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Book Review:
**Taking Sides: Revolutionary Solidarity and the Poverty of
Liberalism - Milstein, Cindy. (2015). Oakland, CA: AK Press.
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Edited by Cindy Milstein, *Taking Sides* is a collection of thirteen essays that probe and nuance prominent social justice concepts such as solidarity, ally politics, decolonization, violence and the role of non-profits. A wide range of authors are featured, almost all of whom are activists or community organizers and some who identify with academia. Drawing from autonomously distributed zines or blog posts, much of the book references Black Lives Matter, anti-police, anti-colonial and other North American (specifically American) social movements.

In “Brave Motherfuckers: Reflections on Past Struggles to Abolish White Supremacy”, Michael Staudenmaier ponders whether white people should show up for Black Lives Matter protests or if their presence functions as a form of uninvited voyeurism. The chapter considers the history of ally politics in the United States, such as white organizing under the leadership of the black panthers and Puerto Rican and African anti-colonial/anti-racist groups who spoke to shared experiences of racialization and colonialism. Staudenmaier offers that white solidarity should not abdicate critical thinking or become solely dependent on the guidance of POC, as white allies choosing not to engage in critical self-reflection, learning and thinking could lead to tokenization or reliance on POC to do critical thinking and teaching for white folks.

The book then considers how violence is used in political struggle, particularly in the fight against police brutality, and media coverage. “The Poor Person’s Defense of Riots: Practical Looting, Rational Riots, and the Shortcomings of Black Liberalism” affirms that looting is a form of protest that is accessible to poor Americans who are often unable to engage in direct action, and should be viewed as no less legitimate than other actions.

Later, Harsha Walia offers a powerful demand for Indigenous struggle to not be lumped under other oppressions in “Decolonize Together: Moving beyond a Politics of Solidarity toward a Politics of Decolonization”. Walia highlights how solidarity is a sustained commitment that is not easily withdrawn, the importance of responsibility over white guilt and that decolonization must occur in relationships with people as well as with the land.

The following essay unpacks ally politics and challenges how privilege discourses root problems solely in the individual, rather than systems or institutions. Allies, according to Tipu’s Tiger, often follow self-identified leaders without a critical assessment of their politics. “Dangerous Allies” suggests that autonomous, identity based organizing is necessary but should not lead to calls for collectives to speak on behalf of entire identity groups.

“A Critique of Ally Politics” pushes this conversation further and questions whether allies often pick the leaders who are most visible to them, which doesn’t always represent the diversity or complexity within community. Further, M. questions whether learning about power and privilege functions as a process for achieving a moral high ground for those who have “unlearned” sufficiently, rather than a lens for understanding the uniqueness of lived experience. Solidarity is envisioned as an acknowledging of the complex identities that individuals hold and that liberation will occur through mutual understanding of how they are interwoven.

This section of the book continues to delve deep in to ally-ship with the widely circulated (in many activist circles) “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex”. The Indigenous Action Media demonstrates how the concept of ally has been rendered meaningless and calls for accomplices who are “complicit in a struggle towards liberation” (p. 88). Originally a zine, this article is powerful on its own but is strengthened by the surrounding chapters which further frame how ally politics evolved and where they could go.

At this point the book considers the systemic connections and public perception of solidarity. In “Coconspirators”, Shirley and Stafford unpack the complexities of cross racial alliances and emphasize that they cannot be separated from identity politics. They use the example of how white co-conspirators are sometimes racialized by mainstream media to not upset white supremacy and advocate for the importance of unpacking identity based complexities. J.B. considers this further in “Outside Agitators”, which they define as mainstream media’s technique to divide and delegitimize movements. The story told is that of external intervenors swooping in to disrupt and, sometimes, use civil disobedience or violent tactics, while implying there is a lack of local support for such measures; but according to J.B., the local community is often using those tactics as well and/or has called for outside support.

In one of the most interesting chapters, Finn Feinberg considers the appropriateness of white people yelling “we are all Oscar Grant” during Black Lives Matter protests. “We Are All Oscar Grant(?): Attacking White Supremacy in the Rebellions and Beyond” considers how this could be disingenuous as white allies will never experience the intersecting oppressions of being a young, black man, but could be a collective proclamation not to be victims or the refusal of hegemonic systems. Ultimately, this section concludes that alliances are not only about shared identities, but rather a resolution to ending oppression.

Next, Leanne Simpson challenges the narrative of Indigenous women as disappeared victims with the telling title “Not Murdered and Not Missing”. Simpson explains how gender is much more fluid and diverse in Anishinaabe culture, and that gender violence, especially against Indigenous women, is deeply rooted in colonialism. She calls upon her community to pull together because “we simply can no longer rely on or expect the state...to do this [fight violence] for us” (p. 123).

In “Spread the Miracle: Abolish the Police”, the Anarchist Jews draw a parallel between the systems that enabled Jewish oppression and ongoing police brutality against black bodies, while calling upon their community to actively challenge the systems, specifically white supremacy, that some of their members are now benefiting from. Before the concluding chapter, the book returns to Black Lives Matter protests as a case study on the complexities of violence as a political tactic. Benjamin Hart asserts that calling protests nonviolent, when they are not, erases the actual climate that these actions exist within. The chapter “In Support of Baltimore; or, Smashing Police Cars Is Logical Political Strategy” explains how nonviolence is a tactic in most modern political movements, rather than a philosophic position. This chapter concludes that if the media, social movements and individuals oppose violence in protests, then there must also be active opposition to policing, sexual assault and prisons.

The concluding chapter “Solidarity, as Weapon and Practice, versus Killer Cops and White Supremacy” unpacks inner protest dynamics and self-appointed authorities that attempt to police rioters. Cindy Milstein questions whether chants that advocate for democracy or “reclaiming” streets adequately acknowledge the harm that is perpetuated under “democratic” systems and the ongoing theft of land from Indigenous peoples (p. 156). Finally, Milstein offers the mantra that solidarity is the best weapon, a verb and a form of love. The last sentence of the book is a cute, maybe cliché, anarchist call for jaywalking and minor disobedience to prepare for the day that bigger laws will need to be broken in the pursuit of justice.

Taking Sides offers a collection of nuanced, complex and thought provoking perspectives that create space for conversations that move beyond an introduction to the concept of privilege and oppression. However, it could be inaccessible for those who are not already part of activist communities or have not had the opportunity to learn certain social justice language. This is not a shortcoming of the book specifically, but an acknowledgement that many conversations about politics and social justice can become elitist and exclude the very people that they attempt to support. Yet the authors in the book effectively raise complex concepts, such as the distinction between nonviolence as a political tactic and as a philosophy, without over simplifying the topic or using unnecessarily academic language.

Further, the book captured emerging discussions but, at times, seemed to be addressing a white reader. Many of the articles discussed the complexities of white ally-ship, which is a relevant and needed conversation, but could have been more explicitly stated in the description of the book. In the context of such complex discussion, it may have also been helpful to include brief author self-locations as the reader was often left wondering what experience and authority the writer was speaking from, such as whether they were a person of colour or a white person reflecting on their experiences with ally-ship.

Regardless, highlighting and centring the voices of people who are doing activism and community organizing is powerful rather than rooting authority in academia and politics. *Taking Sides* creates a space for deep critical reflection while drawing on both historical examples and the personal experiences of the writers in a succinct and plainly written collection of questions and ideas.
