

A friend recently told me of an experience he had at a Pride march in London.¹ Wanting to call out to a group he was with, he shouted:

“Hey guys!”

To which the reply, coming from a gender fluid member of the group:

“Guys? There’s a micro-aggression right there. On Pride of all days!”

What cannot be captured in text is the humour and goodwill embedded in this retort, and is not humour the most effective way to cut through theoretical discourse to the nub of the matter? Facetious or otherwise, the scolding made my friend realise something.

He (incidentally a CIS male) is now working on removing gendered general terms from his vocabulary. How hard, he notes, is it to shift from “guys” to “gang” or – his new favourite – “team” when speaking to a group?² Certainly, for him speaking, no difference at all. But to his interlocutors, this simple monosyllabic shift potentiates the avoidance of socialised discomfort or outright offence.

Is this modification not the embodiment of optimistic criticism?

Becoming aware of the possible impact of what he assumed was neutral language, my friend took it upon himself to remove that threat of offence entirely. To him, it makes no difference: all terms bearing no personal or philosophical import in their subjective linguistic neutrality. To others, however, who have lived and live subjected to and oppressed by phallogocentric, heteronormative discourse, it offers a chance to breathe. To be seen, in that moment, as nothing but themselves, unshaped by symbolic and visual assumption, cultural pigeonholes or casual gender role causality. (Do only “guys” come in groups? The parallel is the ludicrously infantilising “girls”, which robs all agency and (social) intellect from the subject outright.) In saying “team” instead of “guys”, it becomes possible to enable a self-interpellation into cultural and communicative discourse in these moments. And is not life the culmination of such moments? Here we see the insidious power of micro-aggressions, silently building upon the back of Othered persons – invisible to all but those who suffer through it.³ An incessant socio-political undermining of one’s Self, through which life becomes an Irreality wherein lived and internal experiences cannot overlap. Consequently, the symbolic subsumes the Real, but a Symbolic order externally and negatively defined, one with *no place* for the subject it purports to define.

I do not believe this to be an imaginative leap. When someone calls “guys!” to a group, it is the same act as Althusser’s policeman yelling “hey! You there!”. The subject must pause and question their gesture of subjectivisation. But as a non-guy, trans members of that group have been always-already Symbolic, without even the chance at the vexed possibilities of resistance. “Guys!” cannot miss the group, nor the non-guys within it, since it relies upon the subject’s recognition/acceptance of it in

¹ Depending on your position, I rely on the rhetoric of either Žižek or Trump, here. I have the best friends, believe me.

² He was sad not to want to indulge in the connotations of “comrade” ...

³ Two recent examples: comedian Jo Brand calling out an all-male panel for dismissive attitudes towards sexual harassment, saying “If I can just say, as the only representative of the female gender here today – I know it’s not high-level, but it doesn’t have to be high-level for women to feel under siege in somewhere like the House of Commons. Actually, for women if you’re constantly being harassed, even in a small way, that builds up and that wears you down.” Similarly, the blindness of Jason Bateman’s defence of Jeffery Tambor’s sexual harassment allegations, which Elizabeth Walters herself experienced. Perversely, it was not the sight of Walters crying during the conversation, nor her powerful words of progression during the interview, that made Bateman change his approach and apologise. It was, instead, later media backlash.

order to be constituted as a call to the group at all. It is a performance of Lacan's thesis on the letter which "always arrives at its destination", since the destination defines itself thus. The non-guys within the group then face a double binding gesture: not to respond to the call and socially alienate themselves; or reply and internally alienate themselves.⁴

Althusser's interpellation ideologically "transforms the individuals into subjects".⁵ To say "guys" is to rob the LGBTQ community of any resisting dialogue.⁶ But why is resistance a necessity within interpellation? Put simply, because becoming-subject is not a natural process. It is one occurring in the vicissitudes of social conditions. The resistance – what Žižek calls the "double denial" in relation to the moment of interpellation – enacts the subject's inherent multiplicity through an interrupted ontology. Without this resistance, without multiplicity, the Othered member of the group cannot become an I; it is an ontology denied in totality. In a group especially, wherein Self-hood is variously distributed among and within others; for the human individual, their "plurality of constituent elements of the person participate in other realities".⁷ "Guys" is social contact not as unity, but as production; "subjectivity does not pre-exist the process of its own production", as Berardi points out.⁸ "I is an Other": without the chance to enact that internal Otherness in relation to interpellation, one cannot become an I; a lack of resistance to interpellation represents a removal of chaosmosis, a composition of chaos which yields not just sensation, but subject itself.⁹ As Moten notes: "what it would be to have an ontological status, and know it, is what it would be to be a white person".¹⁰

(Alterity – non-"guys" – is a productive unconscious, an Other which cannot be formulated merely in social terms for this very reason. Wider implications for the trans movement abounds. The task of the trans movement (very broadly speaking) is to develop and solidify a social position for non-binary genders and sexualities. The problem lies in trans identities being difference prior to that which is differentiated. In other words, trans identities exist beyond any system of binary gender, but attempt to carve themselves a space within that system. Adding another pigeonhole to a fixed taxonomy of gender is a necessary but incomplete gesture. Naturally, trans communities desire to be enshrined as their own community, to have their experiences validated socially. To find definition in a faulty system is an important step, but not the last: the abolishment of a binary system of gender definition altogether. We could then foresee a future wherein the most progressive trans activists of today later become the most conservative. If gender becomes irrelevant entirely, will that invalidate the current struggle for trans visibility and acceptance?¹¹ If one spends one's life working to define oneself against a binary system, what happens when that system is removed? It is

⁴ Building on: Louis Althusser, "Ideology and State Apparatuses", in *Essays on Ideology*, London: Verso 1984: 163; and Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, London: Verso, 2017: 62-4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ It is the same for black bodies. See the perspicuous unpacking of Pras and kris ex's *Ghetto Superstar* in Fred Moten's *black and blur* Durham: Duke University Press, 2017: 30-3.

⁷ Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship Is – and Is Not* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013: 19. Sahlins is echoing Roger Bastide, who echoes Maurice Leenhardt.

⁸ On this see: Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work* Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009: 120-127.

⁹ I rely here, palpably, on Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999: 204-8.

¹⁰ Moten, 280. The addendum: "straight white male" person.

¹¹ The short answer is no, but it is infinitely more complex. Potentially, we have a scenario coming wherein Othered persons are finally permitted a social expressive space, only to have that entire matrix removed. If that does occur, who can then represent that challenge or speak to that experience.

possible that, having fought for social definition, Othered persons will fight to keep it when those very forms of definition crumble.)

Here we find how casual social language persists a heteronormative, phallogocentric and euro-centric ideology. Perhaps “guys” is harmless; to read into it as I have done to discredit its current general neutrality. Maybe it’s ok to use so long as one acknowledges the operative dialectic relation of it not between word and thing, nor thing and thing, but thing and nothing. Maybe. But, and here is a question innate to optimistic criticism, why flirt with that risk? Why demand such convoluted justification when a ready change of word would suffice? True, it is only a word: but we must use the language of things to get into the abstract. In ready social communication, it’s all we’ve got.¹² If you see it as ritualistic renomination of the unchanged nucleus of the struggle, you have not understood the Othered’s position.

The power of “team” is to critique the matrix of cultural assumptions positively. No one is lost or harmed in their position, but many can be brought into social discourse. It is a resistance predating a preceding ideological power, one which cuts it off before it grows. In one fell swoop, social interpellation becomes neutral and thus is blown open.¹³ Othered persons are offered a true moment of self-identification within a social system, one which usually negates them entirely.

It is admittedly, only a social move. But are these not those most central to lived experience? These outside of institution and system which orbit and engage us as a multitude daily? These battles must be fought locally and at any opportunity. One which dismantles oppressive systems calmly and positively. This optimistic criticism of the social ideological moment is a pure gesture of liberation. It is a pro-active dialogic movement between subject and Other, inherently interdisciplinary because it is inherently human. To claim no change can be enacted on a micro-level is to excuse inactivity. We must embrace the chaos of life as potential for self-led positive change. To hold an awareness of the Othered position.¹⁴ To hold an activism encased in empathy. To reflect the chaos of lived existence as the farmer embraced the prodigal son. To embrace internal multiplicity as solitude. It is not a movement reliant upon a specific enactment of marginality and minority as culturally understood and defined, but a space for those marginalities and minorities to define themselves.¹⁵

It is the thought that male CIS allies cannot be feminists, by virtue of their inherent built-in advantages; but through mutual awareness there can be a mutual unbuilding. Perhaps I am not a feminist but a recovering male.

¹² But, emphatically, not all we ever have.

¹³ I differentiate social and state interpellation, for hopefully obvious reasons.

¹⁴ A position, I think, unique to our digital age. It is thus a movement of Marx’s general intellect.

¹⁵ In a sentence, here is the main problem with the great lie of the “post”-colonial or the “post”-racial.