

Challenging privilege: on solidarity and self-reflection - About “problems that emerge when hierarchical relationships are established in the name of solidarity”

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Solidarity is not a one-way charity undertaking by privileged activists, but a multidimensional process that contributes to the emancipation of everyone involved.

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A German man is not impressed with the grassroots democracy project in Rojava because he has seen something similar decades ago in Latin America. A French woman reproaches Kurdish women for a lack of preparation for her visit because they are not as organized as the Afghan women she observed in the 1970s. A person passes as Rojava’s revolutionary insider after a one-week trip and without access to media and literature in any Middle-Eastern language, but his opinion is regarded as more legitimate and authentic than that of struggling people.

What do these people’s experiences have in common?

They all show genuine interest and care, and their efforts deserve due credit. But there’s something more: the element that underlies a system that enables people to complete the checklist of revolutionary tourism — in the past decade especially in Palestine and Chiapas, now in Rojava. This element is something that revolutionaries must actively problematize: privilege.

To clarify from the start: as someone who writes mostly for an international audience, who facilitates communication and encourages delegations to Kurdistan, I belong to the people who fundamentally value such exchange and work. But people who claim solidarity and who are in a privileged position that enables them to travel and be listened to have a moral obligation to use this privilege for the better. The intention of this article is to contribute to a conversation about problems that emerge when hierarchical relationships are established in the name of solidarity.

CHALLENGING PRIVILEGES

In a world of capitalist, patriarchal nation states, regarding oneself as a world citizen and opposing ideas of nations and states is an act of defiance. However, understanding oneself as an

internationalist revolutionary does not erase unequal conditions and privileges. One has to go further than that.

First of all, there is a series of material privileges and resources that one benefits from: passports of states that help one travel almost everywhere; speaking international languages and possessing a theoretical vocabulary that enables one to articulate and shape a discourse; mastering intellectual tools due to basic education, as well as sufficient time, security and money to provide for most of these things. The absence of war, death, destruction, displacement, starvation and trauma enables one to safely and comfortably conduct research, make long-term decisions and plans, and live by principles without much interference.

The very fact that one is able to sit down with some coffee, read up on a topic through sources written in Western-centric historiography, theory, language and epistemology is a privilege that the vast majority of people of color and workers do not have. And even if they did, they often lack the safe political environment to be able to discuss their findings.

The very fact that I am writing this piece also indicates the privilege of someone who is from an oppressed and marginalized group but who, relative to my own people, has access to some resources and advantages. Wherever there is privilege, there is an associated responsibility to challenge that privilege. The mere existence of privilege is not so much the problem, as is the creation of hierarchical relations and — unintentional — patronizing and appropriating behavior in solidarity work, which disrupts mutual understanding and progress.

Some people have expressed their astonishment about local people's ignorance concerning struggles similar to theirs on the other side of the globe, and have attempted to tone down a victim's discourse because his or her everyday reality is too much for soft Western ears to bear. Others have refused any form of self-reflection when being criticized for distorting the discourse on a people's struggle through imposing narratives in a way that is alienating to the people in question, suggesting instead that oppressed people should just be glad to receive any attention.

The problem lies in the ease of a privileged person's sense of entitlement with which they can write entire books on an entire region without ever visiting the place. It is the male whiteness of entire "radical" conference panels on struggles led by people of color. It is the famous white person's expression of sympathy for a cause that gives a heads-up to their followers to jump on the bandwagon. It is the speed with which causes concerning struggles over life and death are dropped like a hot potato if they appear to be more complicated than anticipated.

How convenient for a revolutionary, being able to brush responsibility and identity off one's shoulder without further complications! While many leftists from privileged countries often militantly stress that they do not represent any state, army, government or culture, they can easily analyze millions of people as one gigantic monolithic block. In erasing their own contexts, they often allow for themselves an individualistic, complex agency, thus feeling rather generous and charitable when discussing among themselves who "deserves" their support, while the Other is blurred into some abstract identity.

MEANINGFUL COMRADESHIP IN THE COLDEST NIGHT

The ways in which solidarity today is designed for the Western gaze has another devastating effect on movements: the competition between struggling people for attention and resources. Instead of building solidarity ties between each other, struggling people are forced to fight for Western leftists' care first, which pits communities against each other and is destructive to internationalism. As Umar

Lateef Misgar, a Kashmiri activist, points out: it is like an evolved form of colonial divide and rule.

Especially the white educated male has the luxury and privilege of being able to visit any site of revolution, to appropriate it as he likes, and then provide his critique of it, with no strings attached and without ever feeling the necessity of looking at his own backyard. Often with a sense of ownership without responsibility, he can attach himself internationally, detach himself locally and vice versa.

His identity transcends ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, sexuality, physicality, ideology, because he is the embodiment of the default, the status quo — barely does he live or know the meaning of deviance. He does not know that most struggles begin with a demand for recognition, a place in history, because he is the one writing it. Thus he often cannot grasp revolutionary motivations beyond theory.

That is why ideological purism allows him to so easily give up solidarity with struggles, which is perhaps one of the biggest expressions of his privilege: he can afford to be dogmatically ideologically pure; he can preach theoretical consistence, because his concern for a struggle is not a matter of survival but one of mere interest to him. He does not have to get his hands dirty. He can roll his eyes on the people who struggle for life, because he is not the one who has to balance ideals against all kinds of geopolitics, socio-economic realities, ethnic and religious conflicts, violence, war, tradition, trauma and poverty.

And that is why people can discard a cause just as quickly as they adopted it, because solving the mistakes, shortcomings, and obstacles that revolutions necessarily face would require an effort they are not willing to make — theoretical discussions or conferences with cake and coffee are more convenient sites for radical rants than the inferno called Mesopotamia.

When people do not receive the instant gratification, which their internalized capitalist mindset requires, in real-life struggles, they can drop historic moments of revolution quickly. The option to leave, to drop out of a cause when the initial romantic charm of it passes and the rawness emerges, is simply not available for people who struggle for life or death. True comradeship, after all, becomes meaningful not in sunshine, but in the coldest night.

LEGITIMIZED STRUGGLES PUT TO THE TEST

A while back, people on the far-left were writing articles on Rojava back and forth in a way that was out of touch with realities on the ground, through assumptions and themes that were non-issues to the people affected. Soon it turned into an exclusive inter-Western and heavily orientalist leftist discussion, where one white man was addressing the other, with neither having been to the region concerned or read more than the opinions of other white men online — with Rojava simply serving as the Third World trope on which all ideologies and assumptions could be projected.

Of course international critical analyses and perspective are crucial to revolutionary processes, but dogmatism, chauvinism and arrogance serve an opposite purpose. Nevermind the fact that these people were far from organizing revolutions in their own locations, yet they still felt in a position to authoritatively judge what makes a revolution and give guiding advice to people who form autonomous women's communes while fighting ISIS.

In a way, such misrepresentation and distortion is necessary to legitimize orientalist images and colonialist intervention. As Sitharthan Sriharan, a Tamil activist elaborates, "privileged leftists often help produce and reproduce the very forces they claim to be against in the actions they perform."

It is interesting to see how struggles that have been legitimized over the course of decades by the thousands of people participating in them are being put to a leftist litmus tests that must pass Western judgment before qualifying for care. Such assumptions harm liberation movements in the sense that they refuse to give appropriate attention and accurate representation; they can actually cause significant political, social, economic and emotional damage, perpetuate misinformation, and delegitimize whole struggles through the domination of discourse by detached groups.

These attitudes fundamentally stem from Eurocentric ideologies that established their cultural imperialism through colonialism, modernist dogmas and capitalism. The symbolic violence that portrays Western history as modern and universal manifests itself in the form of orientalism in the social sciences today and affects the way wide sections of the Western left understand solidarity.

CHECKING YOUR PRIVILEGE

The assumption that solidarity is one-directional, something one “gives” and the other “takes”, is flawed from the start. Solidarity today, especially in the age of information and digital technology, is expressed in a way that articulates a dichotomous relation between an active, thinking subject that “provides” solidarity with a cause and a group that can only react as a passive object without the right to give critical feedback about what kind of solidarity is required.

The solidarity givers can appear from nowhere, erase their own contexts and entitle themselves to dominating the discourse. They are granted an observant bird’s eye view, enabling distanced analytical perspectives and authority, due to supposedly being “impartial”. This immediately creates a hierarchy and the expectation that the group receiving the solidarity is supposed to demonstrate gratitude and deference to the solidarity giver, leaving the group “receiving” solidarity to the mercy of the person granting help. This often marks the end of solidarity and the beginning of charity.

However, oppressed groups are under no obligation or responsibility to provide anything back. As my dear friend Hawzhin Azeez points out from Kobane: “We should not thank privileged people for checking their privileges and doing the right thing. We should expect no less from them because this is the underlying unspoken assumption about ‘solidarity’.”

People claiming allyship must be willing to take up the burden of hard work. They should remind themselves of their privileges and constantly challenge and undo them in order to use themselves as tools to amplify the voices and the principles of the movements they claim to stand in solidarity with — instead of becoming the voice or the embodiment of the struggle themselves. They should not expect gratitude and medals of honor for being ethical, certainly not from marginalized people who are just glad someone is speaking about their existential struggle.

FROM CHARITY TO SOLIDARITY, TEACHING TO LEARNING

The Kurdish freedom movement utilizes “criticism and self-criticism” as productive and ethical mechanisms to improve oneself, the other, and the group. Criticizing another means also being able to criticize oneself. Criticism is not meant to harm others, but is fundamentally based on empathy, honesty and problem-solving.

Solidarity work certainly does not immunize anyone from criticism. On the contrary, it requires it. It even fundamentally relies on it, in order to be ethical. But, to date, solidarity work from the Eurocentric left has been largely devoid of this type of criticism, highlighting the stumbling blocks in the Western left and its inability to organize or even discuss on grassroots premises. Fundamentally,

a true revolutionary is one who begins the revolutionary process internally and who starts with themselves.

Solidarity is not a charity undertaking, but a horizontal, multidimensional, educational and multidirectional process that contributes to the emancipation of everyone involved. Solidarity means to be on an eye-to-eye level with one another, to stand shoulder to shoulder. It means to share skills, experience, knowledge and ideas without perpetuating relations based on power. The difference between charity and solidarity is that one calls you “inspiring” and wants to teach you, while the other calls you “comrade” and wants to learn.

To tackle these issues, it is not enough for every individual to just self-reflect. We actually need a new solidarity paradigm within which we systematically challenge appropriation and power abuse and secure mechanisms of mutual education and perspective exchange.

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P.S.

* “Challenging privilege: on solidarity and self-reflection”. May 4, 2016:
<https://roarmag.org/essays/privilege-revolution-rojava-solidarity/>