funding and passing laws — though never completely on women's terms and sometimes not at all. The state has at least partially supported women's struggles to establish women's shelters, health centres, research programs, community centres, somewhat better legal procedures for rape survivors, abused women, and single mothers — and practically every other landmark in the course of women's recent herstory.

Part and parcel of the women's movement are the more formal efforts within parliament and the courts to guarantee rights, as well as to guarantee recourse to challenging abrogations of these rights. Concepts like "equal rights" have formalized within the state, and as such may have brought about small changes in popular consensus about some basic ethical issues — i.e. discrimination is wrong. The problem with liberal successes in gaining rights is that these rights are only conceptualized as inherent human rights as soon as a state document deems it so. These documents only have power insofar as the state can defend them by means of punishment and coercion, employed by the military, police, prisons, and, in the case of the human rights code in Canada, fines and compensation. To pose the question crudely, what does it mean for women that "equality" is an issue of public concern mostly because the state tells people it should be, and if they don't support it then they're fucked? And what does it mean that the same state that slashes,

freezes, or refuses to create funding for social programs that are needed disproportionately by women — and the same state that brutalizes women and the communities they live in every day — is the same state that also claims to uphold and defend our so- called rights, and on which we depend for the funding of women's services? Lobbying and other liberal political efforts made by the women's movement have increased public knowledge of women's oppression, and women's access to public funding and legal structures that can help us survive in the short-run. These are important. But this comes at the cost of self-emancipation: freeing ourselves by our own means and on our own terms.

One of the implications of the relationship between the women's movement and the state is the condition of the shelter movement. I speak in part from my limited experience with one particular women's organization that runs a women's shelter, but I feel that my suspicions about the shelter movement have been confirmed by other women I have spoken with and some reading that I have done on this topic. Shelters for women and children leaving a violent situation obviously need money to run — to pay staff, to maintain buildings, to offer quality counseling and resources to their clients. The state provides this funding, however funding has not kept up with population and caseload growth especially in recent years under the Tory government in Ontario. Shelters, like most other social service agencies, are cash- strapped. I get the sense that frontline shelter workers are overworked and deal with the same issues many workers face elsewhere: lack of workplace democracy, poor working conditions, and the creation of part-time casual shift work as a way to avoid offering permanent, unionized, full-time positions. Most women's shelters started out with the same structure as grassroots feminist action and consciousness-raising groups — a collective, mostly consensus-based structure. (The legacy of the small-scale, non-hierarchical group contributed to the skills and knowledge of consensus building that activists today take for granted.) As the capacity of shelters grew during the 1980s and 1990s, the collective structures of many shelters (and feminist organizations in general) were gradually replaced by hierarchical boards of directors. Well-established feminist organizations are now characterized by a mass of professional feminist workers (most with degrees in social work, and in some organizations many are white and educated), boards of directors, and executive directors. Feminist activism has become trapped in the livelihoods of privileged professionals.

While the capacity of feminist organizations has grown because of state funding in so far as their services reach more women than they previously did, their dependency on the state has in other ways limited their capacity to grow with grassroots women's struggles. Strapped for cash and preoccupied with getting by and providing the bare essentials of service, many feminist organizations seem to pay lip service to anti-oppression and accessibility.

Many shelters are not wheelchair accessible, can not provide service for women with disabilities who need one-on-one care, only provide services in English, and bar transgendered women from using their services. Furthermore, women with addictions and "mental health issues" often are refused service, as are women who need shelter because of poverty and, in the case of First Nations women, continued colonialism. Racist economic violence by the state often does not count as a form of abuse from which women may be fleeing. Collusion with the state also takes on the form of working relationships with Family and Children's Services (which has a legacy of stealing children from First Nations and poor families) and the police. Within feminist organizations, there are certainly debates about these relationships with state agencies, and I do not think these relationships come from a place of malice or ignorance. At the same time, given these limitations, I think that women can't always rely on feminist organizations to organize

actions and change the world on our behalf. We have to start organizing our own marches, IWD events, and actions. Of course we can work with feminist social service agencies, but ultimately we need to take initiative and responsibility for our own liberation.

Culture

Unless the feminist pop culture magazine *Bitch* is truly the vanguard of the women's movement (and unfortunately I don't think it is), the women's movement, as an organized collective force, rarely intervenes in the cultural sphere to forward its anti-patriarchal messages. Instead, decisions about how feminist messages are circulated in popular culture are made by marketing experts in the fashion and entertainment industries, so that a sort of "lifestyle feminism," has captured the minds of this generation's young women.

Some refer to this "lifestyle feminism" as "third wave feminism". The latter term is an often disputed and sloppily defined signifier for a wide range of cultural expressions, from the politically astute riot grrrl D.I.Y. 'zine and punk subcultures, to mainstream women's music festivals like the Lilith Fair. Cultural expressions in the latter category are often devoid of any political demands, any outright identifications with what is still seen as the dirty "f" word. The Body Shop saps out women's self-esteem and money and justifies this with fundraising for women's shelters. Tampax claims in its ads that the itty-bitty portable tampon that fits into the palm of your hand is "the women's revolution" — because, of course women would not want the size of their menstrual product to imply that their cunts are actually larger, dirtier, and less "discreet" than a piece of three inch long cardboard. Capitalism snatches, distorts, and sells any piece of resistance that it can. The commodification of feminist culture has convinced many that feminism is about making women feel good, no matter how this is accomplished. In common sense, if feminism does not conjure homophobic images of "man-hating" dykes, feminism connotes orgasms, greater consumer choice of lipsticks and menstrual products, climbing the corporate ladder. The most positive meaning feminism takes on in popular culture is that women can do whatever makes us feel good, even if it involves feeling good on the backs of less privileged women.

The reality remains that the majority of women have not benefited from the gains made by the women's movement. While a few educated white women have gained equal opportunity with men in some areas of education and employment, many more white women and women of colour slog away at doing the world's shitwork — as secretaries, nurses, pieceworkers, nurses, cleaners, cashiers, restaurant servers, and as unpaid caregivers for children, the elderly, and the sick. And of course economic, physical, and emotional violence continues to silence, isolate, and kill women. Feminism could mean women working to end the capitalist system that simultaneously relies on and recreates forms of sexism, racism, and heterosexism. But for many women, especially younger women who have no collective memory of the heyday of organized, collective women's struggles, feminism no longer exists — all our demands seem to have been met by the state and corporations — and women's self-determination lies in the ideology of consumer choice.

Feminism, meet anarchism

Many anti-capitalist activists bred by anarchist principles of non-hierarchical organizing and direct action tactics self-identify as feminists and charge their political struggles with an analysis

of how race, gender, and sexuality play out within capitalism and within our own movements for justice.

References to anti-oppression have become a mainstay of recent anti-globalization organizing. For instance, one of the organizing and political principles upon which activists united for anti-G8 action in June of last year was "a clear emphasis on anti-oppression organizing and education." The platform of the People's Global Action network, which is regularly invoked during massive anti-capitalist demonstrations and direct actions, states that "We reject all forms and systems of domination and discrimination including, but not limited to, patriarchy, racism, and religious fundamentalism of all creeds. We embrace the full dignity of all human beings." Anti-globalization activists concerned with anti-oppression can learn from the women's movement what not to do in circulating anti-oppression theory in anti-capitalist discourse. Specifically, the mainstream women's movement often relies upon statist definitions of oppression and thus also statist and reformist avenues to so-called justice.

The little glimpses of feminism that I have seen within the current anarchist movement look promising. When I refer to anarchists, I'm not only referring to members of NEFAC or to people who are publicly known as anarchists, but more importantly to all sorts of people who quietly plod away at anti-poverty and community-based organizing who use anarchist methods of organizing and who grapple, in unglamourous ways, with questions of revolution and oppression. I see within the anarchist movement a critique of the psychiatric industry and of prisons — which play a major role in the institutionalization, medicalization and social control of women, especially of women who resist. Many anarchists promote a critique of the binary gender system, of the social control of queer people, and create an alternative culture where sexuality is celebrated rather than censored — where sex trade workers are supported in their struggles for dignity, not patronized — and where the question of what constitutes empowering and liberating porn is an interesting discussion, rather than a taboo topic. I also see at play within the movement a radical reconceptualization of the human body that embraces differences and goes far beyond merely respecting state-defined standards of "access" and "mobility." Further still, I see activists organizing against all borders and deeply racialized and class-stratified notions and operations of "citizenship". To discuss the anti-racist strategies and discourse within this movement would take up a whole other article, but it is important to recognize that many (but not all) activists somehow associated with anarchism have a much more radical understanding of race and racism than is evidenced by the public personae of many white-dominated feminist organizations whose anti-racism ostensibly lies in their statements about being committed to diversity and multiculturalism. Most anarchists I know don't have degrees in social work or women's studies but through first-hand experience with community organizing understand how brutal canada's "multiculturalism" really is — and most importantly, they're willing to put their bodies on the line to do something about it. Lastly, and perhaps most obviously, people who were introduced to anarchism through the anti-globalization movement as well as seasoned anarchists for the most part understand how capitalism, through colonialism and imperialism, has created a world of relations of domination.

Understanding all of these forms of oppression, and how to struggle against them in solidarity with the oppressed, are essential to developing a feminism that is about the liberation of all women from oppressions such as heterosexism, sexism, and racism. Anarchism, though rarely theorized, tries to practice the critique and reorganization of power that the dominant women's movement may theorize but has not consistently practiced. It would be of benefit to the organized

aspects of the women's movement to look to how an anti- racist, queer-liberationist, anti-ableist feminism is (but also a lot of the time is not) at the heart of anarchist practice.

Many anarchists also occupy themselves with developing economic and political alternatives to being dependent on the state, mass culture, and the capitalist system for survival. As I've already mentioned, the early second wave and the third wave of the women's movement are just as D.I.Y. as any dumpster-diving, patch-making, train-hopping anarchist kid. But often both anarchist and feminist subcultural ventures remain nothing more than futile attempts to remove the individual — or a cluster of individuals — from an exploitative system that otherwise remains unscathed. Some anarchist communities have started the difficult work of building counter-institutions, communes and federations that would hopefully someday, in theory, make a state that has already been weakened by class struggle even more redundant. It would be interesting to see explicitly feminist communities and projects take on the goal of contributing to a dual power, but as it stands, feminist projects mostly remain either individualistically DIY or co-opted by the state.

Anarchism, meet feminism

The women's movement has a lot to learn from the anarchist movement, but anarchists have a lot to learn from the women's movement too. It is annoying that anarchists often don't look outside of their own tight knit subcultures for guidance around issues of privilege and oppression. Discussions about sexism often start from scratch, with no reference to work that women have already been doing to decades around male privilege and violence. It would make sense that a community concerned about sexualized violence, abuse, or women's poverty should look to the women's movement for ideas and skills — but this is not happening. Anarchist communities cannot deal effectively with cases of sexual assault, racism, homophobia, and gendered divisions of labour within their communities. One example of this is how few anarchists know how to support each other through times of crisis and trauma, even though this skill could be gleaned from the feminist counseling tradition within the women's movement. It is not enough that anarchist organizers include the words "anti-oppression" or "feminism" in their platforms — at a community level, all activists ought to be engaging in discussions about, for instance, what kind of feminism and what kind anti-racism they support. And supporting the struggle of women means more than deferring to the judgment of a couple vocal feminists within the community. And it means more than examining power dynamics within an organization, though this is essential. I think anarchist and feminist organizing, to really be effective in struggling against all oppression, has to take on work that directly builds power for women and that directly makes it difficult for the state, capital, and men in general to continue the war on women.

The next step: direct action against patriarchy

Disrupting the business of patriarchy involves disrupting the business of capitalism. It requires direct, vocal, concrete interventions into the workings of everyday life — in short, it requires direct action. I think that most anti-capitalist direct actions — because capitalism relies on and recreates racism and sexism, and because capitalism organizes labour and exploitation through racialization and gender — inherently have the potential to be feminist actions. However, this

shouldn't stop anarchists from targeting corporations and state offices specifically because of, for instance, their poor treatment of women workers or for their cuts to childcare. Nor should it stop us from targeting individual known rapists and abusers who have refused to change their violent behaviour. To explore the potential for the women's movement and the anarchist movement to build solidarity based on a shared commitment to direct action against patriarchy is an idealistic task that would require, again, a whole other article. But I will say that I have desired on so many occasions while marching with candles to the tune of bread and roses to regroup in a small scale women-only affinity group and hash out a militant plan of direct action. I want women to tell those who hold power that we are serious, we aren't leaving the downtown core or parliament hill once the march ends. Although we will probably always have a lot of healing to do from the violence inflicted upon us everyday, we are no longer going to postpone militancy until state funding rolls in or until the next annual general meeting of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. Whether from frustration or boredom or from a larger militant strategy, I want us to find ourselves ready to fight — loudly, and with passion.

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Retrieved on 1 January 2008 from /auto_sol.tao.ca

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