

**Mainstreams**

**Privileges**

and

**Exclusion**

in

**radical groups**

- Thoughts on Facilitation -





## Who writes why?

The authors of this text are three people who are active in different contexts and who have engaged in facilitation and decision making in the past. In March 2013 we have taken part in a course in Wales which has been organised by three training-collectives and which, under the title of "Facilitating Change", dealt with the question of how groups can be supported to achieve more long-lasting and successful group- and decision-

making processes. The one-week course was very much experienced-based and rarely theoretical. From the beginning on, it aimed at naming and analysing mechanisms of exclusion and power relations within the very group of participants in order to reflect upon them and learn from the practice itself. This meant a lot ups and downs, intensive moments, tears, rage, a lot of discussions and individually different revelations.

From the abundance of thoughts, impressions and questions that were triggered by the course, we want to try and extract something that could be useful for the german-speaking context.

The problems we observed are far from new, and our thoughts on them are by no means objective, new realizations, but they have brought us some clarity and have encouraged even more questions. We hope to be able to share some of all this with you.

## Problems we observed

In the social movements we're active in, we often try to decide by consensus, we want to create a world free of exploitation, get rid of relations of domination. (Theoretically) people grapple, to different degrees, with the question of how racism, capitalism, heterosexism and other forms of domination work and try to engage against them in public actions, campaigns, educational work and so forth.

Nevertheless we have the impression that big parts of this movement aren't by far as heterogeneous and diverse as they could be. Instead we see that a lot of groups consist primarily if not exclusively of white, academic folks with a middle-class background. Abstract, rational thought with a lot of self-control, dominates the scene. People who are read as male have, in a lot of cases, more influence than those who are read as female or non-male. Plus: In a lot of groups and movements it strikes us that they distance themselves not only politically but also subculturally from others and that people who do not share certain clothing styles, behaviours and language codes are looked upon with distrust and caginess.

Another aspect is, that way to many groups dissipate, crumble and break up over conflicts. Surely there are various and often external reasons for this, like repression, increasing economic insecurities, atomisation and so forth – which we do not want to consider at this place. But how do group processes and communication have to look like that exactly those do not become the reasons for failing?

## **Mainstream and margin**

The model of mainstream in margins, present in the anglo-american sphere have helped us to better understand mechanisms of exclusion in groups.

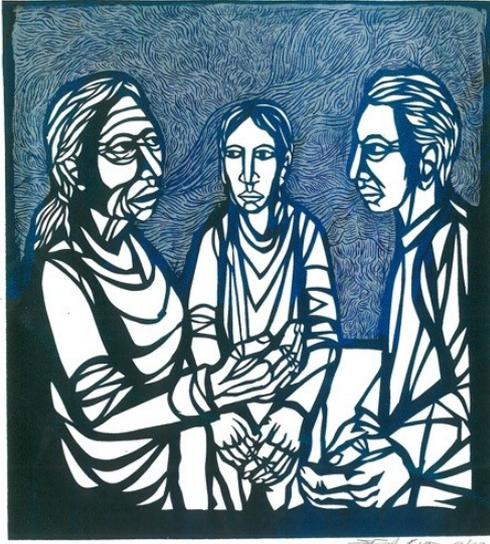
Therefore we give a short introduction:

With mainstream we mean those values, behaviours, modes of working, ways of speaking and identities or people embodying them that direct what is happening in a specific group. With margins we mean those behaviours etc. that are pushed to the edge and most often go unnoticed and unspoken of. The borderline in this case is not static. It depends on the context and most of the people are mainstream in one aspect of their being and margins in another (for example: marginalised since the language being used is not your mother-tongue but at the same times privileged in terms of education, academic thinking, controlled and calm ways of expressing yourself). Furthermore the accepted mainstream/margin behaviours can be group specific (for example gender awareness and a certain type of language thereof as opposed to the communication style embodied by most of society). Often times the experienced and perceived mainstream might be a numerical minority that dominates. It is perceived as a majority by those on the edges since the behaviours and identities at the margins are not heard and talked of and hence have to adapt, if they don't want to risk being pushed out of the group. In the worst case, behaviours that are deemed unacceptable by nearly everybody, are perceived as a mainstream to which everybody obeys. People in the mainstream or those mostly embodying mainstream-behaviours are regularly not aware of their dominative role and position in the group.

Both, mainstreams and margins are not easily identified as long as we are part of either. Typically the mainstream of a group has the feeling that they are "everybody" often speaks of "us" and "we", whereas the margin is often atomised and tries to adapt to the mainstream instead of allying up with other marginalised. Dynamics of mainstreams and margins appear in every group. They should not be "talked away" but instead they demand an honest and self-critical reflection. This is not easy, since despite better intentions and other values, it is a typical mainstream behaviour to unconsciously resist any change and or to avoid it. This is because, again subconsciously, it feels great to be mainstream and there exists a great fear to drift to the margins and to end up as an outsider. Mainstream behaviour also often means to be determined, secure of oneself and present one's opinion with high self-confidence.

## **Social forms of domination (racism, sexism, classism etc.)**

Some of the above examples are obviously direct results of class difference. People who are not part of middle-, upper-class society are often individualised and marginalised or simply do not appear in most groups since they are so heavily dominated by middle-class-mainstreams with their behaviour, language and appearance. At the same time these singular acts are hard to identify and of course can not be categorized in a black and white matrix. Only the sum of them gives some people the feeling to belong and others not to belong.



## Who do we lack in radical groups?

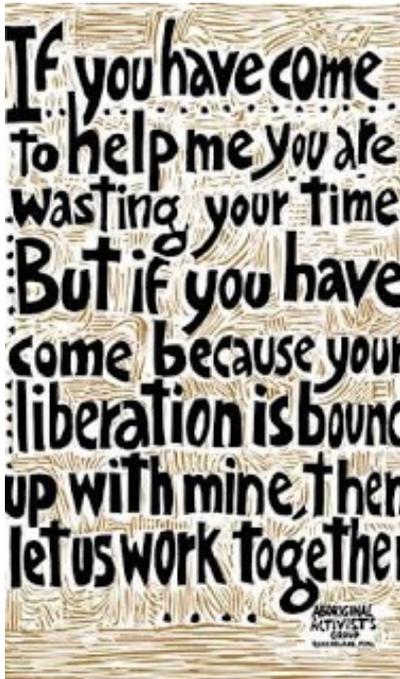
If you look at a random radical group, we can analyse which social forms of exclusion (like class, race, gender, sexual orientation) play a role and that certain certain identities, behaviours and so on are lacking completely in that group. What adds up is the marginalisation based upon what we do NOT talk about – for instance drug use, mutual experience of violence, so called “mental illness”... There are also mechanisms of exclusion that are subcultural and don't correlate directly to mainstream society: lefty closing styles, behavioural norms in political subcultures,

scene language etc. Of course there are also various external reasons why certain people are not part of our movements. For instance it might be that less privileged groups have stronger economic pressures and less time to engage. Nevertheless it would be appropriate to be aware of who is missing and how much our mainstream behaviours are a reason for this. In a next step we could then think about what we could do in order for our groups and movements to diversify and grow.

## Approaches in practice - Concrete experiences from Wales

- As a facilitator put on your goggles for privilege
  - Which person has which privileges?
  - Can this person actually use these for themselves and against the groups? Or not, because of another reason (for instance emotional, psychological state)
  - If yes: How does this person use them? How can we intervene as facilitators?
- Hegemonic behaviours are often invisible. We, as facilitators should put them on the table.
- Don't give too much space to the first voices that make themselves heard, but watch out for and listen to the silenced ones, on the margins of the group. Coming from the outside allows facilitators to perceive the dynamics of the group which are uncomfortable and of which people partly are not conscious. This is why it might make sense to work through certain topics or use specific methods that might be uncomfortable for some in the group and hence rejected at first.
- The mainstream-margin-theory suggests that we as facilitators have to ignore the mainstream in certain situations so to make space for the voices, needs and ideas of the marginalised. Even if this is uncomfortable for the mainstreams – this rejection is often a sign of the defence mode of mainstreams. That means: Making space over and over again, depending on group dynamics.

- We need safe but not necessarily comfortable spaces for all. Since: Is it actually possible to create safe spaces? Or is it an illusion coming from a privileged perspective? Maybe for some people there simply are no safe spaces. What does that imply?
- It might imply that we as facilitators have to think of trigger-dangers that need to be made transparent and to care for supporting structures like emotional support or awareness-groups if we see those risks but want to approach them.
- It is about making relations of oppression bodily felt and tangible for the privileged so that the struggle against them is inscribed emotionally and bodily. This means for the privileged:
  - Learn to take responsibility for your privileges.
  - Question your very own identity.
  - Don't be paralysed by feelings of guilt.
  - Understand that empathy is not merely enough, while still recognizing that it's important in order to pay tribute to the needs of others and those of the group as a whole.
  - To realise that privilege-conscious silence doesn't help as long as there is no honest interest in listening. Because in the end, the realisation of privileges (e.g.: white, male, academically educated) leads to holding yourself back to give others space to speak-out. But until this holding back is felt as coercive and not as an invitation to listen it means a pressure on the rarely heard voices to perform and leads to forced, silent breaks in meeting and conversations that lead nowhere. Instead it needs practice to listen and develop an honest interest in the opinions and feeling of your counterpart.
  - Learn to observe, support and intervene.
  - Make offers to the marginalised and ask instead of acting paternalistically in believing to be doing the "right" thing.
  - Try things, give it a go, take a risk, make mistakes.
  - Be prepared to fail and to be criticised. Be open towards it. Learn.
- We shouldn't degrade the margin to a learning object, which means we have to learn acting in solidarity instead of in the name of marginalised folks. This also means, making sure that the margin isn't forced and abused to further the learning process of the mainstreams.
- Instead it needs spaces for empowerment and self-organisation for people with a similar history and experience of oppression. The facilitation can divide the group along lines of shared privilege and experience of oppression and by that create spaces in which those affected can define their desires, needs and longings themselves. These can then be brought back to and demanded from the group since this is not possible via the facilitation but only by those affected.
- Similarly the reflection of privilege can also happen in groups of a shared history of privilege. In this space ...
  - ... a lot of things can be tried and we can learn to criticise each other.
  - ... those affected can not be hurt, nobody can dispute their space



- ... those affected are not experimented with, without their consent to being up for feeling the consequences
- ... in this space of privilege it is the facilitators role to demand self-reflection and self-critique and intervene and stop any form of alliance-building between the privileged. It's risky business and might be cancelled at some point if those principles are not valued. This failure can than be named and publicly discussed.
- Last but not least: If the mainstream doesn't feel comfortable any more we might be on the right track.

### **Ideas on facilitation and supervising groups**

How can I use my role as facilitator, my position of relative power to support horizontal communication? From our perspective there is no recipe for that. A lot of it is a subjective estimation of which intervention is useful in which situation. To make a suitable judgement it helps to know the context, to get feedback and support from others, to have experience with group processes and also to trust you intuition and sense in the rapid dynamics of a group interaction. That also means risking something at times – if it doesn't work or turns out to be awkward the most important thing is to learn from it. It remains important however to check in with those affected (before and/or after) that the intervention happened *with* rather than *for* them and to be conscious of the danger of paternalism. Having said that, it shouldn't stop one from taking the risk of acting against the mainstream if this leads to resistance and denial in the first instance.

These and other experiences were learned throughout the week in Wales:

- Often it makes sense as facilitator to tinker and get to grips with the vibes of a group (mainstream and margins) instead of heading straight towards the agenda of the day.
- It's important to have in mind, the influence that every single member of the groups has and that it's connected to class, race, gender, education, experience and time spent in the group. As facilitators in movements for radical social change we ourselves have to become aware of mainstreams, margins, ranks and power – and to further this learning process in groups. Since only through a constant struggle of naming and transforming the hidden dynamics in groups can we minimise discriminatory and exclusive behaviour.
- On this basis people are emotionally involved in group processes in very different degrees depending on privilege, background, interest and socialisation (e.g. gender). This is to be considered.
- Our progressing as facilitators should be made transparent . We should

be honest with the group, show our insecurities and have the strength to give things back to the group.

- The facilitation should try to put things on the table. She should further an honest and direct style of communication that names issues spot-on and furthers honesty.
- As a basis for our work with groups we have to answer the questions: Which role does the group want me to take? Do I also understand my role as such? Do I want to take on this role?
- If we want diversity in our groups there will always be different styles of communicating and organising. This means ...
  - ... we have to create this organisation and communicative diversity that fulfils the need of all participants (which can also mean: changing methods constantly, to satisfy one need or the other).
  - ... the mainstream-setting often consists of: rationality, sitting silently, talking eloquently, listening quietly (or at least performing listening), speaking in front of rather big groups, academic and abstract talking.
- It makes sense to remind individuals in groups to speak of themselves "I" and to avoid generalisations but rather criticise the specific behaviour of one another instead of the person as whole being and also to consider the social conditioning that we have gone through.
- It is always to be reflected: Who has access to these meetings (methodologically and based on the power relations).
- Facilitators in social and grassroots movements have to learn to perceive the own feeling and at the same time make space for the emotions of the participants and the group. Emotionality in meetings can be empowering as much as it can be oppressive. Even both at the same time.
- To create trust and openness in groups it can help that we show our vulnerability, so to open up and also share emotions, thoughts and needs that touch us deep down. As facilitators we can consciously further this in groups and create space for this.
- Group size matters. It can also be used consciously. Where is it about the whole group experiencing something together (big group)? Where is it about maximum participation of all those affected (small groups)?
- It's not really about facilitation and activism as separate sphere all together in which we regulate out behaviours for a limited amount of time in a clearly bound space, so to get crazily dominative outside of these settings. It is much more about a transformation of everyday life with one another, about a broad shift in the political culture of the day-to-day: Beyond facilitated spaces in which most of spent the least of their time.
- It's important to develop intuition – with the consciousness that we were and are prone to social conditioning that affects this intuition: For instance me as a white male with academic background nearly always have the "feeling" that I should, can, must say something in groups.
- Especially in radical networks in Germany the facilitation is often misunderstood as the persons who take names and looks after the

- timekeeping instead of facilitators for the group process as a whole.
- The position of power that is taken by the facilitators is helpful as long as it is used for furthering the mandate that has been granted freely by the group. In this context having a co-facilitator or a whole facilitation-team can help to keep checks and balances of this power dynamic and hinder an abuse of it.
  - People that take a lead role in groups nearly always exist. The question is no whether but how: How can this leadership be consciously considered and a decision be made in favour or against this leadership, or to rotate it so to give this position to everybody in the group at times.

## So...

Even if we try all this, conflicts, failures and risks are unavoidable. As always when people live and act together. The mainstream would like to stop this, to avoid conflict because it might move them out of their comfort zone. And exactly this is why conflict can be so useful. It's about a new culture of conflict and learning, that acknowledges that it will be a long, long time until we overcome (unconscious) abuse of power (if ever) and that we have to find a progressive way of dealing with it.

## In this spirit we leave you with some remaining questions:

- How do we reach authentic communication and horizontal exchange between people who have different communication styles and performances?
- How can I use my privileges / my role in groups, so that it helps marginalised folks through solidarity and not paternalism?
- Which behaviours that lead to exclusion do I have to drop in order to allow communication between equals and allow for my diversity?
- What can we do together, in order to soften differences based on privilege and mainstream behaviour?
- What can structural measures like quotas, proportional speaking lists contribute?
- How do allow for feelings and honest communication in political groups?
- Would it be more sustainable to help conflicts to surface so to find a way to deal with them instead of hiding them?

