

Radical Psychiatry and Movement Groups

Claude Steiner

Contents

Letter Than Thou	3
Levelling, hierarchies, and leadership	5

Radical psychiatry's main goal is to help human beings overcome alienation. Because overcoming alienation requires contact with other human beings in groups it is important that radical psychiatry provide guidelines for the healthy functioning and survival of groups. When people who are interested in radical changes organize groups they quite naturally wish to organize them along lines which differ from the authoritarian and alienating basis on which oppressive, establishment groups are usually organized. As a consequence the structure of such groups is usually uncertain and indeterminate, and the cohesiveness of such groups against external attack is weak. There are two types of attacks upon movement groups which have become classic examples: one of them is the levelling of hierarchies; the other is the game 'Lefter Than Thou'.

Lefter Than Thou

It is a phenomenon completely familiar to everyone who has worked in a radical organization that in the course of events it happens that one or more people will attack the leadership by professing to be more revolutionary or more radical than the leadership. Since it is always possible that this is the actual state of affairs- namely that the leadership of the group has become counter-revolutionary, many an organization has been totally torn apart by this kind of argument; in many cases organizations that were doing true and valuable revolutionary work.

How is one to distinguish a situation in which a splinter group is for one reason or another simply attacking the leadership illegitimately, or whether such a group is in fact justified in its attacks?

I would like to cast the illegitimate attack of the leadership of a group by a splinter group in the mould of a Bernean game. The game is called 'Lefter Than Thou'. The thesis of the game is that a group of people doing revolutionary work which has a certain amount of momentum always includes a sub-group of people with revolutionary aspirations but who are incapable of mustering either the energy or the courage to actually engage in such activities.

'Lefter Than Thou' players are persons who are dominated by an extremely intolerant and demanding conscience (or Parent) on the one hand and are not able to mobilize their sacred Child to do any work on the other. Criticism of the activities of the group and the decisions of the leaders becomes a substitute for revolutionary work. This criticism occurs, usually, at meetings where work would ordinarily be discussed, and it always replaces effective action. 'Lefter Than Thou' players are either effective in dismembering the organization and wind up without a context in which to work, or they are expelled from the organization by the effective leadership of it and find themselves again in a situation in which no work can be done. In both cases they have a clear-cut justification for their lack of activity, and this is the pay-off of the game.

It is a hallmark of 'Lefter Than Thou' players that they are angry, often 'Angrier Than Thou'; it is quite possible, however, to distinguish the anger of a 'Lefter Than Thou' player from the anger of a person who is effectively reacting to his oppression.

'Lefter Than Thou' players are most always children of the middle class. On this basis it is easy to see why a group of black militants can hardly be accused of playing 'Lefter Than Thou' while a group of white college students who accuse these black militants of not being radical enough is suspect.

Whether a person plays 'Lefter Than Thou' or not can be determined by making a simple assessment of how much revolutionary action he takes other than at meetings over, say, a period

of a week. It will be seen that if observed closely, the activity of a 'Lefter Than Thou' player occurs mostly in the form of an intellectual 'head trip' at meetings and hardly ever in the real world. 'Lefter Than Thou' players will excel in destructive arguments or sporadic destructive action when sparked or impelled by others. But it will be seen that they lack the capacity to gather momentum in creative or building work and that they lack the capacity to work alone due to the extreme intransigence of the Pig Parent in their head which will defeat, before it is born, every positive, life-giving effort.

It appears, therefore, as if that extraordinarily divisive game 'Lefter Than Thou' is played by persons whose oppression has been largely oppression of the mind. This form of intellectual oppression, a Calvinist 'morality of the intellect', is usually accomplished in a liberal context in the absence of societal or familial application of force, a context in which action or force is actually disavowed so that the chains that bind the person are strictly psychological or within the head, yet most paralyzing indeed. When anger is felt it is not expressed physically but in the form of destructive talk.

Movement groups are especially vulnerable to destructive talk as their leaders are often in awe of and mystified by intellectual accomplishment. It must be remembered that a game has to be played by the Victim as well as the Persecutor. The Victim in this case being the leaders of the group under attack who, ordinarily, are more than willing to submit to the persecution of the 'Lefter Than Thou' player. This willingness to respond to 'head trips' and intellectual arguments is a characteristic of certain cultural subgroups, so that while a 'Lefter Than Thou' player would be scoffed at and ignored in a very clearly action oriented movement group, 'Lefter Than Thou' players have a capacity to affect the decisiveness of the guilt ridden intelligentsia.

This game is a liberal, intellectualized form of the aggressiveness that has been observed among the oppressed poor and the black. It is a well-documented fact that crimes against persons occur mostly between members of oppressed subcultures. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* illustrates how the savage, homicidal and capricious criminality that has been observed among Algerians dissolved when the war of liberation became established. The supposed fact that Algerians are born criminals, taught even to Algerians by the faculty of Algiers, was not only not a fact but a mystification of their oppression. The actual fact of the matter is that the oppressed, when they have no access to their oppressors, either because their oppression is mystified or because their oppressors are not within reach, are likely to wind up at each other's throats. 'Lefter Than Thou' is a case of the frustrated and mystified oppressed seizing the throats of their brothers and sisters because of an incapacity to engage in positive, creative revolutionary action.

The measure of a revolutionary's worth is the work that she or he does. When a person questions the effectiveness of the leadership of a group or the work of a group, the first question to that person should be, 'What work art you doing?' It will be found that in most cases the critic is a person who is doing very little or no work. If that person is, in fact, contributing a great deal of work outside of the discussions at meetings, then the challenge of the validity of the leadership's goals and methods is again open to question. Thus, the demystification of a critic's actual work output is a very important tool in the maintenance of a cohesive movement group.

Another usual attack upon movement groups which is quite effective is 'levelling'.

Levelling, hierarchies, and leadership

The greatest single evil in mankind is the oppression of human being by human being. Oppression ordinarily expresses itself in the form of hierarchical situations in which one person makes decisions for others. It has been the wish of many to eradicate this greatest of all evils from their lives. In order to do so some people have completely levelled hierarchical situations and have attempted to function socially in the total absence of leadership, in the hope of building a society without hierarchies in which the greatest evil, oppression, cannot find a breeding ground.

With the spectre of the worst pig, authorization hierarchy haunting them, people have attempted to work in organizations which have been levelled of all hierarchies. In my opinion such organizations, when they involve more than about eight persons, have an extremely low chance of survival. When 'levellers' enter an organization and impose willy-nilly a no-hierarchies principle they usually bring about the ultimate destruction of the group.

I will attempt to demonstrate the fallacy of levelling of hierarchies, and will attempt to present an alternative to levelling which I believe is capable of making rational use of the valuable qualities of leadership in people while preventing that extension of leadership into oppression which is such a scourge upon humankind.

First let me define some terms:

I will call *oppression* the domination by force or threats of force of one person by another.

I will call *levelling* a situation in which, at least publicly, no leader is recognized and no hierarchy is allowed in a group, even though leadership and hierarchy may in fact exist.

I will call a *hierarchy* a situation in which one human being makes decisions for other human beings.

I will call a *leader* a person in a group who is seen as possessing a skill or quality which causes others to wish to learn or profit from that quality.

Hierarchies come in a great variety of forms, from the murderous hierarchies in a capricious war to the mother-child hierarchy, including the hierarchies between teacher and student, man and woman, black and white, master and slave, factory owner and exploited worker, foreman and journeyman, crafts man and apprentice. Some of these hierarchies are alienating and dehumanizing. Others are not. To relate to all hierarchies as if they were all dehumanizing and evil is a great error, bordering on mindlessness. Hierarchies should be analysed in terms of whether they affect human beings well or badly.

There are at least three human hierarchies which are of obvious value to humankind and which clearly would not profit from being levelled.

The first and most basic hierarchy is the hierarchy between mother and child. Here one person makes decisions for another person and it is difficult to see how levelling this hierarchy would be of any advantage to humankind. When this mother-child or parent-child hierarchy is extended beyond its fruitful and natural reach, namely when it is imposed by force or threats of force and beyond the period in which the child needs parental protection and when it is extended to large aggregations of people, then this parent-child hierarchy becomes the model for the military, the great corporations and so on.

Another such is the hierarchy between a human being who is in great physical pain or need (the sick, the hungry, the wounded, the deranged) and another human being who has the means to fulfill that need. When a person is in dire physical need he may wish that another human being will make decisions for him. Again, this natural hierarchy which is conducive to well-being

can be extended into one that is damaging as has been the case with the hierarchy that has been created by the medical profession and the attending psychiatric and other mental health professions. Again, the continuation of the need beyond necessity, the continuation of ministrations beyond necessity, the encouragement of the preservation of the hierarchy even in the absence of physical need, have resulted in a hierarchical medical establishment which at this point may be doing more against human health than for it. Thus may sound startling but if one separates medical knowledge which is vast and potentially helpful from medical activity which is self-serving and oppressive, one can see that the medical establishment is not only not fully serving humanity but holding back potential help from it.

A third hierarchy is based on differences of skill between human beings in which one person who can be considered a craftsman is sought out by another person who wishes to learn her craft. This hierarchy in which one person places himself below the other in knowledge is desirable to both. The apprentice, by recognizing his need to learn and by riveting his attention to his master, is likely to acquire a skill more quickly and more thoroughly than a student who questions the master's knowledge. On the other hand a teacher who is given the attention and recognition of an apprentice finds his teachings the greatest rewards for his life effort. Both the craftsman and the apprentice profit from this process, and it is hard to see how either of them, especially the student, is damaged by it. Again, this natural hierarchical situation can be extended beyond its necessity so that certain persons are forever kept in an inferior position to others with respect to their skills. This, of course, is the basis for most universities and professional schools and is again an example of where a natural hierarchy can be extended into an oppressive and evil one.

It is characteristic of humanizing hierarchies that they are first, voluntary; second, bent upon their own destruction or self-dissolving.

All three of the above mentioned beneficial hierarchies can be extended into oppressive ones. The tendency toward dehumanizing hierarchies that may exist in human beings can be overcome by human beings who decide that they wish to do so. That very same tendency can be empowered by the human intelligence, and has been, to the point of building monstrous hierarchies which may now consume us. As human beings we have the choice between mindlessly extending natural hierarchies to the point where they will devour us, or equally as mindlessly levelling and abolishing them, or using our intelligence, wherever it suits us, to create groups with humanizing, beneficial hierarchies when needed.

I wish to postulate an intelligent principle of authority which discriminates between hierarchy and oppression and which I hope will be useful to people working in movement organizations.

The first principle of human hierarchies is that they be voluntary and that they be self-dissolving, that is that the eventual historical outcome of the group's work be to make the hierarchy unnecessary.

The second principle of human hierarchies is that leaders shall be responsive and responsible.

In order for a hierarchy to be voluntary it cannot involve oppression or coercion by force or threats of force. As a consequence, no one shall use force or threats of force in any situation relating to human beings within a movement or an organization of which he's a member. Intimidation of group members by psychological means (pigging) must be avoided by developing an atmosphere of mutual protection between group members.

Responsive leaders are leaders that are available for criticism by group members. Thus leadership can be extended only as far as it remains possible for all group members to make extended face to-face contact with the leaders.

Finally, a responsible leader is one who feels the impact of his or her actions and takes responsibility for them. This is a human quality which can only be assessed by observation. Responsibility is judged from the leader's previous actions and can only be ascertained over a period of time during which his or her work is open to scrutiny and during which the important quality of responsibility is observed.

The same kind of guilt that operates in the leadership when faced with 'lifter than thou' players comes into effect when confronted with a leveller.

The self-doubt of a leader is the greatest aid to the leveller. Oppressors don't respond to such attacks at all, but good leaders are prone, because of their basic wish to be responsive and responsible, to allow the attacks of a few to vitiate their useful work for the many. Thus, when faced with such attacks, leaders should responsibly investigate their work and responsively obtain feedback from all the group's members before abdicating their leadership, only if this analysis reinforces the levellers' argument should a leader allow that most precarious process, leveling, to occur in the group.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Claude Steiner
Radical Psychiatry and Movement Groups
Retrieved on April 30, 2014 from web.archive.org
usa.anarchistlibraries.net