

CRAC workshop
Intersectionality, anti-oppression and front-line struggles
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In some of his work, CRAC have discussed the idea that contemporary anarchism is defined by its political culture. One of the key elements of this culture is our stance against all forms of oppression, exploitation and domination; that is, the understanding that these systems are interlocking and thus work together to create stratified living conditions and life chances. However...

- ❖ How can we apply these principles to our organising practices? How can we go beyond the « grocery-list » phenomenon (simple enumeration of all systems of oppression)?
- ❖ How can we articulate the social realities that are lived at the intersections or points of junction of specific oppressions?
- ❖ How to deal with emotions which are evoked by reflections linked to dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression? (ex. denial, defensiveness, guilt, anger, etc.)
- ❖ Overall, what is your experience with these principles and practices? What are some of the challenges that you face in the day to day? What tools have you developed to put these to use?

These questions will be at the heart of discussions on this theme. Below we propose avenues of reflection which have emerged from our research, particularly from data gathered from anti-authoritarian feminists involved in radical queer, anti-racist, and anti-colonial networks.

1. DEFINING INTERSECTIONALITY OR ANTI-OPPRESSION

Understanding the multiplicity of situations of oppression

Oppression can be defined as illegitimate institutionalized power, built and perpetuated throughout the course of history. It allows certain “groups” to confer illegitimate dominance over other “groups”¹.

The following excerpt gives us an idea of the infinite multiplicity of social positions that can be generated by situations of oppression: “(gender), race, color of the skin, age, ethnicity, language, ancestral origin, sexual orientation, (*sexual practices, added by CRAC*), religion, socioeconomic class, skills, culture, geographical location, and status as migrant, Indigenous person, refugee, internally-displaced person, child or person living with HIV/Aids, in a conflict-zone or occupied territory, **determine together a person’s social status**”².

¹ The definitions in this workshop have been borrowed from Nathalie and Tasha’s Fantastical Anti-Oppression Workshop, QPIRG Concordia, not dated.

² AWID, cited in MORRIS, Marika et Bénita BUNJUN (2007). Faire de la recherche avec les cadres d’analyse féministe intersectionnelle. Pour saisir la complexité de la vie des femmes. Ottawa, Institut de recherche sur les

These oppressions are maintained and perpetuated at an institutional or systemic level: we can thus talk of sexism or patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, ableism, racism, colonialism, heteronormativity or ageism. An opposition to these systems is at the heart of the principles, be they formal or informal, upon which antiauthoritarians base their work.

Analysing the relations between different oppressions

Intersectionality is an approach or a tool that allows us to analyse how these situations of oppression relate and mutually reinforce each other. This analysis suggests that all systems of oppression are interlocking; that is, that people's realities are shaped by the simultaneous intersection of a multiplicity of social, cultural, economic and political dynamics.

Notwithstanding the theoretical relevance of this concept, it is often used by « specialists » seemingly disconnected from the grassroots who seek to understand oppression as it relates to those who are considered to be the most « marginalised ».

More and more organizers (notably in the Anglophone milieu) choose to use the term « anti-oppression » to explain their understanding of the effects and impacts of multiple oppressions. The advantage of this concept is that it allows us to work more explicitly with issues related to privilege in our stratified society. From the starting point – the recognition that peoples' differing social “positionalities” translate into power (status) – organizers put their energies and resources into the struggle against systems of oppression.

What then do we mean by anti-oppression?

Like intersectionality, the anti-oppression approach provides us with an analytical tool to understand how systems of power create inequality and injustice in the world. In other words, it can help us understand how certain « groups » have power and how other « groups » are subjected to that power. An anti-oppression framework helps us better understand society, history, current affairs here and elsewhere, dynamics in our workplaces and in our organizing spaces...

Following a workshop prepared by QPIRG-Concordia, the starting point for an anti-oppression framework is an understanding of ourselves as we fit into the world and of the roles we play in different relations of oppression. This role can be understood as stemming from those (in)visible privileges that **all** members of a dominant groups are granted *de facto* because of their social location. As we identify these positions of power, the anti-oppression framework allows us to identify the privileges from which we stand to benefit and how they mutually reinforce each other (that is, how different positions cumulate, overlay each other, and therefore confer more power). This implies becoming aware and naming the mechanisms of power that are active at the points of junction of different systems of oppression, to better combat them.

So it is not about adding up the issues related to gender, racialisation, sexual practices or age; it is the understanding that these different positions, together, create a situation in which a person lives with the effects caused by the interaction of a several systems of oppression. This understanding is part and parcel of **social analysis of context** (conjunctural analysis) and

influences organisers' **choice** of issues and actions. For example, many organizers who work within this framework have chosen to engage in solidarity work with those who are on the front-lines or what is commonly referred to as front-line struggles.

2. SOLIDARITY WORK WITH FOLKS IN FRONT-LINE STRUGGLES

A reading of the issues...

It is this understanding of lived social realities that brings antiauthoritarians to identify their position within the systems of domination, in other words, to become aware of their privileges and oppressions within our stratified society. On this note, it is important to recognize the fact that the vast majority of antiauthoritarian activists are White, have status or are Canadian citizens and have many years of post-secondary education under their belt. Along with providing tools to help analyse context and choose our struggles, the anti-oppression framework can provide guidance as to the choice of actions and the ways in which we engage in organizing on the issues that we choose to focus on.

How does this translate into practice?

Anti-authoritarians who work within anti-oppression frameworks consider that it is important to recognize that all struggles led by and for oppressed people and communities must also be their own struggles, and vice-versa. Concretely, this means supporting these struggles, by choosing to use their privileges to do so, all the while respecting the leadership of those directly affected.

In the field:

- For many activists (including pro-feminists) this means **being part of a support committee** with those who are threatened with deportation, with families of racialised youth who have been killed or brutalised by police, with Indigenous communities struggling here and elsewhere, with prisoners, etc.
- It is common practice for **affinity groups to endorse and support the ideas, activities or street actions of groups working on front-line struggles, even if the latter is not the main focus of their daily organizing** (by signing a public declaration, by helping with outreach, by facilitating access to resources, etc.).
- For some groups, **this solidarity work is more explicit and intentional than for others**. For example, Q-Team, a radical queer group, based on their analysis of the context, the requests for support they have received and the positionalities of their members, will choose to support groups working on anti-racist/anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles (ex. Queers against Israeli apartheid). Similarly, PolitiQ, struggling against heteronormativity and homonormativity, will engage in support work with transsexuals and transgender folks or, the Panthères Roses, who engaged in solidarity work with sex workers.
- What this means, in practice, is for those in positions of privilege **to recognise that role and to position themselves as allies** of a struggle that is led by those who are directly affected (this means helping with behind-the-scenes work). For example, a radical queer group whose membership is largely White and “educated” (read have several years of post-secondary education under their belt), following this analysis, will always try to **integrate into their activities some form of solidarity work with front-line struggles**.

Key ingredients:

- **Understand that our societies are based on an appropriation of power...** Following this perspective, power is the exercise of privileges with the intention and/or effect of keeping those privileges and maintaining the overall pattern of distribution of those privileges.

- **Identify our positionalities: our privileges, our oppressions.**

What do we mean by privilege?

- Rights, favours, advantages, or power that **ALL** members of a dominant group (e.g. men, whites, heterosexuals) are given, through the society's institutions and culture, such as the government, education system, family, etc.. Privilege is linked to norms, status, and power.
- Privilege and oppression can and do exist in the same body.
- The more privilege you have, the more power you will have access to.
- As members of privileged groups, we have systemic advantages that we're often not aware of, *because we are taught not to notice it.*

Once I identify my positionalities, what then?

This involves a whole process of self-reflection and learning. Certain tools developed by feminists in the past have been dusted off, renewed and adapted by antiauthoritarians (ex. the power line, workshops of white supremacy, language of domination).

- For certain people, this means **organising around their own social position**, to organise around a tactical identity (a « we ») to struggle against systems of domination; for example, women, queers, POC, without status, people with disabilities.
- For others, this means **positioning oneself as an ally**; although for some this concept is problematic, it has its relevance as it best describes that idea of using or not using one's power and privilege to support people who are directly affected in their struggles.
- **This position as ally implies venturing out of one's comfort zone:** this means taking a step outside of the zone or space within which we live in conformity with the privileges of the social group that we belong to. In other words, following our ethical compass and our reading of social issues, we reach out to communities living on the front-lines in order to work with them. This is **engaging in solidarity work with those who are directly affected.**
- **Depending on the situation, taking on the role of ally, without erasing oneself.** We engage in a delicate balancing act as we take on this role; between acting according to the needs identified by those directly affected and having a say as to one's own actions (self-determination). Being an ally is an awareness of our own power and privilege and a commitment to using it and/or not using it (whichever is appropriate) to support oppressed communities in their struggles (both individual and larger community struggles). These ingredients are not rules, but tools; they are not meant to immobilise people, but to empower them to be better allies.
- **Organize where people are located.** On the Anglophone scene, antiauthoritarians talk about community-based work. This might mean working closely with more or less mainstream community organisations or social movements, with civil servants, with local churches. This might also mean leaving one's black flag and revolutionary language at home.
- **Facilitate access to resources.** In order to facilitate the participation of people who are directly affected, it is important to create spaces that are as accessible as possible: childcare, food, translation towards several languages, access ramps and spaces that are adapted to those who are living with a disability; neutral toilets, etc.

- **Give ourselves the tools to create spaces that reflect antiauthoritarian values.** Taking note of our positionalities does not automatically lead to behaviour change or to non-hierarchical interpersonal relations. This learning is continuous and is facilitated when the real issues are named and discussed. Different groups seem to do this in different ways :
 - **Informal**
Because of the affinities we share, we agree on certain values, analyses, ways of being and doing, websites or tools that everyone reads individually... there is fluidity in the group that allows us to work together based on shared values... This creates the possibility “to be called on your shit”! And, because we share a political culture, we don’t necessarily have to set up formal practices or tools... the process is more organic.
 - **Formal**
Others use more formal mechanisms and tools. Via moments for learning, be they anti-oppression workshops, skillshares, task rotation in order to limit specialisation and concentration of power, etc. Or, during meetings, groups might use the check-in/check-out, speaking lists (first time speaking; or according to differing positionalities), vibe-watchers, etc.
- We have also observed that certain factors tend to influence whether or not formal mechanisms are used:**
- **The everyday:** sharing a space on a daily basis or living together brings us to define certain ground-rules.
 - **Moments of convergence:** when different groups, each having their own internal culture, come together in a consulta, oftentimes certain practices will be defined at the beginning of the campaign.
 - **When a problem is identified:** we go get the tools we need to deal with the problem.

WRAP-UP

- Contemporary anarchism – that is about self-determination and self-organisation of individuals and communities – is a process of social and political transformation that functions by **contamination or pollination**.
- Given this, it is **not by ideological persuasion** that organising and support relations are developed: we are not in the business of convincing other people of our ideas via propaganda or rhetoric; instead, we seek to work together on different issues according to values that we hold dear.
- These moments of organisation and solidarity are lived moments, **practical experiences** that enable us to learn to interact and act according to our ethical compass.
- The **application of the anti-oppression framework** by antiauthoritarians is an example of this **process of transformation**.