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# Feminist Power

Osa Atoe

2010

Everyone's different, so not everyone's going to agree about whether feminism is still relevant or necessary. I mean, if you're a middle class, college educated white lady with a sensitive white guy boyfriend and you feel liberated cuz you have a hyphenated last name, maybe you feel like the coast is clear and that women are no longer oppressed and we don't need feminism anymore. I'm only saying this because I read this blurb about how Venus magazine has changed hands and how the new publisher says that feminism is outdated and no longer relevant to their magazine. I'm not an avid Venus reader so this decision barely affects me at all, but it did make me want to use the space I have to explain why I think that the idea that feminism is irrelevant is bullshit.

Even though I'm black and gay, I don't really identify as oppressed because I live in the U.S. and I can live where I want and travel around and I have a roof over my head and I've had a lucky life with relatively minor things to complain about. But I don't feel like we still need feminism because I specifically believe that all women are oppressed relative to men (I believe something way more complicated about that relationship that would take a whole other column to explain). I believe that-

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feminism is still relevant because it speaks to the necessity to generally redefine power in our society and globally. If you've read any news lately, how can you not agree that we obviously need a new understanding of power if we want any peace?

When we were starting the Portland chapter of Anarchist People of Color in 2003, I remember sitting in the small group that comprised us, talking about how we wanted to define ourselves. You know, one of those boring activist conversations that seems to never end, but that we were 100% invested in having at the time. I remember talking about how even though I considered myself an anarchist, in my heart, I identified with feminism the most and I wanted that to somehow be reflected in our organization. Lurette, my fellow organizer (who I recently just got back in touch with: Hey, girl!), expressed that there were aspects of feminism that she just couldn't relate to. She was probably thinking of Andrea Dworkin! I told her I felt the same way about anarchism, picturing Rick Mackin and his ilk, in all their manarchist glory. We decided to compromise and define ourselves as an anarcho-feminist group, and since then I've been able to see more and more clearly—in theory and in real life—how these two concepts work together and help us think of new ways to redistribute and rethink power dynamics. We decided to take the best of both of those worlds and leave the rest behind.

I could use war, or border politics or the U.S. Government as examples of why and how anarcho-feminist ideas can change your community and the world, but I'm going to use a far more simple example. And why not get personal since the personal is indeed political?

As you may well know, I set up shows in New Orleans for queer, female-fronted, and all-girl bands who pass through town on tour. I started doing it a year ago and at that point, I envisioned it as a collective. I set up a website for networking with bands & individuals and handed the password out to every girl or queer person I knew who was interested. I played

I want to give a shout out to the Bloody Rag Collective that is putting on shows for bands with women and trans folks in Chicago. I admire your collective approach and maybe one of these days we can overcome geography and join forces somehow.

music with lots of different women, and did my best to encourage them to start bands, have confidence in their skills and be involved with putting on shows. I got some help with flyering here and there, but mostly I did everything on my own. After months of operating that way, it inevitably became my "baby." I'm having fun doing it, and the process feels simple enough. I didn't realize until I talked to this fellow lady punk I know named Rachel the other day that a lot of women find the process of setting up a show daunting partly because of the technical aspects of it, for example, running a PA. I've been doing this stuff for a while now, and honestly I forgot that different people are at different stages of learning about it. I had actually begun to assume that most people weren't really interested in the process.

For me, being a feminist means, in part, learning not to put the idea of expertise on a pedestal. (Who knows, maybe this is something DIY culture taught me but I'm crediting it to feminism now. I guess in the end, it's all one and the same to me.) Somehow along the way, I realized that prioritizing technical knowledge over experiential knowledge is patriarchal. It's like how you might have a girl friend who never claims to know how to play music even though you've seen her play guitar in her bedroom a million times. What is that perceived gap between playing music and calling yourself a musician? What does it mean to "know how" to do something? Why isn't the action of doing something evidence that you know how to do it? Why do people, especially women, convince themselves that they don't know how to do things they already do? Why is it perceived that there is only one correct way to do something and that you probably need to take lessons or read a manual in order to learn it? (Is that enough questions for ya?)

Knowledge really is power. Convincing yourself or allowing yourself to be convinced that you don't or can't know things is dis-empowering. I recently checked out this book from the Iron Rail called *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance,*

*Solidarity* by Amy Allen. In all honesty, it's a little bit dry but not overly academic, so if you're excited about the topic, it'll be a pretty easy read. Plus, it's pretty short, and it's especially great if you've read this kind of thing before but you need a refresher because it's pretty straight-to-the-point.

Allen breaks down three ways of defining power: as a resource, as domination and as empowerment. Feminists who think of power as a resource are basically the ones who think of Hillary Clinton as their saviour. They see power as a resource that has been unequally distributed and they think everything will be fine once women have as much access to power as men. They want more female CEOs and politicians. They don't see anything wrong with the power structure as long as women have an equal place in it. They are dying to wear pantsuits—definitely not going to create the kind of change in the world that I'd like to see.

Feminists who see power as domination define all women as oppressed compared to all men. They wish to end male domination and see power as something defined only by patriarchal violence and the subjugation of women. This conception of power is very black & white and relies on a strict dichotomy, and it doesn't do a very good job accounting for how race, class and numerous other factors change the experience of power for men and women. Plus, not everyone's either a man or a woman, right? This idea of power is compelling, but not the real deal.

Then there's the idea of power as empowerment. I was talking to this woman Gia, who helps to run a woman of color lead space in New Orleans called Gris Gris Lab and she said she doesn't like the word "empowerment" and prefers to talk about "building power." We didn't get to go in depth about it, but I assume she thinks that saying "empower" can give the idea that the group or individual you're referring to has no power and needs to be given power from an outside source. Obviously,

that's not what I believe and I don't think that's what Amy Allen is getting at, either.

Empowerment is just a new way to define power—not as domination, but as "the ability to transform oneself, others, and the world," writes Allen. It means that if you have confidence, skills or knowledge, you don't lord it over other people or use it to bolster your own ego, you share it. The secret surprise is that you also get it back. It's about seeing power as a nurturing force in the world. Allen writes that the main influence for this idea of empowerment is motherhood (in its most ideal incarnation)—fostering growth, not submission through domination. This type of power benefits everyone, not just women, and it can be applied to a variety of relationships, not just ones between women and men. It also works really well with anti-authoritarian and non-hierarchical ways of organizing ourselves. Power *to* the people, not over the people, right? This is an old idea that has yet to gain the popularity it deserves.

Tell me, how are these ideas no longer relevant? Until they are widespread and mainstream, they will continue to be relevant.

Anyway, back to my story. I am unintentionally hogging No More Fiction but I've realized that, and I'm ready to turn it over to the people in the interest of empowering queer punks and lady punks to create their own events and spaces in this city. Combining ideas about anti-authoritarianism with feminist ideas about redefining power should be central to the work we do, no matter how small the project. Even if I'm not psyched on putting on yet another folk-punk show, maybe that's an opportunity for another queer punk or lady punk to get practice putting on a show. Of course it's a two way street—people have to be interested and put in work to be involved. We're going to have a skillshare for queers & women this Thursday to share knowledge about the technical aspects of music that people often find mysterious and off-putting. I hope that event marks a change in the way NMF operates in this town from now on.