

Towards an anarchist anti-racism

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While there is a tradition of grassroots campaigning against racism in Ireland, there is less discussion of what it means to be an anti-racist from an anarchist perspective. Most material focuses on obvious forms such as hate-speech or supporting Travellers & migrants in practical terms. The issue this article seeks to raise, is that in order to get it right we also need to look at ourselves on a personal level, recognise privilege and develop a wider critique that is truer to our own politics. As such I am writing as a white anarchist, to other white anarchists.

To state the obvious: we anarchists are against racism — or at least we proclaim to be in every statement that seeks to set out a policy of inclusion. That is, we, the predominantly white people who rarely experience racial prejudice, proclaim it.

But is that necessarily true in fact? The implicit assumption is that espousing anarchist politics is sufficient to be anti-racist, but do we check if that is actually the case? Do we ask those who are on the receiving end of oppression if we are actually creating non-racist spaces?

Unfortunately, there are distinctions that we often gloss over to avoid somewhat uncomfortable truths. Anti-racism, I argue, needs more than class analysis to be effectively combated.

What is Racism?

There are several types of racism. First, there is the overt discrimination based on seeing someone as inferior because of a perceived difference, usually to do with ethnicity. This ranges from hate speech and direct abuse, not treating people equally in employment or in the statements that use generalisations that tar entire groups of people with the same brush.

The second is the institutionalised racism that comes with more subtle forms of government or company policy, which appear to treat everyone as equal but actually disadvantage particular groups. In this, it is not the individuals, but the entire system that perpetuates discrimination for its own purposes.

The third is the internalised racism of society, a cultural racism, that manifests itself in all sorts of hidden ways, particularly in privileges that we are so used to that we are effectively blind to them.

The first two are relatively easy to recognise for those of us coming from an anarchist background. Through our work on class and anti-State politics, we can see the oppression inherent in such institutions — immigration policies being the standard one, but also social policy such as education. The analysis of discrimination against one group of people is relatively easily applied to others. A clear example is the treatment of Travellers who face coercion by state organisations for not conforming to a particular set of norms and live in a country where the use of derisive names such as 'knackers' is seen as acceptable.

As such, the ways to challenge, name and reject these forms of racism are fairly straightforward. It sits easily with our existing critiques of domination and is easily incorporated, as if that was enough. It is the third aspect that is not caught in this net and slips through as we believe we have done enough. However, it is this that forms the core of much anti-racist organisation and theory globally. At the very centre is the notion of privilege.

Repoliticising Racism

A problem facing anarchists is that much of the realm in which racism is experienced, and anti-racism needs to take place, is the liberal sphere. All too easily, the espousal of equality for all is co-opted and depoliticised: turned into self-serving bureaucracies that simply maintain the privileges of the dominant group.

The Israeli-Irish commentator Ronit Lentin puts this nicely:¹

“However, one of the most important questions asked in relation to antiracism is ‘who speaks for whom, who says what and from where?’ Antiracism can be either generalised – intending to raise awareness among the population and reach a post-racial ‘racelessness’, or colour blindness. Or it can be self-representational, where the lived experience of the racialised informs the struggle. Generalist antiracism is anchored in universal values such as democracy, human rights, equality and tolerance; it reduces the importance of state racism and emphasises individual (or institutional) prejudice. In contrast, self organising antiracism stresses the role of the state, which focuses on notions of the race idea rooted in the political structure. The lived experience of the protagonists informs the struggle and names the state as the main culprit rather than stress individual prejudice, a way of depoliticising racism and antiracism.”

As she points out elsewhere, many of the anti-racist groups in Ireland are led by white, middle-class people, not by the people they are meant to be representing.

Thus, part of the role that anarchists can and should be playing is ensuring that racism is not depoliticised as an issue. Anarchism’s emphasis on self-organisation and critique of the state means that this can be accommodated within our existing politics. Though it is not as straightforward as we like to think: to be effective ‘allies’, it is important that we do not depoliticise it unwittingly in our own actions.

An Anarchist Anti-Racism?

Anarchism brings a recognition of how class, state and capitalism play a role in creating and maintaining oppression of many kinds. However, eliminating these three problems will not simply ‘solve’ racism. We still have to confront our own privilege, but with the added challenge of staying true to our own political framework.

There has been a lot of exploration of cultural racism and how it can be challenged from a radical perspective – see the writings of Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Lena Dominelli for example. What has emerged is a theory based around privilege and challenging existing hierarchies.

Thus, anti-racism includes two important principles. The first is to recognize that we have privileges simply because of our skin colour or ethnic group. We may not like that we have those privileges due to something we could not control – being born – but the first step is not denying that we have them.

The second principle is giving voice to the oppressed, not speaking on their behalf or seeking to dictate how they should define or resist their oppression.

¹ www.humanrights.ie

Both work hand in hand and make demands of us, often uncomfortable ones as we are being asked to face up to things on personal level. It requires that we take a back seat in driving the politics and also that we are proactive in challenging ourselves.

There are increasing amounts of resources available, much of which can be adapted to the particular context of racism within Ireland, and which are generally applicable to combating forms of discrimination other than racism.

By focusing around the issue of voices and privilege, these can be incorporated into an effective anarchist anti-racism: one that does not merely pay lip-service to the idea. There are, however, several issues of particular relevance to us:

‘Colour-blindness’

Because we perceive ourselves as anti-racist, we often act as if someone’s skin colour or other ethnic feature is not there. We want to be ‘colour-blind’, so to speak. The problem is: this ignores the fact that the other person’s colour is a real feature, part of their identity, and affects them in their daily interactions. It is not a neutral thing, and by us pretending that it is, we are denying their experience from their point of view.

By not seeing colour you are not seeing or celebrating the difference, and you are not seeing the hidden racism. As white people we have the privileges that are commonplace to us, that we can simply assume, and thus we often do not realise just how privileged we are. We can often walk away from situations that people from different ethnic groups cannot.

Tolerance

This is a liberal concept, often readily accepted in anarchist circles without question. It was made famous through Voltaire’s (misattributed) quote – “I do not agree with what you say, but I’ll defend to the death your right to say it” – now taken as dogma in liberal-left quarters. I would argue that it is not actually anarchist. There are many things we do not tolerate – fascist street stalls for instance. However, to tolerate means that you acknowledge that someone is different and though you are not happy with that difference you are able co-exist in some way. It is not acceptance.²

It is this recognition of the problems with tolerance that underlies critiques of multiculturalism as an approach to culturally diverse societies.³ This is a place where anarchist thought has a strength that other ideologies do not. There is scope in it for accepting diversity, for acknowledging difference as a good thing, not to be feared, without having to accept all aspects unconditionally. However, we have to be both more explicit and more nuanced in how we approach it. As well as challenging society as a whole, it includes:

- a. developing positions that recognise the oppression on a practical level in our own particular cultures; and
- b. finding ways to show grassroots solidarity that do not repeat patterns of privilege to the detriment of the groups we want to support in their struggles.

² For good arguments about tolerance see, for example, Slavoj Žižek’s *Living in End Times*.

³ Excellently spelled out in Bhikhu Parekh’s *Rethinking Multiculturalism*.

But what about...

Finally, we need to be alert to a fear or 'detour' that often comes up in privileged groups, that of pointing to other groups and saying how much worse they are on some other issue of discrimination. Though a natural response, that does not make it right. It is a divide and rule game allowing us to ignore what is before us while playing to dominant fears that are being used by politicians with aims we are opposed to.

This is not to deny that there are issues, but that we should make sure our own house is in order first before imposing our will on another culture. In many cases it is possible to find organisations from within those cultures, often at great risk, who have a nuanced, considered view of how to integrate the competing demands, which do not play into narratives of hate. Thus, rather than attacking an entire culture and dictating how they should behave, we can find places to show practical solidarity in line with our own politics and challenge racists subtexts with our own communities.

Conclusion

This has only been a brief overview of the topic, touching lightly on many of the problems around forming an effective anti-racist politics. In a subsequent article I look at more practical examples of cultural racism, particularly around notions of land using Northern Ireland and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict to unpick some of the deeper assumptions.

Some Resources

Note: many of the following resources are based on the situation in the US. Each country / culture has its own contexts and ways in which oppression is imposed and experienced, so much will not necessarily translate directly across to Ireland. However, many of the underlying messages do.

Key Texts

- Anti-Racist Social Work, Lena Dominelli.
- Rethinking Multiculturalism, Bhikhu Parekh.
- Paul Kivel: www.paulkivel.com
- Resist Racism: resistracism.wordpress.com
- People of Colour Organize – hard hitting texts challenging problems in white anti-racism: www.peopleofcolororganize.com
- Colours of Resistance, anarchist analyses of anti-racism: www.coloursofresistance.org/
- Racial Equality Tools: www.racialequitytools.org
- Allies for Change: alliesforchange.org/

Articles & Blogs

1. Race Revolt – a zine on race politics by feminists and queers: www.racerevolt.org.uk
2. Text of a 1994 talk on Racism (WSM): struggle.ws
3. Anarchism, Racism & Class Struggle (WSM): struggle.ws
4. Detour-Spotting for white anti-racists, Joan Olsson: www.racialequitytools.org
5. Checklist for Allies Against Racism, John Raible: johnraible.wordpress.com
6. Tiffany, Friend of People of Colour, Audrey Thompson: www.pauahtun.org
7. So you think you are an anti-racist?, Paul Gorski & Multicultural Pavilion: www.edchange.org
8. I don't see colour, I just see a human being, Abagond: abagond.wordpress.com...
9. New Code of Ethics for Anti-Racist White Allies, JLove & Tim Wise: jlove.mvmt.com...
10. Ten Things to Remember: Anti-Racist Strategies for White Students, Chris Dixon: www.soaw.org
11. Beyond the Whiteness: Global Capitalism and White Supremacy: thoughts on movement building and anti-racist organizing, Chris Crass: www.kersplebedeb.com
12. A few good reasons why white people should not wear 'Mohawks' or dreadlocks, C.K. Donovan & Q-L. Driskill: zinelibrary.info
13. Ronit Lentin, Israeli-Irish blogger on racism: www.ronitlentin.net/
14. The Katrina Reader, articles on anti-racism in the context of solidarity following Hurricane Katrina: katrinareader.org

Organisations

- Residents Against Racism: www.residentsagainstracism.org/
- European Network Against Racism Ireland: enarireland.org
- Irish Travellers Network: www.itmtrav.ie
- Traveller Solidarity Network: travellersolidarity.org
- Collective Liberation: collectiveliberation.org/

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