

The Game of not Seeing the Game

How do we deal with power relationships within anarchist communities?

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“They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me. I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game.”

—R.D. Laing, *Knots*

I remember sitting in a circle, making tough decisions about how to respond to a community conflict that had escalated to the point of physical violence. It was a heated discussion. None of us knew what the fuck we were doing. We were angry. We were scared. No one wanted to be wrong.

Why would anyone be upset about violence? We weren't pacifists. The conversation was often steered away from the truth of people's experiences by others who exercised influence over the group.

But we had no leaders, right? Despite lacking official leadership, the unnamed power differences made it near impossible for everyone to share how they were impacted and what they knew. It was clear that some people had the power to shape the perspectives that were allowed, and it was clear that not everyone's experience or opinion would carry the same weight. While some of this may have had to do with systemic privilege, most of it had to do with other kinds of power. But we never talked about it.

Leadership and power differences are heavily stigmatized in anarchist communities and organizations. This makes sense. Time and time again, movements are co-opted by so-called leadership. Also, many of us have been a part of organizations and groups where concentrated power made us less effective, and easier to disrupt.

Probably the most pressing reason is that we live in a society based on power-over and power-under, and this is at odds with anarchist values and visions. In the dominant culture, power is primarily achieved by being above someone else, rather than coming from our own agency.

This means that people can either be in a position of supremacy, where our own empowerment requires the oppression of others, or we can be in a position of powerlessness, constantly blaming those with more power for our conditions and placing our fate in their hands. The two dynamics feed one another and therefore maintain the status quo.

Of course, we can occupy multiple positions, and different situations may grant us more or less access to privilege. No matter where you are positioned in society, this dynamic is at odds with our human need for autonomy.

If I am in a power-over position, I will constantly feel precarious, because rather than having true autonomy I am relying on an oppressive apparatus to give me power. If I am in a power-under position, my need for autonomy will never be met as I constantly look to the powerful to change their behavior and choices in order to make my conditions better.

Even though we envision and long for a different relationship to autonomy and each other, these two positions make sense as long as we live in industrial capitalism. I was in a workshop last year led by radical facilitator and author Miki Kashtan where she defined power as “the ability to mobilize resources to meet needs.”

We do not all have the same power in an oppression-based system. It is hard to locate our agency when the apparatus we are dealing with is massive and harmful. I am not suggesting that we simply need to make different personal choices. I am suggesting that we recognize ways in which we recreate power-over and power-under narratives and infrastructures, even informally, so that we can disrupt that pattern and stop it from feeding itself.

This is where the stigmatization of power differences comes in. As long as it is considered “bad” to have more power than someone else, we will not be able to openly address and make choices about power dynamics. With a stigma, there will always be incentive to deny that power difference exists.

Egalitarian spaces, and power sharing, do not come from removing power differences. They come from adequately naming and facing the truth about our varying power so we can openly dissent, consent, or both. If someone is punished for naming it, or for acknowledging that she has more power, even if that punishment is as simple as being labeled “bad”, we run the risk of being governed by power differences without our consent. This starts to look a lot like power-over and power-under.

I have had many experiences with anarchist groups that struggled with stigmatization of power difference. I was in one group where those with less power consistently became frustrated with lack of influence and access to resources, and looked to people with more power to grant them access or do things their way.

Meanwhile, people with more power, actually held more responsibilities and maintained more relationships. This meant that changing their behavior had high stakes for what they were working on. Rather than talking openly about this, people with power often made decisions behind closed doors to avoid being chastised, which further fueled the complaints about lack of influence.

Since anarchists tend to be much more comfortable talking about power as it relates to privilege and oppression, but not earned power or power based on capacity and ability, any discussion of power would center on societally-sanctioned privilege rather than other prominent types of power difference. This meant that people without access to certain privileges didn’t have their power positions discussed despite the influence on the dynamics of the group.

It meant that many issues that affected power dynamics for people with access to privilege never came to light. It perpetuated powerlessness for those with less power in the group, because their narrative and behavior focused on the powerful making different choices, and never actually changed the conditions under which those choices could only be made by a few. Anyone with power who named differences in earned power or capacity, would be accused of asserting power.

Sound familiar to anyone?

The first step toward power sharing is to recognize power differences as neither good nor bad. If power is “the ability to mobilize resources to meet needs,” then we may all have different access in different situations. Our abilities, capacities, earned power and trust, will always vary as long as we are unique humans.

It may intersect with societal privilege and oppression as well, and we could benefit from awareness of that. Regardless, measured equality is an unattainable goal as long as we are different beings with different gifts and challenges.

We cannot consent to, or change dynamics that we cannot discuss. We cannot discuss anything openly as long as it is in anyone’s best interest to pretend it’s not there.

I encourage anarchists to destigmatize the conversation. Shared power comes from consent and mutual responsibility, not equality.

Naming and facing power difference will allow groups to harvest the wisdom that comes from dissent, acknowledge unique contributions, and welcome each of us into responsibility and choice about dynamics that affect us all.

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