

Sarah Schulman on ‘Conflict Is Not Abuse’: Rethinking Community Responsibility Outside of the State Apparatus



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Abuse as ‘Power Over’ and Conflict as ‘Power Struggle’

Sarah Schulman, a long-standing U.S. activist and author of internationally recognized novels, plays and films, was invited to participate in the **2015 Sexuality Summer School** on queer art and activism, held in May at the University of Manchester. From her engagement with **Act Up** in New York in the late 1980s and onwards, to the creation of the **Lesbian Avengers** in post-Reagan America of the early 1990s, to her current engagement for the rights of Palestinians and endorsement of the **Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions** (BDS) campaign, I like to think of Sarah Schulman as one of the most radical minds that I have had the opportunity to come across. By radical, I mean an activist who embraces critique as an integral dimension of political action, and who is able to rethink the foundations of her engagement through renewed paradigms and historicization of her own actions. Adorno’s expression according to which ‘open thinking points beyond itself’ (Adorno, 1998; p. 293) could fairly apply to Schulman’s intellectual and political profile.

The **public lecture** she gave for the Sexuality Summer School on Thursday May 21st 2015 introduced the audience with provocative and challenging issues that she tackles in her forthcoming book *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility and the Duty of Repair*. Sarah’s main argument is that it is crucial to distinguish *abuse as power over* and *conflict as power struggle* in order to avoid ‘overstating harm’, which encourages escalation of polarization and unnecessary pain that increase the investment and power of the State. At the source of this escalation, Sarah Schulman posits an inversion that makes ‘bullies often conceptualize of themselves as under attack when they are the ones originating the pain’. She says:

It is that moment of over-reaction that I wish us to examine. My thesis is that at every level of human interaction there is the opportunity to conflate discomfort with threat, to mistake internal anxiety for exterior danger, and in turn to escalate rather than resolve.

In this sense, she argues for the necessity to be cautious with the notion of abuse. She reminds us that ‘being uncomfortable signals [for some people] that they are being abused’, when it is not necessarily the case. In a way, Sarah Schulman also suggests that the ability to claim abuse is intricately related to possessing the symbolic and material capital that allows the claim to be heard, and thus does not reflect the proper power of balance that the claim is supposed to unveil.

Thus, she proposes a radical understanding of how anxieties produce escalation towards shunning, blame and violence. In doing so, she shows how differentiating between conflict and abuse rejects the purity of the binary between the victim and the perpetrator for, in cases of conflict (power struggle) and often in cases even of abuse (power over), it does not provide a space for negotiation, changing one’s self-concept, recognition of both traumatised and supremacy behaviours, as well as for the process of repair. Rather than thinking in terms of

accusation, exclusion and punishment, Sarah invites us to recognise that conflict positions are filled with opportunities to face ourselves and to elaborate solutions.

But then, why do bullies think of themselves as being under attack? For Sarah Schulman, previous experiences of trauma are inherently related to the 'inflationary process' that the claim of *being abused* produces:

The collapse of conflict and abuse is partly the result of people desperate, yet ineligible, for compassion. This is a non-cynical reading of a human condition in which people who have suffered in the past or find themselves implicated in situations in which they are afraid to be accountable, fear that – within their group – acknowledging some responsibility will mean being denied their need to be heard and cared for. So they fall back on the accusation of *abuse* to guarantee that they will not be questioned in a way that confirms these fears.

Thus, unjustified accusations of harm avoid confronting one's complicity in creating conflict. Exploring the relation between trauma and supremacy as a starting point to decrease violence, that is looking at the dominants (or the alleged 'perpetrators') in an informed, insightful and ethical perspective is not only theoretically exhilarating, it is emotionally engaging as a posture of radical openness. The day after Sarah Schulman's lecture, we had a creative writing workshop with her. She introduced the session by saying: 'Whatever people do, they do it because they think it is going to make their lives better.' Whether it is through her political essays or creative writing process, Sarah Schulman's methodology and ethics seem altogether coherent, laying on the common grounds of radical understanding.

Genealogy of Conflict as Political Practice

Stemming from a long philosophical tradition of suspicion and false consciousness as ideology, Sarah Schulman 'posit[s] a metalepsis, or the substitution of an effect for a cause' (Spivak, 1987; p. 204). 'The police, the husband and the nation overstate harm' she says, and 'overstating harm increases the power of the State'. From the husband to the police and to the nation, Sarah's paradigm of overstated harm is thus applicable to the micro as well as macro levels. However, the police, she says, cannot be held accountable for solving *conflicts* as it is the *source* itself of violence, 'especially in the lives of women, people of colour, trans women, sex workers and the poor'. Cooperation of anti-violence politics with the police that started in the late 1970s 'shifted from stopping the causes of violence [patriarchy, racism and poverty], to reacting punitively to the expressions of those unaddressed causes'. Punishing rather than solving problems is, as such, a product of 'distorted thinking'. Quoting the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Program's 2014 report on LGBTQI Intimate Partner Abuse, she notes that in 2013, the police mis-arrested the survivor as the perpetrator of violence in over half of all queer domestic abuse. 'Perpetrators, she writes, increasingly are the ones to call the police [...] There is often the false assumption that the one calling the police is innocent'. On the contrary, resisting illegitimate punishment or behaviour is not abuse, although it is often seen as such by those who feel threatened by such unexpected responses.

Given this critical point, she argues that the questions one should raise in the context of alleged abuse is not 'What party should I chose?' but 'What occurred?' Not 'Are you abused?' but 'Are you unsafe', or 'Are you angry, frustrated and uncomfortable?' In asking 'Are you abused', we organize the conversation 'in a way designed to produce the pre-determined revelation that the person is being abused', whereas we should rather 'redirect the conversation to produce deeper and more multifaceted factual understanding of *what is actually happening*, in order to reveal more nuance and dimension that could produce solutions'. In this sense, what Sarah Schulman proposes is a genealogy of conflict as a collective political practice for conflict resolution that is exterior to the State apparatus and that invests in the transformative power of the community.



For me, Sarah’s text echoed the question of the omnipresence of violence within marginalised communities, and I understood it as a political manifesto to try to overcome such devastating expressions of violence. How do we deal with personal and collective traumas? In particular, what do we do with the violence that has *abjected* us and that infiltrates our political and affective communities? An important aspect of her argument is her suspicion towards the notion of ‘victim’. To some extent, I consider her refusal of what she calls the ‘victimology’ a critique of the fetishisation of the category ‘victim’ that the State, capitalist media as well as a certain western and white feminism has used as a basis for political subjectivation, and that reinforces internal exclusions and hierarchies between oppressions. How can we construct a political subject external to a genealogy of violence if violence, through the notion of ‘victim’, is precisely what defines the subject in the moment of its constitution? Escalation towards shunning, projected blame and violence is a tragic routine within feminist and queer communities, and I find it particularly strong that, in this context, Sarah Schulman still expresses a visceral attachment to the idea of community, and holds onto its key principle of collective dialogue to fix the violent dynamics that tear it apart.

I only regret that Sarah Schulman did not inscribe her positions in the context of the abundant already existing literature, from academic to fanzine writings, on restorative justice, rejection of institutional authority (along with the prison abolition movement), community accountability processes, and in the light of the corresponding and various grass-root community practices. A large number of activist groups, in particular with anarchist ties, have long reflected upon the perpetuation of violence produced by the current reproductive model of justice and imagined alternative practices for community and social justice. For instance, the U.S.-based organization **INCITE!**, made up of radical feminists of colour, organized in March 2015 for its 15th anniversary a conference on the theme ‘**Beyond the State: Inciting Transformative Possibilities**’, which highlighted ‘emerging strategies that focus on ending violence without relying on policing, mass incarceration, restrictive legislation and other systems of violence and control’. Another example is the publication of ‘**Community Accountability: Emerging Movements to Transform Violence**’ in 2010, a special issue of *Social Justice: A Journal of Crime, Conflict & World Order* that explored ‘grassroots efforts, cultural interventions, and theoretical questions regarding community-based strategies to address gendered violence’. Still, Sarah Schulman’s scepticism with the notion of abuse conflated with conflict and with the frozen victim/perpetrator dichotomy that it entails is, I think, largely under-explored in the field of restorative justice, which often reconducts this binary rather than engaging with the original bias in the moment of its discursive production.

For Sarah Schulman, shunning, projected blame and perhaps violence can be overcome through a collective commitment to the transformative power of dialogue, critical understanding, accountability, negotiation, deconstruction, reformulation, responsibility and self-criticism, in search of a diminishment of State control. However, the collective praxis that she calls for implies a common will to dedicate *time* to ending violence, and conversely entails a common agreement on the idea that making peace is *worth* being time-consuming. From her harshly critical engagement with the notion of abuse (a central concept in feminism and minority struggles in general), to her interrogation of the relation between trauma and supremacy, to her strict refusal to call upon state intermediaries in situations of conflict and complete rejection of exclusion and punishment as ways of solving problems, Sarah Schulman provides a radical stance on the politics of the community and on the importance of responsibility to address violence. In her words, ‘instead of saying ‘call the police’, we should be saying ‘let’s talk’’. How comes that such a seemingly naive proposition appears to be so radical today? This is probably one of the greatest and most tragic inversions of our time.

Many thanks to Sarah Schulman for her kind and attentive proofreading of this text.

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