

## Introduction

This is the first issue of Radicle, a zine we hope to keep producing, and I've been given the job of writing a first introduction. It has been written and put together by Hana, Pip, and myself. It is a project that has come out of days of wondrous discussions and debates whenever the three of us have managed to come together, which is not often. I always come away from time with Pip and Hana understanding the world slightly differently than before, and feeling inspired to write.

It was this inspiration that led us to start Radicle. We have many hopes for this zine. We are each focused on understanding how power, privilege and marginality affect our lives, including our activism. And we are excited by thinking about futures that we want to live in. Our writing reflects on our experiences and needs, in ways that feel practical and relevant for building those futures.

This first issue looks at different ways of keeping our activism sustainable. My essay on justice is an attempt to imagine how we as anarchists can create a just community that does not tolerate, ignore, apologise for or condone abuse. Where do we look for anarchist solutions to safety and abuse, and what are the problems that need to be faced? Pip writes about the importance of faith in staying strong enough to keep fighting, while holding onto sanity and humanity. Hana challenges us to practice real solidarity across class. This means understanding how class works both economically and socially, and looking at our own power and privilege.

The three of us are each committed to deepening and widening our political understanding, and to communicating honestly and clearly. We would appreciate constructive feedback.

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Table of contents</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Justice without the state</b> <i>Kim</i>	<b>3</b>
<b>Struggle and surrender: reconciling faith and activism</b> <i>Pip</i>	<b>17</b>
<b>Working across class: a struggle for solidarity</b> <i>Hana</i>	<b>21</b>

# Justice without the State

Kim

**A**s anarchists, we reject the state and its abusive criminal justice system, but we still need to deal with conflict and abuse in our midst. When we ignore or refuse to deal with abuse in our communities, we become part of the abuse—we force survivors and their supporters out of the community, and protect the people who have hurt them. A justice system must aim both to reduce the harm from any conflict, and to protect those with less power from those with more. We must find our own solutions to this problem. It is immature to criticise the state system without developing alternatives for our own communities; it reminds me of rebellious teenagers criticising their parents' bourgeois lifestyle, but refusing to leave home and all its luxuries. A mature movement will develop its own justice system, from its own values, to meet its own needs.

Fortunately, there is a huge amount of knowledge and experience that we can turn to for help and inspiration. The majority of human history has relied on community justice models for solving problems, whereas the state system is only a late-comer. This essay takes a brief look at different models of justice. As a reminder of where we are, I start by listing the problems I have with the state system. I look at some customary justice models practiced in communities today, as well as restorative justice. Restorative justice uses the principles and methods of customary justice, but the term usually refers to programmes that operate outside a customary setting, or that have been endorsed by the state. There are criticisms of customary and restorative justice, some of which lead to the development of transformative programmes. Finally I discuss the relevance of this for anarchists. My ideas on community justice come from an anarchism where the community is as important as individuals. My definition of community reflects this: a group of people who are accountable to each other, “each member acknowledges the existence of common values, obligations, and understandings and feels a loyalty and commitment to the community that is expressed through the desire and willingness to advance its interests” (Gyekye 1996:35). It may not be what we have now, but it is surely what we are working to build.

## **State criminal justice system**

Andrea Smith (2005) argues that an understanding of power, control and violence means that we need to address interpersonal, state and structural violence simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> A truly just system would protect the powerless from the powerful, but the state protects those with power from those with none. By defending the powerful against challenge, the state system ensures that they continue to dominate and control—this can only lead to abuse and violence against the least powerful. Capitalism is a system created so a few people can get huge amounts of money from the work of many, many low paid people. The workers have little control over the system. They are kept in line by habit, the remote chance that they may move further up the pyramid, and coercion from the state justice system. State justice criminalises dissent, and creates the illusion that capitalism is a safe and functional system. Police are encouraged to threaten, bully and terrorise those on the margins, simply for being different. Loaded slogans like ‘building safer communities together’<sup>2</sup> protect those who conform from seeing that reality.

The state justice system exists to protect its own interests and values, and to maintain the status quo. In New Zealand, European law is considered the only legitimate law, reflecting European values, including individuality, competition, patriarchy, and private property. Other cultures, including the indigenous culture, are expected to fit in, to adopt European values, and to ignore their own.

When the state system took away our responsibility to deal with conflict and violence in our communities, we lost the skill and confidence to deal with it ourselves. When the law is enforced as a moral code, it takes away our power to develop our own values. We need to set up alternative ways of working out our problems and staying safe, and we need to organise against the state system.

In summary, state justice is founded on inequality: at all stages it is racist<sup>3</sup>, anti-poor, anti-youth, anti-woman. State justice is founded on violence: police, lawyers, judges, guards, social workers are given power over victims and offenders, and there are few among us who haven’t been abused by their power. Victims have almost no power in the state system, and are often re-victimised and bullied by the process. Above all, the state system doesn’t work for anyone who actually needs it. It is effective at protecting the property rights of land owners, but not the safety of women. If the state system does not protect homeless people, poor people, brown people, young people, women, etc, then what is it good for?

## **Different models of community justice**

### *Customary justice systems*

Traditional societies have no state system, and maintain order through equality<sup>4</sup>, respect,

and collective responsibility (Elechi 2006:11). Until the state took control, conflicts were resolved locally, involving everyone affected by a dispute, and aiming to restore community balance. These systems of justice therefore seem an obvious place to start when looking at models for community justice. I am defining customary justice as that which has evolved with the local belief system over generations to solve local problems. The customary justice systems I discuss are those still being practiced. Local religion is central, and customary law is indigenous to the communities that use it. Many books and articles have been written about the local varieties of customary justice systems (eg van Ness & Strong 1997, Mead 2003, Elechi 2006, etc). My brief discussion is based largely on an African justice system (as described by Elechi 2006), a proposed Māori justice system, and Native American justice systems (as described by Smith 2005).

In traditional communities conflict was generally between family members, and community strength was necessary for individual survival. Customary law developed to keep or restore community functioning. This means trying to find solutions that people see as just and fair, and that work long-term. It means the ‘rights’ of individuals are less important than in the Western legal tradition.<sup>5</sup> It also means that customary legal systems generally don’t have a set of rigid rules, and aren’t aiming for consistency either in process or solution. Instead, they focus on the fairness of the process, and the principles or values that are important, to find the most peaceful and enduring solution for the people affected. “Social solidarity is a primary feature” (Elechi 2006:18).

Oko Elechi describes the Afikpo model of justice. In the community he is from “it is an offense against the community to report a crime or take a conflict to the state courts or police until the community had mediated on the matter” (p 6). The indigenous justice system is perceived to be more effective and legitimate than the Nigerian state criminal justice system (imposed under colonisation). The goal of Afikpo justice is to repair the harm done to victims and communities by offenders. This means restoring the victim’s emotional and material loss, as well as empowering and vindicating them. The community gives appropriate support for victims and their families. Offenders and their families are held responsible, they are persuaded to compensate the victim and to apologise to the victim, the victim’s family and the community. The system is humane: the community supports the offender through teaching and healing, but the offender “must first acknowledge the wrong, then, show remorse, shame, and accountability through reparation and expiation” (p xvi). Decisions are made by consensus of all participants, which includes the victim, the offender and all others affected. The system “commands nearly total acceptance and participation”, whereas the Nigerian state criminal justice system is “ineffective and largely ignored by the Afikpo people” (p 2). It is most successful when offenders are strongly connected with others in the community, and value their love, respect and relationships (ie, when there is more to lose). However, in its use now, the Afikpo system excludes serious violent crimes, which are handled by the state system.

A Māori Criminal Justice Colloquium in November 2008 discussed problems with the New Zealand state justice system, and has set up a working group to develop an alternative system for Māori. Moana Jackson argued that the principles of tikanga<sup>6</sup> provide a process for addressing social harm. A Māori justice system could be as simple as reconstituting kawa<sup>7</sup>, not just in our marae, but in our communities and everywhere that we are. His vision is a system “which helps us deal with wrong by re-enforcing what is right, which helps us deal with hurt by dealing with those who are hurt, by helping us deal with injustice by re-defining what is injustice and what is just in our terms” (Jackson, 27/11/2008). Edward Durie (27/11/2008) proposed making the criminal justice system irrelevant, in much the same way that the Afikpo system does in Africa. He suggested setting up a system that uses the mediation and conflict resolution skills our communities already have, instead of resorting to state solutions. Te Wānanga o Raukawa already has such a system: staff and students at Te Wānanga work under te kawa o te ako, and an internal disputes process deals with breaches of kawa. The goal is for the mana<sup>8</sup> of everyone involved (including that of Te Wānanga) to be upheld or restored. Even serious offences, such as sexual assault, are handled by this process rather than referral to the state system. Te kawa o te ako is effective for maintaining the learning environment. I hope, but don’t know, that it is empowering for victims. Staff and students understand the importance of kawa; those who breach kawa may participate in the resolution process for different reasons, such as to continue to work or learn at Te Wānanga, to avoid the shame of being excluded from Wānanga, or simply because they see it as fair.

Many Native American communities<sup>9</sup> are developing their own systems for dealing with criminal behaviour based on traditional methods. Smith (2005) looks at the ability of these programmes to deal with sexual and domestic violence. She gives an example of a programme where the sexual/ domestic violence working team talks to the offender giving the choice to participate or go through the criminal justice system. If they choose the community model, everyone involved (victim, perpetrator and advocate, family, friends, and the working team) develops a healing contract, and everyone in the community is responsible for holding the offender accountable to the contract. Offenders must deal with the humiliation of being known as an offender and being held to account by the community. They must work to being forgiven by the community and the victim. The State system would remove these offenders from society. When these serious but common offences are dealt with in the community, offenders have a better chance of developing ethical relationships.

These programmes are often very effective, particularly when the communities are isolated and there is less opportunity for social connections outside the community. However, some programmes are unable to deal well with sexual and domestic violence. Many Native domestic violence advocates argue that prison is more appropriate than community interventions, or that the threat of prison is necessary for keeping offenders in their programmes. Programmes focused on maintaining community or family unity

often pressure victims to forgive and move on, or blame the victim if she is an adult.

"Traditional approaches toward justice presume that the community will hold a perpetrator accountable for his crime. However, community members often do not regard sexual violence as a crime when cases involve adult women, and they will not hold the offender accountable. Before such approaches can be effective... we must implement community education programmes that will sufficiently change community attitudes about these issues." (Pp 141-2)

To summarise, customary justice systems use the wisdom of ancestors that has developed from generations of trial and error, and which is stored in the local religion. Key principles of the systems are that they involve everyone affected by the conflict or offending; that they are more concerned with a fair process than they are with rules for that process; that they are focused on vindicating and upholding the dignity of the victims; that offenders are held accountable to the victim and the community; that the community is responsible for supporting the victim and holding the offender to account; and, that the systems are therefore dependent on a strong community with common values. There are potential problems with customary justice and I discuss these together with restorative justice in the following section. To me, the main point is that community justice systems are legitimate when they are being developed and maintained by the communities that use them, and they are accountable to those communities. Customary justice provides a starting point for thinking about what we might do.

### *Restorative justice*

In its customary setting, restorative justice "has been the dominant model of criminal justice throughout most of human history for all the world's peoples" (Braithwaite 1998:1). In the 1970s, some people working with offenders took many of the principles of customary justice, and began applying them outside their traditional settings. A group of workers and academics saw this as a new (old) direction for justice, and came up with the name restorative justice. The term is sometimes applied to customary justice models, but I am using it here to refer to its use in non-traditional environments. Restorative justice models look at actions that cause social harm, rather than at 'crime' (defined as a violation of the state and its laws). Like the customary justice systems that it comes from, restorative justice is focused on restoring victims, offenders and communities, and repairing that harm, including harm to relationships (as opposed to punitive or rehabilitative justice, which focus respectively on punishing or rehabilitating the offender). Restorative justice involves the victim, the offender, and anyone else affected by a conflict all working to find a resolution. It is based on the experience that people are more likely to honour a resolution if they participate in finding it.

An aim of restorative justice is to restore compassion to the justice process. It is victim focused. Solutions come from looking at the harm done to victims, and exploring their rights and well-being, rather than the behaviour of offenders (Van Ness 1997). Care needs to be taken to avoid re-victimising the victim; they must not feel under any pressure to participate, and the process and outcome must be desirable to them.<sup>10</sup> The offender is required to accept responsibility and to engage with those affected (the victim and the community) in identifying harm and repair. Howard Zehr (1997:68) defines the problem: “wrong creates obligations; taking responsibility for those obligations is the beginning of genuine accountability”. He summarises the process into three questions: who has been hurt, what are their needs, and whose obligation is it to correct this (Zehr 2002). However, there are very relevant criticisms of restorative justice, which also apply to customary justice.

### *Criticisms of customary and restorative justice*

Both customary and restorative justice are open to the tyranny of the majority. They reflect the dominant values in the community, and may not ensure the safety of minorities or less powerful members of the community. For example, restorative justice tends to work well for property crime, because the majority of people understand property ownership and want to keep property safe. It can fail to work for sexual or domestic violence, because many people will blame a woman (in a way they would never blame a property owner), and don't value the safety of women enough to make it work. Like the State system, community and restorative justice systems may reinforce privilege and unjust power structures. For example, more articulate and educated people may be more able to talk their way out of real accountability; socially popular people, or those central to the community in some way, may not be held to account, whereas socially marginalised people generally are; and richer people are more able to offer compensation.

For restorative or customary justice to be effective, communities have to be totally committed to holding offenders to account, rather than respecting their privacy and keeping a comfortable relationship with them. For example, if a community will not actively watch and challenge abusive partners (this includes telling other people of the abuse), it will fail to keep survivors of domestic violence safe. Smith (2005) argues that a community's desire to put an issue behind them and return to normal relations means that “restorative justice models often promote community silence and denial around issues of sexual/ violence without concern for the safety of survivors”(p 160).

A basic assumption of restorative justice is that our society is fundamentally fine and fair, and the best outcome is restoration of that fineness. Restorative justice looks for individual solutions to individual problems rather than looking for systemic problems. Ruth Morris (1999:8) argues that “you can't restore a community to



wholeness that never was whole.” For example, what solutions can restorative justice offer for sexual violence in societies with a rape culture, or for any ‘crime’ on colonised lands?

In summary, customary and restorative justice systems come from an understanding of crime as social harm rather than law-breaking. Crime is a conflict between individuals that results in harm to victims, communities and the offender. The aim of restorative justice is to reconcile those affected as well as repairing the harm caused. The process is participatory, involving victims, offenders and their communities, rather than the state. However, both restorative and customary justice are open to the tyranny of the majority. These systems require a common understanding of abuse and a commitment from the community that isn’t always met. Finally, by focusing on individuals, restorative justice approaches cannot change a culture of abuse.

Clearly, there isn’t a simple solution. We need to try to deal with the violence and abuse within our communities now, and customary/ restorative justice programmes provide a humane method for doing this. Simultaneously, we need to transform our communities into ones that will not breed and tolerate abuse in the future.

### *Transformative justice*

Education is transformative. It can change the way we understand control, power and powerlessness. It can help us recognise the ways that we are abusive, controlling, violent, even when that behaviour is considered acceptable by many people. It can show us tools, and give us skills and confidence to use them to resolve conflict or approach problems non-violently.

Programmes that aim to change the culture of a community as a way of making it safer, rather than treating problems as solely the fault of individuals, have been called transformative. These programmes understand that the context of violence is important: how the behaviour has been learnt, established, practised and maintained. This means that we are all partially responsible for the violence in our communities: rather than simply holding offenders accountable to the community, transformative justice also holds the community accountable for teaching and condoning violent behaviour and failing to teach alternatives. It aims to correct this, by teaching alternatives to violence and creating communities that do not accept violence as normal. Transformative programmes may focus on victims and perpetrators of social harm (the National Network of Stopping Violence Services is an example), or on community outreach (the It’s Not Okay campaign and the many in-school programmes about healthy relationships are examples of this). Both methods are essential. Transformative justice aims to build communities that are committed to understanding and condemning violence and abuse,

“it is insufficient to educate the victim or the perpetrator if the [community] condone and collude with violence” (Second Māori Taskforce on Whānau Violence, 2004:32).

## What does this mean for us?

Can this work in an anarchist community? We don't have the family ties of traditional communities, we don't have a common religion (even though our politics have some common ground, how far that goes is debatable). Everything we offer is perhaps more easily found somewhere else, where there are less expectations on or accountability for behaviour. It is demonstrably easy to leave an anarchist community when challenged on behaviour. A community justice model could work if 1) we really want it to, 2) we are more obviously intentional in the building of our communities, and 3) we start doing it.

What follows is a list of points for considering how community justice might work.

- ***Community justice works best when there is a community.*** Smith found that customary justice was most effective in isolated communities, because the community was more important to offenders, and they weren't able to just dump one set of friends who were trying to hold them to account, and move on to another group. Modern communities tend to be ill-defined and permeable. I would prefer not to achieve the goal of a safe community by having people leave if called on abusive behaviour. Ideally, people would want to fix things because they see it as their responsibility. The benefits of being part of the community have to be enough that most people would choose to stay and fix things rather than leave. Is this possible?
- ***Community justice is easiest where the well-being of the community is considered more important than the rights of the individual,***<sup>11</sup> eg kin-based communities. This means that individuals are always considering the effects of their actions on other members of the community. It is difficult to create this within a society that is overwhelmingly individualist. How do individualistic values, like personal freedom and privacy, interact with socialist values, like collective responsibility and cooperation? In most of us, these values are constantly in conflict, and we each shift around on this continuum. Some of us will respond to being called on behaviour by claiming our rights, others will willingly take on responsibility. Do we feel like a community has a right/ responsibility to hold individuals to account? What level of coercion is acceptable, and under what circumstances?
- ***Community justice works when there are shared values.*** Traditionally, there was the common belief system/ religion as a code of ethics. How does this work in a group that rejects the dominant culture, that is characterised by non-conformity,

and that is still defining appropriate principles for behaviour? What does our morality or code of ethics look like? It's easy to say 'our community is against any form of oppression, sexism, inter-personal violence, etc'. In reality, those values conflict with other values that we don't usually talk about, like having a nice time with our friends, not getting involved in other people's lives, making our own choices about how we live, and not being told what to do. If I hear that one of my friends is behaving abusively and hurting someone, will I confront them the next time I see them? Will I avoid talking about it because I want to hang out with my friend and I don't like difficult conversations?

- ***Community justice works when communities are united against a behaviour.*** When someone is challenged on that behaviour, even a couple of people undermining that stance can be enough to give the person a way out of feeling responsible for putting things right.
- ***Community justice works when it is focused on the needs of the people who have been hurt.*** If ownership is not with those directly involved, and the community (or a working group) takes control of abuse in the community, then we are copying the bureaucracy of the state system. We are taking control away from the victim and others affected. The process needs to stay participatory and not be controlled by experts deciding what is best for us, directing, arbitrating, judging, rather than mediating and facilitating. Are we capable of letting go and actually trusting those involved to direct the process?
- ***Strong communities have the skills and trust to resolve conflicts early,*** before they turn into big problems that need a formal intervention. We need to get better at challenging each other on shit behaviour. This means we need to get better at letting people know when their behaviour is hurting us, but it also means we need to get better at welcoming and hearing those challenges, however they come. How do we hear criticism without being defensive or criticising the process? How do we make our boundaries clear without being controlling? Building a culture that supports and models good communication is fundamental.
- ***A fair system needs to be centered on the most marginalised,*** for example queer, working-class, brown, women, and those who can't rely on their strong social networks, university informed arguments, or most radical rhetoric. Community justice seems pointless to me if it just repeats the crime of the state system in protecting the most powerful.
- ***We need to be honest about where our communities are at,*** and not pretend we're safer or more enlightened than we really are, or that abuse isn't a problem for us. For example, Smith (Incite statement Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex) warns of "a romanticized notion of communities, which have yet to demonstrate their commitment and ability to keep women and children safe

or seriously address the sexism and homophobia that is deeply embedded within them.” Anti-prison advocate Herman Bianchi claims that even with the best community programmes, there should still be prisons, for dangerous violent people, and for “those people who have received the opportunity to do penitence, to come to reconciliation, to settle the dispute, and refuse, refuse, refuse.” Whether or not we agree, we need to face this honestly. Statements that we don’t need prisons or police because the majority of crime is property, poverty or drug related, offer no answer to the huge amount of abuse in society and in our communities. We need to have some response to that abuse.

## ***The way forward***

I see three parallel strategies as essential: creating systems that keep us safe now; educating ourselves and others about abuse to create a culture that is safer; and, fighting the fucked-up and abusive state system.

### ***1. We need to start now, but we don’t need to start big.***

We don't need to start with a large, well-defined, functional community, and we don't need to find a single solution that can be used in every situation. My first step towards creating something that keeps us safe is working in community with those closest to me, ie, a small intentional group who have some common values. From here, I can gain skills in talking about values and confronting poor behaviour. I can take these skills to my other relationships. I don't have the power to make anyone change their behaviour, but I do have the power to participate in ethical relationships where my values are reflected. I can choose relationships that re-enforce good behaviour and challenge poor behaviour, and I can refuse to participate in other relationships. When I need to, I can call on other people to help me. If enough people are thinking, working and organising on this, we will come up with a set of things that have worked and things that haven't. This body of knowledge can help us build better systems.

### ***2. We need to be talking about abuse.***

We must get better at naming abusive behaviour when we see it, and at putting pressure on people for as long as it takes until they change their abusive behaviour. We should aim (i) to talk about abuse when it is relevant rather than avoid it, (ii) to educate ourselves so that we have a common understanding of abuse and how to respond to it, and (iii) to organise groups, workshops and programmes to talk and educate others about abuse. We have to learn that abuse is serious. Educating ourselves and others is

necessary to avoid re-victimising survivors of abuse, and to support rather than attack those people who are challenging abusive behaviour. For me, education has meant first looking at and healing from the abuse in my life. My next step has been working in a small closed collective where we have been able to build trust. We talk about the abuse around us, how it affects us, how we contribute to it, what we're doing to fight it. This is a safe environment where we can build our understanding of abuse. There are many local organisations educating about abuse that we can learn from and support.

### ***3. We need to be organised, creative and strong in our opposition to the state system.***

We need coherent messages that expose the violence of the state criminal justice system, while still acknowledging that interpersonal violence is a real issue that needs solutions.

## **Summary**

There is no denying that there is behaviour in anarchist communities that needs to be addressed: there are conflicts, abuses of power, abusive relationships, violence. We need to have a constructive way of dealing with conflict and poor behaviour, and a way of keeping safe from violence and dangerous behaviour, without involving the state. Communities all over the world are working on this, using customary, restorative, and transformative justice models. We can organise now to build skills and practice methods. It isn't enough to leave it to some future to resolve, or to take our failures as a reason to stop trying. We can build healthy communities, we can create strategies for sorting even our worst shit without involving the state, and we can expose the state as the bully it is. We need to start now and to support each other's work towards this.

## **Notes**

1. Smith gives colonisation, police brutality and prisons as examples of state violence, and racism and poverty as examples of structural violence.
2. Public relations slogan of the New Zealand police.
3. The mean incarceration rate for all New Zealanders in 2008 was 179 per 100 000, for Māori it was 617 per 100 000 (<http://wdmzpub01.stats.govt.nz/wds/TableViewer/tableView.aspx>); compared with the OECD mean of 150 per 100 000, or excluding the US 130 per 100 000 (World Prison Population List, 8th Edition. UK Home Office, 2008).

4. Elechi uses the term equality to mean that valuing the contribution of all community members is important in conflict resolution, rather than that all community members have equal status or prestige.
5. Traditionally, a variety of penalties could be threatened, such as shaming, death or banishment, that are now illegal or less effective for coercing offenders (for example, in such interdependent communities, banishment could be considered worse than death, now it is often barely a punishment).
6. Used here to mean Māori law
7. Used here to mean the principles that Māori law is based on
8. Used here to mean something similar to reputation and respect
9. This is especially true of Canada, where the sovereign status of Native nations gives them the opportunity to develop their own community-based justice programmes.
10. The process generally involves a mediator, and meetings can be held separately with victim and offender, who may choose not to meet face to face at all.
11. This doesn't mean that individuals aren't important. Gyekye (1996:36) describes it as "emphasis on activity and success of the wider society, not necessarily to the detriment of the individual, but rather to the wellbeing of every individual member of society". Even though these communities are usually hierarchical, they also usually operate by consensus, in that anyone can participate in a decision that affects them.

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# Struggle and Surrender: Reconciling faith and activism

Pip

I was raised an atheist, and for a time I was happy with the absence of God-talk in anarchist conversations. I agreed with Marx that religion is the opiate of the masses and saw faith as a giant trick played by those in power. Certainly, if you are waiting around for an afterlife, and following conservative dictates about how to get there, little chance remains that you will also be trying your darndest to create radical social change on earth. On the other hand, I think there has always been a hole in my life, where Spirit might have been. This sense of lack increased as I struggled to cope with the realities I engaged with as an activist, the incredible suffering and extreme control that underlie our society.

This article is addressed to activists, all those working to overthrow and replace hierarchical, unsustainable institutions and ways of relating. I want to convince you, both that spirituality/religion is an important part of being whole, and that it is our responsibility, as radicals, to address this dimension of what it means to be human. There are several reasons why this work is ours. I don't want to see it left in conservative hands, for one thing. I also don't want it left up to indigenous peoples to be the 'spiritual' ones, with white folks taking them on when some extra depth is needed. But I'll leave both those arguments for another day. Here, my main contention is that some kind of faith is vitally important to sustained and healthy activism.

I am a Pagan and, for me, surrendering to forces greater than myself happens within the context of this faith. I celebrate the seasonal festivals of pre-Christian Europe, I believe that earthly cycles have something to teach me about my own psychology, and that my strength is increased when I align myself with these cycles. I spend some time each day praying, awakening myself/addressing myself, to the web of beings and relationships that I sometimes call Goddess. I am interested to hear from folks from other spiritual traditions about the role faith plays for them.

As activists we are aware of the horrors of the world; we talk about them daily, and take a stand against them regularly (at which point we are often reminded exactly how powerless we are). We are, therefore, extremely vulnerable to despair and



cynicism. For myself, even before the crisis that October 15th, 2007 was for our community, I had seriously begun to doubt that I could handle it. Even worse, a kind of bitter listlessness had begun to settle on me. I still hated capitalists, racists, patriarchs, homophobes and politicians (my analysis was intact), but I wasn't loving life on this planet, and I was fast losing the will to defend it.

Faith is a powerful antidote to this condition, but if one is cynical it is very hard to swallow. Faith means entrusting one's heart to something outside of our individual control; on a logical level it makes little sense to do this, especially if we believe that the world is a generally shitty place. Fortunately, the world is not a generally shitty place. There are amazing people, and forces for good deeper than I can make sense of, that often reward our faith. I want to defend faith, to define it and make it less threatening, but the whole point is that it cannot be fully explained, or logically justified. It requires a leap into the unknown.

### ***A heart, broken open, can contain the whole world.<sup>1</sup>***

On October 15th, 2007, police raided Ruatoki and arrested a number of Tuhoe, charging them with firearms offences, but labelling them as 'terrorists'. A number of friends and anarchist comrades were arrested on the same charges. The three weeks they spent in prison before being granted bail was a turning point for me. I was terrified—partly of being arrested too, but mostly afraid that my friends would never get out of prison, that they would get beaten up or raped, or that they would go mad. I had just started work clipping tickets on commuter trains and I would sit in the toilets at work sobbing and trying to get it together before the next train left. What had happened to my friends hurt terribly and it had also brought up so much other pain. Suddenly I had an emotional connection with millions of prisoners and their loved ones around the world, and I didn't want it. I kept thinking that no matter what I wanted with my life, I would either end up dead or in prison so why bother doing anything. My chest ached constantly and it occurred to me that maybe I would go mad. I thought that certainly I couldn't be an activist any more.

Around this time, we had a book *Coming Back to Life* by Joanna Macy from the town library. I read the sentence, “a heart, broken open, can contain the whole world.” I clung to this sentence in the weeks that followed. In little bursts and big waves I let in the pain that I had been fighting off (literally holding my breath to keep it out). I thought about all those folks in prison, I thought about my friends, I thought about the state of the earth and of capitalism and the chances we had of turning it all around. I thought about the possibility that we wouldn't manage it after all. It hurt like hell and it broke my bleeding heart, and I wanted to die rather than keep on living and have to see us fail.

It wasn't a graceful process, but it is an ancient one. It helped me to think of those who have endured and come out the other side. I learnt in that time not to use ‘greater

suffering' as an excuse to avoid my own. Instead I came to see my willingness to face my own pain as a small tribute to those who have had no option but to feel theirs. It gave me strength to hear Sweet Honey in the Rock singing "I don't know how my people survived slavery. I do remember; that's why I believe."<sup>2</sup>

What I was facing was despair, which is the natural response to overwhelming grief. Pagans see this as part of a natural cycle, the lowest ebb, the longest night, when it seems like dawn is never going to come.<sup>3</sup> But it does. And we come out the other side, stronger, closer, braver, with new insight, and having let go of that which is not necessary. Faith is the larger context or container, the knowing of these cycles, which can hold even our despair.

This process asks a lot of us—it asks that we relinquish conscious control and trust our unconscious selves. We live in a society where most of us have so little control over the basics of our lives—we have no piece of land on which we are guaranteed a place to stand, to grow food, and to shelter, no community where our inherent value is seen. A deep, abiding relationship with our own soul is not encouraged. Without these things, it is hard to feel that we ever have enough and easy to become addicted to power and control.<sup>4</sup>

While resisting and working to overthrow capitalism, we must strive to meet the needs of the soul and to recover a sense of wholeness which will allow us to form mutually nurturing relationships. We cannot fully meet our spiritual needs under capitalism. Neither can spiritually starved folks sustain the confusion, exhaustion and sheer heartbreak that accompanies revolutionary struggle. We must do both.

Embracing spirit has not taken me away from the earth or the fight to defend it.<sup>5</sup> It has reminded me what I am fighting for. I am fighting for this grapevine, the bees that pollinate it, the joy I get eating fresh-picked grapes. I am fighting for the deep sense of belonging that is possible when we enter into right relation with others and with the earth. I am fighting for the breath-taking, tingling feeling I get when hope strikes.

Spirit strengthens and clarifies my desire to create communities of resistance; places where political struggle is grounded in a passionate love for each other and the earth.<sup>6</sup> In this context, spirituality is no mind-numbing drug, but rather an antidote to the apathy and cynicism of our age. Spirit gives me the certainty that change is possible and my voice is necessary.

***"Power of the universe knows my name/ gave me a song to sing and sent me on my way/ standing here for justice, I believe." Sweet Honey in the Rock<sup>7</sup>***

## Notes

1. Joanna Macy has written a lot about the connections between Buddhism, deep ecology and griefwork. This quote is from *Coming Back to Life*, a manual of exercises for opening our hearts and motivating action in defense of the earth.
2. 'I Remember, I Believe', from the album *Sacred Ground* by Sweet Honey in the Rock.
3. It was Barbara Mor's introduction to her and Monic Sjo's book, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, that moved me to examine and embrace natural cycles in my own life. This cyclical pagan view is in direct opposition to the idea, maintained in some Christian and New Age ideologies, that we should reject the physical world and the night for heaven/enlightenment.
4. In the book, *Truth or Dare*, Starhawk writes a lot about addiction and its roots in our oppressive capitalist culture. She examines the 12 step recovery process as a rare and positive community-building movement in our time.
5. Starhawk says "Spirituality promotes passivity when the domain of spirit is defined as outside the world. When this world is the terrain of spirit, we ourselves become actors in the story, and this world becomes the realm in which the sacred must be honoured and freedom created." *Truth or Dare*.
6. The faith I place in loving community has been nurtured by many works of bell hooks and by M. Scott Peck's book, *A Different Drum*.
7. Sweet Honey in the Rock, *ibid*.

# Working across class: a struggle for solidarity

Hana Plant

**F**or a long time now I have been thinking about class and what it means. I remember walking in a 2007 May Day protest, yelling ‘1 2 3 4 no war but the class war’. At the time I wasn’t sure what on earth ‘class war’ meant, and it seemed like no one else did either. Since then more people (especially men) have gotten into class-struggle Anarchism. While I celebrate and embrace this shift, I feel that we should get clearer on this concept called class if we are to begin the hard work of mobilizing ‘the multitude’, which is us and all the other people who are exploited by this capitalist society. In this essay, I argue that we need to bring together an economic and a social analysis of class if we are serious about class struggle. Particularly, I am interested in discussing the ways in which we can give up power and learn how to stand in solidarity across class.

I have noticed that there is more than one definition of class operating in the New Zealand Anarchist scene. I think this is a source of much confusion. On one hand it is seen as an economic relationship, on the other a socio-economic oppression. When we talk about class struggle, we generally use class in an economic sense. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx writes: “Society as a whole is splitting up into... two great classes facing each other – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat”(Marx, 1848). After Marx, I will use the terms bourgeois (capitalist) and proletariat (worker) to describe this specific (economic) power relationship. Here the distinction between classes is not one of income or status, but the means by which a person derives their income. The bourgeoisie own the means of production and in this way control the proletariat, who have no choice but to sell their labor for a wage. The bourgeoisie then pay the proletariat less than the true value of their work in order to make a profit.

According to this view, all workers have an interest in an economic revolution that would end this exploitative relationship. This (economic) analysis of class provides a useful way to understand exactly what makes capitalism capitalism. To my mind, the most important thing this analysis offers is the insight that capitalism cannot be changed by bosses, charity, or ethical consumer choices. Instead it is up to us, the great majority who are exploited under capitalism, to stand together and take back control of our labor/life.

However, an economic analysis of class is not enough. Anarchists talk about class in a social sense when we want to address socio-economic power differentials. Often this is framed in terms of accessibility: “this scene is totally middle-class”, “making this community space vegan/vegetarian will exclude the working class” or “we should poster in lower class suburbs too”. This kind of talk shows that we are conscious of, and care about, social class differences. No one would deny that there is a power difference between a lawyer and a cleaner, yet both of these people belong in the proletariat. While the lawyer makes more money, the difference is not economic in the way Marx meant. To me, there is no question that middle class people in New Zealand society are privileged in relation to working and underclass people. So what makes up a power difference other than an economic relationship? We need to look at this problem squarely and devise ways to challenge it.

On a website called ‘Class Action’ I found the below quote summing up an understanding of class that integrates monetary, cultural and social factors:

“Class affects people not only on an economic level, but also on an emotional level. Class is a relative social rank in terms of income, wealth, education, status/position, and/or power...class is comprised of economic capital (how much you have), social capital (who you know), and cultural capital (what you know)”  
([www.classaction.org](http://www.classaction.org)).

This analysis gives us a starting point for exploring some of the complexities around class. To distinguish this from an economic analysis, I will refer to this understanding as *social class*.

Deconstructing privilege on a variety of levels is necessary if we are to work across class. Yet more and more Anarchists who are interested in class-struggle choose an economic analysis to the exclusion of social class. Furthermore, some Anarchists feel that social class in itself is a divisive and counter revolutionary concept. One fear is that deconstructing (social) class privilege within the proletariat will lead us to forget who the real enemy is (the bourgeoisie). Another is that naming social identity groups within the proletariat will lead to essentialism, that is, fixed ideas about what separates one group from another. While these are valid criticisms, I do not think the answer is to reduce class to an economic relationship. To a grave extent the proletariat is divided, and the remedy is to address power differences rather than gloss over them.

Awareness of social class gives the working and under classes a way to describe their specific (albeit varied) predicament under capitalism, and the middle class a framework in which to limit their own power. Most class-oppressed folks are taught to subordinate themselves to more privileged class groups. Like all privileged groups, middle class people must maintain consciousness of the power this society affords them to dominate. They must take steps to let go of the social power they have been raised to expect, and commit themselves to recognising when prejudice against working and

under class people is at work.

Most middle class folks have been raised to fear, pity and despise lower classes than themselves. Unfortunately these prejudices do not disappear the moment they become Anarchists. It helps to listen to the voices of those oppressed, and acknowledge their reality. Too often, working and underclass people have had to hide their identity in activist groups. In her essay 'A Question of Class' Dorothy Allison writes: "I tried to become one with the lesbian-feminist community so as to feel valuable. I did not know that I was hiding, blending in for safety just as I had done in high school, in college." Raised in a cross-class environment, and trying to fit into a middle class scene, I relate to Allison's experience. I feel a pressure to accentuate the middle class aspects of who I am. Having to deny or hide an important aspect of oneself leads to a state of shame. Part of challenging a culture of silencing lies in resistance. If what we want is to create space for ourselves in anarchist circles, activists from working and underclass backgrounds must seek support to come to class consciousness and demand respect.

Middle class Anarchists often (semi-consciously) see those of lower classes as having more revolutionary potential than themselves. They conceive of the true working class as other and organising becomes something they do to a group rather than with. You hear this in the 'us' and 'them' language around class-struggle. These activists get more excited by a fast-food franchise picket than a teachers strike, even if they have more in common with the teachers. Not believing in or acknowledging social class explicitly, these people end up contradicting themselves by proclaiming they are in fact a part of the proletariat while at the same time seeing blue collar workers as an action hero to manipulate in the video game of class-struggle. While there is nothing wrong with wanting to work with people who have less class privilege than oneself, it is good to admit this power difference and take steps to change it. Without this critical consciousness, middle class folks are likely to position themselves as the enlightened vanguard, which defeats the purpose of Anarchism.

Related to this is the tendency for activists to simplify what it means to be oppressed by social class. As Dorothy Allison writes, "I have had to fight broad generalisations from every theoretical viewpoint...the poverty portrayed by left wing intellectuals was...romantic. The reality of self hatred and violence was either absent or caricatured." People with meaningful emotional, economic or social ties with working or underclass people know that organizing across class boundaries is neither easy nor glamorous. A better approach would be to discuss what we perceive to be the challenges about working across class and take a problem solving approach. The consequence of romantic talk around class-struggle is that it leaves Anarchists unprepared to deal with reality, and therefore more likely to stay in the armchair.

Politicised people are often put off relating to class-oppressed people by behaviour they feel uncomfortable with. Outrageously open sexist, racist, or homophobic attitudes are an example of this. While these attitudes are common across

‘the mainstream’, it is often oppressed-class folks who take the rap. Progressive middle class people who frown upon the man asking intrusive questions about lesbian sex, may well fail to notice the silencing which takes place when middle class men simply fail to take account of lesbian experience. In both cases, patriarchal behaviour is involved, yet one is seen as so much worse than the other.

Class privileged folks who want to engage with the lower classes must examine their discomfort and fear of ‘ways of being’ associated with lower class culture. They must learn to distinguish between the ways in which working and under class folks (like everyone else) perpetuate oppression, and the ways in which lower class culture is used as a scape goat.

***Solidarity*** is an essential concept for people of all class backgrounds committed to Anarchist class struggle. For those raised lower class who socialize or work in a predominantly class privileged environment, it is vital we maintain our connections. Bell hooks writes about the importance of this as a way to maintain resistance:

“My ongoing connection to the working class world of my origin has consistently served as the site of challenge and interrogation of my class values and political allegiances. Affirming and sustaining direct connections to that world continually compels me to think critically about class dynamics in this society.”

For me going home is always difficult because of the violence and child abuse perpetuated by my underclass father and his social group. There have been times in my life when I have chosen to disengage with this reality and spend more time with middle class family members. At the time, the hiding this entailed was a preferable choice to witnessing violence. Over the last few years I have decided to renew my ties and intervene in the destructive behavior as much as possible. I try to be loyal to both sides of my family, refusing to split myself in two.

I think that if middle class people want to work with folks who are more oppressed than themselves, it is important that they strengthen whatever working or underclass connections they have in their family, in-laws, workmates, or circle of friends. This work should be undertaken first, before trying grand-scale outreach or educational projects. This way middle class comrades are more likely to have a sense of class-oppressed people, as people with everyday, mundane struggles rather than pawns in an exciting game.

We want an end to capitalism because it is destroying our lives. We know we cannot achieve it single-handedly, no matter how radical we are as an individual or small group. If we are to organise among the multitude rather than in social groups, we need strategies to deal with the complications this presents. Social class is as real an oppression as any, and, as always, it requires the oppressed to come together and the privileged to sacrifice

power. Having an economic analysis of class should complement, not hinder, this process. Let us deconstruct the privilege that gets in the way of solidarity and start building a movement toward revolution.

**Books I used:**

The Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels

Class Matters: Where We Stand by bell hooks

Skin: Essays on Sex, Class and Literature by Dorothy Allison