

The Stifling Air of Rigid Radicalism

excerpt from Joyful Militancy: Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times

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Capitalism, colonialism and heteropatriarchy make us sick. Are our responses healing us? Are our actions generating wellbeing for others? Or are we unintentionally reproducing the kind of relationships that made us sick in the first place?

—Zainab Amadahy¹

Puritanism, in whatever expression, is a poisonous germ. On the surface everything may look strong and vigorous; yet the poison works its way persistently, until the entire fabric is doomed.

—Emma Goldman²

About a century ago, the famous anarchist Emma Goldman was at a party, dancing her heart out, when a young man took her aside. “With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade,” the man told her that “it did not behoove an agitator to dance.”³ It made the revolutionary movement look bad, he said. Goldman was pissed, and basically told the guy to fuck off. This encounter is thought to be the source of the now-famous defense of joy and play, often attributed to Goldman: “if I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution.” This wasn’t just about dancing. Goldman insisted that conformity and policing persisted within radical movements themselves, and radicals were expected to put ‘the Cause’ before their own desires.

A century later, while the rules may have changed, something still circulates in many political spaces, movements, and milieus, sapping their power from within. It is the vigilant apprehension of errors and complicities in oneself and others; the sad comfort of sorting unfolding events into dead categories; the pleasure of feeling more radical than others and the fear of not being radical enough; the anxious posturing on social media with the highs of being liked and the lows of being ignored; the suspicion and resentment felt in the presence of something new; the way curiosity feels naïve and condescension feels right. We can sense its emergence at certain times, when we feel the need to perform in certain ways, hate the right things, and make the right gestures. We’ve found ourselves on both sides of its puritanical tendencies, as the pure and the corrupt. Above all, it is hostile to difference, curiosity, openness, and experimentation.

This phenomenon cannot be exhaustively described, because it is always mutating and recirculating. It cannot be reduced to certain people or behaviors. It is not that there are a bunch of assholes out there stifling movements and imploding worlds. In fact, this vigilant search for flawed people or behaviors—and the exposure of them everywhere—can be part of the toxic process. No one is immune to it. It is widely felt, but difficult to talk about, so there’s not much point in shouting about it. It is more like a gas: continually circulating, working on us behind our backs, and guiding us towards rigidities, closures, and hostility. The air makes us cough certainties: some feel provoked, and attack or shrink away; others push cough medicine; but none of this stops the spread. For us at least, there is no cure, no gas mask, no unitary solution.

We have come to call this force *rigid radicalism*. It is both *a fixed way of being* and *a way of fixing*. It fixes in the sense of attempting to repair, seeing emergent movements as inherently flawed. To fix is to *see everything as broken*, and treat struggles and projects as deficient. It also fixes in the sense of making permanent, converting fluid practices into stagnant ways of being. When rigidity takes over, creative transformation dies out.

A stark example of rigid radicalism can be found in the US-based Weather Underground, a militant white anti-imperialist group active during the 1970s. They are best known for their series

¹ Amadahy, *Wielding the Force*, 149.

² Emma Goldman, “The Hypocrisy of Puritanism,” in *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader*, ed. Alix Kates Shulman (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1998), 157.

³ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, (New York: Knopf, 1934), 56.

of bombings of public infrastructure and monuments, conducted in an attempt to wake up white Americans to realities of US imperialism, including the government's slaughter of Vietnamese people and its assassination of Black Panthers.

In an effort to deepen their militancy, they adopted the practice of Maoist self-criticism. Criticism sessions, which could last for hours or even days, involved members discussing weaknesses, tactical mistakes, emotional investments, preparedness for violence, and even sexual proclivities in an effort to shed all attachments to the dominant order and induce a revolutionary way of being.⁴ Paradoxically, this attempt to purify themselves of any trace of conformity to the dominant ideology led to a crushing militant conformity, coupled with constant injunctions towards the most radical forms of action possible.⁵

The toxic atmosphere of the Weather Underground is not a cautionary tale of misguided ideas or practices, as if we could simply learn from their mistakes and do it right next time. Rigid radicalism often has the strongest hold when people are convinced they finally have the right answers. Instead, the Weather Underground is a palpable example of the way that radical milieus can feel stifling, inescapable, *and* pleasurable or righteous. And if the congealed rigidity of 1970s Maoism seems quaint or distant, it does not mean rigid radicalism has faded away; only that it has taken on new forms.

Having good politics

But enough! Enough! I can't endure it any more. Bad air! Bad air! This workshop where man fabricates ideals—it seems to me it stinks from nothing but lies.

—Friedrich Nietzsche⁶

Today, one way that rigid radicalism materializes is through the notion of “good politics.” In many circles, it has become common to say of an individual or group, “they have good politics.” What does it mean to *have* good politics? What happens when politics becomes something a person *has*, rather than something people *do together*, as a shared practice? What happens when shared practices always have to be announced and their goodness displayed? Increasingly, we suggest, having good politics means taking the right positions, saying the right things, circulating the most radical things on Facebook or Twitter or Tumblr, calling out the right people for being wrong, and having well-formed opinions.

We are encouraged—and we often encourage each other—to wear our politics and our analysis like badges, as markers of distinction. When politics becomes something that one *has*, like fashion, it always needs to be visible in order to function. Actions need to be publicized, positions need to be taken, and our everyday lives need to be spoken loudly to each other. One is encouraged to make calculations about political commitments based on how they will be seen, and by whom. Politics becomes a spectacle to be performed. This reaches its height online, where sharing the right things and speaking the right words tend to be *the only* ways that people can know each other. Groups need to turn inward and constantly evaluate themselves in relation to

⁴ Thoburn, “Weatherman, the Militant Diagram, and the Problem of Political Passion,” 129; Cathy Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun: My Life and Times as a Weatherman* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 265–300.

⁵ This account is drawn primarily from Bill Ayers, *Fugitive Days: Memoirs of an Antiwar Activist* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), see especially 153–55.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 32.

these ideals and then project them outward, proclaiming their intentions, values, programs, and missions.

But since one can only *have* good politics in comparison to someone else that lacks them, rigid radicalism tends towards constant comparison and measuring. Often the best way to avoid humiliation for lacking good politics is to find *others* lacking in militancy, radicalism, anti-oppression, or some other ideal. One's politics can never quite match these perfectionist ideals, so one is subjected to constant shame and fear.

When radicals attack each other in the game of good politics, it is due at least in part to the fact that *this is a place where people can exercise some power*. Even if one is unable to challenge capitalism and other oppressive structures, even if one is unable to participate in the creation of alternative forms of life, one can always attack *others* for their complicity, and tell oneself that these attacks are radical in and of themselves. One's opponents in the game of good politics and rigid radicalism are not capitalists, nor white supremacists, nor police; they are others vying for the *correct ways* of critiquing and fighting capitalism, white supremacy, and policing. Comparison and evaluation of different camps or currents can be so constant that it becomes an end in itself: every encounter with a new current must be approached with a distrustful search for flaws. We come to know others—their beliefs, their commitments, their worth—based on how good they are at staking out a position and by plotting that position in relation to our own.

In this sense, rigid radicalism is not one political current, but a tendency that seeps into many different currents and milieus today. In some milieus, the currency of good politics is a stated (or demonstrated) willingness for direct action, riots, property destruction, and clashes with police. In others, it is the capacity for anti-oppressive analysis, avoidance of oppressive statements, and the calling out of those who make them. In others it is the capacity to avoid work and survive without buying things or paying rent. In some it is adherence to a vision of leftism or revolution, and in others it is the conviction that the Left is dead and revolution is a ridiculous fantasy. In some it is the capacity to have participated in a lot of projects, or to be connected to a big network of radical organizers. In every case, there is a tendency for one milieu to dismiss the commitments and values of the others and to expose their inadequacies. At its extreme, this generates a form of sectarianism that is fuelled by the very act of being vocally sectarian.

The newcomer is immediately placed in a position of debt: owing dedication, self-sacrifice, and correct analysis that must be continuously proved. Whether it is the performance of anti-oppressive language, revolutionary fervor, nihilist detachment, or an implicit dress code, those who are unfamiliar with the expectations of the milieu are doomed from the start unless they “catch up” and conform. In subtle and overt ways, they will be attacked, mocked, and excluded for getting it wrong, even though these people are often the ones that “good politics” is supposed to support: those without formal education who have not been exposed much to radical milieus, but who have a stake in fighting.

None of this is meant to suggest that we should be more wishy-washy about oppression, or that hard lines are wrong, or that all radical practices are corrupt or bad. We think that developing analysis, naming mistakes, and engaging in conflict are all indispensable. To undo rigid radicalism is not a call to “get along” or “shut up and take action” or “be spontaneous.” It is definitely not a call for less radicalism. People's capacities to challenge and unlearn oppressive behaviors, take direct action, or avoid selling labor and paying rent can create and deepen cracks in the dominant order. They can all be enabling and transformative. But any of these practices can also become

measuring sticks for comparison and evaluation that end up devaluing other practices and stifling the growth of collective capacities.

When politics circulates in a world dominated by hypervisibility and rigidity, there is a huge swath of things that do not count, and can never count: the incredible things that people do when nobody is looking, the ways that people support and care for each other quietly and without recognition, the hesitations and stammerings that come through the encounter with other ways of living and fighting, all the acts of resistance and sabotage that remain secret, the slow transformations that take years or decades, and all of the ineffable movements and struggles and projects that can never be fully captured in words or displayed publicly.

These tendencies have led many to abandon radical milieus. This is the narrowing of possibilities induced by rigidity: either continue in a stifling and depleting atmosphere, or leave and attempt to live the form of life that is offered up by the dominant order. For many, this is not a choice at all because one's very survival is connected to the same spaces where rigidity has taken hold. In this sense, rigid radicalism can be lethal.

Because rigid radicalism induces a sense of duty and obligation everywhere, there is a constant sense that one is never doing enough. In this context, "burnout" in radical spaces is not just about being worn out by hard work; it is often code for being wounded, depleted, and frayed: "*I'm fucking burning.*" What depletes us is not just long hours, but the tendencies of shame, anxiety, mistrust, competition, and perfectionism. It is the way in which these tendencies stifle the capacity for collective creativity and change. Often, saying one is burnt out is the safest way to disappear, to take a break, to take care of oneself and get away from these dynamics.

It can be risky to discuss all this publicly; there is always the chance that one will be cast as a liberal, an oppressor, or a reactionary. For this reason, a lot of conversations about this are happening between people who already trust each other enough to know that they will not be met with immediate suspicion or attack. In these quieter conversations, there is more room for questioning and listening, with space for subtlety, nuance, and care that is so often absent when rigid radicalism takes hold. These are some of the questions we asked in our conversations with people for our book, *Joyful Militancy*: How does rigid radicalism work? What are its contours, and what are its sources? What triggers it, and what makes it spread? How can it be warded off, and how are people activating other ways of being?

Undoing rigid radicalism

To confront rigid radicalism effectively, we think, is not to pin it down and attack it, but to understand it so that we can learn to dissipate it. Because these tendencies are linked to fear, anxiety, shame—to our very desires and sense of who we are and what we are becoming—we think it is important to approach all of this with care and compassion. If one thing is clear from our research and interviews, it is that all radical movements and initiatives have moments of rigidity and closure, and other moments where new things seem possible.

We hesitate to provide straightforward examples here, for two reasons. First, rigid radicalism is fueled by a tendency to put initiatives or people on pedestals, converting a lived and changing radicalism into stifling *ideals and norms*. Examples can be fodder for this conversion. "We did this, and it helped" becomes "that helped, so you should." Second, if hypervisibility is part of the

problem today, there is something to be said for staying under the radar. Quiet experimentation can be a way of evading both pedestals and police.

In our book, rather than discussing examples of specific movements in detail, we try to engage with people involved in a variety of projects and struggles and draw out what we call *common notions*: shared sensibilities that support transformation and the growth of new capacities. One of these is trust. We found people speaking to the importance of trust—feeling trusted and being able to trust oneself and others—as a crucial ingredient of insurrections in Greece, factory occupations in Argentina, and radical youth projects in North America. Yet it would be a mistake to turn trust into an ideal or an imperative. Trust is a risky gift. Like all common notions, it is a fragile name for something that people create together. When held up as a badge of honor or gripped as an identity, common notions die, detached from the processes and relationships that animate them.

Rigid radicalism is always already coming apart, and something else is always already emerging. There are openings, searches, and collective discoveries of new and old ways of moving that let in fresh air. And for the same reason that no one is immune to this toxicity, anyone can participate in its undoing. Many people are initiating conversations about undoing some of these tendencies within the milieus they inhabit. Others are fleeing explicit radicalism, creating something new at the margins of both the dominant order and visibly radical spaces. By breaking off with a crew of friends, some have built quieter alternatives and hubs elsewhere that enable new forms of movement and revive squelched possibilities.

Ultimately, we think that rigidity is undone by activating, stoking, and intensifying the growth of shared power, and defending it with militancy and gentleness; in other words, figuring out how to transform our own situations, treat each other well, listen to each other, experiment, and fight together.

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