

One Giant Red Flag, Folded Into A Book

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CW: lengthy and detailed discussion of abuse, rape, stalking, and apologia for such

Let's be clear from the outset: Conflict Is Not Abuse is not even remotely the same thing as the sentiment or thesis that "conflict is not abuse." Much of the success Sarah Schulman's book has seen is the result of people wanting a defense of the latter thesis and assuming her appropriation of the pre-existing phrase means the book's content follows whatever their own motivations and approach to that distinction is. I will refer to Schulman's book by the acronym CINA throughout this review specifically to avoid such a default association and emphasize the ways in which CINA is *not* an appropriate or productive illustration of the differences between conflict and abuse (a distinction it barely touches and handles inaccurately), nor a useful investigation into the origins of conflation between those two categories.

The first time I was recommended CINA it was by an old comrade and former coworker, a survivor of the green scare, someone I have a deep personal respect and appreciation for. The Left, she complained to me over coffee, has become too quick to cut people off, to leap into recriminations and bitter denunciations over small infractions. Ignorance of non-standard language or etiquette, to say nothing of complex history, systems, and dynamics, is quickly turned into an indelible stain of character. Those without a liberal arts education and other markers of class are gatekept from The Left, which increasingly collapses to nothing more than status games in the non-profit sector. And within such spaces those who flourish are those who turn every disagreement, harm, or conflict, however minor, into a point of perpetual hostility and fracture. Every small clique closes up the drawbridges. Every wound festers. Mutual unintelligibility grows and every issue of epistemology becomes a hotly political declaration of personal alliances.

Sure! I said, *I think pretty much everyone agrees with that.* Indeed such a surface characterization of the left (compounded by today's particularly crude and protozoic social media tools) is pretty much universal. *But crucial and grave distinctions emerge in our analysis and prescriptions.* One can find squabbles for status on Facebook or preening over demonstrating the absolute perfect social justice language to be laughably inane while *also* supporting the recent paradigm shift to a world where the regimes of sickening peace that so many predators and tyrants in subcultural spaces depended upon for decades is eroded and counter-mobilization isn't tamped down.

My friend and I talked for hours, but our broad emphases could not have been more different.

In her mind the central flaw of the Left was people's tolerance or even taste for conflict and schism. In my mind the central flaw of the left was the inverse: a hunger for unity, and, as a result, a simple-minded avoidance of schism.

Indeed, I argued, *it's precisely the Left's pursuit of cohesion above all and an inability to gracefully accept rupture and separation that is the source of much intractable hostility.* Instead of simply going our own ways, the Left sees any division as failure and so tries to force everything into The General Assembly or The Party or The Community – creating self-perpetuating quagmires in a blind faith that discussion can handle everything or that collectivity is a magical fountainhead of warm fuzzies. But the harder we attempt to press everyone into peace and unity the more violent and cataclysmic the inevitable splits. By trying to tamp down every fight and paper over every difference we create more division in total. Instead of stepping up to the hard fight to kick a serial abuser out of institutional power we defuse and avoid explicit conflict, pushing everything into hidden accountability processes designed solely to hold together The Community or The Organization, until the survivors get so exhausted and demoralized they quit activism or end up in a massive schism not just with the serial abuser but with the self-appointed overseers of accountability, even with the entire passively complicit scene.

It's a general pattern: the more a scene accepts separation, the less catastrophic the divisions. Anarchist circles and projects, for example, certainly have our disagreements, grudges, and lingering animosities, but the resulting conflicts, even when they get violent or fucked up, are at least rarely as devastating as the unending fractal of cataclysmic splits between factions of marxists who cannot ideologically countenance any sort of schism and so are overrun by them.

In short, I agreed with the *title* of the book my friend so effusively praised, *conflict isn't abuse*, but I disagreed with what she seemed to have gotten from it. While there are some inane exceptions, we don't have an epidemic of inflating conflict into abuse, we far more often see abuse minimized and marginalized as mere "conflict," with struggles against abusers cast as even worse than abuse. And while normal conflict is sometimes unnecessary or defaulted on for bad reasons, I believe it is often good or even necessary in many situations to *embrace* conflict, and in many cases that can take the form of individuals cutting off contact or collectively boycotting ("ostracizing"). Yes, the insufficiently developed structure of certain contemporary communications technologies that still provide few options in social scope and context, leads to a lot of noise and posturing over trivialities, but this issue pales in comparison to the importance of tearing down the regimes of unjust peace and unity in subcultural communities that have long held up predators, nihilistic apathy and the old boys clubs that cultivate both.

It's worth noting Sarah Schulman repeatedly emphasizes in interviews that she didn't write CINA to address abuse or #MeToo. And yet in practice the discourse around CINA is invariably drawn to such issues.

The most pernicious and loudly prominent tendency among references to CINA are those who use it to declare that a given situation of severe abuse is merely "conflict" – and also, usually, to then frame those treating it more seriously as engaging in "abuse" *themselves* for their reaction. #ConflictIsNotAbuse, in this usage, becomes an opportunistic slogan for deflection and reversals, with a book only distantly attached, off in the ether, providing legitimization in a nebulous but authoritative way.

It's very similar to *The Tyranny Of Structurelessness* – a similarly notorious text that lives primarily as a slogan to legitimize any given instance of tyranny and bureaucracy or to dismiss out of hand any resistance and alternatives to such, as well as to shut down all investigation or talk of non-formalized bottom-up strategies for dealing with informal power. The particulars of the text are less important than the assumed canonicity and unassailability of its title. Few fans invoking the title of the text have actually read the thing; *they don't need to*.

This isn't to say that the wildly fucked up ends to which either text get cited are *unfair* readings or misappropriations of good texts. Make no mistake, CINA is ultimately *exactly* what it has been widely accused of being: *a jawdropping book of nonstop abuse apologia*, a good representation of the ideological frameworks and defensive narratives of many abusers and their defenders. The array of horrid ends to which CINA is widely leveraged may not always be direct reflections of the text, but they do inexorably derive from it.

Just as it's important to be fair and note her repeated dismissals that she wasn't writing about abuse, it's also important to provide the context that Schulman was, according to several publicly posted and widely shared accounts of fellow activists, run out of Toronto for abusing and stalking an ex, repeatedly violating boundaries and even showing up at her house. When she writes things like "*Resistance to shunning, exclusion, and unilateral control, while necessary, are mischaracterized as harm,*" she's quite openly attempting to cast her own personal history of violating requested boundaries as morally necessary *resistance* rather than abuse. This context is critical and clearly

drives everything in CINA, which *repeatedly to the point of cringe comedy* inserts asides about how such stalking and boundary violation isn't abuse, but is even morally obligatory, all while casting someone refusing to answer your calls as essentially The Real Abuse.

Yet I am not here to provide one more sweeping rhetorical denunciation of Schulman and her grotesque book but an autopsy. *How* specifically does CINA function towards the ends of abuse apologia? Why might a few reasonable and even valorous people find it sympathetic?

CINA invites the reader to consider the many situations everyone on the planet has experienced where someone doing bad things sees (or rhetorically frames) themselves as grievously harmed by minor acts, including the resistance or self-defense of those they're harming. Since this is a very broad and sweeping category readers can insert pretty much whatever they like into this picture. After all, it's a common enough experience in the most abstract sense; we're all familiar with crybullies who will claim the smallest misstep is cataclysmically harmful and then frame any sort of resistance to their claims as further grievous injustice. CINA sweepingly postulates that in all these cases the bad-doer sees themselves as the victim because they have little experience dealing with self-criticism, self-doubt, and personal change and so fear collapsing entirely in the face of engagement, choosing to lash out instead.

I want to be clear: instances of this can certainly occur!

The trap is that this explanation can be slapped over almost *any situation...* including criticism of CINA. The credulous reader is enthused by the sense of support they get from the text regarding particular harrowing situations in their own social life. Whenever Schulman's language gets dicey they just remember that one time someone was out-of-pocket online (eg comparing reposting a journalist's copyrighted photo to rape or calling giving neighbors food racist). But increasingly the psychological narrative explanation applies to everything, and so must reflect Deep Truth. It becomes a hammer that can strike at anyone's umbrage with you, all the more so if they have little interest in handholding you endlessly but instead just want you to fuck off and stop bothering them. And so when legions of survivors recoil in horror and denounce CINA as abuse apologia, there's a ready-made explanation for their *hysteria*.

This potent appeal conjoins with the title into a readymade deflection: *okay, sure, the text could maybe do with more caveats that in various places the author isn't saying X when she says something that could be construed as X, but it's not on her to explore in depth what constitutes abuse rather than conflict. She's just doing one half of the work.*

And finally, the favorite defense of Schulman herself: the book is just a grab bag of random ideas, not a formal academic thesis, and is meant to be charitably approached like a jumble of half-finished thoughts mumbled in a bar. Whatever the merits or demerits of this approach, CINA has reached such cultural pervasiveness because it does in fact functionally make a single argument and it's one a lot of people want to hear: *The people accusing you of abuse are in fact the real abusers because it's not like you repeatedly beat anyone, but they ostracized you and refused to return your calls, and that's honestly the worst thing possible.*

The lazy way to denounce CINA is to list some extremely horrible or scandalous pull-quotes at the extremes of this and then just point to them and go "holy shit" (believe me, we'll do that) but I want to talk concretely about some straightforward mistakes in CINA's overall conceptual analysis, the values it assumes, and how they build on one another. There are three core mistakes Schulman makes:

- 1) Centering community, collectivity and existing relationships – as opposed to individual agency – as valuable in-and-of-themselves and the fountainhead of solutions.

2) Ridiculously overestimating the utility or potency of verbal discussion, and prioritizing maintaining communication rather than embracing free association.

3) Treating refusal to talk as itself abusive, or at least shockingly severe harm, rather than something not only often pragmatically necessary but core to and inextricable from individual agency.

The end result of these mistakes (and a variety of reinforcing ones) is the diminishing of actual abuse into the category of conflict by shifting the focus of critique upon survivors and others who set boundaries around communication and association.

Schulman's explicit diminishment of actual abuse is important, as are her extremely reactionary narratives about survivors and false accusations, but such are the *product* of a certain logic that must be explored in depth to be refuted. Along the way I will not in the slightest respect the tissue-thin pretense that CINA is a book merely about conflict and not abuse.

Community Over Individual Choice

Schulman, like a lot of leftists unfortunately, really passionately believes in a phantasm called "*community*" and has this kind of background assumption that *togetherness* is both what we're all obviously striving for and is also basically a fountainhead of magic that can solve anything. She just takes it for granted that anyone reading would recognize "*relationships*" hold innate value *in themselves* above the freedom of their constituent individuals, and she also believes that The Community should be the primary agent and sovereign involved in resolving a conflict. In short, community is the *goal*, the *means*, and the *subject*. As she puts it at the outset:

*"At the center of my vision is the recognition that above all, it is the community surrounding a Conflict that is the source of its resolution. **The community holds the crucial responsibility** to resist overreaction to difference, and to offer alternatives of understanding and complexity. We have to help each other illuminate and counter the role of overstating harm instead of using it to justify cruelty. I suggest that we have a better chance at interrupting unnecessary pain if we articulate our shared responsibility in creating alternatives. Looking for methods of **collective problem-solving** make these destructive, tragic leaps more difficult to accomplish. People who are being punished for doing nothing, for having normative conflict, or for resisting unjustified situations, need the help of other people. While there are many excuses for not intervening in unjust punishment, that intervention is, nonetheless, essential. Without the intervention that most people are afraid to commit to, this escalation cannot be interrupted."* [emphasis added]

There's a world of horrors Shulman is stuffing under anodyne phrases like "*normative conflict*" or "*resisting unjustified situations*" but, again, we'll get to all that. However it's important to note that the "*tragic*" "*escalation*" she's concerned with here is explicitly laid out as that of refusing to talk to someone or attempting to organize a boycott of them, both characterized by the severing of relationships. Such is something Schulman repeatedly treats as unimaginably dire and endlessly compares or equivocates with things like racist police violence and Israel's genocidal project in Palestine. Schulman's position is that if you see someone refusing to talk to a shitbag or folks cutting ties over associating with said shitbag, you have a *moral obligation* not just to proactively

violate any requested boundaries against contact (eg stalking and harassing them to get them to talk to said shitbag) but to aggressively mobilize with other “community” members to band to the “aid” of the shitbag, to force other people into association with said shitbag and defeat any boycott or deplatforming that might otherwise result from a wider awareness of his shitbaggery. Again, Schulman presents this sort of response as a *moral imperative*. And she seems to think this *isn't happening* and needs to.

“One problem here is how to intervene with a person who is overstating harm, hiding behind technology [note: by this she explicitly means anything from preferring email over phone calls to blocking someone], shunning or otherwise escalating... This is the structure behind every successful piece of non-violent progressive political action:

1. *Scapegoated people cannot be made to stand alone.*
2. *Community needs to move towards negotiation.*
3. *More and more people have to join in together to create change.*
4. *The conversation is not over just because an escalator insists that it is.”*

But this is *already* the blueprint of pretty much every attack on a survivor in subcultural spaces. A mob is rallied together to overwhelm someone and deny their basic agency as an individual, to deny them the autonomy to set boundaries and choose who they associate with, to *impose* an endless conversation against their wishes, to *re-establish* relationships to some degree, rather than permit them to escape.

Indeed one of the most constant critiques survivors make is that Leftist and subcultural spaces prioritize the maintenance of “*The Community*” over the freedom of the survivors.

No one wants to sacrifice their own relationships and personal social capital or disrupt the overall social network and so the interests of an abstract “*The Community*” are leveraged to keep abusers while aggressively mobilizing against the disruptiveness of survivors. Even when the abuser in question is a literal admitted child molester (as infamously occurred in the Portland IWW), his friends selfishly don't want to lose the benefits of their relationships with him and so when the parent and a pile of survivors of child sexual assault demand his exclusion from an organization and radical events (to say nothing of his frequent role providing childcare at meetings) they were framed as aggressors against the social peace tearing apart “*The Community*” (hurting the organization's reputation, harming “the work”, destroying relationships, violating procedures for endless formal discussion, etc). Because what's really (selfishly) valued is *social peace* rather than individual autonomy, better social norms, or the liberation of survivors. Anarchists have endlessly written about this over the last two decades:

“In the most extreme cases, accountability processes will be initiated against the explicit wishes of survivors, as an attempt to legitimize the perpetrator in the eyes of others. The pretence of making it a “community issue” allows the false supporters to not only take control out of the survivors hands, but also to portray survivors who refuse to cooperate with their own disempowerment as a barrier to accountability.” (Betrayal: A Critical Analysis of Rape Culture In Anarchist Subcultures, 2013)

“Transformative justice processes” have widely become not one tool among many that survivors could pick as suits their needs and evaluation of a specific context and perpetrator, but

a hidden cellar into which survivors can be reliably forced by organizations and milieus – by “*The Community*” – to contain their disruptiveness, often aggressively sticking them back into the hands of their abuser’s mind games, threats, traumatic memories, and exhausting lies. Like a small town delivering an unruly wife in town square back into the containing box of her husband’s house with a few token stern words to him, the point is to “*repair the damage*” to “*The Community*,” not the survivor.

The playbook is historically consistent and widespread across subcultures and ostensible politics: form ranks around the abuser and collectively bully any survivors demanding his exclusion or honestly really anything. Requests that he leave her alone, sharing what he did to warn other people to stay away, much less mobilizing grassroots social boycotts of him, are treated as high treasonous crimes against “*The Community*” and the web of *relationships* that comprise it.

However in practice the sheer self-interest of these machinations is pretty transparent. In the face of a declaration that someone was abusive, folks mobilize to defend their friendships, social capital, and the broader social order threatened by the survivor often without any sort of pretense (as well as to crack down on any chance they themselves might face negative consequences one day). And when moral arguments are grasped at to defend the maintenance of various relationships, it is usually a jumbled, reactive, contradictory affair.

What’s relatively novel about CINA is the way it attempts to provide a coherent unified moral argument to reject personal boundaries (“avoidance”) and grassroots boycotts (“shunning”) entirely. This is what makes the book so uniquely dangerous as a rallying document for abuse apologists. But it *also* makes it a fascinating artifact because, in so doing, Schulman leverages the collectivist values unfortunately already popular among leftists to shockingly extreme conclusions. CINA is nothing if not a systematic *reductio ad absurdum* of collectivism. If a Right Libertarian wrote it as a parody document of The Left we would sneer that it was a cartoonish hack job with takes no one real would ever make. And yet CINA is littered with sweeping statements that aggressively reject individual autonomy, to give just one example:

“If someone wishes to alter a relationship, they must discuss it with the other person, negotiate the change, and listen to the other person’s account. There is no ethical way around it.”

One would hope that any reasonable person would instantly recognize this claim as ridiculous and abhorrent. Individual agency implies plenty of situations where unilateral alteration of a relationship is clearly licensed and no “*negotiation*” whatsoever is appropriate. If a friend or acquaintance reveals a sexual interest in me they have unavoidably *unilaterally* changed some aspects to our relationship, and I may reciprocate or not, but I owe them no *negotiation* in my response, which in turn *unilaterally* creates a change. If a friend asks to become fuckbuddies I don’t even necessarily owe them an *explanation* for my refusal. Relationships are not democratic communes.

Another obvious and salient example is breaking up with someone. The right of exit from a relationship is not up for *negotiation* nor should it ever be, if someone wants out, they’re out. Hell, I say this as someone in my youth broken up with via an “*I love you too intensely and I’ve decided I don’t want to feel such intensity, please don’t respond*” text, a maddeningly and painfully limited puzzlebox if ever there was one. Everyone knows that getting ghosted can suck, but a breakup is fundamentally a matter of individual choice and should not be something where both parties are forced into a *negotiation* by some National Romantic Relations Board.

There are many situations of change in relationships in which *discussion* and even *negotiation* are quite ethically valorous, *sometimes* requisite on some level, but they are simply not as fundamental of moral priorities as individual autonomy. Having agency comes first. As such, there will always be many contexts in which there is *no* obligation or pull whatsoever to discuss or “*negotiate*” a change to a relationship. An employee, for example, is in a financial relationship with her boss and she can simply unilaterally declare that relationship finished at any time. If a friend of mine starts knowingly dating a cop or infamous snitch I do not owe them a discussion about their betrayal of our shared values or the risk they now pose, certainly not any *negotiation*, I can *and should* cut all contact with them ASAP.

Schulman’s language in even just the above betrays how deeply she sees things in terms of collectives, she speaks of “*a relationship*” as if it were a unified thing but there is actually no singular ontological object out there of “*the relationship*” that we are co-owners or constituent citizens of. There are rather always just individuals with different orientations or sentiments to others. *Your sentiment towards me is not the same object as my sentiment towards you*, they can interact but they are, at core, autonomous. Richly and delightedly entangled though we may become in friendships and love, we are still infinitely more individuals than some net collective entity. Even while the abstract simplification of “*our relationship*” might have significant utility as shorthand, it is just as ultimately ontologically vacuous as aggregate abstractions like “*table*” or “*hand*” – while useful shorthand in a lot of contexts, it describes no actual root *thing* in the universe and it is certainly not emergently autonomous as a new causal or moral entity beyond our individual minds and orientations. “*Radicalism*” is precisely about rejecting abstract conjured holisms and instead focusing our eyes on the *actual roots*.

It’s not uncommon for an abusive parent or partner to harangue someone for not “*doing more for Our Relationship*” in very much the same terms that Leninists will pressure you to sacrifice for *The Organization* they run or jingoists will encourage you to sacrifice at the altar of *The Nation*. These are not real things but simplified abstractions that are invoked to obscure the real dynamics and desires at play.

Your internal sentiment and orientation towards me is entirely your choice – were it anything less you would be reduced in your capacity to even function as a self-reflective agent. Our sentiments towards one another may, of course, grow strongly causally intertwined, and we may indeed pick up strong obligations in various contexts to discuss, engage or inform one another of things that expand our awareness and agency. Communication is vital to consent just as knowledge is vital to agency, so there *can* be extreme situations where you have an imperative to convey vital information to someone when they do not consent to hear it. Someone with a hangover might tell you to leave them in silence, but if you see them about to pour mislabeled rat poison into their coffee you obviously have a moral duty to violate their request. But this is just as obviously not the same thing as a *general obligation* to each others’ attention and engagement. Nor does it rise to the level of a duty of engagement that should be enforced upon the two of us by The Community.

It’s all the rage in The Left to treat “agency” as a kind of arbitrary compartmentalization that can be applied like a fractal, at any scale. In this lens collectives (from relationships to nations) are just as much “agents” as individuals, but there is a drastically important distinction that arises from the vast differences in how quickly and densely information can flow between neurons within a brain versus between conversing committee members. Put simply: the richness and depth of our thoughts, knowledge and experiences are generated far faster than language can ever

convey to another person. We are an individuated species because the self-reflective processes that give rise to meaningful choice happen – by orders of magnitude – primarily in our skulls rather than in the thin bandwidth of communication that is able to pass between us. This is why *individuals* must be at the root of any “*radical*” analysis; in the absence of actual telepathy or borg-like hiveminds, agency and choice are *only* properties of individuals.

To maximize freedom thus obliges respecting the autonomy of individuals so that they can make their own choices rather than be drowned as mere components of some committee (or community) they are locked into. This is not to say that we always have no ethical obligations, I’ve noted the complexity at play and potential exceptions, but our primary lens and our starting point should always be something closer to the individual “right” of free association. It’s *imperative* that individual autonomy be preserved so that choices can be made at all, so that people can even just *think* for themselves, rather than be trapped under the barrage of inefficient chatter. Relations that are not actively and continually *chosen* by each individual can only suppress freedom in net.

It can be worth questioning the absolutist framework of “rights” that this prioritization is often framed in terms of, but Schulman’s approach is simply to *reverse* the right:

“What we have instead is a devolved definition of personal responsibility, which constructs avoidance as a right regardless of the harm it does to others.”

“Simply wanting to exclude... someone through forced absence is not an inherent right.”

*“The concept of “safe space” ...is used by the dominant to defend against the discomfort of hearing other people’s realities, to repress nuance, ignore multiple experiences, and reject **the inherent human right to be heard.**”*

It’s truly hard to fathom a claim as gobsmackingly dystopian as a “*right to be heard.*” If Schulman recognizes that she’s declared an inherent *right* to ownership and control over another person’s brain, she’s completely untroubled by it. Again, Libertarians love to complain that The Left has a tendency to argue sloppily and make up “positive rights” to labor from other people (eg the “right” to a doctor’s labor), but not a one of them ever dreamed things could go this far. This is a right to abuse, and nothing less.

Instead of treating engagement as something to be pursued as a *general ends or instrumental goal*, Schulman instead presents it as a personal obligation in all relationships and contexts. Even worse, it’s a personal obligation that must be enforced by a community. You’re not allowed to come to the conclusion that there are better things to do with your life than continue arguing with your ex; The Community will pressure you to continue to engage with them, because your ex has a *right* to your attention. The Relationship has rights. The Community has a right to perpetuation. And these rights stand above individual free association (which necessarily includes choosing to not engage with someone, e.g. to avoid them). This is what’s inextricably at play in Schulman’s framework. You have a *duty* to engage with other people, to answer their calls, to include them when your friends hang out, to *negotiate* every social action you take rather than making them freely, and this duty must be enforced upon you, which is equivalent to asserting that others have a *right* to your attention, a *vote* in your “relationship” in all situations as if it were a collective or nation.

Schulman acts as though it’s self-evidently ludicrous to claim we have a right to shun but *of course* we have the right to shun. Good god, we have *nothing* if we do not have such a “right”!

Which is to say in more clear terms: we, *as individuals*, must have the core freedom to choose who we associate with and who we waste time engaging with. This is the very premise of individual agency: *choice*. Not “*voice*” in a democratic assemblage, but *choice* in whether or not to show up or not. And, of course, choice in whether to *fork* the organization or group and convene a new one minus the assholes defending the child molester. Anything less is communistic tyranny rather than anarchy.

For a sustainable world of rich connection, individuals must have *conscious choice* in their connections. We must be able to fluidly reorganize and reposition ourselves, building not just chosen family but *constantly and actively chosen* family. Schulman hates the term “family” (“the phrase “*chosen family*” *makes me quake with fear*”), which, fair enough, and she juxtaposes this with friendship, concluding “*a true friend has the conversation.*”

I will say that it is valorous that Schulman seeks a world of connection and engagement, I do as well, but this leads her to praise and seek to deepen precisely the “***unchosen*** *character of inclusive and plural cohabitation.*” [emphasis added]

There are, of course, real and important dangers to clustering effects whereby different communities or cultures might seal themselves from one another and there is an imperative to resist such cultural and epistemic closure in some specific ways by encouraging the choice of engagement, but Schulman’s solutions are slapdash and authoritarian: If some people *might* choose to cluster homogeneously, then *take away their choice*; force them into diverse pluralistic social relationships that they have no agency in reconfiguring or navigating. This “solution” is not the rich teeming chaos of cosmopolitanism but a nationalist and totalitarian caricature of it in which we all have assigned seating to meet some crude diversity quotas.

Nationalists complain that without collectively enforced borders the free association of individuals means their neighbor could sell their home to a foreigner and thus “impose” diversity upon them. Schulman’s argument in CINA takes literally the same form but with different ends. But nationalism isn’t just wrong in the ends of homogeneity, it is wrong in its means of suppressing individual choice. A world of random arbitrary relationships into which we are thrust and locked, and that we must embrace rather than exercise choice over, is not a solution to nationalist divides but rather has been a characteristic fascist wet dream since the time of Heidegger.

The whole point to cosmopolitanism and increasingly global connectivity is to give people *more choice*. Bands of hunter-gatherers come together in large fairs, rural folks run away from small towns to giant cities, so many have fought for the online world we finally have, precisely so that people could have *more social options*. This often looks like more avenues of flight: a battered wife stuck in a small village has fewer chances for solidarity or a place to flee to than she does in a big city. But it can also look like more options in terms of affinity. Cities (and the biggest city, the internet) are sites of constantly spontaneously generated subcultures from the magic of free association. This enables the generation of complex and diverse new cultural experiments, but it also means the erosion of those that don’t work for their members. That is to say, *diversity in some directions and not others*.

That part is critical because “diversity” is not a value in and of itself. Nor is “tolerance.” Such notions are liberal pluralist hangups very different from anarchist commitments. Sadly, Schulman is firmly in the grip of an analysis in terms of diversity and *difference*:

“most of the pain, destruction, waste, and neglect towards human life that we create on this planet and beyond, are consequences of our overreaction to difference”

But that's clearly not the case. If one person wants to selfishly consume a limited resource and the other person doesn't want them to, that's a conflict in values totally separate from any position on or response to difference. The small child torturing small animals to death for fun in the backyard isn't acting out some fear of difference/otherness but simply *not caring* by default about anything beyond their self. Perhaps they can come to eventually recognize and blur their sense of self with the common spark of agency in other patches of the universe, but a failure to evolve such an awareness is not by any means automatically the result of *fearing difference*.

And we don't seek to *tolerate* the existence of evangelical christians, we seek to completely replace them by facilitating escape (and militant resistance). We seek to crush and exterminate bad subcultures and communities from national socialist black metal to hindufascism. To accomplish this means fluidly prefiguratively coming together in new social and cultural spaces with better values and norms in which we can not just breathe more freely but where folks can escape to. Social boycott dynamics are critical to this process to keep out the creep of everything that goes against those values. It's not through some centralized politburo meeting where edicts are voted on that better social spaces develop, but through individuals freely choosing to associate with people who share their values and not with those who don't. People can only truly engage when they each have *choice* in their relations, the freedom to escape, to be able to cut any tie and build new ones with anyone consenting. To build a more richly connected world on the whole we often have to cut away our personal connections with malicious nodes in the network. The anarchist project involves embracing this as a catalyzing individual process from the bottom-up.

So in short: not every instance of homogeneous clustering or exclusion is pernicious. A child molester should not be tabling at a union's family events. Immigrants new to a city reasonably desire to maintain many ties and commonalities. And radical subcultures of resistance *should* ostracize people for severely violating their assumed baseline of shared values and expectations.

Speech As Magic

If one half of Schulman's moral appeal in CINA is a reductio of leftism as collectivism, its other half is a reductio of liberalism's naive faith in speech as salve to everything. If people would only allow her to have a conversation with them, Schulman could correct "misinterpretations" of her and force them to come over to her perspective. CINA's grand theory is that failing to critically engage and be critiqued by others engenders a kind of need for psychological stasis in trauma or entitlement that is the source of all closed groups and domination of the other. This is not a dynamic that *never* happens, it certainly describes many situations well enough, and I'll engage with it more in a coming section, but CINA cashes this out as an imperative to *always* talk.

In this frame *even fascism* is explicitly rendered nothing more than a frantic attempt to *escape* whose "*antidote*" is literally just "*love*." (Like a boomer parody par excellence she's really into the early 20th century pseudoscience of "psychoanalysis" and spends a chapter wishing totally discredited wingnuts like Wilhelm Reich could have just sat all the nazis down in a therapy session and thus solved everything.) In this frame "*the courage to love*" is literally "*inexhaustible*" magic that can solve any problem.

"The responsible person who understands that all parties participate in conflict, says, 'We need help.' If we really think that someone 'needs help,' we help them. The claim

“you need help, therefore I will compound your problems by shunning and bullying you,” obviously is entirely unethical, hypocritical, and socially detrimental.”

This shocking level of boomer liberalism extends from Schulman explicitly rejecting No Platforming fascists, to embracing inane IDW talking points like *“the best answer to speech is more speech... the best answer to [negative] movements is more communication ... what we need is more discomfort.”* (41:10 here) to absolutely laugh-out-loud analysis of social change:

“If the powers that be had invited people with HIV into their halls and said, “We have a conflict here. Therefore we need to sit down together and solve it,” people with HIV would not have had to do civil disobedience, for which they and their supporters were arrested by the police. It was the shunning that made them have to do this. It was the immoral shunning that criminalized people with HIV.”

Naturally she also opposes content warnings as coddling those damn college kids too.

This is all so deeply liberal it’s gobsmacking. I already wrote a lengthy good faith engagement with critics of antifascism in 2017 handling every single argument against No Platforming extensively and laboriously showing how punching nazis is often the most efficient way to pursue the ends of a more connected and engaged world. Any liberal or conservative readers who have happened here and want the 101 should go there; I won’t insult your intelligence and the complexity of objections by simplifying and condensing everything here. However it goes without saying for anarchists or other radicals that Schulman’s takes here are deeply disqualifying.

This sort of liberal stuff is obviously embarrassing, and tends to be what many leftists sympathetic to CINA will make exceptions around or admit the book goes off the rails around, framing it as like *“well grandma’s gonna say some cringe shit, but nevertheless,”* but they’re not disconnected from everything else. They’re a critical link in the chain of Schulman’s argument.

Some of the most easily mocked passages in CINA arise from Schulman’s rants against *kids these days with their text messages and emails; why won’t they answer the phone when I call?!? How dare they take advantage of the possibility for explicit consent!!*

“Most Americans have cell phones now. They can return phone calls on the walk from the subway station to their apartment buildings, from the car to the mall. There is no reason why people do not return phone calls except for the power-play of not answering. It certainly does not save time. It is tragic that we have evolved a social custom that people need to email in order to ask for permission to make a phone call. Just call! Emailing to ask for permission to speak privileges the rage, Supremacy, and Trauma of withholding over the human responsibility to communicate and understand. I say, let’s get back to the first one hundred years of telephone culture, where people looked up each other’s numbers and called. The now “forbidden” ten-to-twenty-minute phone conversation could save the subsequent months or years of misplaced bad feeling. All this terrible loss, for nothing.”

It’s tempting to write these absurdities off as merely an embarrassing boomer moment irrelevant to the rest of CINA and move on, but I think it’s deeply illuminating to examine *why* she focuses in on phone calls and in-person conversations as positive conversation and is so hostile to not just text messages but letters. One can easily argue that text can strip away tone, but so too

do phone calls strip away visual cues. In any case this would make such communication more limited bandwidth, but still a net positive over no communication. Yet Schulman *hates* text. As she puts it:

“email and text are both unidirectional and don’t allow for return information to enhance or transform comprehension.”

There are many distinctions between text and verbal communication, each of which can be a net positive or negative in different contexts, yet the “*unidirectionality*” Schulman focuses on would be better framed as a matter of letting someone gather their thoughts, to think at the speed they need to, to be precise and considered, rather than rushed and provoked. Abusers love to corner people in inescapable ratchets of immediacy, denying them the space and time to formulate and clarify their thoughts consciously.

At the very least consider the breathtaking neurotypical supremacy (and total lack of empathetic modeling of others) in Schulman’s characterization of someone preferring text:

“one party makes a negative power-play by refusing to speak to the other in person.”

Preferring a different medium of communication is thus transmuted into a “*power-play*”! And yet demanding someone allow you to corner them in a medium where they can ambush and escalate in wild directions and you can’t gather your thoughts to deal with these unforeseen maneuvers is somehow *not* one of the most classic power-plays?!

Surely we have all seen the ways that politicians and demagogues use the real-time constraints of verbal discussion to derail, mislead, manipulate, duck, and counter on the fly? If we want to talk about unidirectionality or asymmetry, how about the asymmetry that a small amount of time and effort at bullshit takes far more time and effort to clear up? Verbal communication is deeply prone to manipulators barraging you with tiny dense attacks or deflections that would take pages of written text to break down in response. There are surely *plenty* of valid reasons to want to avoid speaking to someone in person.

Schulman gives an example of a friend emailing her to cancel their lunch plans because of stressful major life commitments and presents that email as a trap:

“So if I respond to your email with one of my own: “I am sad, but let’s talk on the phone before you leave”—that could cause the cataclysmic catastrophic end of all ends. Instead of just calling me, you can decide that I am abusing you. That I am pressuring you, guilt-tripping you... All your anger... converges on me and the horrible transgressing demand I have made on you by asking for us to talk. I am actually your friend, but you turn me into your foe. You therefore don’t answer me, and now we’re fucked up.”

The assumption (or recollection) that such a response is even on the table speaks volumes about Schulman’s relationships and the patterns she’s personally established, but put that aside and note the supposedly innocuous example language she unthinkingly gives without a trace of self-criticism or self-awareness! “*I am sad, but let’s talk on the phone before you leave.*” The very first thing out of Schulman’s mouth is a declaration of her own feelings rather than any sort of sympathy with her friend’s life stresses. The second thing out of her mouth is an almost finalistic declaration of what *will* happen in a heavyhanded tone. Let’s. There’s no open “*do you*

think you might have time to briefly catch up over phone after the chaos ends?" Also why on earth do a *phone call* when there isn't space for a meet up? Why must a phone call happen in the brief window when you're in the same city? There haven't been long-distance charges for a glacial eon, Schulman.

So much abuse is about trapping and monopolizing the target's attention, feeling entitled to claim a chunk of their brain. The experience of being abused is often one of being forced into thinking about the abuser constantly, from trying to predict their acts to trying to follow the latest tangle in their proclamations. Abuse strips away agency by stripping away the capacity for the abused to think *for yourself*, to think about anything else or think at all. If the abuser controls critical needs then everything is devoted to trying to turn yourself into a complex key that can unlock those needs. If the abuser besieges and terrorizes you randomly, you form your brain into a vast prediction net, trying to preempt as best you can every single avenue by which they might strike. Or you huddle up and turn yourself off, turn your brain off, to try and weather through things like an inert object. All of these are about losing your capacity for agency in a way that extends beyond any physical constraints directly imposed upon you. Abuse takes over your brain.

Sometimes the abuser acts so as to not have to think about you, to terrorize you into smallness and confined predictability, but sometimes the abuser is themselves driven by their own ravenous attention on you and the need to *make* you dedicate that same level of attention to them. This sort of abuser is never more happy than when their provocations force you into direct immediate raw unthought emotional tangles with them. They yell and yell until you finally yell back, and then they grin in glee because they *have* you. Neither abuser can stand your *escape* to any degree, which they read as a direct assault on them.

There are many aspects of abuse, but abusers *feel entitled to your attention*.

I can't emphasize this enough. Demanding that an ex listen to you, mobilizing The Community to *force* that ex to give you a monopoly over their brain is an abuser's wet dream. It's how thousands of accountability processes have derailed into an abuser continuously retraumatizing their survivor.

Schulman, it must be emphasized, *has no argument* for why we should be obligated to give away our attention to anyone who wants it. What she has instead is 1) a fixation on pain and suffering of those denied control over the attention of their targets, and 2) the repeated assertion that having no boundaries is "adult" whereas saying no is "childish". Mature adults talk things out in person, only immature *children* – or those so traumatized and broken as to be infantile children – would draw a line around their attention and enforce it.

*"In another example from other people's lives, sometimes angry, supremacist, or traumatized people send emails commanding, "Do not contact me." I want to state here, for the record, that no one is obligated to obey a unidirectional order that has not been discussed. **Negotiation is a human responsibility.** Little children order their parents around: "Mommy, sit there!" When adults give orders while hiding behind technology, they are behaving illegitimately. These unilateral orders do not have to be obeyed. They need to be discussed."*

It would be trivial to compose a little passage reversing the associations, casting knowing how to draw boundaries and assert one's independence and agency as the "mature adult" position

whereas being caught under the boot of others demands to the point where you can't own your own associations or attention as the "child" experience. But I want to reject the entire adult supremacist frame she's appealing to.

If the child often stomps their feet and declares "no" – *no, I refuse to give uncle a kiss, no, I refuse to get dressed to be your marionette at an event, no, I refuse to listen to your lecturing* – perhaps we should see that as an inspiring site of resistance by those most oppressed before they are ground down. Perhaps we should endeavor to be more like children desperately trying to assert their autonomy and consent as agents *who get to choose*. Certainly the world "adults" have built and perpetuated by beating each new generation into surrender is a clearly sickening and grotesque one.

Even though I personally have made choices to maintain some level of contact, I vehemently support every abused child who walked away from their parents and never answered their calls ever again. Hell, I support children who *killed* their abusers. You do not owe everyone a path for reconciliation and negotiation. From abusers to even just wingnuts and inane time burglars, the best option is sometimes to just walk away forever. We have limited time on this planet, why spend it trying to repair every single relationship you have so far happened into?

Schulman somehow cannot even fathom goals other than the maintenance of existing relationships.

"Refusing to speak to someone without terms for repair is a strange, childish act of destruction in which nothing can be won."

Liberation can be won. There's a world of possibility beyond the confines of one given relationship. Opportunity cost is a real thing that is worth considering. That nothing is gained in *one specific relationship* by walking away doesn't mean that a world of possibilities can't be gained through the absence and negation of that relationship.

Rape Culture Narratives

Now that we've covered the broad theoretical structure behind much of CINA's abuse apolo-gia, let's get directly to how it cashes out. You want the horror pull quotes, I am chomping at the bit to provide them.

Guess what Schulman thinks of "no means no" and how she speaks of "accusations"?

*"Now when I hear "When a woman says no, she means no," I know that that is too simple, because I have said no when I didn't mean it. And I am a woman. **When I have said "no" there were times when I did not know that I actually felt "yes" and there are times that I did know that I actually "felt" yes. People do not always know what they feel, nor do they acknowledge what they really know. Sometimes we say what we think we are supposed to say, or what we are used to saying; we don't give the actual moment a chance. Sometimes we just try out saying certain things. Consequently, making an accusation does not make us right, being angry does not make us right, refusing to communicate does not make us right. In fact, all those things could make us very, very wrong.**" [emphasis added]*

I tend to assume my readers have basic critical thinking skills as feminists but I've been surprised before that a critique left to the reader I thought would be obvious wasn't to some, so let's be laborious: yes, it is trivially true that what is spoken in a moment is not always a perfect reflection of someone's full internal utility function. But our incentives align to try to make our proclaimed desires as true to our inner ones as we can. An external observer will never have anywhere near as good of access to your internal desires as you, so we are obliged to take your word for it because the other direction is a hellish clusterfuck. Moreover there's an assumption here that in a conflict of internal desires in a situation there's some deeper truth being obscured by an incorrectly triumphant desire.

What is the fucking rhetorical purpose of going on in a book about how there are some occasions when someone who says no doesn't mean it? Who and what does that kind of maneuver serve? If you go around saying "*but did you know that some women have rape fantasies?!*" loudly in public without a certain kind of studious contextualizing that's not a bare statement of fact, that is a fucking *move*.

Note also the direct slide from "no doesn't always mean no" wheedling to the implication that "making an accusation" is often about caving to social pressures, refusing to reflect, and/or just *trying out* saying a thing. As if rape or abuse accusations just fall out of an improvisational scat singing session at a jazz club.

If this is all sounding like victim blaming that could easily be mistaken for a bit on Tucker Carlson, you're not wrong, Schulman could get a new job as a script writer for him:

"There is a contemporary, quite visible, collectively agreed-upon, almost traditional social model of "abuse" where a man invites a woman to respond to his desires when she does not return those desires, nor has she suggested or advertised that she does. ...But what if she was attracted to him and did show it, and won't acknowledge that? And he doesn't want to live with the "he hit on me" narrative... What he wants is the "I was attracted to him but I wouldn't acknowledge it, so I got confused" version."

Flagrant justification by appealing to every flimsy narrative in mainstream patriarchal rape culture media that feminists have spent decades critiquing? You betcha:

"In the movie, the potential lover goes, knocks on the door, says "Wait," and the reluctant party waits.

"Listen," she tells her. "I know that someone, your ex or your father or someone, told you a story about yourself. That you don't know how to love. But I am here to tell you that it's not true."

Unfortunately, in our contemporary confusion, at the point where the other knocks on our protagonist's door, they are a "stalker." We are no longer allowed to drop by unannounced when things are fraught. She can't call on the phone to deliver the monologue of persuasion with an open heart, because our heroine hides behind voice mail. She can't send it by email, because it will either be deleted, or forwarded to thousands. If she has knocked, called, and emailed, she is now officially, in the era of overstating harm, a "harasser." The person who fights for honest conversation that can heal, such a well-known and beloved character of yore, is, alas, no more. And so Ms. Reluctant never gets the affective reality, the skin, the voice, the tone, the eyes, the smile, the jokes, and especially

the back and forth, the interactivity that reminds her of what it feels like to let someone in, the interactivity that produces a revelation that her future is not impossible. Instead, past pain dominates over possibility. To suggest otherwise is forbidden.”

Schulman tells a story about fantasizing about sex with a stranger she’s eating lunch with, reading that person’s actions as flirtatious

“Is she innocent of being sexually suggestive or is she guilty? ... If I attempt to follow up in order to discover if this was actually aimed at me, I too could be seen as a harasser; after all, this is a professional relationship. Human Resources could be called in to hurt me. Or, just as easily, my interest could be reciprocated. I have to be very, very careful. One false move and I could be the sad object of an outraged story on the dreaded grapevine: “Sarah Schulman came on to me. It was so inappropriate.” The story would never be “I liked her, I flirted with her, she understood me, and then I was scared I would be hurt like I have been before.” “

The dreaded grapevine. Amid everything else I want you to notice how she just assumes everyone sees whisper networks as figures of dread rather than spaces for release and agency.

Also note how the possibility of strategies of direct and explicit consent is not even considered. Instead Schulman leaps off to talking about how “being accused of desire” is the real dynamic going on.

“Being desired is not the same as being harassed, and we do not have to punish or shun the person who sees what is special about us. Just because you want me, doesn’t mean I have to hurt you. Especially if I also feel attractions that I don’t pursue for reasons of projections from my past. I don’t have to avoid you, ignore your call, refuse to return your email, or block you.”

Again, this is coming from someone accused of stalking. I will say the sheer narcissism about what’s going on when someone rejects or critiques her advances is actually impressive. Schulman talks a lot of game about critical reflection, but she always lobs such towards everyone making accusations of abuse or choosing not to talk to someone. You get the impression she has never once critically self-reflected about whether she’s actually harming people by trying to force real time conversation, whether her demands and entitlements are valid and whether the folks who give her pushback might be rational and self-aware enough to be worth considering. There’s never been a valid reason to press the block button on Sarah Schulman and she’s certain there never will or can be.

“Uneven desire is not a crime, it is not rude, it is not an assault or grounds for shunning or being hurtful. It’s just life and we can still be friends. For real. Even forever. But we have to talk.”

Uneven desire is definitely not a crime or even assault, but how we express and act on that desire can be. And no, we absolutely do not have to talk about it. You do not have to talk it out with the person catcalling you on the street. You are not under any obligation to try to talk things out with someone creeping you out.

You certainly *can*. I've leaned into uncomfortable interactions, talked at length with people who had crushes on me that I didn't reciprocate. I've repeatedly invested my attention and emotions in care and communication in situations where I judged communication likely fruitful and the cost to me worth the assistance to them. I've stayed up responding to multiple page drunk emails with no paragraphing sent to me at 3am because I knew my response or lack of response would strongly affect someone and I *chose* to get entangled in that mess. But I had no social *duty* to or absolute ethical imperative.

“People who feel erotically towards forbidden objects—like those other than partners to whom they have pledged monogamy, or those who are the wrong age, who work in the same sexually prohibitive workplace, who are transgender, or sex workers, who are generally desexualized by the dominant culture, or who are “off-type” (as in not as butch as one’s femme identity demands in a partner)—can motivate them to hide feelings, even to themselves.”

Note the language: “*forbidden objects*” ... “*the wrong age*”

If you want to read more about Schulman and her takes beyond the pages of CINA about erotic thoughts towards people “*the wrong age*” you can do some googling, she’s been rather forthright and there’s a lot of survivors of childhood sexual assault with strong feelings about it. Suffice to say it resounds particularly badly in the context of her sneers about how deplorably *childish* it is to try and set boundaries.

Attacking Survivors

Schulman has in public venues deflected comparisons to #MeToo and calling out rape or abuse saying she was targeting something else with CINA, but this is pretty dishonest as she herself disparages “call-out culture” in the text and directly targets things like believing accounts of abuse.

“We have developed these reductive modes like email and texts to accompany reductive ideas that are supposed to serve large social functions but are not based in human complexity... One of these is “Believe women!” We have this slogan in circulation because so many women are not believed when they tell the truth. But what about when they are not telling the truth? Are we still supposed to believe them? ...What about when women say things that aren’t true because they don’t understand themselves, ourselves? Being defended, of course, is rarely deliberate when we are not self-aware, self-critical, accountable, or psychologically sophisticated. Are others still required to obey?”

These are almost exactly the same kind of snottily baiting rhetorical questions that Kristian Williams infamously wrote and had another person read aloud in an interruption at the 2012 Patriarchy In The Movement conference to gasps of fury from the audience. *Are there literally no exceptions?! Who will help the noble truth-speakers to fight their way out of the dogmatic chains of “believing survivors”? What if survivors are actually just fucking stupid and crazy? (Sorry, “not psychologically sophisticated.”) What if there’s actually an epidemic of folks deluding themselves in “victimology?” Hey, we’re just asking questions here. No need to get so upset.*

This isn't a sincere nerdy literalism that can't process the existence of heuristics and counterbalancing emphases, this isn't even remotely a nuanced exploration of the real (albeit rare) exceptions like false accusations and the complex dynamics and paths around such. This is a direct and intentional attack on even the most minimal pushes for solidarity with survivors and against patriarchy. It's about constructing a narrative of equivocation and emphasized exceptions that can be dragged out in defense of inaction when your friend is called out again.

Schulman is so good at the "there's an epidemic of false accusations" game it's honestly shocking she doesn't already have a column for Quillette:

"There are some women, often in the bourgeois class, who now perform that public event commonly recognized as "abused," with ease: that the other person, male or female, wanted something from me that I did not want and so "I was abused." It is a shortcut. They may select some details and omit others; they may rearrange the order of events so that consequences are reconstructed as causes; they may refuse to engage sequence, objective. I recite those few words: "I was abused" or "she was abusive" or "it was an abusive relationship" and it is immediately understood that I am right, and I am violated, and I am in danger and therefore deserving of group acclaim. While the other s/he is wrong, a harasser, s/he had desire and I didn't, so I am clean and s/he is abusive. And if they wanted to straighten this out, or discuss it until more complexities are revealed, then s/he is a stalker, while I am clean."

Look, it's absolutely the case that we have a limited vernacular for abuse and sexual assault. Not everything fits cleanly into categories and the dominant associations they have, and there are some folks who slide descriptions around. I know an individual that worked through a rigorous accountability process and went around diligently and painstakingly warning everyone they were a perpetrator of sexual assault for nearly a decade before the person running their accountability revised and was like "naw it wasn't sexual assault, you were really scummy about trauma in a conversation about the act after, but you were studiously good about consent during sex" and the perpetrator fervently argued back that such *did* qualify as sexual assault according to their own very stringent moral code because it was harm interrelated with the act of sex. Categories can be complicated and fuzzy at the edges! I know someone who was threatened with rape and extensively gaslit that it had been done while they slept. "Abuse" doesn't really encapsulate the rapeyness of this experience, but it's not clear that "rape" constitutes a perfectly accurate term either because of the uncertainty that it happened. And yet when warning about the perpetrator, is the survivor necessarily *obliged* to divulge and explain all the excruciating gory details to convey the exact haziness of the placement between abuse and rape? Why shouldn't they just collapse things into the very quick description "rape"? I have another friend who largely avoids identifying as a rape survivor in radical spaces because she finds that people are quick to collapse "rape" into a prototypical and ubiquitous image of date rape after a punk show rather than the far more involved and horrifying experience of years of child sexual assault she actually experienced and she doesn't want to deal with their misperceptions or explain her trauma.

You see my point: there are other ways to address the complexity of messy real world experiences and the utility of collapsing them into simple terms. Schulman *postures* as a proponent of nuance and complexity, but she's completely one-sided.

All her examples, no matter how ostensibly diverse, build towards the same fucking narrative that we live in a world where all accusations are automatically believed and so there's an epidemic

of folks automatically lying (to themselves as well as others) because of their own brokenness. Thus, rather than folks having a moral responsibility to help facilitate de facto restraining orders, coming to the defense of a basic freedom to say no and assure the autonomy of those in danger from abusers, The Community is *actually* morally obliged to do the inverse, to force people into contact and take on the role of invasive inquisitors.

“Sometimes a person in our lives—a friend, a student, a neighbor or relative—makes negative insinuations about a third party (“He’s a stalker” or “She’s abusive”) and they want us to shun, be cold to, exclude, or in other ways punish this person. Our first responsibility is to determine if they are in physical danger from real violence. If not, then we ask to think with them about the order of events so that the complexities of the situation and how it unfolded can be revealed. It is unethical to hurt someone because we have been told to do so. We are required by decency to ask both the complainant and the accused how they understand the situation. And this, I truly believe, requires an in-person discussion.”

So let’s be clear on what this standard directly means:

1) No boycotts ever because every single person involved would need to have a personal in person conversation with the original parties. You can’t even heed someone’s warning about someone you’re about to go on a date with, at least not without snitching on them for warning you by bringing it up with him.

2) Constantly re-traumatizing the survivor and forcing them to spend all their energy litigating for the smallest of possible concessions re boxing out their abuser.

Fuck that.

Minimizing Abuse Into Conflict

One common criticism of CINA is that Schulman never defines abuse. That is *approximately* true in that she handwaves and deflects around it, but not entirely fair. It’s somewhat reasonable and common enough to assert that it’s *impossible* to give a comprehensive description of abuse because people are horrifically controlling in so many diverse and novel ways and abuse is often a matter of sufficient degree in terms of control, which necessarily involves some “we know it when we experience it” imprecision. Further, it must be admitted that Schulman definitely admits some limited (albeit extreme and basic) examples of abuse. I think there *are* some contexts where CINA is flogged as the default abuse apologia manifesto where Schulman herself would admit, contrary to those invoking her book, that abuse is taking place. Although it’s always easier to offhandedly support a survivor when the situation is far away from one’s community or context.

As CINA has grown in infamy I’ve increasingly run across people who’ve only encountered it secondhand or through shocking pull quotes of her abuse apologia. “*I don’t get it, she’s so opposed to boundaries would she really be okay with someone raping her?*” It’s important to correct such confusions: Schulman no doubt *does* think there are valid boundaries. She objects to abuse in the form of ongoing relationships of one-sided repeated physical violence.

The problem isn’t that Schulman minimizes *literally all abuse*, it’s that she focuses in CINA on equivocating and downplaying around some types of abuse, and most emphatically (and seemingly personally) the “*I demand communication from you*” genres of abuse.

To do this, Schulman cribs the authority of a single trainer, Catherine Hodes, giving a single training she attended, where Schulman breathlessly relays her dawning realization of inane ancient canards like *“Abuse is Power Over and Conflict is Power Struggle.”*

You can *feel* Schulman’s excitement as she relays scribbling these declarations down. *Did you know that an action that at first glance, alone and in isolation, like yelling at a partner, appears abusive can be nothing of the sort when put in a wider context?!* Schulman runs with such banalities in the direction of mandating inquisitions into every accusation and pushing to dismissively redefine most everything as “conflict.”

How reflective this is of Hodes’ positions is hard to judge, and Schulman is clearly making some leaps from these starting points and ignoring other possible paths, but I think there’s another misstep at play that intersects with and reinforces every other horrible argument she makes in CINA.

So far some will have judged me as unoriginal dogmatic attack dog of plumbline feminism, maybe only opportunistically slagging Schulman because she’s unpopular rather than horrifyingly wrong, but let me now illustrate a place where I have a nonstandard opinion a number of feminist comrades disagree with me on and how it is relevant to CINA: I think “power” is best understood as *a relationship of control*, not a resource ideally to be equally distributed, and thus there *can* be, however rarely, situations of *mutual control* and thus, technically, “mutual abuse.”

One has to be really careful with talk of “mutual abuse” because that concept is most often leveraged in the service of abuse apologia by way of false equivalence and a refusal to take sides or intervene. Indeed “mutual abuse” is almost always invoked to *avoid* shunning or otherwise sacrificing personal social capital. The survivor ever fought back or was grouchy at her abuser? *Honestly that relationship was soooo toxic who can really say.* It’s disgusting and if anyone cites me here to legitimize throwing around the accusation of “mutual abuse” to discredit survivors I’ll hunt you down. Also, it is absolutely worth noting that many comrades I respect who work in domestic violence disagree with me here, take everything with a grain of salt.

Yet intense *mutual control* is clearly a thing that can exist – and much of the Left’s most horrific failure modes stem from failing to understand that. *Equal* participation in a toxic democratic commune wherein *everyone is severely controlled* is not liberation, and this is very relevant because Schulman’s appeals to The Community replicate precisely this kind of evil.

Schulman’s diminishment of abuse looks like retaining the classic “mutual abuse” deflection but re-labeling it “conflict” to water things down even further. Only one partner used physical violence against another? Yeah, well but the other partner had said callous shit so it was *just conflict, just a power struggle.*

“I believe that what these couples went through was mutual and therefore Conflict, not Abuse.”

And Schulman delightedly quotes her trainer:

“All human relationships have power dynamics and that is neither good nor bad. Power is not the problem,” Hodes said. “It’s how it is wielded.”

But, as an anarchist, I have always fundamentally and vehemently rejected the notion that power is inherent and morally neutral, a noxious framing and dangerous use of language we

have no reason to concede to just because it took off in the Academic Left after Foucault. I stand with anarchists throughout the ages who have always *rejected* power, from Russian anarchists declaring *all power is poison* to the Crass slogan that defined a generation of punk, urging us to *destroy power*. Precisely what is radical about anarchism is our mission to increasingly and ultimately *abolish* power dynamics on all scales and in all cracks, not merely rearrange or equalize them.

This sort of analysis is impossible to a fascist or leninist for whom everything is power and it's only a question of *who gets how much*. In such a blinkered frame a slave revolt is just a different sort of power, a different side getting to take control. But I think there's a major difference between resistance and control: control diminishes agency and net options, resistance, by way of disrupting control, expands net options. Escaping from your abuser, fighting dirty against them, or even just blocking someone wasting your time, *expands options*.

Part of what is stripped out and flattened away in Schulman's sort of framing of "abuse" and "conflict" is an account of the ethics of conflict. Surely there are *positive* ways to have conflict. Two folks talking shit (sincerely) for decades about the other's opposed political position can be neutral or even *positive* conflict. In contrast, one person dishonestly belittling another person's qualifications in an activist meeting and the other person getting drunk and stealing their van and wrecking it is not a healthy conflict. No great acts there, severely harmful maybe, even deserving of sharp community response like boycotting, but also not *abusive* because they're not matters of systematic control.

But there *are* and can be, however rarely, situations of *mutual and equal systematic control*. Two deeply abusive scumfucks who hunger for control can pair up together and create a spiral of mutually assured destruction if the other attempts to escape, while continuing to get their rocks off controlling the other. Predatory monsters do not always avoid one another, nor is there any law of physics assuring that one will have meaningfully greater material or social resources than the other. I know of two serial rapist and abuser occultists who eventually came together to run a rape cult, with as far as I can tell equal power and material resources, raping others even while reportedly alternately drugging and violating each other. "*Conflict*" is simply too cheap a word for what was going on in that relationship, nor do I feel their systematic controlling is separable from either's history of abusing. Nor was I comfortable with attempts after they separated by folks in their subculture to frame either one as The Survivor to the exclusion of the other and even appeal to me to side with or help one I had known a decade before. Both needed to be thrown into the ocean.

At play in this specific type of example I think is often a fetishization of strength in which neither can admit to the weakness of being afraid or hurt by the other, and so must each escalate in egregious acts of domination to prove their status as ubermensch to themselves and the other.

But consider also a codependent couple whose hunger for security in their relationship, for assurances that the other will never leave them, escalating in mutually agreed upon norms of never talking to other people, openly surveilling each other, etc, until such a toxic environment has developed that both desperately want to escape the other's lines of control and yet do not want to surrender their own. Threats of retaliation can escalate to enforce the ratcheting norms of control. Both can even fear for their life and desperately want to escape the other's control while simultaneously hungering for control of the other themselves. They could even both be houseless without any disparity of control of physical resources. This is qualitatively distinct from *conflict*

(no matter how negative) because of the sustained *systematic control* each leverages over the other.

These are extreme and rare examples that may seem esoteric or contrived, but it's an important point that people *can chain each other down*, much the same way that in Schulman's ideal community members would chain each other down; *you force me into engagement with someone today, I force you into engagement with someone tomorrow, and so on.*

Schulman is incapable of seeing the horror of her prescription precisely because she sees power as neutral when it's equalized. But *power* is what is wrong. And it's not a scalar (a quantity about which you can say nothing beyond *who has more*) but more like a vector space of relations where each point has *its own* relation to each other, containing whatever mix of control or resistance. We recognize there can be cults, polycules, and communes of roughly equal participation in extreme mutual control. When a circle of rabid maoists in the cultural revolution held each other down, there need not have been one apex abuser or even a dominant clique. Mutual domination *is* possible.

This is not at all to say that we shouldn't use basic sense, good heuristics, and conscientious evaluation of trust networks to evaluate situations, nor is it to say to that different proportionalities of control don't matter immensely. Context matters, and a survivor who got a little "problematic" in resisting her abuser needs our full support. This is *not at all* a license to ignore differences in power and start labeling resistance as "mutual abuse." Again, anyone citing me here to defend a claim of "mutual abuse" among their friends is almost certainly my enemy. But there is also practical danger in collapsing things to "conflict" out of a rhetorically defensive refusal to acknowledge even the remote possibility of mutual abuse.

““There should never be cross-restraining orders,” Hodes said. That’s like saying we agree to not see each other. Restraining orders should only be issued if one person is deemed to be a perpetrator and the restraining order is necessary to save the other from Power Over. It’s not a tactical strategy designed to prove a point. If both people are contributing to the problem, then it is mutual and therefore Conflict, and the intervention of the court is unreasonable.”

Putting aside the state legal system, *surely* there are situations where two parties would benefit from boundaries from one another and neither trusts the other to keep their word without broader social enforcement. *Both* Jane and Jill *could* be controlling and put the other in fear for her life. But if one side of that is (as is most common) lying to try and defensively reverse things or leverage their greater social capital against their target... *it's an objectively positive improvement to assist both boundaries!*

If we as community and intimate bystanders somehow don't know literally anything or there's some dark and pressing uncertainty, if we *truly* can't tell who the real abuser is, and both ostensibly want to escape the other... let's fucking facilitate that! Why not just say neither is allowed to go to the other's home or work? Why not share both accounts and asks around the situation?

If Jane is telling the truth and Jill is persuasively DARVOing, no "mutual agreement" to not see each other would be worth anything. If the community supports *both* boundaries, both acts of "*shunning*," as Schulman would decry, then when Jill violates that shit at least Jane has folks ready to respond to help her. To be certain, it is absolutely a travesty and infuriating to allow

Jill to go around lying or tell Jane she's not allowed to come within a block of the co-op where Jill works, much better to figure out the truth, get a girl gang together and go smash out Jill's windows, but when it comes to splitting the baby, "the community" enforcing each party's protective boundaries is infinitely fucking better than forcing "conversation" and intervening to stop "shunning." *Our goal should be to facilitate agency and escape.*

Every survivor I know who wants their rapist or abuser dead does so because they remain an active threat to them or to others that dramatically constrains their freedom. Radical milieus are notoriously bad at enforcing anything like a restraining order (only surpassed in ineffectiveness or unwillingness to enforce by the cops and the state) but if a situation arose in which community members did, in fact, give any sort of shit about survivors and abuse, and we could assist in enforcing such, we should remember that it's better to err on the side of mutual escape.

Schulman wraps CINA up in the legitimization of "mutual abuse is impossible" and uses a focus on *inequality* of power rather than power itself as a way of working against escape from control. Like the worst liberals and leftists, she wants to *democratize* and *communize* control, make it a broad issue of *community*, to bind each other in "conversation" and "negotiation." But *power* is the problem, not merely inequalities of it, our ends should be *freedom*, and language that doesn't reflect that opens the door to dark shit.

Wild Comparisons

One of the most common critiques of CINA takes the form of just pointing in outrage to the comparisons Schulman makes between bottom-up individual choices to not associate with someone and institutional systems of exclusion and oppression. Refusing to talk to an ex or friends shunning someone is put in the same sweeping category as racist police violence, the suppression of queer activists during the AIDS crisis, and Israeli colonialism. Schulman makes clear she sees these on a spectrum of intensity, but the point of the comparison is to frame them as *categorically* the same, all explainable in terms of the same underlying dynamic.

Right out the gate she makes the following characterization

*"Eric Garner informed the police of the consequences of their actions on him, when he told them eleven times, while in an illegal chokehold, "I can't breathe." Michael Brown raised his hands in a sign of surrender and said, "Don't shoot." But something occurred within the minds, impulses, and group identities of the white police officers, in that they construed the original non-event compounded with these factual and peacemaking communications as some kind of threat or attack. In other words, these policemen looked at nothing, the complete absence of threat, and there they saw threat gross enough to justify murder. Nothing happened, but these people with power saw **abuse**." [her emphasis]*

Of course virtually no cop in any such situation would even think to use that word, of course it's deeply minimizing of the abuse to conflate the conceptual category of "threat" with the conceptual category of "abuse" as if all "harm" is conceptually the same, of course it's ridiculous to remove the context of the state or treat it's actions exactly as one would those of some random individual, and of course it's grotesque to frame cop actions as actually being motivated by, as they say on the stand, "fear" rather than the myriad other emotions like outrage, anger,

and disgust, that intersect with a general hunger for power and violent entitlement to it... but it's imperative that we note the overall tendency towards flattening in every dimension to one metanarrative, one simple trick. The individual "*fears difference*" and so "*lashes out*" rather than having a heart-to-heart conversation. That's it. That's all that could conceivably be at play to Schulman.

Now it's certainly true that Israel cultivates a national victim narrative, and it's certainly true that *some* cops grow paranoid and fearful, or at least remember to intone the words "feared for my life" on the stand, but this is so far and away from police violence being of the same nature as someone moving out and not talking to an ex. Similarly, the dynamics and mistakes that lead to oppression from the oppressed, when that happens, take place in a vast variety of ways well beyond Schulman's narrative. To give another historical example, slaughtering the mixed-race children of Spanish colonizers during a few revolts was not something done because the oppressed "*fear self-critical vulnerability*."

To flatten such into the same underlying psychoanalytical dynamic takes stupendous effort to avoid thinking. And, of course, it is wildly insulting to survivors.

Examples of this kind of flattening are everywhere in CINA. Even when Schulman thinks she's introducing nuance she still thinks in terms of degree within a single dimension.

"There is a continuum of pathology in blame, cold-shouldering, shunning, scapegoating, group bullying, incarcerating, occupying, assaulting, and killing."

This is an array of strategies, but they are not necessarily *pathologies* nor approaches that should be rejected outright. Many clearly have contexts in which they are not just permissible but morally obligatory. And surely, even a pacifist who wouldn't kill her rapist or fight the nazis can admit we should *blame* people who are to blame! Yet in Schulman's warped boomer liberalism, even assigning *causal blame* is "*pathological*" because it gets in the way of resolving conflict via conversation.

This bundling of colonialism, police violence, and *refusing to pick up the phone* is invoked in a way that allows Schulman to perform intuition pumps across the *combined* bundle:

"The mere fact that someone has been the recipient of group cruelty has no relationship to whether or not they have done anything to merit it."

That someone has seen their land invaded by a foreign army surely has no relationship with merit, but when someone whines that they've been run out of multiple cities' activist scenes or none of their exes will speak with them should we really force ourselves to blankly assume there's no likely fire behind the smoke?

You see how the argument works: Rather than just outright declaring that accusations of abuse are at least as often wrong as right, Schulman conflates such with wildly different institutional and historical situations where we recognize accusations are in fact largely bullshit, then implicitly transposes this finding over the weird combined bundle back down to the specific.

But in the real world where it is easy to ostracize someone for liking the wrong band or being cringe, it's demonstrably *very hard* in virtually every subculture to get folks to ostracize someone over accusations of abuse or rape. If someone admits they've been ostracized by a scene over accusations of abuse, that's a sharp indicator of the likely veracity of those accusations. Not

perfect proof, of course, but a strong relationship nonetheless. If none of your friends will hang with someone because they each claim he was out-of-pocket and creepy, it's rational and fair to likewise decline his invitation to a date. This adds up to collective shunning, an emergent boycott, but to outright reject "cold-shouldering" and "shunning" in-and-of-themselves requires the suppression of individual reason, it requires us to blind ourselves to data and refuse to think.

Engagement, Supremacy, and Humility

If there's a single paragraph that provides the core thesis of CINA it's the following abuse apologia narrative:

"Over and over I have seen traumatized people refuse to hear or engage information that would alter their self-concepts, even in ways that could bring them more happiness and integrity. For the Supremacist, this refusal comes from a sense of entitlement; that they have an inherent "right" not to question themselves. Conversely, the unrecovered traumatized person's refusal is rooted in a panic that their fragile self cannot bear interrogation; that whatever is keeping them together is not flexible."

It is *absolutely* the case that reactionary and power-seeking perspectives are almost always rooted with a drive towards simplicity and fixedness, often including a struggle to retain a fixed identity, narrative, strategy, worldview, or other attribute. The need to preserve an arbitrary structure through curtailing fluid possibility is almost always what motivates domination. This *can* cash out as an aversion to self-questioning or being questioned.

But there's a lot that shouldn't be extrapolated from that relationship.

To give just one example of a common misstep from that point, the drive to find a simple and fixed *explanation* for something is not in and of itself a problem; in many contexts the truth or the best solution *is* fixed and simple. Indeed, where they are possible, having fixed highly accurate and tightly compressible maps of the world *enables* fluidity because they provide us more agency in our actions.

But more pertinently, domination can come packaged as a drive for connection and "engagement." The drive for simplicity and control often expresses as a domineering hunger to go out and batter down the other, to force them into a form of contact or engagement that shrinks their capacity to think and make choices. Plenty of stalkers turn obsessive about demanding "engagement" around some "misperceptions" or fixate on some narrative where they view themselves as simply trying to introduce critical self-reflection on the part of their targets, all to avoid critical self-reflection around *their own* infractions and abusive behavior.

Engagement *can even be transformative for the abuser*, prompting them to self-reflect and adapt rather than remain utterly fixed, but adapt in a direction of ever more simplicity. An abuser can drag themselves into the mud, destroy their own life, while doing the same for their victim, all in the name of an "engagement" that increasingly constrains all agency and options for both parties. The mere willingness to question oneself, even radically transform oneself is not on its own a virtue or marker that one is not a danger.

While engagement in some broad sense is a crucial component to the ultimate ends of liberation and in daily life, it's a mistake to conflate all engagement as the same or always good in and of itself. A refusal to engage can be and often is necessary, even critical to the maximization of

agency as a whole. Firewalls are necessary to keep malicious hackers out of our devices. When you know someone is attempting to threaten or blackmail you but they have not managed to relay particulars yet, the best strategy is often to simply refuse to read their messages.

The relaying and reception of information are not necessarily positive or even neutral acts. Someone coming up to you on the bus and inquiring if they can lick your ear is not merely asking for consent, their very inquiry *is itself* an action that can be violational. Life's complicated that way.

Schulman's fixation on avoidance of engagement and self-interrogation as the root evil in CINA is overly simplistic to dangerous conclusions.

So too, obviously is her analysis in terms of a sweepingly generalized "Supremacy Ideology," a quintessentially boomer brainworm affliction where the problem is said to be not material relations of domination or even a desire for control, but rather merely ranking or valuing *anything* above anything else. One gets a whiff of the old hippie nihilists and postmodernists who accused anarchists of being "*totalitarians*" for our moral stance that freedom is better than domination. "*Who are you to say that anything is better than anything else?!*" Of course, *specific* patterns and ecosystems of domination can be labeled supremacist as just a matter of fact, white supremacy and adult supremacy are clearly systems that value and empower an arbitrary set of people over others, but to generalize "supremacy" as some kind of problem in-of-itself, would mean labeling "antiracist supremacy" or "antifa supremacy" as a problem.

Indeed one fan of CINA, an admitted abuser, responded to my essay "Bad People" where I discuss among others, torturers at Abu Ghraib, with the breathless accusation that I was a "*supremacist*" because I implicitly judged non-abusers as better than abusers. Like, yes? Also genocidaires are worse than non-genocidaires. Everyone reading this is probably better than Hitler. I prefer good things over bad things? I prefer to eat pizza than a pile of dogshit. You got me, I'm a "supremacist." Who could conceivably care?

But the discursive trainwreck of centering "*supremacy!!*" on its own has grown in the wake of CINA's publication and popularization, particularly around the kind of non-profit spaces where rich liberals make pastel slides for instagram and diversity trainings. It's a good fit for them because it avoids talking about concrete and structural dynamics while at the same time pre-condemning any radical personal values or obligations. Don't bother taking action because the core problem is just in people's hearts, but also don't believe in anything too hard because that would be supremacist.

The commonality across CINA's focus on self-interrogation and its hostility to supremacy is an implicit commitment to "humility" as a virtue. It's *not humble* to block Sarah Schulman's number because you know she's only going to waste your time, it's *not humble* to think you could know better than The Community, it's *not humble* to believe an accusation without a full trial. This fetishized timidity is the very heart of liberalism. Liberalism condemns taking action as *not humble*, it condemns caring about anything consistently or radically as *not humble*. It maintains the status quo and smothers individual agency by encouraging us to think that we can't know anything and we dare not care enough to act on our own.

Fuck this "humility." Let's take it out back and beat it to death with baseball bats.

Rationality and Extreme Responses

All that said, it would be misguided and unproductive to treat CINA as though its every single paragraph were devoid of accurate statements. I may find such points inane, so obvious, basic, and uncontroversial as to be beneath discussion, but numerous fans of CINA evidently find them a breath of fresh air that legitimize or eclipse the rest of the book's outrages.

Again, many people *do* opportunistically inflate minor grievances or harm in outrageous rhetorical terms. This has been particularly abundant in social media spaces since liberals discovered a set of anti-oppression heuristics and norms and collapsed them into overly simplistic codes, gamifying radical politics into a series of card-playing moves for clout. Someone still using a common word that was a few months ago deemed slightly problematic? *Well I've never encountered such extreme violence! This attempt upon my life has left me scarred and disfigured!* We've all been long familiar with extremely bad faith actors or just those so naive that they literally do think such maneuverings *are* liberatory struggle.

Although note that such robotic inanities and disingenuous opportunism as now runs rampant among the liberal college and nonprofit set are not in the slightest bit explained by the psychoanalytical story Schulman tells. No one *actually* feels like every use of the word "bad" is a heinous transmisogynist microaggression because of some postulated etymology. No one *actually* feels deeply hurt that "*straights have started appropriating the term 'partner.'*" And those individuals acting profoundly harmed by such are obviously, trivially engaged in a performance whose self-aware goal is control and status, not originating in some traumatized fear of critical self-recognition or whatever. There are plenty of vicious jackals and disconnected rich kids who have delighted in adopting social justice like it's a game – even the most remote uncontacted tribes know this by now – but that has nothing to do with the heinous epidemic of people not picking up the phone when Sarah Schulman calls.

It is also trivially the case that social divides and distance pose dangers, with different cliques congealing into "teams" that act as micro-nationalisms. Schulman is not wrong to point out that,

"There is often a "cadre" of bad friends around a person encouraging them to do things that are morally wrong, unjustified, and unethical, because endorsing each other's negative actions is built into the group relationship."

It is absolutely true that people will often echo support and hype each other up into delusions or moral erosions. Being loyal is placed above being principled or accurate and the result is an opportunistic collective warping of reality and ethical values. It's just that this group loyalty dynamic most often attacks disruptive survivors. And for obvious reasons. No one is a greater threat to community loyalty than a survivor demanding folks place anarchist values above their personal friendships with the perpetrator.

Yes, a general norm of *loyalty through thick and thin* and fierce hostility to those who betray this norm by ever objecting or nuancing against the group consensus is obviously toxic. And this *can* occur among the traumatized and oppressed, leading to unethical overreaction. To give an extreme contemporary example from a sympathetic subject at a similar sweeping scale to Schulman's favorite examples: the YPG infamously promised to murder the families and *children* of ISIS members, before retracting the tweet in English. Fear of a pressing enemy and the fearful need for loyal community can seal us off from important corrections and let our moral compasses

go awry, and it's easy to imagine this being at the root of the above war crime. I've seen this happen in organizations, small circles and crews in endless contexts, albeit to much smaller missteps than slaughtering children. When affirmations like "you're so valid!!" are the only permissible response in a social circle, delusion is inevitable.

While any CINA fans reading this will have long before now concluded that I'm a hysterical extremist hostile to engagement and promoting us-vs-them epistemic bubbles, the reality is I am reflexively the annoying friend who pivots on a dime the moment they hear a bad argument against the enemy and must squash the bad argument and defend the enemy from it. When consensus process is being violated within an organization to silence a less popular member I intervene on their behalf. I have a compulsion around my friends to counteract confirmation spirals where a more extreme bit of rhetoric that diverges from facts gets reinforced as reality by the empathic hunger to affirm. I try to gently retreat from absolutist leaps of suspicion to numerical assessments of probability. Someone who, at heart, merely means something like, "*Personally I think there's an 80% chance that abuse apologist is himself an abuser with the way he talks and the company he keeps*" can in some cases slip into overemphasizing probabilities with the wrong rhetoric which in turn can get passed around and cycle into assumed proof. I try to encourage placing actual bets using numbers and things of value as a way to settle language down around what we actually mean. Remembering that our predictions or suspicions are probabilistic and never absolute in knowledge also helps soften any whiplash upon a correction when it turns out we are indeed wrong. I strongly believe that our first priority must be acquiring accurate maps of reality; we simply cannot have agency without such. And this means pushing back against bad instincts and cognitive biases.

Being a friend *does* mean often pushing back on a friend's statements. But more often that looks like firmly holding them to account when they underemphasize something like "*it was just taking off a condom, not Real Rape*" and the murmuring of reinforcing affirmation starts from a room full of bros. This kind of pushback is not done by or in the service of The Community, but is necessarily an individual act and often a deeply divisive one that can involve burning friendships and damaging communities. Merely telling a friend "yo dude, that was racist" has no teeth unless unilaterally ending the friendship is at least a possibility. The option of "shunning" is, in fact, often a means by which to secure real engagement rather than comfortable dismissals.

Schulman *is also correct* that a solution in interpersonal conflicts can sometimes be taking space for deescalated deliberation:

"The sudden, triggered reaction a) without consideration of choices; b) without looking at the order of events, motives, justifications, contexts, or outcomes; c) without taking responsibility for consequences on others and the escalation of Conflict; and d) without self-criticism, is the source of social and personal cruelty and the cause of great pain. Lashing out by overreaction, as has been demonstrated, deepens the problem. All of these systems recommend the same tactic: delay."

It is worth noting that Schulman at least accepts the occasional utility of *temporary* distance. But note that this appeal to deliberation *conflicts* with her own valorization of pressing people into verbal real-time communication over text.

And, while we're "handing it to ISIS", there *is* such a phenomenon as "splitting" or "dichotomous thinking" which happens and occurs in everyone to varying degrees, across a variety of

backgrounds, pathologized and not. And yes, it's also often a dynamic with abusers; giving themselves permission to turn on a dime into one extreme emotion or another from the smallest of prompts, so their targets are left harried by constant anxiety, trying to preempt or predict the next trigger for the yelling or love-bombing. Sometimes such hot-and-cold behavior is consciously manipulative, but whether the pattern of behavior is intentional or not with a given abuser doesn't matter.

But, yes, splitting can *also* be a lingering inclination with people who've gone through trauma. The push for absolute loyalty, and violent horrified hostility to anything more nuanced, can arise from a hunger for simplicity, which all abusers share, but also *can* become reflexive for certain individuals dealing with lingering trauma and seeking safety. Indeed, many abusers *target and exploit* people prone to dichotomous thinking.

It's easy to see how such can be maliciously predatory *or* a coping strategy.

This duality is probably what scant substance lies underneath Schulman's thesis, although she obviously packages it in awful terminology and sweeping liberal psychoanalytical frames which is then scaffolding for her piles of shocking abuse-apologia. But again, it's not like there are *never* instances of the sort of dynamics she references.

"When the other seems to be meeting their needs, they're cast in the role of goodness, but when the person challenges them, their intimate becomes the villain. The inability to hold simultaneity, nuance, and shades of mutual weakness and strength"

This is a fair enough portrayal of a thing that definitely can happen. And such *can* be a source and style of abuse. Even as a tiny child my mother would flip between a variety of perspectives towards me like tenderness and then suddenly violent castigation as "*just another male abuser! just like your father! just like your grandfather!*" set off by things like my four-year-old self letting a damp towel fall to the floor. This extreme kind of reflexive black and white, all or nothing thinking can impede epistemic rationality and facilitate both individuals and social cliques falling into runaway dynamics of *us versus them* that not just overrespond to legitimately fucked shit but also incorrectly identify threats. The oppressed *can* become oppressors, those under the boot *can* use it as an excuse to abandon moral responsibilities, including that for nuanced accuracy, and much of anarchism is about addressing this danger while we struggle against our enemies in power. We burn the guillotine precisely because we are concerned about our own potential overreach or missteps in fighting our oppressors. Denying that such can happen is not a good response to CINA and will only perpetuate the way it gets its claws into people.

But I want to be very clear here because this is tricky territory and there's a dominant narrative around "the cycle of abuse" that portrays survivors as future abusers by default or even just more inclined to abuse. *This is simply not born out by the numbers.* A specific survivor *can* perpetuate abuse, in some cases, yes, giving themselves permission to lean into splitting, see people as threats who are not and escalate way out of bounds; but on the whole abusers do not have a background as survivors and it is far more common for survivors to be targeted and victimized again, rather than transforming into abusers themselves. Indeed the narrative that survivors are "made crazy" from their trauma is often used by predators to isolate them, just as the narrative that abuse originates from mental illness is used to shed abusers from responsibility and help them DARVO against pathologized survivors.

And, at the same time, *it's totally reasonable* for those who've survived trauma to sharply adjust their heuristics accordingly, to have at least a bit more hair-trigger response to some things.

It would be *irrational* for someone attacked by a sabertooth tiger *not* to increase their estimation of the likelihood of encountering sabertooth tigers in their region. It would be an *irrational* investment of attention not to err on the side of overactive pattern-recognition when the grass rustles. Both in the senses of epistemic rationality and instrumental rationality. Moreover the bayesian adjustments made by individuals, even if actually over-adjustments in the most strict sense, can have collective benefits in social aggregate. If everyone else is still dismissive about the threat of sabertooth tigers, survivors of their prior attacks being hyper-vigilant can provide net benefits to the entire group including those underestimating the threat.

Schulman replicates and reinforces tired narratives about survivors being irrational and childish, but it's critical that we note *her prescriptions* to not update our beliefs on survivor testimony directly *oblige* individuals to act irrationally, against their individual interests and best knowledge or evaluation of information, deleting what they know from their brains. And this isn't even a situation of individual rationality versus collective rationality. Aggregate interests are often served best by divergent individual strategies that are responsive to the distinct conditions and information each encounters.

The fact is there *are* black-and-white situations, there *are* individuals of immense malice and danger who are not merely mistaken but irrevocably committed to bad values. To many survivors, our experiences are an epistemic awakening to the very real cloaked presence of such predators. It is, sniff, *pure ideology* to demand people abandon their own critical cognitive capacities because you're committed to a liberal notion that no one is truly bad at heart and everyone can be reached.

Schulman's game, casting those who furiously object to CINA's abuse apologia as irrational traumatized children trying to preserve a weak mental self-image through defensive black-or-white thinking is, beyond being functionally unfalsifiable, *itself* a clear example of defensive simplistic thinking.

The fact is that many people cling to "the world comes in greys, never black and white" as a defensive simplification of reality to preserve their own self-image as someone who can change and muddle moral questions to avoid responsibility. Folks become obsessive zealots against the possibility or commonality of black and white situations and, in so doing, throw passionate support behind every abuser and cryptofascist in their community in the name of *transformative justice*, precisely to avoid the kind of dangerous self-reflection Schulman claims to prioritize.

Indeed it's *deeply irrational* to think that The Community can or should centrally (ie "collectively") plan responses to abuse. Schulman's fetishization of community and collective responses is *far worse* than the risks of epistemic closure among the survivor's friends since bystanders are broadly less equipped with relevant and direct knowledge. Further, the sort of folks who leap to appoint themselves investigators and arbiters of "accountability processes" over the wishes of survivors are just soviet commissars writ small and, beyond the grotesque power dynamics, we should immediately apprehend such situations as just as fundamentally irrational as state communism. It is *irrational* to assume that a third party, much less a committee of them, will generally have better capacity to understand, evaluate and solve a situation, and it is *irrational* to elevate their goals, values, and notions of "solution" above that of a survivor. It's *irrational* to pretend you sit in a state of pure ignorance and must personally undertake a full investigation before holding any evaluation of probability in your brain when an accusation is made.

At least it is irrational if we presume the stated goals are indeed the goals.

We *do* have broad moral obligations to engage with ourselves and the world around us, to struggle to avoid epistemic bubbles, to lean into some hard and painful things to learn and better

ourselves. But this is *not at all* the same thing as a *specific* obligation to answer when Sarah Schulman calls.

Yes, there are reasons to be inclined towards engagement but rejecting it in specific cases – what Schulman sees as cold shouldering, shunning, etc – is in many cases *the only rational move*.

On numerous occasions I have, for reasons of compassion and where I calculated it could make a net positive difference, made myself available for (limited) communication with individuals who have stalked or abused me, sometimes against the urgings of all my housemates, friends, partners, etc. But there is also a clear trap to a naive or first-order consequentialist analysis: by simply escalating one's emotional investment in me it's always possible for someone to create a situation where the pain caused to them by my *not doing a thing* is higher than the disutility that doing it would cause me. Obsessive stalker fans can thus make themselves into utility monsters. "*If you don't drop everything to meet me right now I'll kill myself.*" "*Engage with my every question or I'll lose my mind for weeks in anguish and rage.*" Unless one creates and holds personal boundaries, including holding to permanent blocks, it *incentivizes* people to become emotional-investment traps whose wellbeing hangs on your every action, to exploit your empathy. This is a stark runaway failure mode, not just for the individual whose compassion is exploited, but for the entire community where this kind of manipulation via self-mutilation is productive.

A common pattern of abuse is disrupting and monopolizing the target's attention, *forcing* us to think about them, to empathize with them. And in the process their emotional universe consumes our own. *He had a bad day at work, she was abused by her dad, they fear being abandoned*, etc. The abuser ceases to be an individual agent and becomes merely a vast network of tugging and pulling causes. We regain a limited sense of control by uncovering these hidden causes, and we redirect our attention from direct resistance to the abuse to instead trying to negotiate or influence these external prods. *If only I send him to work with a better lunch, maybe he'll weather the storm of his boss better.* What is almost always lost in this sort of analysis is any recognition of the abuser's own agency or potential for agency. And this facilitates them. The abuser gets to relax, to abandon any ethical pressure to diligent consideration and reasoned reflection, and instead devolve into nothing more than a billiard ball moved by other people and forces. Every impulse they have is the product of something external and there is no obligation upon them to reflect on it, much less deliberate and make a choice.

Empathy is often recognized as a characteristic of the oppressed; while our rulers often don't have to think about us, we can be forced to think endlessly about our rulers. Even though this asymmetry of knowledge stems from their callous and confident disregard, it can be turned around and leveraged as a tool of resistance. The battered wife knows exactly how to administer the poison to her husband. The hacker knows an exploit to take down the system.

But what can be useful as a strategy of resistance *individually* is not necessarily desirable as *social* norms or individual obligations. Nor is obsession and emotional dependence a certifier of being oppressed or in the right.

Conclusion: An Unending Curse

Standing around a campfire with a couple dozen comrades as conversation turned to CINA, one of them asked, "*Why do people always flock to the worst possible critiques of real problems? Why do they always pick the worst text and act like it invented critiquing the problem?*" The an-

swer, I think – beyond who has the time and capital to publish and promote full books that are academically “citable” – is just coalitional politics: A text pointing to eg the existence of folks exaggerating harm while analyzing such with nuance will draw a certain number of readers, but a text that points to that existence and also says what abusers want to hear will draw those same readers *plus* a highly motivated army of abuse apologists. Once a sufficient mass of attention is reached, a given text becomes canonical and gets handled with respect as somehow the origin of obvious things mentioned in passing. Jo Freeman invented pointing out informal power dynamics. Michel Foucault invented comparing schools to prisons. Kristian Williams invented thinking about false accusations. You’re allowed to respond, *but aren’t you blessed that they started the conversation.*

I worry this same cursed and dishonest dynamic is congealing around CINA as it has taken root in liberal and non-profit spaces.

You can say, *if you like some stray legitimate points Schulman mentions, find a different author or text that makes them, or fuck it, make them yourself and share that, nobody owns ideas, no need to promote an overall evil book.* But the response is increasingly “*but it’s the canonical text!*” usually followed by attempts to claim the mantle of “nuance” by way of shirking any responsibility to take a stand. “*You both make some interesting points! We should promote the debate! ...Whoever remains most genteel wins.*”

You just want to scream.

At the same time, just as tepid glancing touches on trivially real dynamics provides cover to Schulman’s pernicious arguments and frameworks, I also worry that CINA is so noxious, so obviously bad, that other folks will try to slap down its abuser apologia by dismissing *all concern* with dynamics of group loyalty, splitting, spiraling, bubbling, etc. This is, after all, how so much discourse goes, the counter-reaction to a narrative often slides into rejecting anything that looks like any component of its arguments. Which, in turn, fuels the complexes of those who feel like the book is a solitary torch of light in the darkness, a noble dissent against a hegemonic culture, speaking truth to power.

But CINA is *not* a text that breaks new ground or takes real chances, its only remotely novel content is the absurd intensification of ancient abuser narratives. It says when someone draws a boundary and says “I refuse to speak to you” that is itself tantamount to abuse (or Israeli war crimes) and the other person has a right, even moral duty, to violate that boundary. Calling, messaging, physically stalking, harassing any mutuals, sealioning in their mentions, anything to force the other person to come to the table. You are even obliged to do this as a bystander to someone else drawing a boundary, in fact The Community must come together to ensure escape is impossible. You are obliged to do this because individuals cannot be allowed autonomy in their self-reflection and you, with a crude psychoanalytic just-so-story, surely know better than them when they are making a mistake or turning away from engagement with reality.

The ideology of domination is absolutely founded in a drive for stasis and isolation. Power – at every scale – is about reducing complexity in the world, simplifying to what can be controlled, what can be made rigid. The drive for power is deeply tied to a fear of the complexity created by other people having choices and thinking for themselves. Nationalism is a great expression of this: violently slicing through the complex tangle of actually existing human relationships and creating prisons in which to contain people, limiting their choice in possible relationships.

But *so too* is forced contact between individuals and elevating a Relationship or Community above individual choice. The abuser cannot stand their target thinking their own thoughts or

living their own life, as such creates space for dangerous unknown possibilities. The abuser must interject and interrupt, make it impossible for a train of thought or existence to take flight away from their control. They often emotionally escalate or engage in other communicative strategies that demand further communication, until they can force their target to become preoccupied with them.

This hunger for real time contact is often righteously framed as a drive for honesty through directness, but *rawness* is not the same thing as *honesty*. The process of compressing our thoughts into words and then someone else unzipping those words into conceptual relations in their own brain requires active reflection and deliberation to achieve accuracy. Bypassing that for an immediate rawness can only mean a breakdown in the fidelity of the information transmitted, which reduces the agency of both individuals.

The other individual, in trying to get distance or enforce a defensive boundary, including permanent ones and even catalyzing social boycotts, is trying to create a world where they can think about something other than whatever the abuser is likely to do next and whatever is going on in their mind. Yes, the drawing of such boundaries involves the curtailment or severing of *specific* lines of engagement but they're trying to create net possibility rather than strangle it.

But, sadly, many leftists dream *not* of a liberated world of infinite expanding possibility but of the reassurances of fixed Community. Capitalism appears to them primarily as an atomizing force that creates precarity and anxiety and so they focus on visions of a world where everything is more or less assured. Their core motivation is thus a hunger for *permanence* rather than *choice*.

Combine this with liberal delusions that talking and the magic of "*looking into one another's eyes*" can solve any problem and what results is an ideology that cannot accept unresolved conflict, that compulsively cannot respect unilateral decisions to refuse to talk, and so makes every split worse.

I've spent the better part of two decades viciously critiquing the frameworks and instincts of right-libertarians, in particular the notion of rights and negative freedom. But they're not wrong that norms and defaults of defensive individual boundaries are important. They're not wrong that power should be abolished rather than democratized. CINA is a case study in the horrors of the opposite direction.

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William Gillis
One Giant Red Flag, Folded Into A Book
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