

# Five Things White Activists Should Never Say

Version 2.1

If I'm to be a white ally, I figure I should take some of the burden off people of color to explain what's wrong with some of the things white people say. With that in mind I've decided to compile a list of things that white people—specifically, white activists—should never say.

While reading this list, keep in mind that I'm drawing heavily from my own experience. There are plenty of fucked up things white people can say. For the most part, however, I've decided to focus on blatantly racist comments that I've heard first hand. Also, I tend to mention anarchists a lot, because I used to be an anarchist, so I organized with other anarchists. This does not mean that white anarchists have a monopoly on racism. In many cases one could substitute the term *social liberal* or *socialist* for *anarchist*, and the point would still be applicable.

## 1. “They belong to *that* religion.”

I have yet to visit an activist group with religious homogeneity. That said, among the activists I've worked with certain religious views are more acceptable than others. If a disproportionate number of the people who hold a religious stance are European or of European descent, the stance is acceptable. So it's okay to be an atheist, a pagan, or a Quaker. If a religious stance doesn't meet this criterion, it tends to be viewed with suspicion.

Islam, the Baptist church, the Episcopal church, and the Roman Catholic Church are among the

religious institutions that white activists have denigrated without regard for the number of people of color within them. It would be outside the scope of this piece to argue that a particular religious body is good or bad. But I will point out that it's folly to treat the members of any of the aforementioned institutions as a monolithic, univocal group that stands opposite of everything activists believe in. Individual Catholics, for example, have differences of opinion on pretty much everything, and often membership to the church has more to do with wanting to preserve family or community ties than with adhering to a certain set of doctrines. Indeed the attempt to divorce family and ethnic ties from religion is of relatively recent Western origin. If white people don't want to alienate people of color from their organizing, they're going to have to learn to show more tolerance for the religions they adhere to.

## 2. “All nationalism is bad.”

The idea that all nationalism, including ethnic nationalism, is bad is often rooted in anarchism, an ideology that was first propounded by European men in the nineteenth century and which since then has drawn more than its fair share of white thinkers. Even if we set this aside, white people who raise the “all nationalism is bad” objection often miss the point that the essence of ethnic nationalism has nothing to do with what anarchists mean by state and everything to do with racial or ethnic identity.

It's important to keep in mind that some people link themselves to a nation in order to express racial or ethnic identity rather than allegiance to a state. If white people can avoid doing

this, this doesn't mean that they're all awesome anti-statists; rather it means that they have the privilege of being part of the group that is seen as the default racial or ethnic group. When white activists forget this, it's a disaster in the making. For example, I once saw an activist remove a poster from a wall, simply because it said, “Soy de aquí como el coquí,” which translates to, “I am as Puerto Rican as the coquí.” The message, which should be obvious to anyone who claims to be anti-racist, has nothing to do with a particular state; it is that one's ethnic identity is something to be proud of.

## 3. “I know what it's like to face racist oppression; I face oppression too.”

No, unless you've experienced racism you do not know what it's like to experience racism.

I used to find this response somewhat confusing. Surely, racist oppression isn't *completely* disanalogous to other kinds of oppression, right? After all, don't we use much the same vocabulary—words like *privilege*, *oppression*, and *intersectionality*—while discussing all kinds of oppression? And can't someone who faces one sort of oppression gain insight into another by making a comparison? I think the answer to all these questions is a very cautious yes—cautious because there's a danger lurking just around the corner. If comparing racist oppression to your oppression helps you realize that something you said or did was racist, then it's probably a good thing that you made the comparison. Even so, before you share your insight with the world you should run it by someone who faces both kinds of oppression, because

no matter how oppressed or well-intentioned you may be, you're still coming from a perspective of white privilege and you may be wrong about something crucial. Better yet, start reading the works of people who face multiple kinds of oppression and let them guide you into appropriate analogies.

The danger of white people's comparisons is that often the only “insight” gained from analogy is that because the white people making it are oppressed, they can never be racist. This denies one of the central components of anti-oppression work, which is that the oppressed have unique insight into their oppression by virtue of having experienced the oppression, *including the ways in which it is disanalogous to other kinds of oppression*. This is important, because it may be that it was just these disanalogous elements were at play when you said what you did five minutes ago and that what you said is therefore racist for reasons you don't understand. Not incidentally, the unique knowledge that an oppressed group has is known as *the epistemic privilege of the oppressed*. If your goal is to eliminate inequality, you don't want to appropriate one of the few kinds of privilege that oppressed people have, do you?

Though many examples of analogies gone wrong could be listed, I'll give only one here—one that's limited to activist circles. Some activists are inclined to make statements like, “I know what it's like to be black; I'm an anarchist.” I think what often happens is that white activists identify one sort of oppression, such as state oppression, as the Big Evil. They don't see that other oppressive forces besides the Big Evil

are at work and therefore they fail to see that some people face oppression that they don't comprehend. If you're white and have gone to jail for political reasons, that is unfortunate, but this does not mean you know what it's like to be a person of color. As a white person, you have the privilege of choosing whether or not to engage in political activities that may land you in jail; people of color can abstain from such activities and still end up in jail simply for being people of color. As a white person, you will probably be treated better in jail than a person of color who is your counterpart. As a white person, you don't know what it's like to experience the racist oppression people of color experience outside of jail. As a white person, you don't know what it's like to be a person of color in white activists' space, hearing white people say that they know exactly what it's like to experience racist oppression. In short it is incredibly myopic to think that one point of (apparent) commonality gives white people insight into what it's like to be people of color.

#### **4. "If we focus on this other kind of oppression, racism will disappear."**

In the previous section I noted a tendency of white people to fail to see any oppression outside the oppression they consider the Big Evil. In a related phenomenon white people will, while perhaps acknowledging the existence of other kinds of oppression, argue that without the Big Evil there would be no other oppression. Therefore anyone who confronts other kinds of oppression is only treating symptoms; the only cure for society's ills is to fight the Big Evil. The Big Evil could be statism, sexism, or any number of other things, but I'd like to focus on

classism, because in my experience it's named as the Big Evil in activist circles more than anything else.

If this piece were about the oppressions I face, you'd see I have a lot to say against classism. However, it wouldn't be appropriate for me to focus on it here. All too often white activists derail conversations about racism by bringing up classism. The problem with white activists' saying that racism reduces to classism is that it is an attempt to keep people of color from directly confronting their oppression so that they will instead confront an oppression that directly affects white people.

To support the claim that racism reduces to classism some white activists point out that in the US at least racist institutions were established as a part of divide-and-conquer scheme to keep the working class from rising up against the upper class. Setting aside the fact that this gives an account of only some racist institutions (the expansion that drove Native Americans west, for example, was already well underway), the argument presupposes that if working class white people had not bought into the view that they were superior to their black counterparts, they may have succeeded in revolting against the upper class. In other words white people's racism prevented the demise of classism. I do not mean to say that we should make a reversal and say that generally speaking classism is reducible to racism. However, I do mean to say that racism is a problem in its own right.

#### **5. "Let's show people of color how to organize."**

Many white activists have the impression that they have arrived. They believe that they are the authorities on the best way to organize and no longer have any racist bullshit they need to work on. Therefore if people of a particular racial or ethnic group don't want to work with them, it must be because they have yet to be informed of the awesomeness that is their group of white activists.

There's a reason I'm putting this remark last. I hope that after even a small sampling of racist comments white activists make—there are many others that aren't included here—it's apparent just how ridiculous it is to think that the only matter keeping people of various ethnic and racial minorities out of a given activist group is a lack of information. If an organization has disproportionately few people of color as members, it's often because people of color don't see how it benefits them, and that is often because the organization has racist tendencies that it has yet to address.

Perhaps the bigger problem with this remark is that it's blatantly tokenizing. The people who make it aren't primarily interested in forming a diverse coalition to confront the problems that people of color face; if they were, they'd visit the meeting of the people of color regularly and ask them how they could help without expecting glory for themselves or their organization. Instead they want to use people of color to make their activist group more diverse. They are making one more thing—segregation itself!—the responsibility of people of color.

Unfortunately, many white activists try to address this concern by avoiding

outreach to people of color altogether. This only ends up contributing to the problem, since in effect the white activists in question are saying that people of color can't decide for themselves whether to organize with white people. The proper solution is to be ready and willing to work side by side with activists of color while respecting that there are times when they want to work with white people and times when they do not.

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*I (Veronika) am alone responsible for any shortcomings this pamphlet has; all comments about them should be addressed to me.*

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