

What's new under the black flag?

Some thoughts on anti-sexism in the libertarian movement

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There's still a lot to do if we are really going to fight against patriarchy within libertarian groups. Klito, a women-only collective, sees some problems and wants to suggest some courses of action. We, as libertarian feminists, want to sound an alarm. We denounce the double workday of women workers who, once they get home, get stuck with household chores, but also among libertarians, there is the double struggle of women. The struggle against patriarchy requires two times as much energy as other battles because we must fight not only on the social front but also within the political groups in which we work as activists. Who puts the labels on the envelopes? Sweeps the meeting rooms? The women, usually. Who coordinates the demos? Who speaks louder at the meetings? The men, usually.

In the libertarian groups of France, women's issues are certainly taken into consideration but not in a very satisfactory way. When groups mobilize for International Women's Day or against the "right-to-lifers," we can ask ourselves what the real place is of the anti-patriarchy struggle in the practices and thought of libertarian groups in France. We have no false illusions about this—libertarians reproduce gender and sexual domination like everyone else. Since we claim to be fighting this domination, it would be a good idea to focus on its presence amongst ourselves. Ignoring this phenomenon is the best way to make it worse.

A little history

A look at history shows us that the anarchist movement has not considered feminism one of its major concerns. Although Bakunin, for example, advocated complete equality between woman and men and denounced the contradiction in many male militants who fought for socio-economic equality and freedom while being tyrants at home, Proudhon, on the other hand, pillar of the libertarian movement, was a notorious misogynist. This author of a sentences like " the woman is a pretty animal but an animal nonetheless. She is as eager for kisses as a goat is for salt," is still the master thinker for many. There have always been homophobic anarchists, as well, who argue that homosexuality represents a "bourgeois perversion." Emma Goldman described the obstacles against her when she raised this issue: "Censorship came from some of my own comrades because I was treating such 'unnatural' themes as homosexuality," she related in 1912. The shell of the idea of sexual liberation has often been resuscitated but without its anti-patriarchy value. For most militants, in 1936 as in 1970, it has meant above all the sexual availability of women militants and feminists for meeting male desires.

Invisible women

The problem of gender is rarely an integral part of anti-capitalist and anti-racist discourse and struggle. Starting with the good old sexist principle that the male supersedes the female, the unemployed are defended without their defenders realizing that they are WOMEN unemployed workers, above all, and that women are twice as exploited as men on the job. The same thing is true in the movement to defend undocumented immigrants (sans-papiers)—women are invisible despite the fact that their situation is always worse than men's. Sometimes this absence is justified by the fact that the issue of gender comes out of a bourgeois theory praising inter-classism. We need an exacting analytical method to comprehend the inequalities between men and women, between heterosexuals and others. The misunderstanding of this issue is produced in several

ways. This invisibility of women's oppression, in particular, comes primarily from the fact that many libertarians (men and women) have a compartmentalized vision of struggles as if women's issues could be reduced to one area of struggle.

Although in the struggles against the bosses, against poverty and economic instability, or for freedom of movement and immigrant rights, women are the first effected, it is rarely mentioned in political literature, for example, to what they are subjected because of their sex. The issue of gender runs through ALL struggles! To believe as many do that gender issues are reserved for women only (while saying to women, at best, that they "support them in their struggle") allows them to clear themselves of any charges of not participating in the fight against patriarchy. The "women's commissions" of some libertarian groups, like the social-democrat parties, indeed reveal the implicit disengagement of men. The Mujeres Libres (Free Women) movement during the Spanish civil war was a unique example of massive struggle by anarchist women. But let's remember that this group of 20,000 proletarian feminists encountered resistance from their male counterparts, who thought that the women workers were stealing their place as men and did not accept, in particular, that the Free Women critiqued the glorification of motherhood. You say there's no hierarchy of struggle?

Patriarchy and capitalism

Paradoxically, another, more subtle way of excluding feminism from struggles in progress is to include the patriarchy theme as a "natural" part of the class struggle. For some, being an anarchist automatically makes you a feminist. To consider patriarchy an avatar or a consequence of capitalism alone is to refuse to see the specificity of this gender-based system. We must remember that when we struggle against the class system, we are struggling against ALL domination! Capitalism is not the sum total of oppression (our fight for a better world would much easier if it were). The struggle against patriarchy is a struggle in its own right. Although patriarchy and capitalism are interwoven and reinforced by each other, we must admit that they are two autonomous systems (some patriarchal systems are built on non-capitalist economies). There are thereby two struggles, at least, which we must carry out in parallel.

Few libertarian feminists denounce these weaknesses, without doubt because they have internalized the same invisibility all women have under patriarchy. There are certainly more men than women in anarchist groups, and while the fact that women investing little time in politics is a social phenomenon, the violent and warlike image associated with those who brandish the black flag comes from somewhere, no doubt. Does keeping this masculine "folklore" alive really make any sense? Besides, it is difficult for many women to see themselves as part of a group of women because they are persuaded that they are living a social reality identical to men's, which allows the building of cohesive militant groups. Women who attempt to point out these oppression issues within the group are labelled "feminist," which means for many "habitual pain- in-the-ass." This scorn for the issue of patriarchy illustrates how difficult it is to confront the myths upon which political groups depend, such as "power issues do not exist in this group," "there's no domination of some members by others," etc. It is time to recognize that a militant group is not immune from the ills of society.

Gender? Don't know...

It's a shame that the analysis of some libertarians is limited to the status of women without taking into account the social construction of gender. Most libertarians do not get beyond essentialist theories based on biological behavioural differences that seem to explain (without justifying, of course) male domination. However, nature alone could not have created the categories of men and women as they exist. We are not born as men or women; we become one or the other. From our infancy, family, school and society in general inculcate us with our roles according to our biological sex. Girls are taught the value of sweetness, understanding, submission and passivity and boys those of violence, bravery, self-affirmation. Taking this conditioning into account allows us to reject biological determinism and "natural" feminine and masculine qualities. The construction of gender that feminism has widely appropriated, including the reformists, has not been accepted by libertarians. It is easier to unite based on a common exterior enemy (religion, fascists who scoff at laws protecting women, and the bosses who exploit women) than challenge each other individually by grappling with the power relations that exist within libertarian organizations. Not only do most libertarian groups not challenge patriarchy—they feed it.

Sexuality is political

This deficiency in libertarian practice in regard to feminism produces, in addition to discrimination against women, a negation of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans-sexuals (LGBT). Do they even exist in libertarian circles? Of course they do, just like everywhere else in society. Nevertheless, we ask such a question because they are invisible. Under cover of respect for individual freedom, some people declare that the private is not political and impose a taboo on discussions about sexuality. They refuse to consider that sexuality is culturally constructed, an essential fact today thanks to the struggles of the Seventies. Refusing to talk about issues around some sexual behaviours reveals a prudishness sometimes bordering on puritanism. Some people decree that we can all do what we want in our own beds, but they'd rather not talk about it because it has nothing to do with politics.

However, raunchy songs, sexist jokes and lesbo-gay-bi-transphobia are still rampant among some anarchists, reinforcing the reigning hetero-centrism. They denigrate some sexual behaviours and keep alive the lesbo-gay-bi-transphobic atmosphere that depends on the idea that heterosexuality is the only model. Today, to declare oneself lesbian, trans, bi or gay in a libertarian organization has a risk (as much as at work or in our families) that many don't dare to take. This is nothing new in the history of libertarian struggles. Feminist movements, lesbian, homo and queer struggles have moved things forward a little, but it is necessary to keep fighting. Nothing will evolve without putting in place effective methods—in particular, the creation of non-mixed groups of women and men as spaces for political reflection on power over/under relations, in particular men/women and heteros/LGBT.

It is not enough to want to destroy capitalism and patriarchy as represented by the bosses and moral order, but we must change behaviours right here and now. In the libertarian movement and elsewhere, nothing will change without the mobilization of the interested parties: women, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, the trans-gendered; and the involvement of men and heteros is imperative if the latter want to be consistent in their libertarian thought.

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