

The anarchy-narcissists

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We all know them, all tried to work with them. The one who insists on being the leader. The one who says everyone who criticizes her is a fed. The manipulative male “feminist.” His close cousin, the serial sexual perpetrator who thinks he’s the hero of the story.

They are the narcissists among us. And what is narcissism? “... an excessive need for admiration, disregard for others’ feelings, an inability to handle any criticism, and a sense of entitlement,” says Google.

Last issue of Slingshot, I wrote about the need for all of us to learn a little humility. This issue I’ll discuss a small number of people with a very large impact. This is not intended as a call for or against ostracizing or reeducating such people. Rather, an initial inquiry into a topic we too often ignore or don’t see, and ideas on designing our community projects with the assumption that narcissists are inevitable.

Vocabulary

Narcissist, narcissism, narcissistic behavior, healthy narcissism, narcissistic personality, narcissistic personality disorder. Even among psychological researchers and mental health workers, the words vary in meaning. So to clear for this article:

- narcissist (person/personality): Someone who exhibits the behavior above.
- narcissistic behavior: The behavior. The distinction is emphasized because some approaches confront the behavior, however consistently or not, without focusing on individuals.
- narcissistic personality: Someone who severely and consistently exhibits narcissistic behavior over a lifetime or many years; stronger language than just calling someone a narcissist. Used here as a term for the person as well as the trait.
- narcissistic personality disorder: A psychiatric, i.e., quasi-medical term, for a narcissistic personality. While this may apply to any narcissistic personality, here it refers to a person who hopes to be a considerate member of the community with loving relationships but struggles with deeply rooted narcissistic behaviors.
- healthy narcissism: A term for narcissistic behaviors at reasonable, functional levels. For clarity I prefer to simply use other terms for this, although the concept may come up. See egoism below.

In this article I use male pronouns for narcissists, because narcissistic personality is more common in men. But by no means exclusive to men; there’s sufficient little Hillarys among us.

Egoism

Egoism is an anarchistic philosophy in which the point of life is to pursue one’s own interest. It’s considered to have started with Max Stirner and is popular with post-left anarchists. While I’m here neither to critique egoism nor to give it free advertising, I do want to distinguish it from

narcissism (so post-leftists don't write "In Praise of Narcissism in response). The two things are in some ways opposite, although on rare occasion a egoist can be a narcissist.

Leading psychoanalysts and new-age psychics¹ agree that the root of narcissism is a sense of worthlessness, or a lack of a sense of self altogether. The narcissist personality creates a false grandiose cover self: attractive, heroic, charismatic, a very stable genius. Egoism, on the other hand, actually embraces a sort of radical self-acceptance. The egoist boldly embraces the true desires of their real self, and doesn't give a shit what you think of their flatulence and acne.

The Impact

What makes the narcissist personality different from others who misbehave is the relentless refusal to change their actions and the rabbit hole of manipulation and games for any who try to work with them on it. For example, consider sexual abuse, one of the most destructive behaviors in anarchist scenes and the frustrations people experience organizing around it:

"Accountability processes do a lot of good but sometimes they just teach men how to appear unabusive when nothing's changed but the words coming out of their mouths. Survivors and friends are left wondering if said male is no longer a threat. Eventually the issue recedes from peoples' minds because they don't want to seem overly reactionary and don't know what further steps to even take and the perpetrator is able to continue on in their life without much changing."

From "Is the Anarchist Man Our Comrade" quoted in *Accounting for Ourselves* by Crimethinc. The pamphlet goes on to discuss the impact on the community of these stymied efforts: "This stuff depresses people and burns them out," and "Accountability processes suck up disproportionate time and energy." All this begs two too often ignored questions:

1. Why is this happening in activist scenes devoted to the opposite? The stock answer is that "abuse happens in all communities," but if our values don't make a difference, what is the point of a feminist community?
2. Why would someone devoted to life-affirming values and a better world not only minimize or deny previous behavior, but actively pursue future behavior under duress?

The answer to both questions may be that radical movements attract narcissist personalities for narcissist reasons. Even if not more numerous than in the general population, their presence and effect is noticeable. To be admired, to be the leader, to lead and exploit naïve sheep. To some degree that's many of us; a "healthy narcissism" drives us to be like Cesar Chavez or Emma Goldman. The narcissist personality joins to become Stalin or Pol Pot.

Post-authoritarian social movements have been damaged by our own success in a way. When Marxist activism was the norm, and entrenched leadership was considered more functional, narcissist aspired to be great leaders, hoping, like the great communists of the past, to use the scientific principles of socialism to remake the universe according to their own whims. When a narcissist failed in the heroic struggle to be the leader, he became the leader of a new alphabet-soup-group. A leader lucky enough to hit the bigtime was immune to accountability (SWP in Britain).²

¹ James F. Masterson. *The Search for the Real Self*. The Free Press, 1988. Teal Swan. "Narcissism." Youtube.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/mar/09/socialist-workers-party-rape-kangaroo-court>

Since the Cold War ended and as anarchy increases in hipness, the narcissists come to our door.

What to do?

Much more has been written about narcissistic personalities in personal relationships than in communities. Do lessons apply? A lot of it is like “Ten Signs He’s a Narcissist” so you can avoid a relationship with that person. The advice is usually intended for someone who’s suffered already in such relationships.

This preemptive exclusion approach won’t work in communities and movements, for many reasons: the scale involved, people with narcissistic personality disorder can change. Some people on the narcissistic spectrum just need to plug into a community to get functional. Besides such people with too much healthy narcissism, many with other situations can be mistaken for narcissists: autistic people, people with complex PTSD, and ADHD.

And, or course, if anyone is ever punished, it must be because of their behavior and not some clever label we put on them. Nor should anyone’s bad behavior be ignored because of an amateur diagnosis.

The other notable aspect of narcissist relationships is the affinity for codependence with narcissists. This is applicable to radical movements. While part of the problem is that narcissists can rely on available forms of institutionalized privilege, the tenaciousness of narcissist personalities in our communities is empowered by a dainty everyone-is-special mentality.

Part of a culture of integrity is a balanced approach to compassion—which usually turns out to be the overall most compassionate approach to compassion. This includes neither attacking or defending anyone based on our own neuroses, the knee-jerk reactions we use to reassure ourselves of our own goodness. Our noble capacities for pity and tolerance can be balanced by the needs of those who don’t need pity and tolerance but do need safety and functionality.

Remembering that a narcissist personality lacks an affirming sense of self. Achieving a stable resiliency from narcissist disruption and devastation, a culture of integrity can focus on how our community can embrace the worth of the true selves of all, becoming a place of healing for people on the narcissist spectrum, regardless of why they came here in the first place.

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