

Tactics for the Fight Against Abuse

Learning from Anti-Fascism

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The Size of the Problem

We live in a culture of abuse. With acknowledgement that these numbers are insufficient due to underreporting: more than 60% of adults in the so-called United States have experienced at least one ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience) and a quarter of adults have experienced three or more ACEs. Over 33% of women and 25% of men have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Systemic marginalization and oppression increases one's vulnerability to intimate violence: disabled women experience intimate partner violence at a rate 40% higher than non-disabled women, 45.1% of Black women and 40.1% of Black men have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetimes, 43.8% of lesbian women and 61.1% of bisexual women have experienced intimate partner violence at some point in their lifetime, 26% of gay men and 37.3% of bisexual men have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime, more than half (54%) of all transgender people have experienced some form of intimate partner violence, immigrant women experience domestic violence at 3 times the national average, and low income women are five times more likely to experience intimate partner violence than wealthier women.

Abuse, the logical conclusion of intimate authoritarianism, is not only rampant in our society, but it is the fabric that holds much of the hierarchy together. For far too long have radicals considered abuse to be an unfortunate, but sadly inevitable, expression of individual pathology, rather than as the territory of political conflict and oppression that it is. I have challenged this myth about abuse in more depth in previous essays, and so will instead focus this essay on expanding upon my call for radicals to apply the same logic and tactics we leverage against fascists to the intimate authoritarians we find afflicting our movements.

The Limitations of Reform

Liberals frequently oppose anti-fascist tactics like deplatforming and physical confrontation on the grounds that it would be, according to them, more effective if we took the time to speak to fascists and win their hearts and minds over to our cause. Most radicals dismiss and laugh off as liberal bullshit the idea that we should pour our energy into the reform and redemption of people who are organizing to steal our autonomy and our lives, and yet can turn to survivors of abuse with the same liberal demand to prioritize saving the souls of our abusers at the expense of our safety and the effectiveness of our anti-abuse political project. This is at least in part because many radicals continue to understand abuse as something that happens outside of politics, a result of individual pathology to be corrected rather than an expression of an authoritarian values system to be confronted.

What results from treating abuse as something to be reformed on the individual level is not dissimilar from what results when we treat fascism as something to be reformed on the individual level: there are some fringe cases of fundamental change, a larger portion of perpetrators that learn to change their language or methods while maintaining their authoritarian values (usually resulting in a shifted or expanded capacity to do harm, not less), and a majority of cases where little to no change happens at all, all at the cost of an extraordinary amount of time and resources.

Batterer Intervention Programs (BIPs) are programs that seek to rehabilitate individual abusers through various methods, many of them informed by feminist analysis of abuse. The purpose of these programs is to teach abusers skills for nonviolent communication, understand and regulate their feelings, and resist from acting on their desires to control their partners or family members. While these programs sound like the perfect tool in theory, in practice their impact on abuse leaves much to be desired. While they often do reduce recidivism as measured by the State (and only modestly), survivor reports indicate no decrease in abusive behavior. This suggests that BIPs may change some abusers, but most either get nothing from these programs or learn how to be abusive in ways that will lessen State involvement while still resulting in power and control over their victim(s).

For Restorative Justice interventions on abuse there is even less data than there is for the success of BIPs, but the same dynamics can be seen when they are treated as the sole acceptable intervention on abuse. Rarely do we even see them applied with any sort of real vigor, as typically all the abuser has to say is that they want to be “accountable” and many in their community will declare that as Restorative Justice Completed! However, even when a full process is attempted, it can often serve to reestablish the abuser’s credibility in the community while their survivor is retraumatized by the process and the abusive dynamics of the relationship are replicated. The survivor is pressured to attend talks with the abuser, sideline their own needs and boundaries in order to center their abuser’s redemption, and accept that the goal is ultimately to restore the conditions that the abuse originally sprung from (the abuser is “restored” to their original social position within the community). Because Restorative Justice processes are largely designed with the intention of addressing the harm that springs from a single incident (a robbery, a singular physical assault, etc.) it is a process frequently unequipped to address abuse, which is not the result of a singular incident of harm but of a broader context of entrapment and control over time and is an expression of the abuser’s core values system.

While an abuser or a fascist coming to understand their values system as reprehensible and in need of rejecting, thus ceasing to be an abuser or fascist, is the best case scenario we can hope for, organizing our energies towards that end will never be adequate in responding to the violence they do nor does it serve to protect those most vulnerable to their political projects of control and domination. Our resources

are limited and the threat is immense and growing by the day. What is required of us is to understand that the authoritarianism expressed by abusers is as dangerous and reactionary as authoritarianism expressed by fascists. To understand that, in fact, the authoritarianism of fascists and the authoritarianism of abusers have their roots in the very same values system and work together as forces of oppression. With that understanding our goals in bashing back against abuse need to be informed by what tactics are most effective in establishing safety for survivors and in disrupting abusers' ability to gain and maintain power.

Deplatforming

Abuse does not happen in a vacuum. As I've discussed in other essays, abuse occurs in a context. The context that entraps victims can and frequently does include a myriad of interpersonal tactics employed by the abuser that play off of communal and structural contexts that enforce that control. Frequently, effective abusers have institutional or other forms of social power, are well liked and held to high esteem, have access and sway in many different spaces their victims are disempowered in. Abusers who have any kind of significant social platform can and do leverage that platform to find new victims, to find allies, to maintain control, to silence survivors who would otherwise speak out, and to punish those who do attempt to challenge them.

As with fascists, deplatforming an abuser is a necessary and effective tactic. While, like with fascists, it does not stop an abuser from being an abuser or fundamentally change their values system, it is a significant form of harm reduction that can limit the scope of the harm they can enact, their access to past and present victims, their access to new victims, their ability to rally their allies, and their ability to organize against their survivor's interests. Deplatforming can look like running abusers off social media, out of their positions of power, out of community spaces, and more. Abusers show their willingness to leverage what power they have to control and co-opt the autonomy of others; therefore, disarming them of that power can increase community safety, survivor autonomy, and establish anti-abuse social norms that puts every other abuser or potential abuser who witnesses it on notice.

Community Warnings and Call Outs

When anti-fascists uncover the identity of a fascist the next step is to release their information — name, face, relevant activity, location, history, etc. — to the public in the form of a community warning. Beyond posting this information online, anti-fascists find other ways to make those around the fascist aware of their identity

and beliefs, like, for example, calling their workplace, flyering their neighborhood, alerting their friends and family, etc. This has many different purposes that work towards the end of reducing the power of fascists, their ability to advance their political projects, and helps to make being a fascist an untenable and unappealing option.

These tactics can and do work to similar effect against abusers. Alerting the community properly can result in a significant hit to the abuser's ability to continue quietly collecting, abusing, and discarding victims. Flyering their neighborhood, calling their job, alerting their colleagues, friends, current partners, potential partners, etc. can even cut abusers off from some of the means they use to keep their victims entrapped such as their ability to leverage their economic power or social standing. As with fascists, it also communicates a strong message that being abusive results in a relentless attack on ones power and general peace of mind: a threat that – if consistently demonstrated to be true – depicts most abusers' worst nightmare.

Confrontation

While many liberals decry any use of violence that is not State-sanctioned, most radicals recognize that violence is simply another tactic that gains its moral weight from the context in which it is used. As nice as it would be for us to be able to use the tactics detailed above and see the fascist threat disappear, we are well aware that physical confrontation and violent resistance is necessary to push back the fascist threat. When fascists organize and work to build their power, anti-fascists are there to communicate just how dangerous being a fascist can be for one's health and well-being.

While the above tactics are useful in reducing fascists' capacities to organize and harm, reliance on nonviolent tactics alone is untenable. Some fascists are undeterred by attempts at deplatforming and are empowered/entrenched enough in their movement that community alerts do little to stop them. If we were not prepared to meet these fascists with violence, we would be leaving those most vulnerable to them open to attack. We know that fascists who are unopposed do not slink home in disappointment as some liberals like to claim. Instead, fascists who are unopposed and unafraid build power and do not stop building that power until they come up against a hard edge of resistance.

It is the same logic with abusers, even as some may balk at this suggestion. While some abusers may be deterred by the tactics above, many keep a grasp on much of their power and are entrenched enough in a surrounding community of allies and apologists that deplatforming and community alerts are insufficient to the task. The traumatizing nature of experiencing abuse should be and is reason enough

for violent resistance against abusers, but it seems important to take a moment to remind the reader that abuse does not always end in a mutual parting of ways of abuser and survivor. Each year approximately 4,000 women die because of domestic violence, and up to 75% are murdered *after* the relationship has ended. Women are more likely to be killed by an intimate partner or family member than by any other person. On a communal level: 68% of mass shooters have a history of domestic violence and 59% of mass shootings are directly tied to domestic violence (at least one victim of the shooting was a partner or family member of the shooter) and 20% of victims in domestic violence related murders are “corollary victims” (friends, family, bystanders who intervened, etc.) Successfully challenging abusers is very literally a matter of life or death for many.

We need to make being an abuser as hazardous as we endeavour to make being a fascist. Deplatforming and community warnings are useful tools but when they fail us or are inadequate to the task we need to not be restricted only to nonviolent methods. If an abuser will not do the work to reject their values system, will not step back from their positions of power, will not be deterred by social pressure, physical pressure becomes a necessity. Abusers need to be made afraid for their physical safety. Like with fascists, it needs to be demonstrated to them consistently that showing their faces in public and building their power can and will be responded to be force. Social norms need to be established that send a message to every abuser and potential abusers that abuse is not a safe activity for them, especially if they hope to keep all of their teeth.

Three Way Fight

Anti-authoritarians understand that the conflict against fascism is a three way fight: we are in conflict with both the State and with non-State reactionary forces, including those who experience aspects of State repression or even perform some forms of anti-State sentiment. Some wish to collapse the State and other reactionary forces into a solid and singular enemy, and while it is true that State and non-State reactionary forces are not entirely separate or unrelated enemies (far from it), it is reductive and dangerous to deny the multiplicity of authoritarian projects that exist within the political arena, or the possibility that they may conflict with each other while still remaining our enemies. Fascists who parrot populist language and say ACAB are not our allies. They are people who seek out more political power with which they can inflict their authoritarian values on others. This means, as anti-fascists, that we are in a three way fight with both the established system of power — the State — *and* with non-State reactionaries that seek to build their own power and advance their political goals. From this position we can recognize all calls to ignore or even work with fascist militias positioned against the current State, all

enemy-of-my-enemy logic, as the counter-productive and dangerous rot that it is. We have enemies in more places than just the machinery of the State, and ignoring the reality of the threat they pose to vulnerable people and movements for liberation in general can only happen at our peril.

As there can be fascists who see the authoritarian State as their enemy, so, too, can there be abusers who see the authoritarian State as their enemy. One does not have to have consistent anti-authoritarian values to be against the system as it is. In fact, the source of some people's rage at the authoritarian system as it stands is not the fact that it oppresses others and robs them of their agency, but instead their feelings of entitlement to power over others that the system keeps from them. Like fascists, intimate authoritarians may indeed position themselves against the current system in order to build power for themselves, but that does *not* automatically make them vital members of the struggle against authoritarianism.

Many radicals who would scoff at the idea that we need to ignore or even make room for fascists who claim they are anti-State because of our supposed "common enemy" frequently turn to survivors with the very same argument: that to oust our abusers would compromise "unity" or otherwise weaken us in our struggle against more powerful enemies. The reality remains, however, that authoritarianism, domination, and control are not the sole property of the State, nor — as evidenced by fascists who attack the State — only advanced by its mechanisms. A fascist ignored or accepted in an anti-authoritarian movement becomes a fascist with unfettered access to countless vulnerable people they intend to disempower and control. An abuser ignored or accepted in an anti-authoritarian movement will do the same. Our fight is not unidirectional. It is against all forces that wish to constrict, co-opt, and wipe out the autonomy of others. Our strength comes from our consistent rejection of those values and our willingness to meet them in battle on *any* front they may appear. Were they go, we go.

Centering Survivor Autonomy

The conditions of abuse constrict and co-opt the autonomy of the survivor. Thus, challenging those conditions adequately requires taking actions that expand and honor the survivor's autonomy. While I have outlined effective tactics and practices that can be leveraged against abuser power, this is ultimately the most important and central component to responding to abuse.

The survivor is the expert in their own needs. They have been, or are still, entrapped in a situation where someone (or multiple people) have denied their needs as worthy of consideration and rejected their self-knowledge as silly, ridiculous, naive, or worthy of punishment. In the fight against fascism we center (or at least *should* center) the needs, vulnerabilities, and perspectives of those most affected by

the fascist project, and so must we with survivors when we work to challenge abuse. A survivor has been living in the conditions of abuse and knows the intricacies of those conditions, the tactics of their abuser, their level of safety, what methods may work to regain their autonomy and which ones would further endanger them better than any outside observer can. This means that, even when we have a toolbelt full of tactics to deploy against their abuser, we must follow the survivor's lead, instead of being yet another person who denies them their agency. They know their context, and each survivor's context is ultimately unique to them. If they reject a tactic for their situation, that rejection must be honored.

There is more that can and must be done to center survivor autonomy than just dealing with abuse on a case by case basis, just as we resist fascism on a broader scale than attacking individual fascists. Among these is something difficult to quantify, but vital to practice: keeping an eye to power and how it functions among us. What are the mechanisms in your community that an abuser has leveraged to their advantage? The centralized power structure in an organization? The ability to perform to social scripts and niceties that gives them social power denied to the people unable to do so? Do people in your community generally believe that controlling behaviors (looking through a partner's texts, stalking, extreme jealousy and restricting friendships, etc.) are romantic? Is hitting, screaming at, degrading children considered acceptable? Who didn't believe the victim, and for what reasons? Just as we work to resist fascism on a broader level by putting in the time to understand it as an ideology, seeing its place in our political system, becoming aware of what people have at stake in organizing for it (building their personal power), and then challenging it in each of those arenas, we must also do so with intimate authoritarianism.

Centering and building survivor autonomy as a political project has material demands as well as ideological ones, just as anti-fascist work does. Fascist and abusers are empowered in our society, even if mainstream culture occasionally provides lip service of rejecting them. They leverage systems that *already exist* in a hierarchical society in order to build their own power. Building survivor autonomy, then, requires we work to bring the systems that create hierarchy (cisheteropatriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, capitalism, the State!) crashing down at the same time we also build ways of being that do not depend on the hierarchy to function, this can and already does appear in the form of mutual aid. Survivor networks are filled with survivors providing what mutual aid we can to one another: a place to stay, help moving, defense against a dangerous abuser, childcare, etc. Imagine, for a moment, an anti-authoritarian movement that saw abuse as an important territory for both resistance and mutual aid. How might that loosen the contextual nets that keep so many survivors entrapped? How many more people would see our projects as sites of potential liberation, rather than yet another place they become vulnerable to abusers?

As lovely and important as that image is, as an anarchist survivor I feel compelled to end this essay with bared teeth rather than open arms. We live in a culture of abuse, and it is apparent to most survivors that many people are more content to flow along with the social status quo than to challenge abuse when it is inconvenient for them, no matter how many times they posted #believesurvivors during the MeToo movement. The rehabilitation of our abusers is frequently of far more concern than our wellbeing or autonomy, because to challenge the former and expand the latter always requires a massive upheaval, a total rejection of the social and material context that created the abuse. In other words: a revolution. As a survivor of childhood and intimate partner abuse, I demand nothing less than that revolution. I demand upheaval. I demand an anti-authoritarian movement in which all authoritarians — anyone who believes it is acceptable to restrict, co-opt, or destroy someone else's autonomy for their own power and gain — are acknowledged as what they are: our political enemies.

Anarchist Archive

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