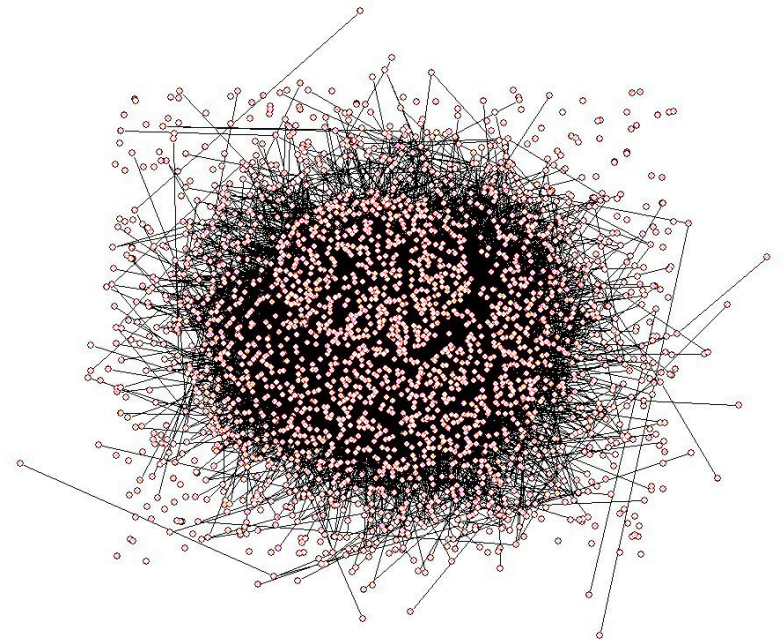


# The Conversations We Can't Have:

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## Social Capital and Violence in Radical Communities



Emmi Bevensee

- [1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information\\_flow\\_%28information\\_theory%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_flow_%28information_theory%29)
- [2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmwbcW4E35c>
- [3] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_system\\_%28systems\\_theory%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_system_%28systems_theory%29)
- [4] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_capital](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_capital)
- [5] <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Intimate-Partner-Violence-and-Sexual-Abuse-among-LGBT-People.pdf>
- [6] <https://mainweb-v.musc.edu/vawprevention/lesbianrx/factsheet.shtml>
- [7] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bari-zell-weinberger-esq/its-time-to-acknowledge-m\\_b\\_8292976.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bari-zell-weinberger-esq/its-time-to-acknowledge-m_b_8292976.html)
- [8] <https://wiki.lesswrong.com/wiki/Signaling>
- [9] [http://lesswrong.com/lw/jb/applause\\_lights/](http://lesswrong.com/lw/jb/applause_lights/)
- [10] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtue\\_signalling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtue_signalling)
- [11] [http://lesswrong.com/lw/gt/a\\_fable\\_of\\_science\\_and\\_politics/](http://lesswrong.com/lw/gt/a_fable_of_science_and_politics/)
- [12] <http://slatestarcodex.com/2014/09/30/i-can-tolerate-anything-except-the-outgroup/>
- [13] <http://www.overcomingbias.com/2010/06/near-far-summary.html>
- [14] <http://slatestarcodex.com/2016/07/27/post-partisanship-is-hyper-partisanship/>
- [15] <http://slatestarcodex.com/2016/07/27/post-partisanship-is-hyper-partisanship/>
- [16] [http://lesswrong.com/lw/i7/belief\\_as\\_attire/](http://lesswrong.com/lw/i7/belief_as_attire/)
- [17] [http://lesswrong.com/lw/i4/belief\\_in\\_belief/](http://lesswrong.com/lw/i4/belief_in_belief/)
- [18] <http://www.advocate.com/crime/2014/09/04/2-studies-prove-domestic-violence-lgbt-issue>
- [19] <https://libcom.org/blog/why-no-platform-still-relevant-trouble-liberal-anti-fascism-05012013>
- [20] <https://blog.patternsinthevoid.net/the-forest-for-the-trees.html>

Through these conversations we can strive to undermine and interrogate the hierarchical abuse of social capital in ourselves, and our communities, so that we can trade brittle and violent fallacies for flourishing and decentralized networks of intricate solidarity, invaluable earned trust, and meaningful accountability. We are all implicated in this critique, myself certainly included. But we can support each others growth and utilize accountability for those with an honest drive to participate. Most of us do earnestly want to eliminate violence and coercion but struggle with the how of it. We can make social capital non-hierarchical. *Cool kids fuck off.*

**made up of people are bad so we need a government**

*Big thanks to Megan Clapp, William Gillis, John Langley, Ahl Tamar, Jac Swift, Jackie Joslyn, Asta Bellamy, BlackCat, and Emma Buck for the insightful critiques and questions that helped flesh out this essay in addition to your unpaid copy-edits. May you be blessed with anti-authoritarian trust networks in your next lives. ; )*

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*Note: This essay is geared towards higher level conversations that organizers and folks deeply engaged in radical communities and thought are having.*

There are conversations that radicals are trying to have and also desperately avoiding. Conversations that push the edges of our frameworks into and past their limits, often with victims along the path. The problem is that we have created a somewhat rigid identity politic framework that — while succeeding in creating a message that is clear enough to reach a broad and mainstream audience — is often so inflexible that it wreaks havoc on the situations that fall outside of its scope or threaten its integrity with their liminality. Intersectionality has tried to address the complexity of our experience but much of the more radical implications have not yet caught on. In many situations we try to reach beyond the point where the discourse currently is without doing the necessary preliminary work of building the trust and nuance needed to parse complexity. To make these conversations even more difficult, people build social capital, or social power, around themselves along many often conflicting dynamics of intersectional privilege and marginalization. This social capital weaves into intersectional power dynamics that make certain needed conversations difficult or taboo.

### **Consent and Power**

Perfect consent is impossible in any dynamic where there are differentials of power, which is to say, literally every single interaction we have. We struggle as best we can to level the playing field and make our agreements meaningful. We wrestle with the limits of language and the ways we use it to communicate deeply subjective states and experiences across chasms of difference. We can only process so much information before our systems get overloaded and bogged down. These constraints, coupled with the coercion inherent in having power over another being, make consent an asymptotic process in which we can really only ever try our best and be accountable when it breaks down.

Consent is mediated by power differentials along structural, informal, social, physical, intellectual, and other forces in clearly discernible ways. For a grotesque example, if someone has power over one's potential career trajectory, there is an incentive to feign consent to that person's wishes, even if they do not explicitly leverage it in any way. The power is embedded even if it's never spoken. This example is illustrative of the way that power interacts with all of our interactions and agreements, extending to more subtle and also non-sexual contexts as well.

### **Intersectionality as Dynamic and Contextual**

Suffering is not easily calculated yet we, on the broad left, tend to keep a rough tally of someone's oppressed identities in our head in order to form rough sensitivity calculations. This is mostly not a bad thing. It's a necessary thing. But it's a process with stark limits that, if we apply too rigidly, can create errors with painful implications. The problem is that power does not strictly follow the patterns we have come to recognize within it. Power exists on many different levels that interact constantly and dynamically. The levels at which power interacts are nested but not with strict uniformity. The subjective impacts the interpersonal. All of which are interacting with each other and the micro and macro forces at play in a big mess of waveforms. These different levels can contradict each other if they are seen in strict silos rather than as information<sup>1</sup> flows<sup>2</sup> in open systems.<sup>3</sup> For example, a person can be oppressed structurally but enact certain forms of informal social power in radical spaces that overcompensate for the real obstacles that person faces. Power and domination can be both general and contextual.

By now many of us have interacted with a situation where a person who may be oppressed structurally but has used that oppression to justify or obscure their violence against another more structurally privileged person or someone of roughly their same level. This is because there is a certain type of social capital, or social power, that one can sometimes leverage in

also watch out, because if observed, you will be targeted. Such figures can be taken out though,<sup>20</sup> through a powerful enough coalition of consciousness, resistance, and brave survivors. There are a wide range of determinants, both nature (neurological architecture and genetics) and nurture (trauma, family of origin, and abuse history), as to why people become this way. These types of accusations should not be leveled lightly, as they are often watered down to mean anything and disproportionate punishments are handed out as a result, but neither should we flinch when they are due. These persons are quite possibly the most serious internal threats to activist communities.

(1) The word "sociopath" or the diagnosis of "sociopathy" are of course controversial terms with a wide range of usage and have been used to stifle dissent and neurodiversity. However, the phenomena described in the section above, as is understood by this term, stands as one of the most immediate internal threats to activist safety in radical communities so I have chosen to use the word for clarity of communication, acknowledging that it's complex. Use of this term should not hide the fact that many of these are tendencies that we all possess in varying degrees. We should not pathologize as a means of ignoring our own capacity for non-consensual sadism.

### **Flexible Heuristics and the Conversations We Need**

A firm and yet nuanced resistance to domination and coercion, as is presented in anti-authoritarian ethics systems such as anarchism, provide a more subtle and flexible instrument of assessment than a rigid deployment of identity based tallies. Anarchism asks us to acknowledge that power is dynamic; it is structural and also contextual. We should prioritize larger violences of course, but not to the extent of minimizing the gray areas. Furthermore, anarchism asks us to remain intellectually vigilant and discerning about the ways we can best mobilize meaningful consent in the face of complex distortions resulting from social capital and its ilk. From this lens, we can more delicately and effectively edge into the conversations that we are collectively stumbling through. We can start to meaningfully ask how we perpetuate domination, coercion, and violence even in our attempts to undermine them with love, empathy, and discernment. It is through this subtlety and slow trust-building that we can amass the humility and dedication necessary to overcoming violence in its diverse array of forms.

of the people who would minimize the brunt of my argument are either the people I describe, currently in the snares of some such figure and in denial, incredibly lucky, not paying attention, or just haven't been in radical communities for long enough. Swim in the fringes and with the outliers, nerds, socially awkward, and weirdos of a radical community for long enough and people will start to come to you with the stories of the abusers that put the knife in, twisted, and then denied the existence of the knife publicly and had too much social capital for anyone to take the accusation seriously.

If you find these people in your circles, do whatever is necessary to protect yourself and those most at risk. Accountability and restorative justice processes are preferable whenever possible but most of the time with The Worst Kind of Asshole they will either flatly deny everything or fake their way through it, often at repeated harm to the victims. They cannot be trusted and there is no ethically graceful way to deal with them (maybe put them all on an island with only Steem as their economy?) except for no platforming,<sup>19</sup> removing them, warning the communities they migrate to, and physically protecting the victims. Some tell-tale signs to look out for are a string of quiet accusations from those that are noticeably less likely to defend themselves, especially publicly, wide reaching charisma, embrace of authoritarian ideas in intimate contexts, and skillful manipulation of social justice discourse and norms. Much of the time though, you need look no further than the center limelight of your community movements. Just ask, who would I feel unable to question? Who do I feel like has enough power to get away with something? Who do I feel afraid to have a needed conversation about? Does this person have a partner whose social capital almost entirely relies on their connection to this social capitalist? Chances are that the Worst Kind of Asshole got to that position with full knowledge of what they were building and why. Once you've spotted them, warn people and defend yourself. Subvert their power as best you can but

radical spaces due to the difficulties and delicacies inherent in calling that person out if they are oppressed in other ways. This is tricky of course because, in the instances of say, a trans person assaulting a cis person, or a person of color abusing a white person, there are no doubt structural influences and traumas that in part led to these incidences and certainly color the way we seek to enact or minimize accountability. We know that in, for example, bringing to light the instance of an oppressed person calling someone out in an excessively violent matter, we risk privileged discourses manipulating this instance to undermine the ways in which other oppressed people struggle to assert their boundaries in the face of massive sociopolitical resistance.



### **Social Capital in Radical Communities**

Social capital<sup>4</sup> is a term originally from Bordieu, Loury, Coleman, and Portes and then later utilized in economics, despite the fact that the value of social networks has been studied by social philosophers for much longer. I'm here referring to social capital as the sort of cool points that make

certain people untouchable, unquestionable, and invulnerable to critique. Of course it can also just be your social safety net, queer kinship, or chosen fam', but for this essay we're focusing on the accumulation of social capital as it creates informal hierarchies in radical communities. Social capital is really just the relationships and trust we have but it's also a type of currency that we can give and gain according to certain rules that we've largely intuited or aggressively been forced to learn. This social capital as currency can then aggregate around cults of personality, creating the recipe for dominance and coercion (this is a common critique of anarcho-communist ideals). Furthermore, social capital itself, can be used to create and gather more social capital. In this way, there's a high risk for runaway wealth accumulation where you can buy more social standing/relations, with your existing social standing/relations.

Social capital is when a well-known organizer sexually assaults or commits violence against someone in the community (often a cis-man to a cis-woman but queers, transfolks, gay men, dykes, and straight cis-women I'm looking at y'all too) and then the victim's story is minimized because the organizer, without anyone saying the words, is determined to be more important or at least harder to challenge. This is a simple narrative, especially when it's from a straight white man to a straight white woman, that radical communities have begun to build some ability to confront (although it's still horrifically common). However, when the woman assaults the man, or there are multiple overlapping layers of oppression, privilege, and social standing, the issues can get so complicated that we tear each other apart just trying to parse through them. Communities become polemic and internal rifts are created that are often never overcome. Accountability becomes impossible as people compete to be the victim. Narratives are often created and accepted even when the involved parties actually do want a more nuanced process. Social capital often interacts with complicated power dynamics to paralyze our ability to have the conversations we need most, when we need them most.

on purpose or accidentally, there are the persons with sociopathic tendencies(1), the serial abusers, the professional politicians, and the targeter of vulnerable persons. These assholes will exploit charisma and a raw selfish sadism to do whatever they can to protect themselves and their interests. But to make it worse, they'll convince masses of people it's in their best interests to support them. They are practiced in the art of manipulation and social engineering and they will seek out the empaths and those with a history of traumatic violence to victimize them with the knowledge that they'll say nothing to no one. They will pull them close in a way that makes people look up to them for their caring appearance and then, they will systematically destroy their lives and weave them into a cycle of coercion and domination. There are of course persons incapable of empathy who somehow still develop a sense of roughly utilitarian ethics that makes them functionally decent (I've known some) but unfortunately amongst sociopaths, they are the severe outlier. Sociopathic persons prey on activist communities who, in their naive generosity and fertile campus for social capital accumulation, breed and attract these weaponized wounds of humans. They will commonly utilize a casual misanthropy, subtle authoritarianism, and twist a nihilism of the oppressed to justify their wake of destruction. Even their authoritarianism we come to accept because, "they get stuff done" because often they're great organizers that we come to depend on for a variety of projects. They make themselves un-expendable. All of the fallacies and subtle dynamics of social capital are tools in their kit. They thrive on cults of personalities centered around them. They're often incredibly intelligent. As selfish utilitarians, they will often flip and become snitches and state collaborators if it seems in their benefit. They make it so that attacking them, or even questioning them on any front, will be the most dangerous thing that someone could possibly do, especially if the potential critics are so vulnerable that they depend entirely on their social network for survival. Of course people will say I'm exaggerating or playing into pathologizing psychiatric stereotypes, and while this is true to an extent, we can't back away from pointing out these persons in our community. Many

be seen as a minimization of their struggle or a violence against their experience as Truth. This latter phenomena is of course because so often, intersectionally marginalized people are silenced and our truths are ignored. However, this can never give us a carte blanche for fascism. We are the owners of our experience as our truth, but can also be wrong about how we interpret or draw conclusions from that information. No one person's thoughts should constitute absolute truth for other people even if they have more of a certain kind of credibility from lived experience as that identity.

This can also happen in different ways when social capital is the main difference rather than dynamics of identity based oppression. For example if two same raced queer femmes get into an incident of violence (queer women are at roughly the same rates of domestic violence as straight couples),<sup>18</sup> as the story breaks into the community, there will be a tendency to trust the more likeable party rather than look for credible evidence. This is because we interpret social capital as likeability or at least as a veneer of cool that can render someone untouchable in a way that forces people into cognitive dissonance in their interpretations of events. If someone fears losing social status by speaking out against someone with significant social capital, the potential accuser will have a subconscious pull towards distorting either their own understanding of events to avoid risk, or at least altering how they present it publicly. This is because, if something is dangerous, it's often hard to confront, so we have a built-in incentive to lie to ourselves that can only be confronted with intellectually and emotionally discerning diligence. If we lie to protect or benefit ourselves, we've participated, if in a smaller role, in the original violence. Disrupting distortions of social capital is critical to real accountability and truth-seeking especially surrounding the process of protecting survivors.

### **The Worst Kind of Asshole**

Amidst those those that garner extensive social capital, whether

Social capital can be gained in many ways and sometimes these ways overlap. For example, one can often be entitled with social capital as a direct result of structural privilege and the conditioning that it bestows. This is that white-passing manarchist or brocialist that's 1/16 native with blue eyes and identifies as "gender-queer" but is cis-male passing and feels entitled to all the PoC and queer spaces despite being pretty generally terrible, especially to dark skinned queer femmes that he wants to fuck (most of these "examples" come directly from real stories). But, this Terrible Person is liked by a lot of the other shitty and macho PoC, queer dudes, or popular native fetshizing whites so he's actually seemingly quite popular to the extent that it becomes dangerous to critique or question him. Alternatively social capital can also be awarded because someone is intersectionally oppressed. For example, there may be a transwoman or black-femme who can get away with acting abusively because they have too much oppressed social capital to get called out by anyone other than another with the same rough oppression tally, with whom they've built a personal solidarity or someone else who is exceptionally trusted, brave, and otherwise delicate.

Obviously these two forms of social capital (privileged and oppressed) are very different in that privileged social capital is structurally backed and oppressed social capital is only backed (if anywhere) in radical communities. As mentioned by William Gillis in personal dialogue, "Social capital is not a universally fungible currency. Social capital in one group may be negative social capital in another. There can even be pockets of different norms or rules within larger expanses where entirely different norms or rules dominate." There are competing currencies of social capital that may not be accepted as payment everywhere. This would be like trying to use an Israeli Shekel to pay for hummus in Lebanon. You might get the secret police called on you or at least some spit in your food. The symbols, or rules, one internalizes in the ingroup, may in fact work against you in the outgroup. Structurally backed social capital, as presented by those with privilege as it's generally used, is also backed by the state which means it's backed by the police, government, and



cultural norms. As radicals we know this and see it play out so often that in an attempt to counteract this coercive dynamic we try to build up people made marginalized by society especially if they are charismatic, funny, and attractive. This process is not inherently bad. To the contrary it is a form of love and commitment to equity but when applied uncritically to all situations, it runs into clear limits, especially wherein the justification of violence is concerned.

Social capital, like any other currency, can also be lost, often at another person's gain. For example, a person has social capital, but makes a mistake that renders them vulnerable, others can build their own social capital by publicly attacking this person especially if the core person attacking them also has social capital. This is especially possible when the person who is being accused, whether rightly or wrongly, occupies less marginalized identities than the original accuser. This phenomena happens because a person can gain cool social points by siding with the oppressed person and attacking the less-marginalized person as a form of virtue signalling.

### **Signaling and Team Sports**

There are some essential ideas here that show some of the rules about how social capital is bought and sold. Signaling<sup>8</sup> is a tool of social capital accumulation that is basically about sending a code to a particular group that suggests that we are of the same group. This is like going to a Bernie Sanders rally and saying, "Bernie Sanders is the only hope for our nation's children". At a Bernie rally this is a great way to make friends, build trust, and signal for applause<sup>9</sup> however, this is not a good way to make friends at a GOP convention (unless the other Bernie people are watching it live on TV). There are countless ways we can act on this, and subtle dynamics that I don't have the space to address here but, it is important to understand that this can impact how power shifts socially. Virtue signalling<sup>10</sup> is a related phenomena that has to do with signalling that one is virtuous (as defined by the ingroup) as a means of building social capital. This is the



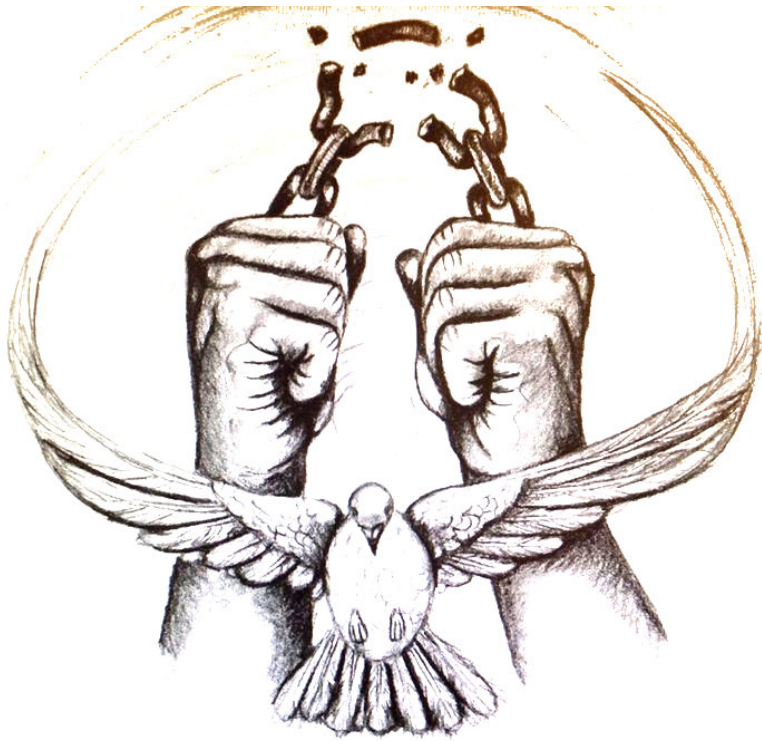
This particular matrix of rules and norms is just one that is common in left "social justice" circles. The reality of social capital is much more complex. In different networks and circles, social capital flows in different ways. Even overlapping friend groups may have different eddies and rivers. The core issue is that those who are least good at navigating social capital are often barred from support, credibility, and respect even though the how of this can be different in each sub-communities or groups. The person with the runaway compounded social capital is often the cis-guy, but sometimes it's the person who can best exploit "The Discourse" accepted in that group. This is the one who can swiftly and gracefully use radical catch phrases to justify manipulative conceit, for example- "muh autonomy!". Another type of social capital bourgeoisie can be the person with the most oppression points for whom any critique would



*and accountability.* We seek to fit things into neat boxes wherein, whoever has the least social capital will almost always be framed as the aggressor whether they are or aren't. We also often return to our oppression tally and seek to vilify whoever is the least structurally oppressed in a response to a historical radical tendency to minimize the violence experienced by marginalized people. So if there is a woman and a man involved, we have a knee-jerk belief that the man is wrong and the woman is right because that is most often how the pattern works. If there is a white partner and a PoC partner we assume that most likely the white partner was acting on some internal racism, because that is most often how the pattern works. But the thing about patterns, they are rules of thumb (heuristics) not perfect predictive tools. To the extent that they obscure nuance, they prevent us from revealing the complexity of coercion that is generally present. We prefer a clear victim and aggressor when generally, both parties have something to be accountable for even if one party was significantly more violent than the other. Again, our fear that nuance will be manipulated to victim blame prevents us from really digging into the truth in all of it's messy contradictions.

white person who describes at length about how bad racism is because they think it will give them credibility and earn them trust, and in many communities it will. This can also be the activist who doesn't do the grunt work of organizing, but gets all the interviews and photo ops at the action, and as a result is known as a key organizer. This is also the person who donates money to a charity solely for the publicity it gives them.

The alt-right and many anarcho-capitalists and libertarians have weaponized this tendency of the left in order to demean any explicit sentiment of social concern or empathy as merely "virtue signalling" deserving of sociopathic ridicule at the level of mean popular kids in highschool. While they're manipulating the concept with weaponized irony to support their own fascist violence, the critique of the left's performance of good intentions in a popularity contest is a valid one. It's useful to consider even if it has come from the "outgroup" such as the broader right or even left-market anarchists and post-left people. This phenomena places positions of informal power as being more important than the actual impacts we need desperately to build. Further, these acts of inauthenticity can also obscure attitudes such as anti-blackness under the window dressing of liberal anti-racism. For example, a white ally may play the role of good white ally to a tee, but yet remain completely unwilling to invest in the difficult work of actually engaging with their own racism in soul-searching and consensual trust building dialogue with actual folks of color. By deferring constantly to something that a person of color has said, many white people have been known to absolve themselves of guilt and avoid critical inquiry. But of course, the level of conversation we need to have is dangerous. It makes sense that everyone involved would be hesitant. We've also all seen it go to shit or get hijacked in bizarre ways with massive fallout. However, this just means we need to do it better, not that we can afford to avoid it altogether.



When we fall into games like this, we are essentially playing team sports<sup>11</sup> and constantly signalling to prove that we are team blue which is better than evil team green or vice versa. This prevents us from deeply engaging with ideas or efficacy in favor of group think with all its accompanying failures in nuance. Further, this team sports creates not only ingroup and outgroup dynamics,<sup>12</sup> but also near and far group<sup>13</sup> fallacies such as the radical fixation with prioritizing liberals as enemies more so than a group like ISIS.<sup>14</sup> This can also be seen when someone is more quick to empathise with Putin than with a local liberal, despite the fact that one is almost certainly a significantly larger threat with a value system that is much farther away ideologically from ours. Once we've mastered the near/far fallacy we can virtue signal with it to our incrowd to get points ( like a white person saying "I hate white people."). This has not only to do with geographic distance, but also a scope insensitivity<sup>15</sup> to threat as a result of perceived ideological

proximity. It is through these types of processes that people can end up deeply advocating for things that they internally don't even believe or agree with<sup>16</sup> because they value what it means to seem to believe a thing. This is referred to by Daniel Dennet as "belief in belief." So someone may say, so and so is the worst racist in the world and a rapist even though they know that this is not true, or at least that it's exaggerated, but believe that it will advance them in some other way, or they believe that they should believe it even if they don't.<sup>17</sup>

These types of fallacies (there are of course countless others) and social power dynamics come into play especially during a crisis situation in radical communities. As communities become polarized and fall into encampments, a dehumanization of the other team begins and fractures radical communities into splinters. This is not a call for a watered down consensus style, liberal unity. Divides are a healthy aspect of dissent and individual thought coupled with the natural emergence of affinity. We can work to eliminate oppression, but we may never eliminate conflict (short of the "rapture of the nerds" singularity upload). However, the situation often becomes so toxic that people who should reasonably be allies are torn apart in the search for social standing, cool ally points, and self-righteous certainty in lieu of a nuanced appreciation for multiple intersecting layers of power and violence often at play in any given radical flashpoint of conflict.

### **Love and Intimacy**

In my experience, the confluence of all of these issues is usually surrounding a really toxic relationship between two or more, often marginalized and popular, radicals or organizers. When they are both well know "cool" activists, the fallout from their relationship can lead to a bitter breakdown of communities leading to vicious infighting and even physical violence. At a certain point, we don't even know what to believe as the exaggerations blur with the actual facts of the violences that have occurred. *It becomes a competition to control the collective narrative rather than a process of legitimate inquiry*