

AFFINITY

These words mark the end of Affinity as a project. We present them in a spirit of humility and deep respect for all the friends and accomplices we've met along the way, and in thanks to all who have contributed. We dedicate them to all acts of resistance, refusal, and struggle that point in the direction of freedom, autonomy and dignity. We don't present them as answers of any kind, nor pretend that they provide anything approaching a coherent strategy. We offer them merely as prompts and suggestions for a path out and against this oppressive and suffocating culture.

Whilst we will no longer be producing any future issues of Affinity, we are still interested in hearing people's thoughts, comments and feedback.

You can contact us at blackirispress@riseup.net.

All previous issues of Affinity, including some articles that aren't included here, can be found at <https://network23.org/blackirispress>.

Please be aware that some of these articles contain potentially triggering descriptions of physical and sexual abuse.

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PRIVILEGE

Some Reflections on Privilege and Resistance.....

The words below are an attempt to communicate some personal thoughts and reflections on the role of privilege when it comes to engaging in acts of resistance against the dominant culture. Whilst much of what follows stems from considerations of my own privileged position within varied and overlapping hierarchical relationships and structures, this has been written in the hope that some of it may resonate with the experience of others and therefore contribute to a conversation about the tensions that arise from the benefits and advantages a minority of us receive from the dominant culture we are (hopefully) trying to destroy.

So, from the beginning.....

Born white, male and middle class, and growing up in an affluent small town, my childhood was secure, sheltered, and decidedly non-precarious. I was aware as I was growing up that there were considerable amounts of violence and suffering in the world, but this awareness was cultivated almost exclusively through the dominant culture's media, and so for a long time was tainted and skewed by its inherent bias. The misery and deprivation caused by poverty, war, famine etc. were made to feel distant and somewhat unreal, news of which was filtered through the limited spaces created for it within a culture industry that largely succeeded in fostering high levels of passivity in its audience. For the most part, these instances of suffering were presented as unfortunate exceptions in the normal course of things, accidents in the usually peaceful functioning of the global political and economic system. This was an easy trick to pull on people who, like me, inhabited a privileged bubble in which such violence was very rarely directly experienced. When this illusion was impossible to maintain, the suffering of the exploited was presented as a necessary evil, an unfortunate yet inevitable reality. Some people were poor. Others were rich. Innocent people die in war. That's just the way things were. There was no alternative.

Whilst the structural violence of society remained somewhat hidden and unknown to me, I experienced my own forms of deprivation at the hands of the dominant culture by way of prolonged struggles with feelings of isolation and alienation, feelings I now realise were very much a consequence of the atomised way in which the current system forces people to live. Situated within institutions including the family and the school system that were highly ordered and controlled, there was not only very little room for any sense of autonomy or freedom, but there was also a constant struggle to find meaning in a way of life that seemed strangely empty of authentic experience. The paths offered to me had already been set beforehand, and the disconnect between those prescribed paths and as of then unarticulated desires significantly contributed to feelings of depression and loneliness. The desire to escape was at times unbearable, but at all times unfulfilled because of a sense of dependency on those very same oppressive institutions that quickly crushed any confidence of being able to survive outside their structures. There was no alternative. And so the only possible escape was to retreat into isolation, non-participation as a means of salvaging some sense of dignity or authenticity, borne of frustration over the inability to engage in meaningful communication with those around me (i.e. communication that was not mediated by pre-determined social roles).

Eventually, via some of the cracks that open up from time to time in the desert of mainstream culture that let out something meaningful, I began to develop a political consciousness of the reasons behind these experiences. At the same time I started to become more aware of my own relationship with the violence and suffering that I'd noticed in the world, a disturbing but illuminating understanding of the extent to which the privilege I had experienced up to that point was made possible by unimaginable amounts of structural violence and oppression, both historical and contemporary. One of the immediate reactions to this realisation was a feeling of responsibility, that I had to do something to help those below me on the hierarchy for whose suffering I was partly responsible. Combined with at times intense feelings of guilt, this was one of the main motivations behind my initial involvement in political activism.

Thankfully, after some time I began to recognise the problematic assumptions that influenced this relationship between feelings of guilt and the responsibility to do something, the principal one being the adoption of a logic of representation, an attitude of acting on behalf of the oppressed and exploited; I was partly responsible for their suffering, and materially benefited from it, and therefore it was my job to sort it out. By adopting such a position, I was reflecting the very same attitudes that keep such hierarchies in place, accepting the idea that the oppressed and exploited were also powerless, or somehow incapable of helping themselves.

In order to avoid adopting the superior attitudes of the class I was a part of, I realised that I had to come to an awareness of how those in a position of privilege, like me, must understand and reflect upon the different forms of oppression they themselves face from the dominant culture. True, the forms of oppression I faced don't compare to those who find themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy, but then it's not a competition in any case. Only by coming to a deep understanding of how capitalism and the state, the whole dominant culture, are oppressing and hurting all of us in varied and infinite ways can we build affinities between different communities that cut across the privilege divide.

Another important result of developing such an awareness is that it creates fertile ground in which to confront and hopefully overcome fear. Namely, the fear of what we think we've got to lose. When we realise that what we're afraid of losing isn't actually worth saving, we are much more likely to put more at risk in our struggles against the dominant system. Moreover, to be in any way effective, or to have any claim to authenticity, our actions must put this privilege at risk, in fact actively attempt to destroy the system that has made it possible. Strategies that don't put this privilege at risk are likely to be ineffective, because by definition they pose no threat to the system that perpetuates them.

It is only by putting this privilege at risk that we can begin to build meaningful affinities with those who, due to their position within the hierarchy, find themselves more vulnerable to the structural violence perpetuated by the dominant system. In building these affinities, however,

the burden of responsibility falls on those who find themselves in positions of privilege to understand the ways in which their race, age, gender, class etc. have concrete and tangible effects on their interactions with those lower down on the hierarchy. This is often difficult as it requires the unlearning of thousands of internalised and socialized ways of being and relating to people that have become second nature. Take the question of violence for example. The dominant culture promotes the notion that violence is always illegitimate, illegal, immoral etc. unless performed by the state (or occasionally some other agent, but only if the direction of violence is down the hierarchy rather than up). The internalisation of this principle by those who have been sheltered from the everyday violence of society creates a real obstacle when it comes to engaging in acts of resistance that go beyond the dominant culture's codes of legitimacy. It is exactly these kinds of internal barriers that we (the privileged) must deconstruct if we are to successfully join others who, having been forced to bear the brunt of the everyday violence of the state and capital, are engaged in a struggle to defend themselves against the forces that threaten their lives.

VIOLENCE

Violence Is Not a Choice

Violence is written on my body; chipped bones from bats and batons, scars from whips, belts and knives, messages from the past sent to remind me that there is no getting away, there is no escape, that violence occurs daily and that it cannot be escaped by denial or forgetfulness. The beatings that my parents expressed upon my body, the rapes on my person that my grandfather carried out, the homelessness and drug addiction that capitalism subjected me to, the days, months and years of my life the state took away when they put me in prison for trying to survive in the only way I knew how, and the unrelenting domination perpetuated by this culture means that violence can never be an abstract thing. It can be an effective tool, it can change function, identities, behaviour. In my life it has changed the way I lived on numerous occasions, it has shaped the person I view myself as and changed the how and why of what I do in this world.

In many cases one instance of violence has led to another, has led to another, has led to another, and with each instance this culture has supplied the willing means to respond with further violence. My grandfather raped my mother, which gave her further motivation to beat and molest me; my grandfather raped me, and the behaviour of him and my mother had a close relation to me reaching for solace in crack and crystal meth, which led me to escalate the thieving I was already doing to feed myself, often violently; this in turn led to being sent to prison on a number of occasions, each one as violent as the next.

This is not an essay that is arguing against violence, although no doubt some may read the paragraph above as an example of how violence can only lead to more violence. But the other paragraph isn't merely one that describes a simple version of how violence has intersected with my life, it's a paragraph that describes how violence has swallowed this society and its culture up whole. The chain of events does not start with my grandfather, it starts (and ends) with the society and culture in which he was raised, and the one in which his parents were raised. It's one that rewards those who

are willing to dominate others, it encourages greed, and it can only ever be violent. That's why we should kill it, with our hands and fists, with our bricks and sticks we should kill it. Its death will be violent, perhaps excruciatingly so. We need to begin here and now, which is our only choice unless we want to wait until it's too late.

And it will be too late; for millions it already is, for millions their lives have already entered the realm of the experience of systematic destruction of populations. Those of us who can read zines like this are amongst the most privileged on the planet, because we can deny or intellectually argue ourselves out of doing anything at all. Unfortunately, for the most part we choose to do just that; at best we sign petitions, buy fair trade, have free parties, lock ourselves to gates and tend to our allotments, all of which are protected by the continued violence of our culture and society against millions and millions of other people.

If we are to step up, if we are to take stone in hand and smash it into the body of this society and its culture, then it will be an act of violence. If it happens today, tomorrow, over and over again for the next ten, twenty plus years, it will violently disturb many, many people. People who refuse to admit to the horrors that have occurred at the behest of this society of capitalism, domination, exploitation and greed, are going to be forced into living in a world where they have lost their privilege, their wealth, their capital. They might not be happy about this, they might try and keep what they have. They might fight to maintain borders which exclude people, they might fight to maintain the domination of countries where natural "resources" are thick. They might fight to continue to rape, steal and plunder everything they can. This fighting might include millions of surveillance cameras around the poorest neighbourhoods, it might include the incarceration of those who have the least wealth and capital. It will almost certainly include spending more money on weapons than on schools, and just as likely is that their fight will include a police force whose goal is to protect property before people. It could include using the badly funded schools to spread the culture of violence and encourage a society of

domination and abuse, by explaining away all of the world's horrors as unconnected to the lives of those who aren't living through them.

We need to be violent towards these people, we need to be violent towards them now. We need to destroy the instruments they use; prisons, schools, police stations, bailiffs, banks, courts, elections, telecommunication networks. Violence is an effective tool, it's not the only effective tool, but it is effective and if ever we needed effective tools it'd be now. The violence which was etched upon my body must now be used against this society and its culture which is killing us. And this needs to happen ten million times over. I have no qualms about using the violence at my own disposal to force those who dominate to stop. Well, that's a lie, I have qualms in the form of fear of the repercussions for myself, but I recognise them for what they are. They're the cops in my head saying that my actions will come back to haunt me, that they won't achieve their intentions, that I'll be caught and throw my life away, that there must be another way. There isn't another way. My intentions are to do as much as I can as often as I can to bring this society down; to not do so would be to fail in my intentions. I am already haunted by the violence etched on my body and the lack of action which has followed it.

I signed a petition last week. It was a perfectly reasonable petition asking for things that we should never have to ask for. Two thousand people had signed it. I wondered about how many people have signed a petition asking for something that we shouldn't need to ask for. Dear Sir/Madam, Please don't send this man back to a country where he'll be tortured. To whom it may concern, Please stop poisoning drinking water. Dear Member of Parliament, Please stop bombing children. Dear C.E.O, Could you please stop exploiting the land around you and everyone you can. There must be hundreds of thousands of people who have signed petitions like this, and I wonder what would happen if each of them took it upon themselves to violently attack one aspect of this society and its culture. At the very least it would have greater effect than every single petition ever signed. And to be effective is the goal.

Violence and Resistance

The article below presents some thoughts and reflections on the issue of violence from a relatively distanced and analytical perspective. However, arguments that neglect the personal and subjective run the risk of becoming separate from our lived experience. With this in mind, I will talk briefly about an example from my personal life that may help to illustrate the points made below and provide some kind of reference or anchor for the more abstract considerations presented here.

A member of my family recently fought a year-long losing battle against cancer. It started in his throat, then spread to the rest of his body, attacking his body until he was a thin, gaunt, pain-filled shadow of the person he once was. Throughout this time, from the point of diagnosis to the agonising final days, our attitudes and feelings towards what was happening were similar to those you would have to someone who had suffered a terrible accident. It was simply unfortunate, and there was nothing more to it than that. What was never considered, or at least never discussed, was what caused this suffering (or even whether there was a cause). Our anger and remorse were loosely directed against some notion of the injustice of fate. We never thought of looking into what actually caused his suffering, and the suffering of countless others, namely the innumerable amounts of carcinogens and toxins spewed out by industrial processes that have permeated our whole environment. Our water, our air, our food. We never thought of directing our anger towards the people who were responsible for polluting our bodies to the extent that cancer has become such a common illness. We never thought of this because we have been so heavily conditioned to ignore or simply not see altogether the violence on which the machine runs (and yes, spewing carcinogens and toxins that are known to cause cancer into the environment in the service of producing unnecessary consumer goods that we are conditioned to want by the advertising industry IS violent). Had we worked to break through such conditioning, we would have been able to direct our anger toward the true cause and started to see

what we could do about it. Instead, we just felt powerless in the face of an unjust fate. And everything just carried on as normal.

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Perhaps more than any other topic, the discussion of violence comes laden with a whole host of assumptions and baggage inherited from the dominant system's codes and laws that have seeped into our consciousness and shaped our perception of the world. One of the central myths utilised by the ruling order to bolster its power is that of the existence of social peace. We are conditioned to perceive violence as a way of acting and relating to each other that occurs when the accepted parameters of social relations break down, an irregular outburst that signals a rupture with the otherwise smooth, peaceful functioning of society. What such conditioning attempts to achieve is the concealment of the everyday violence that runs through the very core of our society, the violence upon which the smooth functioning of our political and economic system depends. One of the first steps towards unshackling ourselves from the ways in which the ruling order wants us to see the world is to explicitly recognise the existence of this systemic violence and its diffusion into all corners of our society. It is only once we have uncovered and faced up to the violent reality of our current situation that we can engage in an honest discussion about the role of violence in resisting the dominant culture.

When we dismantle the illusion of social peace and examine the underlying mechanisms of our society in all their brute ugliness, we can bear witness to the systemic violence that accompanies their functioning. The roots of this violence can be traced back to the initial processes of civilisation, the forcible separation of people from their land through their relocation into cities and the inevitable violence involved in extracting and importing resources into these metropolitan centres. It can be found in all processes of production, the conversion of living things into dead objects. It can particularly be found in the mode of operation of industrial civilisation, the physical repression and constant threat of violence upon which the power of the state and capital depends. It can be found in any and all of the institutions of our current society, the system of wage slavery, the prison-

industrial complex, institutional schooling, industrial (and increasingly privatised) healthcare etc. The systemic violence we suffer at the hands of such institutions is internalised and replicated in the way we relate to each other in our more immediate relationships, manifest in the huge levels of domestic violence and abuse, the horrifyingly high incidence of rape and low levels of accountability for perpetrators, gang culture etc. Thus social peace is an illusion intended to mask the violent reality of everyday life in our culture.

The central role that violence plays in the mechanics of civilised culture means that our very participation in society involves us in it. There is therefore a somewhat sobering accuracy to the suggestion that a life of non-violence is impossible in this culture. Such a perspective must also include a broadening of the parameters of what constitutes violent behaviour to include inactivity. The dominant culture is fundamentally dependent on systematic and widespread exploitation, oppression, and destruction of the human and non-human world. Our unavoidable insertion in the chain of industrial production and consumption directly implicates us in this violence. Having recognised this, we must then consider the potential for inaction to constitute violent behaviour.

Given that our most basic interaction with this society implicates us in the violence on which it is based, it becomes meaningless to engage in a moralistic debate that pitches violent against non-violent resistance. Recourse to morality when discussing tactics and strategies traps us within the dominant culture's control mechanisms. The established moral code of our society has been created and adapted to suit the needs of the powerful against those lower down in the hierarchy. Whilst upholding the violence of the state and capital, it disempowers the rest of us by de-legitimising acts of violence undertaken by individuals acting autonomously of those forces (particularly when such violence is directed up the hierarchy). Instead of tying ourselves down by focusing on the supposed moral considerations of utilising violent or non-violent resistance against the dominant culture, we should instead be discussing how to best channel the violence in which we're already complicit as a means for bringing about radical social change.

Such a discussion should certainly include ethical considerations as to what we consider appropriate behaviour. But a clear distinction should be made between morality, i.e. the moral codes established as part of and in the interests of the dominant culture, and ethical principles that are formulated by free and autonomous individuals and/or collectives.

Freeing ourselves from the constraints of the dominant culture's morality allows us to consider violence on our own terms. The question then becomes not one of violence vs. non-violence, but what the most appropriate strategy or tactic is given the circumstances. Whilst of course there are non-violent forms of resistance that are immensely valuable and effective (writing letters of support to prisoners for example), what such an approach helps to avoid is the creation of a culture of resistance that excludes violent tactics and which therefore acts to strengthen the power of the ruling order. Such a culture of non-violence legitimises the state's monopoly on violence and strengthens the state's modes of democratic control. Resistance that dogmatically remains non-violent then begins 'to play the role of a loyal opposition in a performance that dramatizes dissent and creates the illusion that democratic government is not elitist or authoritarian'.¹

This process of freeing ourselves from dominant moral codes also allows us to start to move beyond the often unquestioned assumption that violence is only ever justified when undertaken in self-defence. It allows us to begin to consider the usefulness of violence as a means of attacking the systems and institutions that act as instruments for civilisation's destructiveness. In this way we are able to give ourselves the initiative instead of waiting for the state to act. We shouldn't always wait for them to bring the fight to us. We need to embrace the urgency of dismantling their mechanics.

In place of a conclusion, there are just a couple of points that I wanted to touch on to finish off.

¹ Peter Gelderloos, *'How Non-violence Protects the State'*

Firstly, when we use the term violence, we must be aware that this is not a singular, unchanging absolute. It is a word that encompasses a wide variety of ways of acting/thinking/relating that should not be considered the same. The vast majority of the acts of violence carried out in our current society are horrific, from the whole-scale destruction of the non-human world, to the horrendous levels of violence inflicted on our bodies through the various oppressive mechanisms of the dominant culture, physical, sexual, economic, psychological etc. But there is no reason that this should lead to a dismissal of all violence. The violence of the woman who kills her rapist is not the same as that of the prison guard who tortures an inmate.

Finally, I wanted to briefly address the relationship between patriarchy and violence, in particular the argument that by advocating violence or engaging in acts of violent resistance we run the risk of reinforcing the domination of men and promoting aggressive, competitive behaviour that values typically masculine characteristics and therefore alienates women. Whilst I certainly share a desire to actively challenge patriarchy in our movement, and those who use violence to reinforce their position in the gender hierarchy should certainly be challenged, I don't agree that violence itself is to blame, or for that matter is inherently masculine. The argument that the use of violent tactics reinforces a macho culture that values men more than women runs uncomfortably close to accepting the conventional stereotype of women as somehow more passive, gentle and non-violent.

MENTAL HEALTH

Whilst we have retained the use of the term 'mental health', as used in the original issue, we recognise that it's problematic. It is a term which is closely tied to psychiatric and medical institutions and traditions that seek to control us by establishing false divisions between what is considered normal and abnormal. We recognise that characteristics associated with 'mental illness' are just part of a spectrum of emotional states and states of consciousness that we all find ourselves on somewhere. The identification of certain parts of this spectrum as resulting from a sickness is used as a way to control those who don't fit smoothly into the world of work and production.

We reject this, fully and completely.

However, we also recognise our limits in not having an alternative language and vocabulary to discuss these matters, hence the continued use of the language of 'mental health'. We would be very interested to hear from anyone who has further thoughts on this.

A Personal Story of Depression

I have suffered from some form of depression for as long as I can remember. In early childhood I clung to my mum and quickly developed an unhealthy level of social anxiety. Whenever anyone I didn't recognise entered the room, or whenever my mum was out of sight, I would begin to cry and wail, overcome by feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. As I grew older, this desperate anxiety settled into a crippling shyness. The world seemed full of risks, hazards and pitfalls that could only be avoided by staying well within the bounds of what I considered a comfortable and safe environment. Whilst I would grow to hate the boredom and isolation that resulted from the cultivation of these kinds of characteristics, they would be far outweighed in my mind by the dangers that lay in crossing any of the boundaries I set for myself. A bearable course through life was one in which I remained unnoticed. This meant a strict adherence to the rules, laws and conventions imposed by the culture and society I was brought up in. The storms and turmoil that come with adolescence led to more withdrawal, increasing social anxiety and extremely low self-esteem.

Whilst my personality and circumstances have changed and developed, the patterns of emotional response and thought formed in these years have all stayed with me into adulthood. This has been complicated and added to by an increasingly painful awareness of the devastating and violent catastrophe of the society I live in, all of which seems to have rendered me particularly vulnerable to sustained depressive episodes.

For a long time I can remember feeling that my depression and withdrawal from society was down to a personal defect, a weakness in my personality and emotional make-up that rendered me unfit for normal society. In retrospect, I realise that depression, anxiety, withdrawal and mental instability were and are entirely reasonable and appropriate reactions to a sick society.

The dominant culture of advanced industrial capitalism provides fertile ground for the cultivation of mental instability. One of the most basic experiences of living in a society such as ours is the fundamental conflict between the force of our desires, our creative urges and free initiative, and the social conditions that constitute the prison we inhabit. Our entire economy runs off the energy of repressed desire. We are born into a society of strict control and restraint in which we must never stray from the dry and lifeless paths laid out for us by the state and capitalism if we want to survive. We are subject to incredible amounts of drudgery and misery as we are coerced into a system of institutional education, the main goal of which is to cultivate obedience. We live a numb existence achingly void of authentic or emotionally fulfilling experience. We feel desperately alone in a culture that breeds separation, isolation, and alienation to such an extent that we can no longer rely on the support of those closest to us. Being born into an industrial society denies us the very possibility or opportunity to live in small, autonomous communities within which the individual is able to make meaningful decisions over the conditions and course of their life. Meaning, self-worth and agency become almost unattainable in a system of industrial capitalism that demands highly centralised organisation and coordination on a mass scale. We are constantly abused, attacked and polluted on psychological, physical, and emotional levels without any control or power to defend ourselves. Our most basic well-being lies in the hands of a small minority who make up the elite of our society, and thus our very existence feels fundamentally insecure. We witness the systematic destruction of the planet that sustains us, the unimaginable scale of oppression and suffering on which our society is based, and are powerless to do anything to stop it. The basic conditions of our social life breed discontent and dissatisfaction on such a massive scale that to remain psychologically and mentally robust in such conditions becomes incredibly difficult.

The creation of social conditions that produce alienation and depression is no accident. By rendering us isolated and depressed those who have had the most power to shape our society have attempted to nullify the opportunities for revolt. The potentially rebellious anger and frustration that

might erupt from this situation is kept in check by the normalisation of dissatisfaction and discontent in our culture. The conflicts and tensions between our desires and a society of strict control are hidden beneath a veneer of social respectability, absurd etiquette and an inauthentic culture in which the expression of genuine emotion is severely discouraged.

Without any obvious outlets, this suffocating claustrophobia produces acts of despair that are then categorised as arising from a disturbed or mentally unstable psyche. When I was a young teenager, during a lunch-break at school a boy in my class, without any immediate provocation, unwound a paper clip, put the two ends into a plug socket, held it with one hand and flicked the switch with the other. It caused a temporary short-circuit in our block and he sustained a fairly serious electric shock. I remember at the time conforming to how the incident was understood by everyone around me, that it was an irrational act by someone who had temporarily lost their grasp on normality. But looking back, I've wondered whether this was in fact a meaningful and in some sense rational, desperate attempt to escape. In an environment that was so void of authentic experiences or genuine emotional engagements, where everything was this dull façade of routines and alienated relationships, perhaps this was the manifestation of a desire for authentic experience, genuine feeling, or just to do something that broke the monotonous grey treadmill of everyday life.

For those who have successfully nurtured a desire to break through this suffocating veil of social harmony and to use their anger to try and take back control of their lives, susceptibility to depression is a major obstacle. The inability, no matter how hard you try, to find meaning or purpose in anything inevitably breeds hopelessness. Your plans not only seem pointless and futile, but any attempts to make plans for the future become restricted by an acute awareness of your mental unpredictability. The once resolute desire to squat and stop living in rented accommodation becomes muddled and diluted by the recognition of your need for security and comfort in your home environment. Instead of opening up opportunities for collective action, meetings become something to survive, successful if you've managed to make it out the other side in one piece. The excitement you feel for a

new project is quickly reeled in as you realise you can't make commitments beyond a week and can't guarantee to be able to fulfill the promises you've made. Your mental health then becomes yet another barrier in the fulfillment of your desires, and contributes to a harrowing tension between what you want to achieve and your ability to do so.

Depression, like many other aspects of mental health, remains highly stigmatised and misunderstood. It is only in the last few months that I have come to recognise what I've been experiencing as related to symptoms of depression. One of the reasons why it has taken me so long to develop an understanding of my own mental health is the culture of silence that surrounds these issues, a chronic avoidance and neglect that makes it extremely difficult to talk about openly and honestly. If you do express a desire to talk about it, more often than not you are siphoned off to 'specialists' (psychiatrists, counsellors, doctors), reinforcing the idea that this is not something to address or engage with in your everyday relationships. As a small gesture of resistance against this trend, I'd like to use the remainder of the article to discuss the personal effects of depression, the specifics of how it has felt for me so that others, including and especially friends of mine, might better understand what can often appear so complex and murky.

When you perceive your external world as a terrible whirlwind of violence and oppression that you have no means of stopping, the loss of control over your own mind and emotions feels like the destruction of your last hope of sanctuary, a final terrifying invasion of the one place you thought you could retreat in safety. A dark storm cloud descends and engulfs you, and no matter how hard you try you just can't find a way out. It feels somehow external to you, but something you can't get out from under to see what it actually is. Everything you see and experience is coloured by this dark, black filter. No matter how much you recognise your thought patterns as negative and self-destructive, they seem to carry on their course independent of you, reducing you to a witness, helpless and tragic. Emotional responses have their roots in a dark and complex web that defies

any attempt at understanding. You begin to get trapped in a downward spiral of triggers and sparks that you have no control over.

Low self-esteem is one of the most destructive and consistent contributors to this downward spiral. If left unchecked, it turns into a terrible self-perpetuating machine into which all other symptoms feed-back and get reinforced. Loss of control over your emotions becomes a sign of weakness, just one of many personal defects. You become convinced your social anxiety stems from a defunct personality, from being uninteresting, introvert, unattractive. This is why you're so alone. And you're jeopardising the relationships you do have by becoming a burden on those you love, because you're too weak to look after yourself. On top of all this, you're a shitty person because you're too self-absorbed and indulgent to even move beyond thinking about yourself to at least try and do something to resist the oppression you see around you. All these dark strands and negative thought patterns feed into one another to form a constant low whisper in your head that leaves you hating yourself. And once you start to think that you don't matter or have no worth, it becomes almost impossible to muster the energy or initiative to do the things to help you recover.

Depressive episodes inevitably have a significant and often destructive effect on your relationships. Intense social anxiety means that maintaining peripheral relationships becomes incredibly difficult, since being in social settings becomes claustrophobic and deeply upsetting to the point that you have to avoid them or risk triggering an even deeper and more profound depression. You feel cut off from the possibility of forming new relationships and meeting new people, with all the hope and excitement that comes with it. As for already existing close friendships, you feel constantly worried about becoming a burden on those you love, and your fear of upsetting them creates a strong temptation to be dishonest and conceal how you're really feeling. All of these feelings combine to create an irresistible urge to withdraw from society. They form a tight knit web around your room that catches you every time you try to leave. You begin to live a disturbing paradox where isolation becomes both a sanctuary and a deep-seated fear. You hide from people because of your low self-esteem, social anxiety, and

diminished energy, but soon start to dread the prospect of remaining alone. You realise how few close friends you have, and you begin to feel disconnected from those closest to you. You find yourself entering the dangerous waters of thinking that nobody would really notice if you weren't around.

Whilst caught in a depressive episode, everything loses any sense of meaning or purpose. The cliché of not being able to get yourself out of bed in the morning becomes a disturbing reality, as even basic everyday tasks seem futile and pointless. At its more extreme, this can manifest itself in physical symptoms of not only lethargy and tiredness, but also a kind of temporary paralysis. Seemingly unprovoked, your body gradually freezes until you can't move, as if someone had pulled the plug and drained all of the energy out of you. Everything stops, words won't form in your mouth, your breath becomes heavy, and you just remain motionless.

Underlying all of these symptoms like a bed of nails is a crippling guilt. For me, this has been intimately linked with an acute awareness of my privileged life and background. I've often found myself extremely susceptible to the misguided notion that growing up in an advanced industrial society such as the UK, along with the material privilege that comes with being born high up within the hierarchy of that society, means that you have somehow escaped oppression. It's a short step from here to believing that you have no legitimate reason to feel depressed or low. You begin to feel that in some perverse way you are disrespecting the suffering of others in materially less privileged situations than yourself. This creates a highly destructive downward spiral in which your guilt feeds into your depression, and the more depressed you feel the guiltier you feel.

Keeping this spiral downwards in check is key to preventing depressive feelings from getting out of control. An important aspect of this is recognising your suffering as real and legitimate. Once you stop feeling guilty, you can begin to see your mental health as another battleground in a struggle against oppression.

WHAT IS IT?

IT'S A DARK FUCKING CLOUD, GUSTY + BROODING + ALL-ENGULFING. IT'S A RUSTY SPLUTTERING ENGINE THAT STUMBLES TO A HALT AND AIN'T NO AMOUNT OF KICKSTARTING GONNA MAKE THOSE COGS TURN. IT'S THE BOTTOM FALLING OUT. IT'S THE WORN OUT FAILURE OF THAT DEEP-BURIED MECHANISM THAT ~~FEEDS~~ ^{GENTLY FEEDS} THE "EVERYTHING-WILL-BE-OK" IMPULSE. IT'S A TIRED, WEARY, SORROWFUL + GUILT-FILLED SURRENDER. IT'S A BURNING SADNESS. IT'S A DOWNWARD SPIRAL AND A COMPLEX MESS OF TRIGGERS + SPARKS + A LONG FUCKING ROW OF FALLING DOMINOES THAT YOU CAN'T DO NOTHING TO STOP 'COS YOU CAN NEVER CATCH UP. ~~IT'S~~ IT'S BLANK EMPTY STARES AMIDST THE CONFUSION + POWERLESSNESS. IT'S NOT HAVING A FUCKING CLUE WHAT TO DO. IT'S LOTS OF WORRY. AND LOTS OF ANGER. IT'S THE HOPE THAT YOU'D BEEN NURTURING AND QUIETLY RELYING ON SPREADING IT'S DELICATE WINGS AND FLYING AWAY TO ESCAPE THE STORMY WEATHER. IT'S A SMALL BEMUDGED CHILD WHO STAYS FROZEN TO THE SPOT IN FEAR OF IT ALL. IT'S CONTINUOUS SELF-DOUBT. IT'S ENDLESS TRAP-DOORS. IT'S EVERYTHING CHANGING COLOUR TO DULL GREY + BLACK. IT'S A LONG CHAIN AND A HEAVY FUCKING WEIGHT.

Anarchism and Mental Health

Mental health is a complex issue that cannot be reduced to simple black-and-white terms. I argue, though, that an important aspect of understanding and dealing with mental health is to acknowledge how much it can be shaped by our own internalising of society's norms and how others with those same internalised norms affect us. And how anarchism is able to shine a light on the path out of this mess.

There are so many different ways in which the issue of mental health can be approached, yet it remains such a difficult issue because it is so personal to us and society has become so confused in its relations to it.

I had never paid much attention to it until I developed a long term debilitating illness that affected my activism greatly. All of a sudden I had to be aware of the ebb and flow of my own mental state and how it affected me, how others affected me and how society shaped it. It was a sobering experience.

When I was growing up, mental health was a taboo subject except to be used as an insult. If someone went to Grancha or St. Dymphna's (Irish mental health hospitals) then it was seen with shame. As an activist, burn-out was acknowledged, but not understood. We lost people, it was sad, but we did not think any further about it, just let them disappear from our lives.

It is with gratefulness that I acknowledge the role that groups such as Activist Trauma Support have taken in highlighting the importance of the issue in activist circles and bringing about better understanding of people's needs. I think it is a mature and important development. I have seen far too many of my colleagues fall by the wayside over the years because of the lack of understanding of what was going on in their heads. And in the midst of the current police infiltrator hullabaloo, this increased understanding has been invaluable in helping people come to terms, in finding resources and in friends learning how to pull together.

I do not pretend that I understand mental health issues. What I write comes from my experience alone. I do not know how much it is built into our nature, whether some people are genetically more at risk, or how much it is a creation of social relations. Saying that, I believe as an anarchist it is an issue we need to grapple from various perspectives.

We do feel stress and strain in our everyday lives; it is part of living, of having relations with the surrounding world, of having needs and desires that demand satisfying. When this becomes problematic is when these stresses threaten to overwhelm us, to damage our ability to work.

Capitalism affects us in two important ways. One, it creates entire new categories of stress and strain, especially through advertising that implants new requirements in order to be considered successful, new products that have to be acquired, new images of success and body that have to be attained, yet keeps them permanently shifting, ever out of reach. We look to unforgiving companies for the answer, but their answer is more of the consumerism that contributed to the problem in the first place.

Two, it breaks down our communities, the very things that we depend on to check ourselves in everyday life. It is communities that provide us with the achievable standards to measure ourselves by, but capitalism teases us away from them, atomises us even further. It leaves us more isolated and thus more susceptible to the pressures it wants to put on us, to turn us into good consumers. And without that support base we become ever more vulnerable, ever more open to having those stresses and strains put upon us.

If just from a mental health perspective, we have to destroy capitalism!
Hurrah.

However, that is not the full story.

In the mental health issues that I've experienced, much of it comes down to feelings of safety and pressure. Safety in that we know we have support to throw a wobble every now and again. Pressure in that it is often what we believe others expect of us that causes us to place intolerable pressures on

ourselves; we want to maintain a particular worldview of ourselves, or a position of status that requires sacrifices to sustain.

These beliefs are not constructed solely within ourselves; we are internalising the expectations and pressures of society around us. Often, the only way to counter it is seen as a complete rejection of that society, to refuse all the norms being imposed on us outright. To rebel in every way or to withdraw totally. But this is just a cry for help in itself, and reflects the dominant paradigm of our times, the one that we barely recognise around us because it's so pervasive – that of liberty and individuality over all.

This seems to me to be part of the problem. I am an anarchist, and that means that I do not simply care about my own liberty and freedoms; I have to also care about the communities I am involved in, I have to take responsibility for my actions and make an effort to be part of them. This is actually anarchists' abiding strength, the ability to merge both the individual and the community without alienating either.

By recognising our community, by opening up our individuality to its collective strength we gain so much more. We have been conditioned by capitalism and liberalism to do the opposite, but it is at our cost and the cost of our community. We all have a role to play in re-building the trust that is needed to make our communities work, and with it will come the ability to ease the pressure on our own mental health.

However, a word of caution. Mental health is an important part of being resilient in the face of capitalism's onslaught, but not all mental health is defined within us. To use the jargon of the moment, we live in a world of post-political governments, where the grand ideas have faded into squabbles over the centre ground and how best to direct the bureaucracy that has taken over so much of the real power.

More and more we are being encouraged into considering ourselves as a society of vulnerable people. It started off as a way of fighting political battles – avoiding the lack of substance in politics or the hegemonic dominance of liberalism in the media and parliament – but is developing into a tool of control. The personal is becoming the ground for political battles;

we are told how to eat, how to exercise, how much to drink, how to be responsible and so on. This, I am sure, is all useful and well-intentioned advice, but it's coming from distant institutions, governments telling us how to act and think, and in doing so, they are constantly re-enforcing the fact that we are all members of some vulnerable group or other. We are being encouraged to see ourselves as victims. We are being denied agency at the same time as we are being told we have more agency than ever before. Is it any wonder people constantly feel like they are going mad...

Sometimes, what we really do not need is another pill or placebo to make us feel real and connected. In combating the issues around mental health, this is another set of false relationships that need to be demolished. It is one that anarchism helps with, because it allows us to challenge the relationships we have with society that are causing us so much unnecessary worry.

This is not to undermine the importance of mental health but to understand how it feels to me to be related to the world in which we currently live. Mental health does not exclusively exist independently of our society. As anarchists we should question those relationships as much as we question other forms of domination.

We all play a role, because, to a greater or lesser degree, we have all grown up in a society where the ideals of liberalism and capitalism have influenced our development. In a million and one ways we replicate the patterns of domination, even in our own anarchist circles, continuing the pressures that put strain on people. If someone has to fight against patriarchal, dominating, macho behaviour in an anarchist group, it is one more strain on them, and that is before they even get to fight against the bigger picture.

Yet, at the same time we have to be aware of people fighting against this, the loss of intimacy with family and friends who no longer share the same ideals, the constant barrage of information telling us to behave in a way that is not true to ourselves.

There is no simple answer. We have to muddle along, but greater awareness of mental health issues and the world in which they are created

will go a long way for groups of us to find common solutions we can live with. Such processes will not be overturned in a generation, we simply have to prepare the way for the day that becomes possible. We have to accept it is a two pronged approach, and there are no easy answers; help each other to reject the behaviours of oppression forced on us while also learning to trust each other and be strong in ourselves. Part of it has to come from within us, requiring us to examine the origins of our fears, never an easy process. This is why we need the support of our community to help us break away from the years of indoctrination. We also have to learn to be aware of our own roles in repeating these oppressions in all their forms, and that is another personal challenge for everyone who would define themselves as anarchists.

If we do not accept the issues of mental health, refuse to acknowledge the stresses of life and how they can originate in each other, then any future anarchist society will be little better than the one we have now. Simply that an issue may be uncomfortable is not a forgivable excuse.

PATRIARCHY

Sexism is Driving Me Mad. Literally.

I am a naturally confident and outgoing person but sexism is making me feel depressed, withdrawn and unable to cope with social situations. Sexism is attacking me on two main fronts; firstly through physical, verbal and emotional abuse and secondly by silencing my attempts to challenge and articulate this abuse and its effects. Before the abusive comments pour in (oh the irony!) let me just say this: my case is not special, I am not unlucky and this is not my fault. I am only guilty of having been born female in a patriarchal society. While the odds may at times seem stacked against me, I am dedicated to resisting and I am determined to recover.

Abuse

It would be near impossible to describe in detail the amount of physical abuse men have inflicted on me over the course of my life. My memories of primary and secondary school are full of being slapped, punched, kicked and sexually abused by boys. Lacking self-confidence and self-worth, during college I was trapped in a physically, sexually and psychologically abusive long-term relationship. At university, a man I had a casual relationship with threatened to “crack my skull open with one hand” because I had tried to refuse him sex when he appeared uninvited and very drunk at my house at 3am. Most recently, I have had a ‘relationship’ with a man whose extreme insensitivity and emotional manipulation compounded my lack of self-esteem and agency. These were not by any means my only experiences of this kind and these were not exceptions. Physical abuse has damaged my mental health by destroying the sanctity of my body and violating my sense of self. By inflicting pain on me with total immunity, these men have also reminded me of their physical power and social dominance.

As alluded to above, since raising questions of gender online I have been the victim of serious verbal abuse. Trolling and general nastiness is common on the internet due to the anonymity provided by cyberspace (by which I

mean they would **never** get away with chatting like that to my face!) So I will not focus on these comments here. But I will remind readers of the real life verbal abuse men frequently subject me to, especially when their sexism and position of dominance is challenged. I will also briefly highlight the fact that the commonplace nature of sexist jokes, inappropriate sexual innuendos (for example from a male superior at work) and sexism in the media are all manifestations of a culture of sexism which normalises attitudes and behaviours which are hurtful to women.

I Cannot Speak

People who know me will 'lol' when they read this. I speak a lot, I am a talkative person. But because of sexist attitudes, despite being a loud, confident and articulate speaker, what I say is not always heard, listened to or understood (I can only *imagine* what this must be like for naturally shy and quiet women). Often I am not listened to due to an inability to accept that my perspective, as a woman, is valid; men often immediately disagree with me or attack me even when I am explaining *how I feel* about something. The most common example of this is when I state that a sexist comment or action made me feel uncomfortable and the type of man our Letter to Male Activists [*re-printed in this zine*] was written to immediately dismisses my feelings, defends the sexism and tells me why I can't or shouldn't feel offended. This type of man will often patronise women, will assume them to have "misunderstood" everything and will talk to women with the same tone a particularly arrogant headmaster adopts to calmly scold an irritating 11 year old.

Another example of men effectively silencing me arises when I tell a man "I am not interested" and because of sexist ideas about men's ownership and control of women and our sexuality he hears "I am playing hard to get." When I say "no" he hears "yes" or "maybe, just keep trying." (See the "Translation" section of the Sisters of Resistance Terminology Tool Kit). If I become annoyed he is pleased: "Yea I like feisty women." No matter what I say or how I feel, he only hears what he wants to hear.

When a man complains he is justified, while women are “moaning”, “bitching” or “nagging.” Often women are not taken seriously; when I say “I am depressed” or “I am going through a mental break down” most people laugh or reply “oh yea me too.” This probably has as much to do with sexism as it does with the stigma surrounding mental health. But being systematically dehumanised, devalued and marginalised is enough to make anyone feel like they are going a bit mad. In the context of the abuse outlined above, women’s mental health becomes even more complex; how can you name abuse that is normalised? Mental health institutions are as sexist and racist as the society they inhabit; historically they have seen white, male, heterosexist, upper/middle-class norms forced upon the rest of us, who have been sectioned, electrocuted, drugged and sedated into compliance.

Sexism also creates an environment in which issues women are statistically much more likely to experience are not socially acceptable to articulate. This is partly because no one wants to hear them; they are difficult to hear. It is also because we do not live in a society that is sympathetic to these experiences; rather it is one that blames the victim. In addition to coping with the psychological effects of ill-treatment, the survivor must work through feelings of shame, guilt and rejection. In the above section on abuse, I did not talk about rape or incestuous sexual abuse for these reasons.

Resisting and Recovering

As I hope readers of *Sisters of Resistance* are already aware, I am not a passive victim in any of this. I resist the abuse and I continually struggle to be heard. I am lucky to have truly supportive sistas and a number of strong male allies. I constantly seek to improve my mental health through a variety of methods including self-care, cognitive behavioural therapy, meditation, reading about Buddhism and counselling.

I have found reading Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery. The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* invaluable and both

academically and personally enlightening. Herman, a feminist psychologist, argues that the women's movement of the 1960s created physical spaces and a socio-political environment from within which women could start to articulate their traumatic experiences of incest, rape and male violence. She demonstrates that an examination of women's mental health must acknowledge patriarchy and she maps the course to recovery.

I have recently coined the term "celibacy for sanity" as I am currently refraining from intimacy until I meet a man (or woman, I'm open-minded) who treats me with the respect and compassion I deserve. I refuse to settle and I am not lowering my standards. I suddenly realised that I had spent way too much of my time loving men who didn't, or couldn't, love me back. I decided it was time to stop loving my oppressor and start loving myself. This decision has left me feeling empowered and happier. I no longer rely on men for my self-esteem and for once my love is reciprocated. This might sound really cliché, I know it did to me at first, but it's true; only I can give myself the love that I need.

This article first appeared on the Sisters of Resistance website - sistersofresistance.wordpress.com.

Men Confronting Patriarchy

In the Autumn of 2010 a handful of men in Nottingham began having some informal discussions about rape, consent, masculinity and their own patriarchal behaviours. We decided to meet as a group on a regular basis in order to challenge, support and inform each other in a more collective way as we attempted to tackle our gendered position. Below is an article I wrote as a call out for the first meeting, stating my own position and what I imagined the group could be, and inviting others along to participate. This is followed by something I've written 10 months and 20 meetings later. It's an attempt to reflect upon the process we've undertaken, think about the mistakes we've made and the positives that emerged from it. Like all the articles in Affinity it's not meant to be the final word, or an authoritative statement, it's an attempt to start some discussions and continue some others.

*

I am patriarchal. I carry the patriarchy in my back pocket, and use it when it's needed. Sometimes I'm conscious of this, but most of the time I'm not. When I am conscious of it I am disgusted with myself, in the same way I am disgusted with myself when I pull out my passport at the border control. When I am not conscious of using it I am failing to live up to the ideals that I hold most dear. The ideals that say that I need to be vigilant, identify and then challenge power and authority in all its forms. If I don't even recognise my own use of power then how will I be able to combat and destroy it in its other forms. So, when I sit in another meeting and watch myself or other men dominate the proceedings uncritically and without thought then I once more feed into a system based upon domination and violence. A system which cannot be separated from other violent systems within this culture, those that relate to border control, wage slavery, ecological destruction, prisons and surveillance, to name only a few. All of which should be fought against constantly and continuously. And it's not as if I don't want to smash patriarchy. Just as my experiences have led me to believe that we must

destroy all other aspects of capitalism and its culture, so do my experiences tell me that patriarchy should be ground down until it no longer exists. I have seen my mother beaten and raped by male members of her family and stayed close to those men; I've seen my friends live through abusive relationships because the society from which they can't escape has told them that they have no other choice. I've witnessed my sisters learning to value themselves on the basis of how their looks correspond with those that the dominant culture promote as beautiful, because they are taught that it is the only value they have, their confidence and ability to exercise agency having been shaped by their gender. And I've seen roles and skills determined by patriarchy. But at the same time I don't fight patriarchy within myself with nearly the same energy and consciousness as I fight against other aspects of this system. I want to, but somehow, perhaps because it has been so ingrained in me due to the culture of which I am a part, I still find myself playing the male defined role in my relationships with women and men. Sometimes I'm called on it, sometimes I catch myself and stop, but it's often played out without anyone saying a thing.

Maybe it's because it's too easy to forget that patriarchy is as much a mediating and destructive factor in men's lives as it is women's (and every other gender). All the examples above highlight the corrosiveness that patriarchy has on women's lives. But it is important to remember that; a) the two genders construct is not unbiased. It is used in order to create and enforce a hierarchy, through defining each gender as a set, prescribed thing which is then naturalized. And b) patriarchy has had a role in limiting my capacity as a human being.

In the most basic sense it has encouraged me to repress my willingness to give and receive emotional warmth and support, it has pushed me towards aggression, and defined me as someone who should control and dominate others around me, thus taking opportunities away from me to listen, learn and develop my capacities as a human being. Patriarchy limits my tendencies to accept tenderness and has pushed down my willingness to show love and care. It has told me that these are characteristics which belong to another gender, and that to allow them into myself would be unnatural. Needless to

say the processes and mechanisms which patriarchy uses are complex and multifarious. I am not trying to describe it as a single monolithic creature hell-bent on controlling us; it works in tandem with other processes of this civilization's culture, and it is reproduced by us all. And it's this reproduction which must be challenged, taken head on with a full heart and desperate passion, because if we do not confront patriarchy within us and around us we will continue to feed into the culture of domination and destruction which is rapidly ripping this world apart.

The task of smashing patriarchy cannot be undertaken alone. It is not a self-improvement programme, it is something that we must collectively organise around within our communities. It is something which we may not have the skills or the language to do yet, therefore we must create the language and build those skills together. Men confronting patriarchy groups are just one tool that may help us do this. At the very least it can be a starting point, a space to begin to share experiences and ideas we have.

10 months later....

When we had the first men confronting patriarchy meeting we wanted to be open, and to invite as many people as possible. Within a few meetings we decided that we'd make it a closed meeting, and the five of us who had been attending would suggest other people to invite. We also decided to make it men only. These decisions were not made without thought and are reflected upon and readdressed every month or so. We came to those decisions because we quickly realised how shit we often are at communicating about our weaknesses, our insecurities and our negative behaviours; that in order to work through these things collectively we'd have to create a space where we all felt safe and able to do so at our own pace. None of us were unaware of the irony of a group of men creating an all-male safe space, when it's men like us who continually inhabit spaces and make them unsafe for women to participate in. The hope was that in creating a space safe enough for us to confront all our patriarchal bullshit we'd be able to go back into other spaces with less of that bullshit. That bullshit where we feel

entitled to speak and drown out voices which are not encased with male privilege, where we would not patronize, belittle, dominate and place our knowledges above anyone else's. In creating an all-male safe space we have been able to become closer allies, men who trust other men with our thoughts and feelings, and thus are able to challenge each other when we use our male privileges elsewhere.

I don't think this is without fault though. To start with there is possibly a case to be made for the idea that it was only our male privilege that enabled us to create that all-male safe space. If we can find the time and energy to sit for two hours every couple of weeks to talk about the issues that come with our maleness, then we are having various other needs and wants taken care of. Our whiteness and our economic positions mean that we are not having to worry about shelter or where our next meal is coming from. Various forms of cultural capital intersect and give us differing forms of emotional and psychological comfort and security. And for some of us we have women in our lives who are emotionally supportive, thus empowering us to talk about patriarchy for two hours a week.

Secondly, about five months after the first meeting we organised a film night. We showed a mainstream American film, talked a little about our group, and initiated a discussion about the issues the film and our group raised. About a dozen people came, it was equally split between men and women, and the brief conversation we had showed the benefits of having a mixed gendered group as it provided a richer more varied discussion regarding gender positions and relationships with patriarchy. Whilst all but a couple of people in the group were close friends, as a larger mixed gendered group we didn't have the time to create the same levels of trust and comfort; thus some discussions didn't occur which have occurred in our own smaller group and in other individual conversations with some of the people who came to the film night.

Since that film night and discussion we have been in contact with a couple of feminist groups to see if they'd like to organise a mixed gendered space, but understandably they prefer to work on their own group projects and it is not their responsibility to help us fix our behaviours, thought patterns

and general bullshit. It's our own. Which is the tricky paradox. It's our responsibility to do the work, to break the cycle, to stop acting like men raised in this society and become the people we wish existed in the society we want to create. However, we're not always the most observant, we're not always the ones able to see our behaviours; the other people, both men and women, are. So, a major part of the process is to make us less defensive to criticism; the less defensive we are the more able others will be to point out where we're acting like stunted, abusive, emotionally manipulative bullies. Which, in case it wasn't clear, is what we want to stop being.

What's next?

The group will continue meeting, we've lost one of our members whose gone off travelling, but there's four of us left, and we talk to other men we know to see if they'd be interested in coming along. We've talked about creating more mixed gendered spaces, and how we could make them safe for everyone to participate in. Perhaps another film night or discussion where we'd invite men and women in our community to come along. We'd like to work towards making it so all the spaces and all the meetings we attend have an in-built recognition of the gender hierarchies that are at play within them. There aren't any women I know who don't have stories of when men have used patriarchy to their advantage. If the group has an aim then perhaps it's to have fewer and fewer of those stories repeat themselves.

For myself, I know that it in many ways the call out for the group I wrote ten months ago still applies. I am still patriarchal, it's how I was raised as a child and it's how I've been socialized throughout my life. But as soon I recognized it then it was my responsibility to myself as an anarchist, as a friend, as an anti-authoritarian, as a partner, as a comrade, and as a person to deal with my bullshit behaviours. Ten months into the group I haven't dealt with all my shitty patriarchal patterns. Just this week my partner has been away, and it's been startling how emotionally stunted I have become; it's because I'm reliant on her for vast quantities of my emotional well-

being. I haven't taken responsibility for that myself. I believe that men are trained not to be emotionally responsible; in some cases they're trained to deny their emotions, and in others cases they always have women, whether that's mothers, lovers, sisters or friends to take care of them. In both cases (and there are exceptions, and there is a grey area between the two) this results in the emotional abuse of people around them. In this fucked up world (and if you don't think it's fucked up then you're probably reading the wrong zine) everyone is going to be hurt at some point, and that hurt will probably cause some anger or something equally shitty which is going to come out in some form or another. If you're a lover, an anarchist, a friend, a member of a community, then you have a responsibility as to what form that comes out in. You know the world's fucked up, and you know it's going to fuck you up, so if you sit back and let yourself fuck other people up without trying, without challenging yourself, without demanding more of yourself then I think that's patriarchal bullshit. I think that's how I still am, mainly because it hurts and it's unpleasant, and it's hard work, and because pretty much everything in this society encourages me to not deal with it, not to face up to it. I'm lucky that there are a number of people who love me and care for me, and for a too large portion of the time I'm unable to respond to that love and care with respect, because I haven't made enough effort to deal with my shit; I haven't made enough effort to extinguish that little voice that I think is in lots of little boys heads that says "this is my world, what I think and say and do is important. It's more important than what that person thinks, says, or does. And because of that people will take care of what I want and what I need, because what I think, say and do is important. I don't have time to take care of what other people want or need". I do want to extinguish that voice, and that's in part what the group is for.

I'm reminded of what a close female friend said to me recently, that within my writing there is always a push and pull between the general and specific, and the more general or generalising I am the weaker the writing and the points it's trying to make become. Whilst the more personally specific I am the stronger it is. With that in mind I can see that the previous few paragraphs do seep into generalisations, and therefore I should try to be

more specific. I'll offer one example up for brevity, and try to keep it brief though.

I grew up in households where women were by any definition terrorised by men. Grandfathers forcing grandmothers to eat their dinner off the floor; fathers punching mothers until teeth dangled from their gums, male cousins forcing female cousins into giving them hand jobs; the men of my extended family were given carte blanche to treat the women as they pleased. This pattern of behaviour was extended to physically stronger men assaulting weaker men in order to maintain order. I can see the root cause of this behaviour stemming from the two Grandfathers, and the ways in which they treated their wives and children, and everyone else imitating them. I can't be sure whether my grandfathers learnt their ways of behaving from their fathers, but I don't think it's a bad guess. I lived amongst this for around nine years, and it leaves me with a bitter taste in my mouth as well as a fair bit of bullshit in my head as to how to be a man.

For reasons somewhat unrelated to this my mum moved me and my siblings away from this situation, but due to this situation she had very few ways in which she could survive away from her family, which led her to becoming a prostitute for the rest of her life. She would often bring her punters back to the flat she lived in with me and my sisters, so I saw a large number of men treat her very much as an object which they could purchase for as long as they wanted without any other obligations. During this time I spent time in youth detention and care homes. In the latter there were many different forms of abuse and assault as differently screwed up kids took out their bullshit on others around them. Similarly in youth detention, which were all male environments, there were very clear hierarchies and modes of behaviour which favoured physical domination and prized "masculine" characteristics. As a teenager growing up in council flats in a large urban environment the ways in which me and my friends identified physical strength, aggression and general hardness/"up-for-it-ness" as the traits with which we should define ourselves was, I think, connected to our home lives; but it was also reinforced by larger social values which trickled down to us. Values which focus on competition, strength, domination; which

view women as primarily sexual objects, and men as weak and pathetic if they don't have any power/capital with which to purchase these objects. In the environments that I have found myself in during my adult life these values and these traits have looked different, but they are very similar.

I've never been to a people's kitchen where the women are forced to eat their dinner off the floor, and the physical violence that occurs is not as explicit, but the roots from which my family's behaviour grew from is also connected to the behaviours that can be found within the anarchist movement in the UK. Whilst my upbringing was specific, it wasn't due to any individual genetic condition; it was due to a large number of people being socialised in a certain way. They were socialised in this rather sick society, and that patriarchal society has similar effects on us all. My life has meant I've witnessed and been informed by particularly overt elements of the violence patriarchy can result in. This definitely leaves me with a fair amount of bullshit to dig through, and it's unpleasant to see how I respond to "softer" forms of patriarchal violence in the anarchist movement. Whether that be replicating aggression in meetings or encouraging the glorification of "up-for-it-ness". I want a total transformation of this society; I want anarchy to be our way towards living in a society where everyone has total freedom, and often my desperation for this comes out as aggression, and often it comes out in me privileging "up-for-it-ness" above everything else. But both of these result in others having their autonomy and their freedoms diminished, thus they become the antithesis of how I believe the world should be. It's for this reason that I wish to deal with my bullshit, and want to encourage others to do the same. Patriarchy has distorted who we are, and I think we should work towards acknowledging this and challenging it within ourselves.

A Letter to Male Activists

To so-called Male “Feminists”,

We are writing this as we can no longer refrain from commenting on the problematic views and behaviours you exhibit. We hope you will read, listen and respect these comments.

You claim to be “leftist,” “revolutionary”, “conscious” and “feminist.” You may even claim to study the subject of female oppression both academically and interpersonally. But the acts of oppression you have perpetrated on the women around you do not support these claims. Being the compassionate sistas we are, we made the effort (and it takes A LOT of emotional and psychological effort) to talk with you about your sexist behaviour. And time and time again, you’ve shocked us with the level of violence and force, verbal and physical, that you employ against us in a desperate attempt to silence our challenge to your male activist egos.

Whether drunk, stoned or sober, in responding to us with aggression, you were acting out your social conditioning. While masculinity is synonymous with aggression and strength, femininity is equated with submission, subservience and vulnerability. We are socialised into these roles of male and female, and they profoundly affect our sense of ourselves and how we interact with each other on a personal level. Therefore if men and women do not actively challenge their own sexist and oppressive or self-oppressive tendencies, over the course of our interactions a relationship of dominance will inevitably arise. But you fail to see that your masculine identity is formed on this social construct. This conditioning started the day you are born when the doctor declared “It’s a boy!” and continued, encouraged by parents, teachers, and the world around you, which told you that boys can run faster, jump higher and will eventually grow up to be smarter, bigger and better than girls. While baby boys are cherished the world over, mothers in some of the most densely populated places on the planet abort female foetuses and drown girl babies in milk. We point to the West’s hypocrisy in

the face of its own insidious misogyny and reject imperialism's attempt to hijack "female liberation" to justify illegal wars and military occupations. Femicide also survives in the "liberated" West where the majority of women who are murdered are killed by a current or former male partner, where one in three women will be beaten or raped by a man in her lifetime, where the Eurocentric white male perspective and the hierarchy of power that values men over women and light skin over dark are normalised with a system of reward and punishment. This is the all-important *context* to which we are continually referring, and which you continually choose to ignore.

We have watched you attempt to intimidate us with volume and tone, physicality and body language. Instead of listening respectfully to our experience of oppression, you consistently attempt to redefine yourself as the victim, when it is you who is in fact the perpetrator. You have tried to make us insecure and unconfident by patronising us and undermining our intelligence. But it is not that we have misunderstood you; it is that we do not agree. You should know your attempts to silence us will not be successful; rather, they will simply invite further critique, and further criticism will in turn infuriate you. Perhaps you are furious because you are unaccustomed to intelligent women who are not afraid to point out when you are wrong. Perhaps there are not many of us women who go out of our way, even sometimes risking personal safety, to be recognised as equals by men. Perhaps this is why you desperately draw upon unlikely examples and unbelievable hypothetical situations to support your badly structured arguments, why you insist what you believe about sexism is based on a book you read, or a class you took, why you claim to have reason, logic and science on your side. Yet although your employment of imaginary scenarios and patriarchal dichotomies peeves us, these arguments are easily destroyed. The most offensive and astounding line of argument appears when you routinely inform us that you are not sexist, that you "respect women". Well, as the women you are claiming to respect, let us tell you this: it is not up to you to determine whether or not you or other men are sexist. If we are offended by a sexist comment, act, film, song or cultural product, you have absolutely no grounds to tell us why we should not be. As the victims of

sexism, we define, describe and delineate it. In preventing us from doing so, you make a psychologically and politically difficult task almost impossible.

Simply asserting that you are a “feminist” does not make it true. In fact, by calling yourself a feminist in the face of criticism of your attitudes and those of other men, you not only fail to actively reject and challenge the sexism within yourself and society, you also deflect our critique of your behaviour and silence our already marginalised and seldom heard voices. If you truly wish to join the fight for female liberation then you must listen to us when we are detailing our experience of your and other males’ oppressive behaviour – denying its existence does not make it go away. You must engage with our perspective and embark on a long and arduous journey of self-criticism, analysis and reflection. In doing so, you will see what has been clear to us all along: that your denial and refusal to self-criticise is a direct product and reflection of the power structure to which you are opposed, in which (predominately male) heads of nations, bankers and CEOs also deny culpability for systematic violence and oppression, while (male-dominated) police and prison systems protect and maintain this system. While we will continue to challenge this macro-oppression, we will no longer remain silent in the face of your oppression of us, your fellow female activists.

In closing, we ask you to listen. Listen to us when we speak, listen to our criticisms, listen to our experiences. Stop defending sexism, stop defending men, stop defending yourself. Do not interrupt women when they speak and stop immediately disagreeing with us. When it comes to sexism, you are not under attack, women are. We are under attack from this patriarchal male power structure all day, every day, and we need activist spaces to be safe and respectful places in which women are treated *as equals*. You will not win without us, so it is in your interests to work with us *as equals*. You can create these spaces of equality by actively challenging sexist gender roles, by taking over the chores and actions typically still carried out by women: washing up, cooking, making tea, cleaning, tidying up, looking after children, doing the food shopping, providing emotional support, washing and drying clothes, emptying bins, sorting recycling, listening to people, caring for the sick, etc. Take the minutes at meetings.

Make sure the male to female ratio of speakers, facilitators, participants or chairs is always 50/50. Type up e-mail lists and take over the other menial administrative tasks still disproportionately done by women. Become aware of what the women around you are doing, feeling and experiencing and help and assist them however you can. Notice the male-female dynamics in meetings, on demonstrations and in conversations and actively address this imbalance. Do not attribute the hard work and ideas of the women in your organisation to men; stop taking the women in your organisation for granted. Incorporate an awareness of gender and feminism into your everyday life; for if you want to bring about revolutionary change, you must begin with yourself.

Yours,

Sisters of Resistance

<http://sistersofresistance.wordpress.com/>

WORK

Washing Up

The more I observe the radical and anarchist scenes, the more I am convinced we need a better understanding of work and what it has become. It seems to me that we are torn between liberating ourselves from the slavery of work and also the desire to support those for whom work has become a form of oppression. One is an attempt to live outside the constraints of capitalism; the other is to work within it.

Work is a concept that can be considered in many different ways. It is often more than just the 9-to-5 job, or the selling of labour, skills and knowledge to exploitative paymasters, though that is often what conversations reduce it to.

Mainly, though, work is often how we define ourselves in relation to the system (capitalism or patriarchy) – whether the factory job, the civil servant, the professional classes, the carer or housewife. Bosses are those who have control over work; class is an abstract relation about work in this sense. Even the lumpen, the *déclassé*, those who have stepped outside the system insofar as possible – often how we view ourselves – still consider part of their identity in terms of what they are not: commodified workers.

This stepping outside of traditional roles is an important part of radical / anarchist politics today, if regularly criticised as mere lifestylism (though it is much more than that). Murray Bookchin captured this in his classic 1960s essay *Listen Marxist!*:

Until now, the achievement of this consciousness [for the proletariat to use its power to achieve a social revolution] has been blocked by the fact that the factory milieu is one of the most well-entrenched areas of the work ethic, of hierarchical systems of management, of obedience to leaders, and in recent times of production committed to superfluous commodities and armaments. The factory serves not only to “discipline”, “unite” and “organize” the workers, but also to do so in a thoroughly bourgeois fashion. In the factory, capitalistic production not only

renews the social relations of capitalism with each working day, as Marx observed, it also renews the psyche, values and ideology of capitalism.

...the history of class struggle is the history of a disease, of the wounds opened up by the famous “social question”, of man's one-sided development in trying to gain control over nature by dominating his fellow man. If the by-product of this disease has been technological advance, the main products have been repression, a horrible shedding of human blood, and a terrifying distortion of the human psyche.

The worker becomes a revolutionary not by becoming more of a worker but by undoing his “workerness”... when he comes to detest his class status here and now, when he begins to shed exactly those features which the Marxists so prize in him – his work ethic, his obedience to leaders, his consumerism, his vestiges of puritanism. In this sense the worker becomes a revolutionary to the degree that he sheds his class and achieves an un-class consciousness...What he is shedding are precisely those class shackles that bind him to all systems of domination. He abandons those class interests that enslave him to consumerism, suburbia and a bookkeeping conception of life.

Is all this not what we do when we take our first steps outside the system, not just imagining a new form for society, but putting it into practice? Though not a subject of regular discussion, I would argue this is a fair summary of what has been happening over the last forty years of radical activism; the common theme underlying much practice regardless of individuals' starting points.

Yet, it strikes me that this lack of discussion meant two questionable trends have developed alongside it. When Bookchin wrote those words, he was also arguing that we live in a post-scarcity society; one of unprecedented material wealth, and that has given us the freedom to explore life outside the constraints of the workplace. I think he has a point. This is not to say exploitation or poverty has ended, but it is not hard to see how much different the movements would be without the increased wealth of society – whether through the privileges that come with increased access to education, wealthier relatives / cheaper goods in real terms and the net of the welfare state.

So the first concern is that we are not mindful of the huge infrastructure underneath our privileged activist lives. As long as we fail to recognise this, then we are living a lie, we are part of the bourgeois living off others. It is not hard to see why others, who do have to work, dismiss those who do step out of the system.

This is not to say we should not leave the system. We most certainly should. It is not sufficient to say we need to hang in there for some mythical revolution that will somehow magically sort everything out. Dropping out will not cause the system to crumble; and even if a critical mass did it, all it would do is leave chaos in its wake, opening the door for reactionary counter-measures.

Rather, in seeking to leave the system we should be expropriating it as well – stealing space and resources and remoulding them to our desires; recreating work in our image, not that of capitalists. In doing this we can learn the true value of work and of the resources we are consuming.

Too often I see people caught in the joyous phase of abandoning the capitalist system only to reproduce its flaws. It is only natural; we are imperfect, torn between being shaped by the capitalist world and finding our way in the new one. We forget that this new world is not one devoid of responsibility. The washing up still needs to be done. We cannot take and expect others to simply clean up after us, or to provide what we need. There is a vast difference between receiving something that is given out of the generosity of our spirit, and taking it.

We can see it in something as basic as washing up. Some people think they are above doing it; others have yet to realise that it does not get done by elves, or that their parents are not around to do it for them. Either way it is a failure of our politics. The revolution is unlikely to abolish the need to wash-up.

The other concern is that in stepping outside of the workplace we have lost our connection to it and ended up fetishizing it, just as Marxists such as the socialist workers do. We talk about the workers as a great big abstract idea, which leaves us in a position where we cannot approach them

objectively or critically but rather romanticism them. The 'Worker' remains cruelly exploited at all times, when that is not entirely true or how they might view themselves – especially given how middle class our society has become.

We speak of them as a single entity with uniform desire, a process that would readily be criticised if it was applied to other groups in society that face oppression. Thus, it ends up as patronizing – the poor worker, so oppressed by their conditions that they should be excused their many faults... as if they are not able to make those choices themselves. As if we have the privilege of absolving them of their sins by declaring them blameless.

Consider then, the worker in a cold-calling centre who preys on the vulnerable and causes pain to the elderly and disabled. Those who make rubber bullets, bombs and guns. The journalist-commentator who justifies repression and upholds a corrupt liberal-capitalist system. At some point responsibility for what we do has to be considered; is it right to take on a job that explicitly causes suffering to others or justifies it? Do these workers ever apologize for the pain and suffering that they get their wages from? If we are to argue these are okay, where do we stop, where do we draw the line? Maybe we should support the police on their strikes – after all they are selling their labour as well.

When I have challenged this way of talking about work, I get only hollow replies, such as it's the system – it's not their fault; or, come this great revolution the workers will spontaneously turn the factories over to something else...assuming they are working in a factory. What will all those administrators do?

I would have more sympathy if there was absolutely no alternative, but we are demonstrating that they do exist. However, we are pretty poor at putting this across. One of the great sadnesses of recent times was the Vesta and Ford worker strikes. They seemed so exciting, so positive with sit-ins and occupations, Climate Campers pouring down to offer support, and it seemed we might be able to transcend political differences on environment

and work. Only to find that we were defending their lay-off packages, their pensions. Was this really what social resistance had come to? Where was the belief that the workers could take over those factories, self-manage these viable businesses? Do we really have that little belief in the workers and of our own politics?

That is why I would argue that it is fundamental to anarchist and radical politics to support alternative structures that make those first steps outside the bourgeois workplace for something that is about the community – the radical cooperative, the community supported business, the autonomous social space, the land projects. First steps, slowly relearning old ways and the joy of producing for its own sake, but crucial ones.

PRISON

Prison, Patriarchy and Abuse

This essay will be structured in three parts. Each of them will overlap and reference one another, and are all rooted in particular experiences that have taken place during my life. The first will be rooted in my childhood years, before I was disciplined via the prison system but at a time when I witnessed many of my family members being disciplined in such a way. The second section takes place during the years whilst I was in and out of youth detention and adult prisons. The third analyses the effects that being imprisoned has had on me, as both someone who is politically active and as someone conditioned as male. I'll then attempt to express some conclusions, particularly in regard to the ways in which patriarchy and prison have entwined during my life.

I was raised in the 80's and early 90's and could easily be regarded as both one of Thatcher's children and one of Charles Murray's underclass. Very few of my extended family had any kind of sustained periods of employment, and many lived off the radar of social services and the welfare state. Uncles, cousins, grandfathers and my dad were involved in various forms of low-level law breaking activity in order to have cash in their pockets, and the majority of them spent varying amounts of time in prison during the first ten years of my life. Whilst undoubtedly there was resentment for these periods inside, there was also an acceptance that it was going to happen. With the exception of when long sentences (more than a few years) were given or if it was someone's first sentence, it was treated with little outward emotion. I remember one weekend though where there was a lot of drinking, dancing and crying because one cousin was in court the following week and everyone knew he was going to be going away for quite a while (although that reaction was in large part due to the fact that his fiancée had recently given birth to a little girl, and the fiancée was very young and very scared).

As for me, it was during this period that I learnt to rob, shoplifting to begin with, and then as I reached double figures breaking and entering to

steal whatever had been left lying around in a living room and I could carry easily. The possible consequences of this were minimized by my family circle, as they knew it was occurring and those closer to my age encouraged and schooled me. There were no moral questions asked. It was a case of accepting our social station, and then trying to even things out so we didn't go without. Don't rob from your neighbours and don't rob from anyone your family might know were the only moral do's and don't's. Everything else was up for grabs. Nor did I feel the threat of prison too heavily. To start with I was still in single figures and at most I'd be singled out and categorized as a thief and a troublemaker, labels which would not be easily removed later in life. But at the same time, the assumption made was that those labels had been attached to me anyway, and so I might as well embrace them as I'd be living with the consequences of being born where I was born and into the family I was born into no matter what I did. Due to punishment being so normalized I was able to act with little constraint when it came to illegal acts. Prison, community service, and probation were rites of passage for the male members of my family. Not doing something because you were scared of the pigs or going to prison made you less of a man. And being less of a man was considered far worse punishment than anything the state might do to you. Added to this was the adulation that was bestowed upon those who returned from prison, parties lasting for days with the newly released being treated like a returning hero with booze and women thrown at them. I remember an uncle getting out during the month I was seven. His party was way better than mine, and way better than that of a christening and a marriage that had both happened in the weeks prior. He probably sat in the same seat for several days, only getting out to take one of a number of women into a nearby bedroom or to go to the toilet. Other men pouring him drinks, women bringing him food and offering themselves. I could only marvel at the amount of attention he was getting, and hope that one day I would get something similar.

By the time I was given a custodial sentence however, my mother had moved me far away from the rest of our family. She had fled them in order to be able to visit my dad who had been sent down for a number of years and was spending it in a prison a long way from our town. She wanted to

be able to see him on a regular basis and the other stresses of our extended family had taken their toll on her. So by the time I was thirteen and had been given a three month sentence in youth detention centre, there was no-one to send me off, no-one to remind me of how I had to behave whilst inside, and no-one to tell me that I was a man now. The latter two were already well embedded in my brain though. I knew not to back down to anyone, not to go looking for trouble when it wasn't needed but to face it down when it came. And I knew I was going to become a man inside, and that when I came out I'd be harder and cooler than any of the other wannabe kids who I hung with and had never done any time. I also knew that I wasn't supposed to care whether anyone saw me off, or welcomed me back. That the whole thing was no big deal, and I just had to get on with it. Looking back on it I was way more scared of going in than I was once I was in. Those first few days were boring more than anything else, my energy levels rising and rising quickly with so little to do and so few distractions. As time went on and I had more interactions with the other boys this boredom dulled a little. Fights happened, but for the most part they were dull and short affairs which were quickly broken up by the screws who watched over us almost permanently. They made feeble attempts to educate us, but this was even less successful than the attempts to do so on the outside world. We were mostly high energy, unfocused teenagers who did not give a fuck, and had been put in a room together with someone who was quite possibly well-intentioned but ultimately clueless, and I left with the reading age of a seven year old that I'd gone in with.

This repeated itself a few more times, and in general very little of significance happened. I took a few beatings, I gave a few beatings, but despite my size (I was a small skinny kid, who was malnourished on the outside, and on the inside at least got fed regularly) I was never really picked on, primarily because my family had taught me to fight and show no emotion even when taking a heavy beating. One event that does stick in my mind was when one fight got out of hand and a number of screws had to get involved to break it up, which only encouraged more of us to get involved. This took place in the recreation room and resulted in a couple of screws being beaten bloody with pool cues, and a few teenagers including

myself with broken bones. There was a moment during this where we had them, we completely had them. For the most part people who are picked to work in prisons of any kind are picked because they show very little fear easily, and they choose their work because they have little hesitation in showing authority in a physical way. But during this fight many of them showed their fear, showed why they had to hide behind uniforms and state power, because they were fucking scared of a beating, scared of what they might do if they took one, in a way that very few of us kids were. It was definitely a moment that filled us with emotions we felt comfortable showing as well. First we were able show our anger untamed. It was always bubbling under the service, but seldom able to escape because of the prison cage. The second was a fierce joy and something akin to love with one another in the following days and weeks. We discussed the finer details of the fight quietly with one another, knowing that we'd shared something rare. We'd had them, not just the screws, but all of those who had been fucking us, spitting on us, beating on us, stopping us since the day our parents fucked us into life. It's this sentiment that has informed my more recent experiences as a self-identifying anarchist who aims to challenge this patriarchal capitalist society on an everyday level.

That experience had many genuinely positive and deep effects on me, and it is not something that I regret. Nor do I regret many of the acts that caused me to spend over three years of my life in various kinds of state prisons. However, they were all birthed by a particular understanding of how I as a young male should behave in this society, one where the ability to physically dominate others is rewarded. This can be seen in mine and my fellow young offenders ability to beat prison guards one fine day. It can be seen when smaller fights broke out between us, where we were unskilled in dealing with our petty conflicts and unable to see the solidarity between us and instead struck one another as if the other was causing our inability to love or connect to others. The most violent example, however, can be seen in the way the wealthiest members of this society can imprison huge numbers of young men. Their economic power is so great that they can have those prisons built and ensure that anyone who steps out of place is punished. They have the finances to get others to physically dominate on

their behalf on a massive scale. In order to protect what they have, they will use whatever type of violence is at their disposal. The threat of prison keeps many in check, and for others to whom the threat is not enough and who are caught then the threat is carried out. There is not the time or space here to detail the ways in which prison methodology has encroached massively into the rest of society. However, I do not think it is a difficult task to draw the lines between prisons and wardens to job centres and their employees to schools and teachers to city centres and cops to neighbourhoods and community officers to homes and patriarchal family units. The emphasis is on control via sanctions. Threats linger in the air constantly.

This is patriarchy. This is the inability to have empathy, to listen and to acknowledge that others with less power than you may have as much worth as you. This is the constant fear of others, young men growing up to learn that the only power worth having is that over another person. This is the lack of connection, the lack of love for oneself and those around you. This is prison.

I have managed to identify and to a lesser extent unlearn many of the lessons and behaviours that were developed in my person during the first twenty odd years of my life, but they have undoubtedly left scars. I don't fear prison, but that's because deep down I believe the lessons my family taught me; that men should not fear prison, that not being a man makes you vulnerable and soft, and that vulnerability and softness are worthless. I hope to one day entirely reject the notion that vulnerability and softness have no worth, as they are the things that will enable me to free myself enough to connect with others richly, deeply, fully. Being unable to connect with others intensely is a painful punishment for living in and learning patriarchal values. It is to me as much a prison as prison is.

Solidarity = Praxis: A Taste of Prison and Solidarity in Greece

“Whoever passed by the front of a court house or prison and his look didn't darken in the thought that he could be there as the culprit, then he did not live his time with integrity and dignity.”

– *Conspiracy Cells of Fire*

As the Greek heat rises in the cell the mind clouds over, the written slogans vibrate as I touch the plaster, everything seems ready to break inside, emotions running high, thoughts running wild. Then all of a sudden we hear it, a faint chant can be heard outside. It drafts in through the bars. We climb upon them, we scream back our reply, the words vibrating off dangerously constructed walls, our dry throats never daring to stop, the joy of an Albanian bank robber's face as he screams along with us. There and then, during that night in a police station cell, I really witnessed my first true expression of solidarity as a captive of the state. In the morning I did not know every person who came to the court, I'd never even seen all their faces until I walked with others behind a line of nervous riot police. But what I do know is they are comrades in the same fight, we the prisoners entering the theatre of absurdity, the Kafkaesque trial, heads held high with non-negotiable solidarity ringing in our ears.

My taste of prisoner solidarity was not in the country I originate from but within the insurrection in Greece, a threat of my own imprisonment in the UK driving me to such volatile surroundings. In the anti-authoritarian circles of Greece, prisoner solidarity is an important factor of the struggle against the state, not just in the last few years, but through many decades. From my own experiences I witnessed many actions for prisoners, such as gigs to raise money to cover the legal cost of cases and to help those inside financially. Other actions included 'microphonie', a form of static protest in

the street where a sound system is used to pump out music along with solidarity statements and leaflets to pedestrians, solidarity protests outside of prisons, police stations and even at courts. What did interest me was that certain groups including one I was involved in were willing to be even more confrontational, when they would take their solidarity to places such as radio or TV stations and public buildings in order to occupy them, to shatter the peace of the spectacle, to let their solidarity break beyond the concrete alienation we inhabit, to reach those abducted by assassins in uniform.

It is important to build links with comrades inside. This goes without saying but is often forgotten. The struggle against prison cannot be just fought inside though, it has to spread to the outside as well. When prisoners react against their conditions with actions such as a hunger strike, then this cannot be isolated on its own, it will be doomed to defeat very quickly. In Greece there has been many a hunger strike in reaction to certain incidents, which could not have been sustained if it was not for the support from the outside, protests in the streets, outside prisons, many numerable actions to raise the issues further. Communication with prisoners is essential to build a network in order to react, but also to share experiences and knowledge, to be critical of how it is practiced. In a prisoner solidarity group I took part in, we had a channel of dialogue with prisoners on the subject of solidarity, how they thought it could be enacted upon, what it meant to them. To answer democracy's cement graveyards we must break the isolation of prison. If we don't prisoners live in oblivion, a form of emptiness, where days are passed in poverty of liberation. In order to bring an end to the incarceration of our comrades, it is not just enough to demand or beg from those who imprison. This is just Christian humanism relying upon the non-existent benevolence of those who enslave us. As the anti-prison revolutionary outlaws Os Cangaceiros stated "The demands form a prisoners' offensive against their isolation and an appeal to those on the outside to act concretely to break it. It's a question of bringing pressure to bear against this society, of shitting on a world that would prefer to remain deaf in regards to its prisons."

Prison is not just metal bars and barbed wire, but also the world we live in, the 'prison society.' From the moment we are born to the moment our bodies give in, we are recorded and observed by overseers, the bureaucrats, the police of our very existence. Being honest, when we dwell in concrete cubes of isolation in the urban sprawl, is it any different from prison cells? In the UK our every move is watched by CCTV, while your every transaction is recorded down to the fine detail. They know what you eat for breakfast every day, eat your heart out Orwell! But the prison we live goes beyond this, our lives are restricted in how we choose to live them as well. We are subjected to many a constraint in the form of laws, morality, religion, state, humanity, fatherland, socialism, communism, capitalism etc. all phantoms that the mass are binded to. It is designed to destroy the individual, to restrict the rebellious instinct, the spontaneous freedom that we want to exist by. If we do resist or stand out of line against the authority which controls us then we are earmarked as uncontrollable, either psychologically drugged to be reintegrated or removed from the picture in order to not disturb its impeccable scenery. The prison system is in actual fact a concentrated form of society on the outside. This became more apparent to me when I was in the cells of a Greek police station. Already aware of the constraints beyond the four walls through my whole life, inside I cemented my thought that the brutality of the state and capital is more defined in these places, as I heard the stories of torture inflicted by police from fellow prisoners arrested for immigration, hooliganism, theft etc, all in order to get a signed confession from them. Living conditions reduced and controlled down to the closest detail, where you can't take a shit without the guards' consent. Having to pay money for our sub-standard nutrition, creating a market all of its own, along with drugs as well. Then I thought this mini society inside is in reality a mere reflection of repression on the outside, just in a prison it becomes all the more clearer, the blinds are lifted from your eyes. This is why it is not enough to struggle just against prisons themselves, but also to destroy that which makes them possible.

It became apparent to me that in Greece certain comrades are not scared to transform words into action, where praxis is not just a mere concept, it is being lived and very much acted upon. Solidarity is also not

just words, it can't only be stuck on a wall in the form of a poster in amongst the many other thousands in the streets. It needs to leap beyond them, to strike at the very system that creates the conditions in which we find it intolerable to exist. A solidarity demo to prisoners is one thing, but this alone is not going to bring the walls of every prison crumbling down, so that we can embrace those inside once again. The mere fact that the state holds hostage those who confront it is a sign of the repression that it inflicts upon us, punishment for our resistance against its everyday control over our lives. I do not just talk of 'political prisoners', I talk of all who resist, even those I met in the hell holes of the prison system, such as hooligans, immigrants, bank robbers, thieves, all the uncontrollables. To me the most effective solidarity we can give to those incarcerated is to physically attack the state and capitalist system that makes our existence so intolerable, to continue the conflict our comrades and fellow prisoners began. For example, if a comrade is taken from us because of their illegalist actions, such as expropriation, then it would be appropriate to spread such a method of resistance against allowing the force of morality or law to rule our desire to truly live. To only dedicate such actions in solidarity with the imprisoned (not that creating awareness of certain individuals cases is not valid) means we are lost in a continuous dialogue of shout-outs to each other, always trying to catch up with the repressive machine, never actually trying to bring about its destruction. If a critical dialogue is not also used against the walls erected around us, then we risk ghettoizing ourselves, failing to see the prison system as a weapon that is used to attack all those who don't fit in, who resist against the existent. With this alongside the usual (not any unimportant) methods, solidarity is far more potent, creating real connections with those inside, the walls crumbling between us; not continuously running behind prisoners cases but moving to bring about the day when there will be none, when not just the prisons but all forms of authority are rubble our children play in.

So I say to you, do not let the imprisonment of those who dared to resist against enslavement drag us down, we never forget them. Solidarity is stronger than any prison constructed. Our comrades smile with us in the moments we step into the streets breathing our own lives, in the very

incendiary destruction we should inflict upon the babel tower of incarceration!