

Less Within, More Between

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caveat: Both feminists and anarchists come in wildly divergent flavors (some mutually exclusive), and yet those labels remain useful. I do not continually say “this kind of anarchist” or “my kind of feminist,” so please understand that I’m biased and referring to the anarchist and feminist ideas that are most interesting to me.

Feminism is meaningful as a perspective on what humans need, and what “human” means. This is qualitatively different from feminism being merely about defining “woman” more expansively. Feminists believe that both men and women are constrained by gender/sex roles in this culture (and most cultures that have survived under the current paradigm). We believe that while one group in this culture is more obviously powerful (i.e. able to do more of what they want, to determine more of the course of their lives), that the definitions of “power” are warped: for example, one way men are considered to be powerful is that men can and do beat the people who care about them, which is hardly actually powerful. In other words, men are usually more able to make decisions about externals but also usually have a more severe lack of internal options regarding range of feelings and relationships. Part of the power equation in this culture is the power of being a victim or martyr that women have been encouraged to claim as our own. The fact that this is frequently a dissatisfying option doesn’t refute the point that there is a status that comes from being worse off than other people. (The “innocent victim of war/crime/catastrophe/blood transfusion stories is only the most blatant example of this line of thinking.) The power that comes from that status can be hard to give up, especially if there seems to be no other kind of power available. This is the best answer I can find to the question of a conversation I had in my 20s with an anti-choice woman who argued that if it is possible for women to get abortions, then men will not be forced to deal with the consequences of their actions. In this perspective, abortions mean that women’s bodies become men’s toys. If pregnancy is the last option for getting a husband to take care of you — i.e. for survival, to some people — then socially-acceptable abortions take away women’s last, strongest tool.

Put a “strong” woman in the same small group with a “weak” one, and [there] becomes a problem: How does she not dominate? How does she share her hardearned skills and confidence with her sister? From the other side — how does the “weak” woman learn to act in her own behalf?... Those of us who have learned to survive

by dominating others, as well as those of us who have learned to survive by accepting domination, need to resocialize ourselves into being strong without playing dominance-submission games, into controlling what happens to us without controlling others... (Carol Ehrlich – Socialism, Anarchism & Feminism)

Anarcha-feminists reject simple essentialist analysis. We know that while characteristics that are assigned to women in this culture need bolstering (nurturing, wombs, moods, non-linear thinking – all mostly good) and women need bolstering (we deserve better than what we get), it is misleading to conflate the two. It is not a matter of deserving better because we have wombs (we don't all have wombs) or because we are nurturers (we are not the only ones who nurture), and so on.

As anarchist feminists we are not asking men to atone for the sins of the forefathers, we are asking them to take responsibility for the masculinity of the future. We are not asking women to be perpetually aware of their oppression but to emerge from it. *Mostly we are not locating conflict within certain people, but in the kind of behavior that takes place between them.* (Flick Ruby – Anarcha-feminism; emphasis added)

Feminism and anarchy both encourage people to take responsibility for our own lives and relationships. This is different from advocating a) that people make the government behave itself, or b) that generalized men make space, in some generalized way, for generalized women. Who can deny that there are institutional structures that enforce oppressive/oppressed roles for men and women? Or that there are patterns of behavior that are endlessly, tediously replicated between most men and most women? But we know that no government is going to help—or even allow—us to liberate ourselves. We also know that individual behavior is most effectively challenged on an individual level. In other words, if a man is acting like a jerk, then having his less-jerky peers deal with him directly (in whatever way makes sense for the situation) will be a more effective response than (for example) writing/reading some paper saying that men are jerks and should do fill-in-the-blank.

And if there's no group of less-jerky people who are prepared to deal with him respectfully and appropriately? Then the situation is best treated as motivation to get started developing such a group. We have to build these relationships, not continue trying to get by without them.

Feminism or anarchism is frequently people's first and deepest exposure to a fundamental and global type of critical thinking that can work as a compass for gauging every interaction that we have in the world. This is why both feminism and anarchism vary so widely – because on one hand, the most significant aspect of both types of analysis is the intensity, clarity and wide range of their critique of the present situation. Both act as elevators dropping us down many floors (as many as we can stand) in the edifice of our current situation.

Both feminism and anarchism emphasize the relevance of day-to-day actions and situations: there are political and personal aspects to all experiences. Feminism especially brings an awareness of the concrete, personal and emotional repercussions of oppression. Most political theory is happy to exist platonically, but feminism insists that we check ourselves and our friends regarding the decisions we make, the relationships we live, the choices we assume. Feminism tracks the genesis of personal behavior from political, social constructs (which is the original meaning of “the personal is political”). Feminism rejects abstractions to the extent that they distract us from

what we can do now to make the world better, or to the extent that people act like we can make a better world without challenging problematic patterns now. To say that this is feminist is to say that it is not behavior that comes easily or gracefully within a sexist culture. We all have to find our ability to a) value and work on relationships, b) value ourselves and our ideas, and c) be creative (and patient) when those two seem to be at odds. DIY, communal living and polyamory are all aspects of this kind of perspective. A significant part of this living- in-the-real-world aspect of feminism is the recognition that actual situations, choices, and people are complex, with conflicting motivations and unpredictable interactions. There is no purity. (The concept of purity is a christian construct that valorizes the non-physical/sacred by denigrating the physical/mundane, as a way to bolster the power of religious, ideological “experts.”) Walking towards being more wonderful is gratifying (and fun!), as long as it’s kept in perspective. Feminism and anarchism both help us keep that perspective: anarchism by reminding us that none of us want to be Authorities/experts, that Authority is undesirable as a state, dehumanizing as a position.

The combination of feminism’s understanding of complex emotional realities and anarchy’s belief in our fundamental ability to be in appropriate relationship means that an anarcho-feminist response to inappropriate behavior by community members requires a community response that is just and supportive to all parties involved.

... to draw back respectfully from the Self-gate of the plainest, most unpromising creature, even from the most debased criminal, because one knows the nonentity and the criminal in oneself, to spare all condemnation (how much more trial and sentence) because one knows the stuff of which man is made and recoils at nothing since all is in himself, this is what Anarchism may mean to you. It means that to me.
(Voltairine deCleyre — *Anarchism*)

We acknowledge that we are all broken by the society that raised us, that we all need to learn how to interact with each other better, and that while some of us are more broken than others, self righteousness is not helpful to us, either as individuals or as groups.

Anarcho-feminists are somewhere along the road of holding the community and the individual in simultaneous regard, challenging both the individualism and the group-think taught us by patriarchal capitalism. This balancing act (uh, this wildly swinging trapeze?) addresses both the need for reconciliation and the reality that we cannot spend all our time trying to help people who don’t want to change. (And of course we reject the whole christian continuum of Righteous Casting Out of Sinners on one pole and martyr-sacrificing-self-for-other-people on the other.) Anarchists and feminists also find ways of being in relationship that are different from culturally prescribed models — like by challenging the primacy of romantic/sexual relationships, and the idea that any relationship is separable from the context and social relationships it exists within (e.g. abusive relationships are frequently misunderstood to be the business only of the people involved, rather than a part of whatever social circles are involved).

While a bias towards the real is one of the things that maintains feminism’s relevance, that bias also limits us when it comes to articulating what our goals are. I have been to too many conferences, anarchist and otherwise, where the feminist component is dominated by talk about the prevalence of sexist behavior (duh) and how we need to support each other (again duh, or perhaps, unh unh, depending on the definition of support and who “each other” is; questions that are never addressed). The lack of analytic and strategic thinking is in part a valid rejection of

abstraction, and in part intellectual laziness and/or intimidation. The feminist tactic of analyzing our individual behavior and needs, too frequently is used to attack people for not abiding by “rules,” when what it is good for is challenging ourselves and our friends to keep our theory and practice fresh and meaningful. This means criticism has to work for something other than making one person feel better than another.

Finally, there is an ongoing tension for anarchists between understanding ourselves as members of groups and understanding ourselves as individuals. U.s. culture exploits both those urges in people, and dissidents in the u.s. tend to prioritize one or the other; e.g. anarcho-individualists vs. anarcho-communists or -syndicalists. But really we need to incorporate our needs for both autonomy and membership into how we want to live. We all need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of how u.s. culture manipulates us through both sets of needs (by pushing conformity and individuality). Feminism provides anarchists with tools to discuss both autonomy and membership. “Feminism,” “racism,” “classism”: the whole lexicon of “identity” is useful to today’s anarchists to the extent that it provides us with ways to talk about, and to meet, both sets of needs.

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