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The Superior Race of Good People

On William Gillis' "Bad people"

Jack, Page of Swords

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Ostracism of abusers in leftist spaces might have begun as a traumatized response, as a way to give the victims of abuse the space they need and protect them from their abusers, which is a legitimate goal. I totally understand why, when we do not have access to better tools to address abuse and violence inside of our communities, this is the one we use. And I agree that abuse and violence have to be addressed. But the ostracism of abusers is also rooted in the idea that there is a particularly disgusting class of subhumans called "abusers" who ought to be oppressed or eradicated for the sake of normal people. Ostracism is collective abuse. One might argue that it can, sometimes, be a necessary evil. But defending the systematization of abusive ways of dealing with violence and abuse in leftist spaces cannot come without a cognitive dissonance, one which cannot be solved without adopting a supremacist worldview in disguise. This is what Gillis demonstrates, involuntarily but with great brilliance.

Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do
not become a monster...

For when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also
gazes into you.

– Friedrich W. Nietzsche

power at all. It merely constitutes self-defense for a world free of power relationships.⁷⁸

3. Ostracism as a practice

It is no surprise that the defense of ostracism by Gillis ends up being a supremacist manifesto. And, frankly, I don't see how it could have been something else. As I pointed out in my introduction, ostracism is a praxis whose underlying theory *has to be* supremacist.

Lesbian activist Sarah Schulman, in her book *Conflict is Not Abuse*, explains how traumatized and supremacist behaviors and worldviews look very much alike. In both cases, it is about not tolerating sharing space with someone else. The difference (in my own words) is that traumatized people act from a place of inferiority ("I might be destroyed if we share a space"), whereas supremacists act from a place of superiority ("having to share a space with them would be insulting"). Schulman also says that the frontier between the two is blurry. As a Jewish American, she talks about how the rhetoric in support of the Israeli colonization in her community taps into both the fear of extinction and the disdain for the "inferior" palestinians.

⁷ One should note that moral essentialism and victimization essentialism are core features of supremacism. It is easy to be confused when, for example, White supremacists are presenting themselves as victims, and to think they are either mistaken or lying about the facts. Truth is: this is actually not about the facts. Supremacist rhetoric considers victimizers and victimized to be fixed and definitive identities, ergo not depending of the actual harm being done and the sometimes changing power relationships.

⁸ Finally, Gillis' confusion between *what is good* (for him) and *what is free from power* makes me think of the way in which, in anarchism, power is often seen as something inherently bad. Therefore, what is considered bad is perceived as the result of power, while what is perceived to be good is seen as *natural*, meaning here *unbiased by power*. Another way of saying this is that *there is no social relationship without power relationship*. The utopist ideal of a world without power relationships leads, in practice, to a dystopia where no power relationship is ever acknowledged.

"Contrary to the assertions of some leftists there are in fact thoroughly monstrous people who are not just victims of their social conditions."

That's how starts "Bad people", a bizarre essay published in *The Anarchist Library* last August by the scientist, writer and activist William Gillis, where he both advocates for the ostracism of abusers as a good anarchist praxis, and... errr... proposes a way to prevent ex-cops from forming urban gangs in the post-state anarchist society to come.

And... Well. I'm feeling grateful towards Gillis for taking the time (and the risk) to publish his ideas on the matter with such franchise. Granted, the result is disastrous. This paper is delusional supremacist pseudo-scientific garbage. But this might very well be what some anarchists think today in their heart of hearts. At least, some of them seem to operate under similar implicit assumptions. So, it's really good to see it put out in the open. This way, we can look at it and criticize it. Thus I should at least begin by recognizing that Gillis has the merit to really attempt to politically and ethically justify the systematic ostracism of abusers as an anarchist duty. I've seen too much people talking against it in theory and still participating in it, or using it for their own interest, or tolerating it in practice – hell, I even was one of these people – to not be grateful for Gillis' coherence and honesty on the matter.

As to why bother writing against this paper, I think there are two reasons. One of them is that I think Gillis' ideas have to be rebutted and called out for what they are. It is good to point finger at supremacist rhetoric when we see it, and even more when it passes at anarchism. But there is more than that.

I believe that **what we do informs what we think**, at least as much as the converse. And I do believe that ostracism, as a practice, leads to a worldview that cannot fall too far away from Gillis'. Not a lot of ostracizers in leftist spaces take the time to write about it in such details, nor have the same candor and lack of self-consciousness about what they think. It takes a highly edu-

cated white man's confidence to suggest in writing that mathematics prove the existence of "bad people". But what I believe is that Gillis is quite good at capturing the theory from which ostracism is the praxis.

Ostracism says that getting rid of some people is "the solution". This implies a worldview where those people are "the problem". Not some behavior. Not some ideas. Some *people*. And, you know... *Someone has to solve the problem*. And *that* is supremacist thinking. What is interesting in Gillis' essay is that it illustrates wonderfully where ostracism leads.

Now, let me sum up Gillis' ideas. According to him, people can be broadly hierarchized into three categories depending on their inherent moral value: the *bad people*, the *apathetics* and the *altruists*.

Bad people are the bottom of the barrel. Brutal, cruel, callous. "Fundamentally evil". Not only are they bad, they are also irredeemable.

People not mistaken or confused, people for whom no therapy, argument, enticement, or punishment will ever work. People for all intents and purposes permanently locked to certain malicious values and perspectives.

And those people do not deserve to exist. Actually, they barely exist at all. They went too far on the path of evil and barely count as humans anymore.

These bad people are the walking dead, husks of former imaginative and inquisitive minds.

This is something lot of leftists refuse to acknowledge, but it is the cold, hard, truth. This is science. Game theory somehow says that these people exist and will exist in every society, community

Recall how Gillis compares the cancelling of "bad people" with the boycott of a big tomato company. That's a bad metaphor for a number of reasons, but one of them is that the power balance at play is not the same when a group of activists plan a boycott against a multinational company and when a community ostracizes one of its members. Indeed, boycott is a tool developed to face overwhelmingly more powerful entities. Actual boycotts do not aim to destroy the targeted companies nor remove them from society. Boycotters know this to be nearly impossible for them. Rather, boycotts are used as leverage to obtain satisfaction on explicit demands. This is why actual boycotts sometimes end. Using such a comparison seems telling to me: big tomato companies are, by definition and by essence, the ones in power, while the boycotters are permanent underdogs.⁵

To put it simply, my theory is that Gillis cannot think of bad people as something else than victimizers, and good people as something else than victimized (or eventually saviors).⁶ That would explain how he can look at a world where altruists have the power to mass-murder bad people and see a world without power relationships: in his eyes, the power of altruists over bad people is no

⁵ Also, big tomato companies are institutions, they do not suffer like humans do. Gillis' comparison is also telling in the way that Gillis never acknowledges that violence towards persons is not morally the same than violence towards companies, and how it echoes the dehumanization of "bad people". I would like to add that the boycott of big bad tomato companies does not even work anymore, and actually never really worked so well. There have been few, if not none, successful international boycott campaigns against multinational companies, for quite a long time now (on issues about production, salaries and exploitation, I mean, I'm not talking about people angry because of too much, or not enough, women in ads, movies or video games). No doubt that, if they were one, it would not spread easily on corporate-owned social media platforms.

⁶ It is also telling that Gillis does not think about the possibility that the bad guys might victimize each other.

2. Victimization Essentialism

Another contradiction Gillis does not notice is that he describes altruists' final victory as the removal of all positions of power, while stating *at the same time* that, in this new era, altruists actually can mass-incarcerate or mass-murder bad people if they want to. One might ask how Gillis does not see that (the fate of the bad people being in the hands of the altruists) as a position of power. I attribute this blindness to what I call *victimization essentialism*. Let me explain.

Moral essentialism might explain why Gillis does not consider that the ability to name someone "bad" and "irredeemable", and to be massively believed and followed, is a kind of power. In his view, "bad person" is not a stigma, socially constructed and attributed, but an inherent truth about someone. Therefore, it seems, he does not see stigmatizing someone as "bad" as the exercise of social power, but only as the natural process of a truth being revealed, and ostracism as the natural consequence of it. And I think it's for the same reasons that Gillis does not see popularity and audience outreach as positions of power and privilege, but merely side effects of true altruism.

But this does not fully explain Gillis' lack of awareness about power. Even with an essentialist view of badness or goodness, one would still might recognize when the good guys have power over the bad ones. Why can't Gillis acknowledge that, far from the end of all power relationships, his dream vision is about altruists ruling over bad people? One reason might be because he *cannot* acknowledge that without shattering the anarchist coating over his supremacist beliefs. But I would like to propose another one: I happen to believe Gillis operates in a framework where victimized and victimizer are essences, fixed and definitive identities.

using here the same postmodernist lens Augusta-Scott uses to understand men choosing to abuse in intimate relationships.)

and organisation on earth. Rapists, most cops and most conservatives are among those "rotten" individuals.

Bad people should either be oppressed or exterminated. They are a constant threat for non-bad people, and so should be eradicated, removed from society entirely or kept under constant surveillance. They should not be oppressed by a state, however, nor by any kind of formal institution. Not because it would be morally bad – it would not – but because bad people always hijack every formal power apparatus and use them to do bad stuff. That's why the surveillance of population, the detection of bad people and their elimination from society should be decentralized and informal, as part of everybody's civic duty.

This is difficult, because most people are shitty. The overwhelming majority of the population belongs to the apathetic, egoistic underbelly of the human race. They are not, like the *altruists* (the moral elite of humanity), ready to make sacrifices for the greater good. Thus, they will tolerate monsters if they happen to like them. What a bunch of dicks, right? They are, when you think about it, bad people as well.

Luckily, altruists have a new weapon, now. Thanks to Twitter, they can coalesce and coerce the apathetic scum into participating in the ostracism of bad people, by threatening to subject them to the same treatment, a fair punishment for not collaborating with the get-rid-of-bad-people initiative.

So, this is already atrocious. I feel the need to stress that I am in no way exaggerating Gillis' position.

But here's the thing. The people sticking with Sam [a guy who committed rape] are purely some degree of Bad People. They're not altruists. They won't sacrifice to stop Sam from raping again. So you get a few altruists on your side willing to sacrifice to help you. If you get enough of them together, even when you're a minority, you can collectively leverage a lot more. "If

you stay friends with Sam you will lose not just one friend but five friends.”

I’m not exaggerating either the awfulness of it all. At some point, Gillis even distinguishes between the “empathetic” rape victim who “warn[s] everyone [they] can to prevent [their] rapist to rape again” from the “selfish” one who “[doesn’t] care, or only care[s] enough for a deniable whisper of warning here or there”. And... err... what’s with them, William? Should you cut ties with them too? After all, they seem pretty bad, but if you threaten them with losing more friends, maybe they will be inclined to sacrifice for the greater good...

But let’s get back to it, because we’re far from finished.

Thanks to this new weapon of “cancelling”, the right is losing. Yeah, that’s right. Gamergate and Trump’s presidency are somehow the proof of the increasing power of altruists: since the boom of social media, thanks to whom “the promise of the internet was fulfilled” (I have no words...), altruists of the world united. Now the far-right extremists have no choice but to forge an improbable alliance, since the cancelling left threaten them all. However, they are bound to lose, because...

“Cancelling” is a weapon best wield by the altruists. Not only do they stand on top of the hierarchy of moral value, altruists are also elite in moral toughness. Especially over conservatives, cops and other bad people, who are just a bunch of dumb cowards.¹ “Boycotting” people is tedious, ungratifying work, and only altruists have the moral bravery to really and consistently cut ties with people they know to be bad.² So, in the end, only the true altruists (who recognize themselves by how willing they truly are to

¹ Also, in case you’re asking, there is a fixed hierarchy of intelligence. Altruists are also the smartest, while bad people are stupid and ignorant, even if they might possess some sort of malignant cleverness for specific power-grabbing games.

² Gillis happens to notice that “bad people” may be brave enough to physically fight and die for their cause. This doesn’t contradict his theory, however,

energy, money, etc, until the impact starts dissuading people. Then you target the remaining defectors. The moment another tomato company adopts the same practices you come out swinging hard, no matter the personal cost. You never allow defectors.

How those people, ostracizing all those who are not complying with their ostracism decrees, are not meat-eating canines “butchering the sheep”? Where’s the recognition of the messy complexity Gillis says he cares about so much? It’s just about erasing people from the map, threatening everyone until they comply, and “never allow defectors” – which in this case means forbidding empathy towards “bad people”, inquiry on what the problems are and creativity in solving them. Instead of his own professed values, Gillis glorifies the “hard resolve” of the ostracizers. Heck, his whole hierarchy of human value is based on having or not the hard resolve to participate relentlessly in cancelling campaigns.

Gillis seems to not have really talked with a cop for quite some time, but most of them, when asked, think of themselves as altruists ready to put their lives on the line and sacrifice themselves for the weak and the victimized. And they express frustration about their hierarchy, the judiciary system, all the leftist weak-ass bureaucratic stuff coming, in their eyes, from “apathetic” civilians because of who they cannot effectively neutralize the bad guys. Gillis has basically the same worldview than *Dirty Harry* or *Watchmen*’s Rorschach. They are noble in their readiness to protect the weak from bad guys at all cost for themselves, and they are dangerous in their readiness to do it at all cost for everyone else.⁴

⁴ To be clear, I’m not saying that cops are not “sadistic sociopaths who are in the force for the pleasure to feel powerful”. That’s a part of what they are. I’m merely saying that they’re not *just* that. They also are people that want to protect the weak from the bad guys. And I’m not saying that they are alternatively one or the other, or that some cops are good and others are bad: they can be both *at the same time*. I feel the same about ostracizers. (If you wanna dig deeper, I’m

If we don't recognize the humanity of police officers, then we might not recognize the police officer in our own humanity. If we think that all cops are just sadistic sociopaths who are in the force for the pleasure to feel powerful by pepper-spraying leftists or shooting Black people, then we might not recognize it when we reproduce cop-like mentality. Even when we, to reuse the words of Gillis, start to "*preserve simplistic hierarchies and rules with violence*", or to "*maintain "order" — that is to say to make the world legible to the simple-minded*". As it is, here, very obviously the case.

What's very striking in this paper is how much Gillis looks like the cops he's describing, while not noticing the similarities. Take these sentences, for example:

[Their worldview] is one largely of zero-sum violent competition, fearful of messy complexity, disdainful of empathy, inquiry, and creativity, anything that might undermine hard resolve.

They may paint themselves as sheep dogs protecting the sheep against the wolves, but they are at the end of the day both meat-eating canines, and the sheep end up being butchered either way.

Then now read how Gillis talks about what he's doing and explains how ostracism works, using a comparison with boycott tactics:

Boycotts, like strikes, are most effective when they're transitive in some manner. You don't just boycott the tomato company, you boycott every company that buys from them as well. You get colleges to divest investments from anything near the tomato company. You threaten to boycott any state that continues giving the tomato company tax write-offs. You sacrifice collectively immense reputation, time,

cancel) will have the social status, the popularity and the collective trust needed to wield cancelling as an effective weapon.

In the end, short for being genocided or enslaved by bad people, altruists will lead anarchism to victory, "the end of all power relationships". Once their victory is secured, we bad people won't be all killed, mostly because we're too many (he counted).

This is adamantly not to advocate an exterminationist policy. There are seven hundred thousand law enforcement officers in the United States. They may be the worst of the worst, but offensive mass murder on anything near that scale should be unthinkable, and is clearly not on a path to anything like a liberated world. Mass imprisonment in some kind of Stalinesque re-education project is likewise beyond unconscionable, and even less likely than therapy to have a deep impact.

Instead, they will put all of us bad people in ghettos in the suburbs. Our territories will be respected and we will be allowed to trade with them, because it's in their best interest to give us an occupation and something to invest our energies in. They might even train us so we can have disempowered jobs. But they will keep us under constant surveillance and every one of them will be ready to come exterminate us at the slightest hint of hierarchical organization (because, since we're cowards, we are inoffensive as long as we do not operate in a formal hierarchy).

Again, I'm not exaggerating:

because "dying is easy" compared to organizing cancelling campaigns. Gillis does not explain, however, how conservatives sometimes find the moral strength to "cancel" their daughters who get pregnant, their sons who come out as gay, their acquaintances who use drugs, or... you know... the "cancelling" of communists under McCarthy, or whatever the Amish or the Jehovah's Witnesses are doing...

We agree to leave you that stupid house you bought in the suburbs, with firm social norms against violating such. You can operate on the market, collect food and basic needs from post-state social services, and we'll retrain anyone to work in professions without power. But the moment someone organizes a hierarchy or fields an ex-cop gang to spread terror again that gang gets exterminated by every surrounding watchful civilian. We have to be willing to, at the drop of a hat, race out of our houses and confront and stop with violence the predatory gangs the ex-cops will try to form.

This "structural incentive" for bad people to stay quiet will maintain peace and anarchy in the U.S.

The End.

Okay, so... What's the moral of this story?

First, I hope Gillis will forgive me one day (if he ever reads me, which is highly unsure) for dunking on him so hard. For my defense, he's literally advocating for having me killed or put into a bad people reserve. So, I think my jabs are pretty fair game here.³

Then, **I would like to reflect on what went wrong.** How an anarchist thinker can end up believing in definitive hierarchies of intrinsic human value, or pondering on how the anarchist elite

³ If you read this, William, know that I feel a little sorry for you. Everybody thinks and says shitty stuff at times. You and I are in the business of risking to do it publicly. This is really frightening and sometimes devastating. That's a price to pay for the power we wield, you more than me, and I hope it will not crush you. I hope you'll get embarrassed by what you wrote and how stupid, pretentious and oppressive it was. Because it's really embarrassing, mate. And, if at some point you are, I hope you'll have the emotional clarity and bravery to admit your embarrassment instead of double-backing. I just want you to know that you'll be treated with humanity, compassion and kindness (at least by me) if you decide, at some point, to recognize how much of a dick you've been in this writing. You do seem to me "locked to certain malicious values and perspectives", but it doesn't have to be permanent unless you decide it is.

might cleanse society from bad people, and *still* calling this anarchism? How can someone advocate for anarchism by implying that police, justice and prisons would be okay if it weren't for the inevitable existence of bad people to turn them sour? And how an institution like *The Anarchist Library* can read this and say "yeah, that's our kind of stuff"?

Looking at the trainwreck is fascinating (and quite funny, if you have dark humor), but let's try to get a moral out of it. I would like to propose three explanations about how we did get there: simple-minded ACAB-ism, what I call "victimization essentialism", and ostracism as a practice.

1. Simple-minded ACAB-ism

The police are rotten because policing *attracts* rot. The role of the police is to preserve simplistic hierarchies and rules with violence. To maintain "order" — that is to say to make the world legible to the simple-minded. [...] The role of policing attracts, facilitates, and is best performed by pre-existing bad people.

I'm not an opponent to the "ACAB" motto. Hating law enforcement is perfectly understandable, and sometimes healthy. And, strategically, it might have value sometimes spread that hate. But one problem with hate is it makes us stupid. Specifically, here, it makes us forget that cops are cops for reasons that are not all despicable. They can be very beautiful and noble reasons for someone to start a career in law enforcement, like, for example, the will to *protect the weak from bad people*. I know, these noble motivations are often misguided, and translate so rarely into coherent behaviors in police departments that we might be tempted to omit them altogether. One problem with doing so is that we then cannot recognize it when we start, for very noble reasons, to think and behave like cops.