

Keywords for Radicals: Domination

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Domination is a key trope in horizontal activism. There is disagreement about its precise definition but the prevailing view is that domination describes a form of power, institutionalized in social and economic hierarchies and experienced through cultural bias. On this account non-domination demands the equalization of power. An alternative view, common in historical anarchisms, conceptualizes domination as a type of unfreedom. These different conceptions support different strategies for change: the first focused on processes that confront privilege and the second on activism against enslavement.

Uri Gordon argues that domination 'serves as a generic concept for the various systematic features of society whereby groups and persons are controlled, coerced, exploited, humiliated, discriminated against, etc.'¹ For the Colors of Resistance network domination is a synonym for oppression. The *Definitions for the Revolution* has no entry for domination but defines an oppressor as 'one who uses her/his power to dominate another, or who refuses to use her/his power to challenge that domination'.² Domination is a form of privilege or '[u]nearned social power accorded by the formal and informal institutions of society to ALL members of a dominant group (e.g. white privilege, male privilege, etc.)'.³ CrimethInc., in contrast, distinguishes domination from oppression. Domination 'occurs when an individual or group coerces, controls, or intimidates others'. Oppression describes 'the systematic privileging of one group over another.' While it is possible to imagine members of oppressed groups dominating the privileged, it is impossible 'for a more privileged group to be oppressed by a less privileged group', and most likely that the oppressed will also be dominated, though this is not spelt out in CrimethInc.'s position.⁴ In all these instances, domination is linked to privilege and defined as power. CrimethInc. argue that the control of 'domineering authorities' – landlords, employers, magistrates – is a power that supports hierarchy.⁵ This is also the way that Sam Clark defines the concept in *Living Without Domination*. Domination is a capacity to exercise power. And in the state, power is distributed unequally in centralising, monopolising and hierarchical systems.⁶

Domination distinguishes the critical politics of contemporary activism from historical movement struggles. Examining shifts in the post-war period, Cindy Milstein argues that 'anarchists agree on the necessity of a world without capital and states'⁷ but

adds that the 'generalized critique of hierarchy and domination' serves as 'the prism' for activist politics.⁸ As Gordon puts it, the word domination designates 'the paradigm which governs both micro- and macro-political relations'. It is a generic concept for the 'systematic features of society whereby groups and persons are controlled, coerced, exploited, humiliated, discriminated against etc.'⁹

Gordon explains the pervasiveness of domination in contemporary discourses of resistance first, a result of the 'convergences of radical feminist, ecological, anti-racist and queer struggles' in the late 1960s, fused through subsequent waves of global protest, and second, with reference to the malleability of the concept to multiple forms of 'oppression, exclusion and control'. The rejection of domination challenges and corrects critiques of anti-statism, now deemed outmoded and associated with faulty conceptions of power: domination does not reduce to class division, nor is it derived exclusively from law (realised, for example, through the police, schools and religious institutions). Domination refers instead to broader sociological and cultural processes. 'Regimes of domination' Gordon notes 'are the overarching context that anarchists see as conditioning people's socialisation and background assumptions about norms, explaining why people fall into certain patterns of behaviour and have expectations that contribute to the perpetuation of dominatory relations.' By 'naming' or identifying particular instances of domination, activists are able to 'transcend specific antagonisms towards the generalised resistance that they promote.'¹⁰

Domination has long been defined as power but conventional dictionary definitions describe domination narrowly, typically with reference to the church and state. The 1828 Webster dictionary defines domination as the 'exercise of power in ruling; dominion; government', or 'one highly exalted in power' and, refers to the Christian hierarchy to describe 'the fourth order of angelic beings'.¹¹ Various editions of the *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française* give comparable definitions. Also referring to the Christian hierarchy, the 1762 entry is 'power, empire, sovereign authority'.¹² The 1913 edition of Webster includes some modernising inflections. The reference to the fourth order of angelic beings and to 'the act of dominating; exercise of power in ruling; dominion; supremacy; authority' remain, but domination also defines a 'ruling party; a party in power'.¹³ Moreover, domination is linked to the particular power of the tyrant or the absolute ruler. Webster includes 'arbitrary authority' in the definition and 'arbitrary or insolent sway'. The French dictionaries of 1762 and 1798 refer to the 'domination of the Turk' to capture this idea. The

Orientalist prejudice was removed from the 1832 and 1932 editions but the connection with injustice, absolutism and usurpation is constant.

In this second sense, domination describes the power of a master, importantly a power which denies liberty by instituting relations based on dependence. Edmund Burke's observation, the 'haughtiness of domination combines with the spirit of freedom', establishes domination as an antonym for slavery in Webster. For Burke, domination was the denial of liberty, epitomised in slavery, ironically measured by the eagerness of masters to enslave others. Intervening in the Independence debates of the 1770s Burke judged the spirit of freedom higher in Virginia and the Carolinas than in the northern American states because the people owned a 'vast multitude of slaves'. His general observation was that '[w]here this is the case in any part of the world, those who are free, are by far the most proud and jealous of their freedom.'¹⁴

These discourses of slavery and freedom were pronounced in the historical movements which contemporary activists use as a foil for their ideas. 'If there is a state' Bakunin argued in *Statism and Anarchy*, 'then necessarily there is domination, and consequently slavery. A state without slavery, open or camouflaged, is inconceivable – that is why we are enemies of the state.'¹⁵ The association of domination with slavery and the denial of freedom pointed up the perceived continuity of absolutist and representative regimes, which the conventional dictionary definitions keep apart. Kropotkin made the same point, though noted that the institutions in which power was vested reinforced domination through culture and socialisation.

... during and after the revolutions, when the lawyers rose to power, they did their best to strengthen the principle upon which their ascendancy depended ... the people received it as an improvement upon the arbitrary authority and violence of the past ... They bowed their neck beneath the yoke of law to save themselves from the arbitrary power of their lords.

The middle class has ever since continued to make the most of this maxim ... It has preached this doctrine in its schools, it has propagated it in its writings, it has moulded its art and science to the same purpose, it has thrust its beliefs into every hole and corner – like a pious Englishwoman who slips tracts under the

door – and it has done all this so successfully that today we behold the issue in the detestable fact that men who long for freedom begin the attempt to obtain it by entreating their masters to be kind enough to protect them by modifying the laws which these masters themselves have created!¹⁶

The transformation of chattel to wage slavery, also discussed by Marx, was a key tenet of this discourse of domination. Kropotkin described the economists' attempts to represent 'the enforced contract (under threat of hunger) between master and workingman as a state of freedom' as an idea of liberty 'obscured by the surviving influence of past centuries of serfdom and religious oppression'. Political citizenship similarly meant being 'a serf and a taxpayer of the State'.¹⁷ Kropotkin spoke of workingmen, but the unfreedoms which domination and slavery entailed also encompass the forms of oppression ('racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, anti-semitism, ablism, ageism') which the Colors of Resistance network *Definitions for Revolution* treat as power relations.¹⁸ For Selma James enslavement means being dependent on the will of another and being forced to do things contrary to will.¹⁹ Work is a fundamental to slavery but she analyses women's domestic enslavement to show how it colonises life in particular ways. The struggle against enslavement is not only a struggle for financial independence but also about 'abortion, sterilization, housework, rape, divorce, child custody and care, lesbianism and organisms'.²⁰

These different conceptions of domination support overlapping but distinctive strategies for action. In both cases, overcoming domination involves organizing. For Milstein the commitment to non-domination underpins an ethical, prefigurative politics which is designed to promote autonomy, community and local control. It captures the fluid, practice-based dimensions of horizontal activism and a commitment to enact changes in everyday life. In Kropotkin's historical activism, the strategy was to stimulate grass-roots networks based on mutual aid and the principle of free agreement. James's activism has been about mobilizing against capitalism in community networks and work organisations. Yet the cultures of non-domination are quite different. Because it accentuates the need to address privilege, contemporary activism calls for the systemic opposition to domination through practices which overcome power advantages. In Gordon's terms, non-domination is about exercising 'power with' rather than 'power over'.²¹ It demands the adoption of forms of organisation, non-hierarchical, decentralized and consensus-based, that 'uncover, challenge

and erode' the dynamics of domination.²² An important measure of non-domination is the willingness or ability of individuals to organise 'against our privilege' not just 'against our oppression'.²³ For CrimethInc., resisting domination means developing 'the self-awareness to resist dominating social situations and prevent others from dominating them'. The process is 'emotionally intense and challenging' and likely to involve anger and guilt.²⁴

Where domination is defined as a condition of slavery, non-domination is instead framed as a strategy of resistance through which the enslaved take direct action against the institutions and practices that deny freedom. This might be understood as a demand for autonomy, as Daniel Colson argues,²⁵ or linked to the recognition of interdependence, as Martha Acklesberg discusses.²⁶ But attacking domination downplays the commitment to confront individual power advantages. Indeed, James warns women to overcome feelings of guilt.²⁷ It emphasizes active engagement to resist enslavement.

¹ Uri Gordon, *Anarchy Alive! Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory* (London: Pluto, 2008), p. 32.

² *Colors of Resistance Archive*, Definitions for the Revolution, 'Oppressor, Oppressed, Oppression', <http://www.coloursofresistance.org/definitions-for-the-revolution/>

³ Definitions for the Revolution, 'Privilege', <http://www.coloursofresistance.org/definitions/privilege/>

⁴ CrimethInc. Ex-Workers Collective, 'Undermining Oppression', <http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/atoz/underminingoppression.php>

⁵ CrimethInc. Ex-Workers Collective, 'No Masters', <http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/atoz/nomasters.php>

⁶ Sam Clark, *Living Without Domination. The Possibility of an Anarchist Utopia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 38; 76;143.

⁷ Cindy Milstein, *Anarchism and its Aspirations* (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press/Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2010), p. 35.

⁸ Milstein, p. 39.

⁹ Gordon, *Anarchy Alive!*, p. 32.

¹⁰ Gordon, *Anarchy Alive!* pp. 31-33.

¹¹ *Webster's Dictionary 1828* Online Edition, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/>

¹² *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*, University of Chicago ARTFL Project, <http://artfl.atilf.fr/dictionnaires/oneook.htm>

¹³ *Wester's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1913 + 1828), University of Chicago, ARTFL Project, <http://machaut.uchicago.edu/?resource=Webster%27s&word=domination&float=on&use1913=on&use1828=on>

¹⁴ Edmund Burke, 'Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies', [1775] *The Founders' Constitution*, ed. Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner (University of Chicago Press/The Liberty Fund, 1987/2000), <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch1s2.html>

¹⁵ Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, Marshall Shatz (ed.) (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990), p. 178.

¹⁶ Kropotkin, 'Law and Authority', in R.N. Baldwin (ed.) *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets* (New York: Dover, 1970), pp. 199-200.

¹⁷ Kropotkin, 'Communism and Anarchy' [1900/ 1901], in Iain McKay (ed.) *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, (Oakland CA, & Edinburgh: AK Press, 2004), p. 638.

¹⁸ 'Oppressor, Oppressed, Oppression', <http://www.coloursofresistance.org/definitions-for-the-revolution/>

¹⁹ Selma James, 'The Perspective of Winning', in *Sex Race and Class*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), p. 79.

²⁰ Selma James, 'Marx and Feminism', in *Sex Race and Class*, pp. 144-5.

²¹ Gordon, *Anarchy Alive!* pp. 49-55.

²² Gordon, *Anarchy Alive!* p. 32.

²³ 'Oppressor, Oppressed, Oppression', <http://www.coloursofresistance.org/definitions-for-the-revolution/>

²⁴ CrimethInc. Ex-Workers Collective, 'Undermining Oppression', <http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/atoz/underminingoppression.php>

²⁵ Daniel Colson, 'Domination', *Petit lexique philosophique de L'anarchisme de Proudhon à Deleuze*, (Brodard & Taupin: Librairie Générale Française, 2001), pp. 80-1.

²⁶ Martha Acklesberg, 'Dependency or Mutuality: A Feminist Perspective on Dilemmas of Welfare Policy', in *Resisting Citizenship* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 59-69.

²⁷ Selma James, 'Women, The Unions, And Work', in *Sex Race and Class*, p. 75.