

Identity and Power

What does liberation look like? How do we go about making liberation possible? Who do we include when we say “we”? This zine explores these questions through the lens of identity.

Here and Now Zines

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Introduction

We're writing this zine because we want to get free and because we experience oppression around our identities. This zine is written specifically to and for people who also experience oppression around their identities, with the hopes of starting critical conversation amongst ourselves. Throughout this essay, when we use the words "we/us/our" the meaning varies. At times we are referring to ourselves as the authors, at other times we are referring to marginalized people in general, and even at others we're referring to anyone who wants to get free.

First, we'd like to acknowledge the many complexities of oppression and how it affects us and those who've come before us, how it has shifted throughout time and place, and how it continues to shape the current contexts of our lives. This zine does not aim to dismiss the ways in which our realities are affected and limited by our identities. Even though we understand identity to be at the root of many oppressions and struggles, we won't allow that to stop us from developing critical perspectives around it.

When we use the terms liberation and freedom, we mean total freedom. What does this mean to us? To us freedom means to live with no restrictions. Unfortunately, this is impossible with all of the systems currently in place that dictate our lives (economy, government, societal roles...). These systems are sources of domination and exploitation and in order to end oppression — we would need to destroy all of the inner workings holding these systems in place. With the way things are now we do not have control over our lives, the systems in place control us and how we move through the world.¹ Only through their destruction, can we imagine freedom for everyone, freedom from all oppression and domination. Anything less, would result in freedom for only some, and freedom from only some oppressions.

Around us we see certain approaches to identity clouding struggles that could otherwise aim for liberation. We will explain how these approaches are not actually liberatory. We see these struggles against domination moving toward half measures like inclusion, guilt, representation, reparations, safety and comfort, and so many other partial measures. Although these moves can provide temporary relief up to a point, the problem lies in the fact that they don't go beyond that and often can't.

Identity politics is an approach to political struggle and analysis based on racial, religious, social, ethnic, or cultural identities that has the goal of leveraging or gaining power. Identity politics are about new hierarchies and/or inclusion, not liberation. This can look like fighting for inclusion within the systems in place, changing how the system treats oppressed people, wanting better placement within the system, wanting a different system, etc. Identity politics do not lead to freedom because they do not aim to, instead their goal is to re-arrange the structures and systems that keep us unfree. They have the tendency to first center identity then decide what to do from there. We don't consider approaches to struggle that acknowledge or even center identity that seek liberation outside of the system, to be identity politics. An example of this is the Maroons, groups of ex-slaves and indigenous people, who escaped into the swamps to live freely, and raided and ambushed colonizers. Another example is the Bash Back! tendency, queer

¹ For example with an economy we are not free to live how we desire since we are forced to participate within it to ensure our most basic necessities (ie: we need work/money to buy food and pay rent in order to survive); governments control how we are allowed to move through the world with their borders and laws restricting our movements and actions; societal roles such as wife, student, employee, son, etc. confine and punish us within the limits of acceptability and morality (i.e. we stop ourselves &/or are stopped by others from expressing ourselves).

anarchists who fought capitalism and the state, homophobia and transphobia, by rioting, stealing, and physically hurting their oppressors.² We don't consider these struggles to be identity politics because they aimed to attack power outside of the system. That they revolved around identity has more to do with who participated than an intention to adjust or reshape the relations of oppressed people to their oppressors.

Temporary Relief

Dying of oppression is our tragic reality. The suicides, work accidents, deaths on the block, murderous boyfriends, medical neglect, deaths in prison, ODs, bombings, and police murders are manmade plagues among us. This society has no problem letting us die and no problem killing us. For some of us, survival is impossible, for others death looms so closely, we are constantly facing the overwhelming task of survival. Enveloped within this looming death, it is understandable to lose sight of anything outside of not dying. Survival and healing are crucial to our existence, literally. Nonetheless, survival on its own is not getting free, it's just getting by. Many of the ways we survive as oppressed people are subversive. We often choose to or must use subversive means to stay alive and take care. We break the isolation imposed on us to process trauma, we spread joy in our subcultures, we put what we need in our bags when our boss isn't looking, we duck the cops when we are carrying drugs or weapons. These moments of rebellion and slipping through the cracks get us through the day, and can sometimes make us stronger, but they won't tear down the society that feeds on our death. We do not think marginalized people surviving even in subversive ways is inherently revolutionary. Not dying is not enough to end domination.

It's 2021, there's yet to be a violent revolution that kills all rich people, the new president of the USA is a charming latinx trans woman from LA, she's the first woman, trans person, and latinx person to be commander in chief. She sends a few programs to the hood for nicer swimming pools, and arranges to have more people of color in her progressive party, uplifting their voices. Her and her cabinet continue to order bombings of the Middle East, send armed men (and women!) to patrol the border, and generally keep the country running smoothly. What do we gain when we center marginalized people? Someone's identity does not determine if and how they want to be free. As long as there's a pedestal to put people on there'll always be people looking up, instead of around, at each other and themselves. Our oppressors are already on pedestals they've installed for themselves, when we try to outdo them we enter into their game. What if we knocked down every pedestal? What if there were no pedestals? As long as power exists, there will be hierarchies, and a re-positioning of who's on top still leaves others on the bottom.

Creating spaces that center oppressed individuals and attempt to exclude oppressive ones³ are important and in many cases necessary, but are not ultimately freeing in and of themselves. Does centering oppressed people eliminate power or simply re-arrange it? Imagine going to an all queer punk show, you see a lot of your friends, you enjoy the bands, there's no shitty dudes bro-ing out! You have a great night, later you take the bus home, and go to sleep, it felt good to be

² To learn more about the Maroons we suggest the essay "Autonomous Resistance to Slavery and Colonization; Two Essays by Russell Maroon Shoatz". To learn more about Bash Back! we suggest the book "Queer Ultraviolence: A Bash Back! Anthology".

³ It is impossible to exclude oppressive people from any space. It is a false dichotomy to think that the oppressed and the oppressors are two separate groups. Oppression is multi-faceted, people can be oppressive and oppressed at the same time.

amongst your people. The next day you wake up and go about your life. This kind of experience is held up as liberatory, and in a way it is temporarily, but it doesn't take the offensive. This kind of environment can be cathartic and healing, but it won't take down the systems that keep queers oppressed. For these spaces to point toward a total freedom (instead of a freedom from certain people, at certain times, in a certain place) they would have to orient themselves toward getting rid of oppression outside of just those spaces.

We are frustrated with identity politics and the ways in which identity is prioritized above liberation. We are even more frustrated when these approaches portray themselves as liberatory. We understand that some people are content with partial freedom ie: more rights and privileges, visibility, temporarily freeing spaces etc., we aren't here to judge them. We just wish they would stop calling it something that it's not.

For those of us in what's called North America we have a 500 year rearview mirror to look into the ways race and colonialism have made life hell. Those of us who aren't men can look back even longer and see why gender is terror. In everyday life we see how people treat us as though they don't care about us. If we want to be free, we might want to consider taking seriously that our oppressors ACTUALLY don't care about us. This means we cannot expect begging, looking good, or entitlement to their emotional generosity to do much more than they ever have, which is to say, not much⁴. It is centuries worth of ridiculous to think that having a "human right" or "moral obligation" to freedom will be enough to get it. Being an oppressive and powerful dirtbag is a hill many people are more than willing to die on, if that's the case being entitled to their generosity and humanity is probably useless.

Let's imagine they did give a shit for a second, just hypothetically. The liberal oppressors have done a horrible job of actually getting us free. When they 'freed' us from slavery we still had to work to not die, just in a money system instead of a slave one. Where we've gotten to vote, and get jobs, they've only pulled us deeper into their web of control. Where we've been 'allowed' to be gay it's only been to sell us more things and keep better track of our lives. It's almost like our oppressors are better at including us in ways that benefit them than they are at helping us to get free, even if some of them genuinely think they're doing what's right.

On the other hand I know some of you want to be given a certain amount of power, you feel it's our turn now, you feel that we deserve to be credited for all we've brought to society and for how much we've suffered for it, you know a certain pleasure in leveraging a privileged person's guilt to get what you want. This switching of roles lets us be on top for once. This is cathartic, but it isn't freedom. Wanting people to bow down based on privilege is wanting to be in charge (ie: a boss, authority) so this is yet another form of authoritarianism.⁵ It perpetuates the system, this time with new faces at the wheel. There's still a top and a bottom, people continue to suffer at the expense of others. This is where our struggles diverge, we do not believe liberation (or even equality for those who seek it) are possible while authority is maintained. Our struggle for liberation must be fundamentally anti-authoritarian.⁶

⁴ The Civil Rights Movement and the struggle against colonialism in India are often held up as successful movements based in begging and looking good, but these movements were more complicated and confrontational than they are shown to have been.

⁵ Authoritarianism by definition is the enforcement or advocacy of strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom.

⁶ To be clear, using force to destroy an oppressor is not necessarily authoritarian, but expecting obedience or submission is.

Aside from being authoritarian, when we leverage guilt we reinforce our dependence on our status as oppressed people and our reliance on our oppressors. We see this trend that manipulates guilt dominating social media, taking the form of reparations. Your computer breaks, you're already tied down with work and bills, so you make a sweeping call asking white cis men to buy you a new computer. This not only bounces back to other ideas we've already mentioned of the entitlement and ridiculous expectation that someone with more resources will give them up, but it also reinforces a dynamic of helplessness, where one is relying on someone else to feel guilty enough and morally obliged to help us. There is a big difference between helping one another from a genuine place of interest, solidarity, friendship, or desire to share and receiving help because we feel like someone "should" help us and that they are wrong if they don't. We don't want relations of guilt, imposed duty, or debt, we want relations of friendship, solidarity, care, empathy, and even hostility. We would rather steal a computer than receive a guilt gift, rather start from ourselves than lean into our oppression and our oppressors.

There is an interesting contradiction that happens when we leverage our identity to guilt someone into doing what we want. At first, we might achieve a quick fix, feel a fleeting sense of control. Even though this may help us in the short term, it certainly isn't a reparation. Do we really imagine that getting a few hundred or even thousand dollars will "repair" generations of exploitation and oppression? To really repair the losses we face from our identities, we would need to find ourselves on equal footing with each other which is impossible with the way things are since the whole system is based on us being oppressed. Attempts to get reparations makes us more invested in the things, people, identities oppressing us without challenging the systems that made them necessary in the first place. This dissuades us from fighting oppression and figuring out how to get what we need directly, through our own creative means, alone or with our friends. What would it look like if instead of relying on the charity of others and digging ourselves deeper into our own victimhood, we began imagining how to find our own strength and start getting what we needed ourselves, on our own terms?

We've seen too many times someone blow off a criticism of their actions by pointing out how oppressed they are compared to their critic. To us this feels like a cheap trick, playing the game of oppression olympics. Oppression olympics means using one's oppressed identities as a means to scale a social ladder, the more oppressed one is, the more agency they're allowed in the network of radical social justice spaces. This is yet another attempt to reverse a power dynamic instead of destroy it. Dismissing someone's criticisms or wanting them to not speak up because they're less oppressed than us is an ignorant cop-out and is weak. Are we really not able to defend our own ideas anymore? It's exhausting to deal with frustrating men, annoying white people, and clueless straight people, certainly, and if we don't want to engage that's fine. We can say "I don't care right now" or "bruh, I'm tired". It's another thing to expect them (or anyone) to simply silence their criticism because of the identities we've inherited. When instead of articulating our own arguments, we resort to using "I'm a woman of color so how can you criticize me?" we're not only rebuilding and climbing back up pedestals, we're also building a culture that dismisses conversation and critical dialogue. Let's not forget that someone who is marginalized can still perpetuate oppression, identity doesn't excuse peoples behaviors.

We are against identity because we think it holds this oppressive reality together. Our identities as marginalized people are our inheritances that separate us as inferior. For centuries, distinctions of inferiority have been used as the building blocks for exploitation and control. Identity is the infrastructure of our suffering and would need to be shattered if we wish to see oppression

demolished. Presently, identity pits us against each other instead of against the system's infrastructures. Scrambling to tally distinctions of how oppressed we are in comparison to others and what we deserve to be compensated doesn't end our exploitation and only keeps us distracted from making the necessary calculations to sabotage the infrastructure holding domination in place.

No one is "responsible" more than anyone else for undoing systems of domination (whether they benefit from them or not). The continued existence of domination is everyone's fault. Whether people play their roles as victims, oppressors, or attempt to be "neutrals" they are still upholding the system. That is, unless they are actively fighting to break it down.

So Where Do We Go From Here?

We can survive forever without the misery ending. We can find ways to secure more comfort in our lives, but maintaining comfort only ensures contentment. We don't care about contentment, we'd rather be free. More often than not, we will be stifled by our own security if we are not already suffocating from the oppressive conditions that surround us, and we will have to face the choice between letting things remain as they are or moving in uncharted directions towards living freely.

To put an end to the world of suffering imposed on us we need to do more than survive. Widening the cracks, taking aim at the sources of oppression, exploding our small refusals into revolt, these have the possibility of finally putting an end to oppression. Liberation won't be given to us. Freedom must be snatched up, stolen, taken by force or cunning. When we rely on our oppressors or use their means to become free the results are pitiful anyway. We've seen how easy it is to follow trends that are well accepted without using our imaginations since we are taught to rely on the instructions of others to guide us or the system to serve us. It's easier to cling to systems already in place because we don't have to think for ourselves or take risks. Nonetheless if we wish to create a new freedom, it is essential that we begin to undertake the more difficult task of going into the unknown, thinking outside the means of struggle that others have thought up for us, moving beyond these boxes of identity and prescribed ways of living, and start thinking and acting for ourselves. One way to do this is by seriously examining our desires and visions for what we'd want freedom to look like, and what we would do with that freedom.

We know best what we need, and we are the only ones equipped to make it reality. Instead of entitlement, guilt trips, and waiting for hand outs, can we imagine what it would take to make our freedom ourselves, despite and against our oppressors?

No one is free until we're all free.

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Afterthoughts

It cannot be ignored that revolt against oppressive systems is scary, risky and dangerous, even more so for the more marginalized. It is understandable that these consequences might dissuade us. Ultimately, since most will not prioritize taking the risks that are required for a new free way of life, where does that leave us?

Some of you may ask, is freedom even possible? What can the destruction of all these systems actually look like? How do we deal with the circumstances we are in? Can't healing be transformative? Can't these "partial moves" contribute to creating conditions that allow for future liberation

The answer to all these questions is.. you have to find out for yourself

Hit us up tho if u got shit to say — hereandnowzines@riseup.net

We're excited about the conversations this zine will produce.

Appendix: Words Too Vague

Identity places us into vague homogenous groups that cannot account for our individualities or all the different ways in which we are oppressed. No two black people experience anti-blackness the same way, their hairstyle, the lightness or darkness of their skin, the words they use, the depth of their voice, their size, are all factors that will affect "how black" they will be treated (without, of course, the possibility of not being treated as black), and that's before we even take into consideration the intersection with other identities they "have". We see these umbrella groupings of identity lazily used to erase the different intersections that are at play when we experience oppression. For example, two people of color can experience racial discrimination in completely different ways. It's also possible that they do not share the same class background, race, gender, sexuality, or ability, all of which greatly affect the ease with which they move through society. Catch-all terms like people of color, women, or queer do not distinguish between the ways that experiences of oppression differ within these groupings. These terms are used to flatten people's experiences as if they are the same.

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What does liberation look like? How do we go about making liberation possible? Who do we include when we say “we”? This zine explores these questions through the lens of identity.
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