

*Sarah Schulman*

# Conflict Is Not Abuse

*Overstating Harm,  
Community Responsibility;  
and the Duty of Repair*

## Introduction | A Reparative Manifesto

### Methodology

I also grew up in feminism, in which the meaning of the private sphere is organic to the meaning of the larger frame of power, and one is understood as consequential to the other. So to see and then examine the relationship of individual anxiety to its geopolitical expression is an historically consistent impulse.

My range of consideration is broad. Queer intellectuals and artists are no longer required to stay within our subject ghetto. We no longer have to choose between queer subjectivity and the world. The world, at least the world of ideas, now understands that the two are integrated. In some arenas I can claim “expertise,” but in others I have something deeper to offer. As an artist I offer the reader an eclectic way in. I do not practice the “one, long, slow idea” school of thought. Instead, through three decades of books, plays, and movies, I have evolved a style of offering the reader many, many new ideas at once. Some of them will stick, some will be rejected, and some will be grappled with in a manner that creates even newer insights on the part of the reader.

### Facing and Dealing with Conflict

Conflict, after all, is rooted in difference and people are and always will be different. With the exception of those natural disasters that are not caused by human misdeed, most of the pain, destruction, waste, and neglect towards human life that we create on this planet and beyond, are consequences of our over-reaction to difference. This is expressed through our resistance to facing and resolving problems, which is overwhelmingly a refusal to change how we see ourselves in order to be accountable. Therefore how we understand Conflict, how we respond to Conflict, and how we behave as bystanders in the face of other people’s Conflict determines whether or not we have collective justice and peace.

! At the center of my vision is the recognition that above all, it is the community surrounding a Conflict that is the source of its resolution.

While people are punished at every level of human relationship for doing nothing, for normative Conflict and for resistance, simultaneously we have the overwhelming reality of actual violence and real Abuse. There is an enormous existing literature that analyzes and quantifies actual violence and real Abuse. There are political movements like Black Lives Matter and Palestine Solidarity that respond to this real violence and actual Abuse. And on the individual and family level there is a financially and culturally significant Recovery Industry with books, podcasts, videos, workshops, and a wide variety of practitioners and healing practices. Because discourse on actual violence and abuse and the recovery process is already embedded in the commercial and cultural realm, I am not going to repeat that information here. Instead, in *this* book I am looking at something quite different. Without in any way minimizing the role of violence in our lives, I am looking, *simultaneously*, at how a heightened rhetoric of threat that confuses doing nothing, normative conflict, and resistance with actual abuse, has produced a wide practice of *overstating harm*. And that this overstatement of harm is often expressed in “shunning,” a literal refusal to speak in person with another human being, or group of people, an exclusion of their information, the active obstruction to a person being heard and the pretense that they do not exist. I am examining the inaccurate claiming of “abuse” as a substitute for problem-solving. I make plain how this deflection of responsibility produces unnecessary separation and perpetuates anxiety while producing cruelty, shunning, undeserved punishment, incarceration, and occupation.

## Positive Change Can Happen

! ...while perfection is never achievable, possitive change is always possible. Resolution doesn't mean that everyone is happy, but it does mean that perhaps fewer people are being blamed for pain they have not caused, or being cast as the receptacle of other people's anxieties, so that fewer people are dehumanized by false accusation. Or as Matt Brinn suggests, that when we are in the realm of Conflict, we can move from the Abuse-based construction of *perpetrator and victim* to the more accurate recognition of the parties as *the conflicted*, each with legitimate concerns and legitimate rights that must be considered in order to produce just resolution.

...which must be expressed through behavior, not just feeling. Yet, as we learned by the AIDS crisis, significant attitudinal change, while inhabited by many, is propelled by a *critical mass*, a small diverse collection of individuals with focused intent and effective action who rise to the occasion to literally change our minds.

If victory is measured by the success of causing lifelong trauma to 1.8 million people (and not for the first time) waiting to be executed at any moment then the victory is yours and adds up to

our moral implosion, the ethical defeat of a society engaged in no self-inspection, wallowing in self-pity over postponed airline flights and burnishing itself with the pride of the enlightened.

Haas identifies the key elements found in many group supremacy formations, whether families, cliques, or nations. It's what Canadian Jude Johnson names "meritocracy, entitlement, enemy mind." One group deserves the right to be unquestioned and they are entitled to dehumanize the other whom they misrepresent as "a threat" while using this distortion as the grounds for self-congratulation, indifferent to the pain they cause and the long-term negative consequences of their actions.

Any pain that human beings can create, human beings can transcend. But we have to understand what we are doing, This transformation also requires a critical mass...

The contact must be more than superficial. A meta-analysis of 515 studies involving a quarter of a million people concluded that "intergroup contact fosters "greater trust and forgiveness for past transgressions." The effects are evident regardless of gender, age, religion, or ethnicity. They seem to hold even when the contact is indirect—that is, you are less likely to be prejudiced against a certain group if a member of your group is friends with a member of that group. A 2009 study published in *American Psychologist* found, somewhat incredibly, that simply thinking about positive interactions with a member of another group reduces prejudice. Imaginary contact may be better than none at all.

Yet over and over again, self-righteousness and the refusal to be self-critical is expressed as dominance reliant on the ability to shun or exclude the other party. Those seeking justice often have to organize allies in order to force contact and conversation, negotiation.

As I try to show over and over again, refusing to be self-critical in order to solve conflicts enhances the power of the state. We can resist this process.

For example, when I was sixteen in 1975 and faced the brutality of my parents' homophobia, I went to my high school guidance counselor. He told me not to tell my classmates that I was a lesbian because they could shun me. In other words, instead of intervening, he upheld the distorted thinking, unjustified punishment, and exclusion. Today, when I hear about familial homophobia from my students, I connect them to relevant aspects of the LGBT community, provide alternatives in my classroom, and offer to speak to their parents, i.e., to intervene and stand up to brutality in order to protect its recipient and transform their context. I do this in the midst of a critical mass of other teachers taking the same action, and in this way there is a paradigm shift, where the school that, in my case, was part of the oppression system can become part of the resistance and solution. This is the kind of step that I am asking for, and which I believe is possible both inside and outside of institutions and with friends. The move from complicit bystander to active participant for change is the same kind of attitudinal shift that many of us went through in relationship to people with AIDS, and must go through in

relationship to Palestine. But I am not asking for this on a disaster by disaster basis, but rather as a shift in our collective mindset.

Namely, false accusations of harm are used to avoid acknowledgement of complicity in creating conflict and instead escalate normative conflict to the level of crisis. This choice to punish rather than resolve is a product of distorted thinking, and relies on reinforcement of negative group relationships, when instead these ideologies should be actively challenged. Through this overstatement of harm, false accusations are used to justify cruelty, while shunning keeps information from entering into the process. Resistance to shunning, exclusion, and unilateral control, while necessary, are mischaracterized as harm and used to re-justify more escalation towards bullying, state intervention, and violence. Emphasizing communication and repair, instead of shunning and separation, is the key to transforming these paradigms.

...the individual's inability to problem-solve serves the interests of the state.

## PART ONE | The Conflicted Self and the Abusive State

### Chapter One | **In Love:** Conflict Is Not Abuse

! If a person cannot solve a conflict with a friend, how can they possibly contribute to larger efforts for peace? If we refuse to speak to a friend because we project our anxieties onto an email they wrote, how are we going to welcome refugees, immigrants, and the homeless into our communities? The values required for social repair are the same values required for personal repair. And so this discussion must begin in the most micro experience. Confusing being mortal with being threatened can occur in any realm. The fact that something *could* go wrong does not mean that we are in danger. It means that we are alive. Mortality is the sign of life.

! Experiencing anxiety does not mean that anyone is doing anything to us that is unjust.

In order to “protect” ourselves by keeping our lives small and shutting out intimacies, we could actually be hurting ourselves, missing out on a transformative experience of the heart, and sabotaging our small but crucial contribution to making peace. And the withholding also mis-trains those around us to not see us and others like us as sexual, loving adults who have the right to be in intimacy with equals. Relationships of all kind, after all, are the centerpiece of healing.

So because the question is so big, I start in the smallest place.

## The Dangerous First

A different person, perhaps one with a history of a specific kind of sexual abuse, processed in a specific way, especially if it pertained to suggestive language, could find her speech inappropriate and upsetting. They could find it harassing. It could be a “trigger.” However, I find it inviting