

A Note on Call-Out Culture

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Call-out culture refers to the tendency among progressives, radicals, activists, and community organizers to publicly name instances or patterns of oppressive behaviour and language use by others. People can be called out for statements and actions that are sexist, racist, ableist, and the list goes on. Because call-outs tend to be public, they can enable a particularly armchair and academic brand of activism: one in which the act of calling out is seen as an end in itself.

What makes call-out culture so toxic is not necessarily its frequency so much as the nature and performance of the call-out itself. Especially in online venues like Twitter and Facebook, calling someone out isn't just a private interaction between two individuals: it's a public performance where people can demonstrate their wit or how pure their politics are. Indeed, sometimes it can feel like the performance itself is more significant than the content of the call-out. This is why "calling in" has been proposed as an alternative to calling out: calling in means speaking privately with an individual who has done some wrong, in order to address the behaviour without making a spectacle of the address itself.

In the context of call-out culture, it is easy to forget that the individual we are calling out is a human being, and that different human beings in different social locations will be receptive to different strategies for learning and growing. For instance, most call-outs I have witnessed immediately render anyone who has committed a perceived wrong as an outsider to the community. One action becomes a reason to pass judgment on someone's entire being, as if there is no difference between a community member or friend and a random stranger walking down the street (who is of course also someone's friend). Call-out culture can end up mirroring what the prison industrial complex

teaches us about crime and punishment: to banish and dispose of individuals rather than to engage with them as people with complicated stories and histories.

It isn't an exaggeration to say that there is a mild totalitarian undercurrent not just in call-out culture but also in how progressive communities police and define the bounds of who's *in* and who's *out*. More often than not, this boundary is constructed through the use of appropriate language and terminology – a language and terminology that are forever shifting and almost impossible to keep up with. In such a context, it is impossible not to fail at least some of the time. And what happens when someone has mastered proficiency in languages of accountability and then learned to justify all of their actions by falling back on that language? How do we hold people to account who are experts at using anti-oppressive language to justify oppressive behaviour? We don't have a word to describe this kind of perverse exercise of power, despite the fact that it occurs on an almost daily basis in progressive circles. Perhaps we could call it *anti-oppressivism*.

Humour often plays a role in call-out culture and by drawing attention to this I am not saying that wit has no place in undermining oppression; humour can be one of the most useful tools available to oppressed people. But when people are reduced to their identities of privilege (as white, cisgender, male, etc.) and mocked as such, it means we're treating each other as if our individual social locations *stand in* for the total systems those parts of our identities represent. Individuals become synonymous with systems of oppression, and this can turn systemic analysis into moral judgment. Too often, when it comes to being called out, narrow definitions of a person's identity count for everything.

No matter the wrong we are naming, there are ways to call people out that do not reduce individuals to agents of social advantage. There are ways of calling people out that are compassionate and creative, and that recognize the whole individual instead of viewing them simply as representations of the systems from which they benefit. Paying attention to these other contexts will mean refusing to unleash all of our very real trauma onto the psyches of those we imagine to only represent the systems that oppress us. Given the nature of online social networks, call-outs are not going away any time soon. But reminding ourselves of what a call-out is meant to accomplish will go a long way toward creating the kinds of substantial, material changes in people's behaviour – and in community dynamics – that we envision and need.

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