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A Queer Ethic of Conflict and the Challenge of Friendship

David S. Byers

Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair

Sarah Schulman

Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016. 15 + 299.

Conflicts, according to Sarah Schulman in her most recent book, are varied, sometimes mundane, and often consequential challenges to dominant understandings. Conflicts can range from simply showing up in interaction, for people whose social identities and sexualities are contested, to active resistance to state and intergroup violence, marginalization, and oppression. Schulman's deceptively simple contention is that such conflicts are so uncomfortable for most people that we pervasively misunderstand or misrepresent them as potentially leading to serious psychological, social, and physical harm. Intentionally or not, we overstate the danger of necessary and inevitable conflict and frame it as abuse.

The obfuscation of necessary conflict relates in part to a defense of consolidated power and control—when people with more power feel narcissistically injured when those with less power pose a challenge. Schulman offers various case studies of this threatening interaction across power differentials, including driving (or walking, or selling loose cigarettes) while black in the United States, having sex while HIV+ in Canada, and resisting the occupation of the West Bank and siege on Gaza as a Palestinian.

In the last example, Schulman provides a careful analysis of social media posts about Israel's assault on Gaza in 2014, pointing to the Israeli government's anxious control of the narrative through shunning and dehumanizing Palestinian resistance. The analysis remains as

prescient today as prosaic. As I first sat down to read Schulman's book, sixteen-year-old Ahd Tamimi was arrested for allegedly slapping and kicking two Israeli soldiers patrolling her village in the occupied West Bank (see Goldman 2017). Arrests of children and adolescents in the West Bank are common, usually for throwing stones at the occupying army (see Addameer.org). Tamimi's case has received unusual attention because her family filmed the incident and the Israeli Education Minister has since offered that she should be imprisoned for life as punishment. Schulman's point about overstating harm to justify state control could hardly be more evident. Israeli social psychologist Niza Yanay (2013) offers a similar psychoanalytic reading of the Israeli military's violent response to challenges to its supremacy. Building on a Fanonian conceptualization of colonialist anxiety, Yanay critiques the dominant power's disavowed yet frustrated yearning for the subjugated group's validation.

In Schulman's analysis, these overestimations of harm can also play out at the interpersonal level, even when the person claiming abuse may have less or similar structural or institutional power as the person accused. She offers several provocative examples, including sexual interactions in professional settings characterized too quickly and simply as sexual harassment, student demands for "trigger warnings" in college coursework to avoid uncomfortable content, and conflation of violence and abuses of power in intimate relationships. In a particularly disturbing example, she recounts an incident between two female friends in a long-term, high-conflict relationship. One of them threw a heavy object at the other, causing a broken bone, and weeks later the woman who was injured called the police to have her former partner arrested. Schulman suggests that the conflict might have been better resolved by seeking remediation and parting ways. Instead, the injured friend sought recourse for her pain and anger with punitive and likely ineffective legal measures, effectively recentering the state.

The tradition of psychoanalytic, feminist, and queer theorization about conflict and power across micro and macro levels of interaction—between individuals, between individuals and the state, and between states—inevitably leads to additional distortions. Schulman’s work, however, largely finds coherence because of her strategy of locating disparate problems within a personal frame of reference through an ethic of bystander accountability. In each example, from Gaza to an East Village apartment, Schulman insistently implicates herself—as a member of the community and a friend who plays a role.

Many of us are drawn into the group enactments Schulman describes, overstating the harm of interpersonal interactions to justify punishments of uncomfortable differences through shunning and scapegoating. This justification undermines our ability to engage productively in conflict and address dangerous abuse when it occurs. The slippage happens actively between us, yet we can interrupt the circuit by acting as what Schulman terms “good friends”—relations that, regardless of other formal and informal ties, facilitate questioning and accountability. We otherwise tend to egg each other on in escalating claims of abuse through notions of exceptionalism, whether in shared response to past trauma or relying on assumptions about the group’s supremacy. Schulman’s premise that traumatized groups often behave like groups organized around supremacy is an old, yet still challenging one in psychoanalytic contexts. I have theorized that targeted and traumatized people often need “accountable recognition” of social pain from their peers (2016: 343)—believable counter-projections to expectations of violence and indifference that can allow traumatized people to reconstitute and reengage across differences. Schulman centers her analysis not on pain but instead on the difficult recognition of the conflict itself.

Here, too, is where a friend can help. Whether we are family members, teachers, students, colleagues, social workers, postal workers, lovers, and others who can also be friends—Schulman’s new book offers an often persuasive new (and old) strategy for queer ethical engagement: a model of friendship that assumes conflict and difference, where we depend on each other to ask questions and hold each other accountable.

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