

Privilege and Oppression

Collective Action

June 6, 2016

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1. Scope and Purpose

This position statement is intended to sketch some initial points of agreement concerning our understanding of ideas about privilege, oppression and intersectionality. These points are neither complete nor final, and it is our intention to expand on and develop these points as our collective understanding develops.

2. Points of Agreement

2. 1 There are numerous interacting systems of oppression that are experienced in a variety of ways by different actors in our society. These intertwined oppressive systems include (but are not limited to) sexism, racism, queerphobia, anti-trans bigotry and ableism. We think fighting against these forms of oppression is just as important to the creation of an anarchist society as fighting capitalism and the state. Only by working to eliminate oppressive power relations within the working classes will we be able to create a revolutionary movement capable of genuinely transforming society. And only by organising against all oppressive and exploitative systems of power will we create a society worth fighting for – rather than one which simply installs a new elite in place of the old.

2.2 We reject the idea that any struggle against any form of oppression has to “wait”, for the revolution or anything else. All oppressive systems are unjust, and all people struggling against oppressive systems are right to do so. The idea that confronting manifestations of oppressive systems within the working class only divides and weakens working class struggle is mistaken. When we tolerate the manifestations of oppressive ideology and practice we are divided and weakened. Systems of oppression divide us now, attempts to ignore or paper over this reality do nothing change this situation. We must identify and confront sexism, racism, ableism, queerphobia and transphobia in order to erode the divisions that exist amongst all people who are variously oppressed by these systems and exploited by capitalism.

2.3 It is our position that both an anti-oppression analysis and an analysis of capitalism, class and the state are useful, and that these analyses are more useful when integrated. If we do not make the effort to understand the dynamics of different oppressive structures we will not be able to understand the complexity of capitalism and the state, and our resistance strategies will suffer as a result. Developing an analysis of capitalism and the state also strengthens and deepens our understanding of the functioning of other oppressive systems. We need to understand how transphobia, white supremacy, queerphobia and patriarchy are institutionalised through the economic and political structures of our societies if we are to successfully abolish them.

“These structured inequalities and hierarchies inform and support one another. For example, the labor of women in child-bearing and rearing provides new bodies for the larger social factory to allow capitalism to continue. White supremacy and racism allow capitalists control over a segment of the labor market that can serve as stocks of cheap labor. Compulsory heterosexuality allows the policing of the patriarchal family form, strengthening patriarchy and male dominance. And all structured forms of inequality add to the nihilistic belief that institutionalized hierarchy is inevitable and that liberatory movements are based on utopian dreams” – Deric Shannon and J. Rogue.

2.4 There are some important differences between capitalism and other systems of oppression and exploitation. Capitalism is a system of class rule founded upon control of the means of production (private property, such as land, factories, resources). The class rule of capitalism is buttressed by ideological and cultural structures but it is primarily a system of economic control and class exploitation. Other systems of oppression typically rely upon class hierarchy and exploitation as a key tool for maintaining the subordinate position of the oppressed group. For example, patriarchy and white supremacy could not be sustained without the exploitation of the labour of women and people of colour, which keeps them in an economically powerless position. However, economic control is less central to these forms of oppression. Instead, social institutions, such as the family and the gender binary, play a more central role in fostering these oppressive power relations.

The economic character of capitalism means that there are some key differences in how we abolish the power of the capitalist class, in comparison to struggles against white supremacy, anti-trans bigotry, queerphobia and patriarchy:

“[W]e aim to end capitalism through a revolution in which the working class seize the means of production from the ruling class, and create an anarchist communist society in which there is no ruling class. For the other struggles mentioned, this doesn’t quite work the same way – we can’t force men to give up their maleness, or white people to give up their whiteness, or send them all to the guillotine and reclaim their power and privilege as if it were a resource that they were hoarding. Instead we need to take apart and understand the systems that tend to concentrate power and resources in the hands of the culturally privileged and question the very concepts of gender, sexuality, race etc. that are used to build the identities that divide us” – the Anarchist Federation’s Women’s Caucus (UK).

2.5 Broadly speaking, all systems of oppression create two groups: a group in a position of relative privilege and a group that is subordinated and oppressed. The group in the position of privilege does receive a relative benefit from this situation, whether or not there appears to be some form of direct transfer of benefit from the oppressed to the privileged group. This occurs whether or not it is acknowledged. “The privileged group do not have to be active supporters of the system of oppression, or even aware of it” (AFED, 2012) in order to experience the relative benefits of their position in this structure.

It is important to understand this real sense in which people privileged by systems of oppression benefit or receive advantages due to their privileged status. It is also true that, in another sense, the vast majority of people stand to benefit from abolishing these systems of oppression along with capitalism and the state. Both of these senses of ‘benefit’ are important for an anarchist analysis of oppression. Those privileged by systems of oppression (white people, men, able bodied people etc) must realise that these systems of oppression are fundamentally destructive, and that a revolutionary transformation of society will be impossible while they hold sway with significant portions of the working class. Thus, there is a real sense in which it is in the interests of all oppressed and exploited people to challenge these systems of oppression. It is also important, however, to understand and acknowledge the relative advantages and benefits which lead those in privileged power positions to perceive it to be in their interests to maintain oppressive structures. While the benefits and advantages that privileged people receive (not being required

to do as much reproductive labour, having a comparative advantage in capitalist job markets) do not outweigh the ultimate interest we all have in abolishing these forms of oppression, they do pose significant, weighty obstacles to the pursuit of an anarchist society. We are bound up in these systems, whether we like it or not.

2.6 We believe the concept of privilege is useful for pointing out how being in a dominant social position can make it easy to fail to pay attention to the struggles of others. Thinking about privilege helps us interrogate whose needs are seen as important, and whose are sidelined, in our political struggles.

“To talk about privilege reveals what is normal to those without the oppression, yet cannot be taken for granted by those with it. To talk about homophobia alone may reveal the existence of prejudices – stereotypes about how gay men and lesbian women behave, perhaps, or violence targeted against people for their sexuality. It’s unusual to find an anarchist who won’t condemn these things. To talk about straight privilege, however, shows the other side of the system, the invisible side: what behaviour is considered “typical” for straight people? There isn’t one – straight isn’t treated like a sexual category, it is treated like the absence of “gay”. You don’t have to worry about whether you come across as “too straight” when you’re going to a job interview, or whether your straight friends will think you’re denying your straightness if you don’t dress or talk straight enough, or whether your gay friends will be uncomfortable if you take them to a straight club, or if they’ll embarrass you by saying something ignorant about getting hit on by somebody of the opposite sex. This analysis goes beyond worries about discrimination or prejudice to the very heart of what we consider normal and neutral, what we consider different and other, what needs explaining, what’s taken as read – the prejudices in favour of being straight aren’t recognisable as prejudices, because they’re built into our very perceptions of what is the default way to be” – the Anarchist Federation’s Women’s Caucus (UK).

References/Further Reading

The following pieces were cited in this position statement.

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