

MUTUAL CRITICISM

Booklet, Lecture,
Mutual Criticism



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PRACTICE THE FORM TO ACHIEVE THE ESSENCE

I. INTRODUCTION

Mutual criticism is the practice, undertaken by a collective, in which each member of the community is subjected to criticism by the group.

This document traces mutual criticism over 150 years, making note, with an eye toward future use, of its development over time and its successes and failures. Particularly in the United States, our rich history of collectivism (including 19th century Bible Communism) is lost to common memory, whitewashed by the individualist mandate of the free market economy.

Rising inequality and impending climate catastrophe are pushing global capitalism to the brink of collapse. It might be time to start forming collective bonds again, to rediscover solidarity. By exploring this forgotten form of social management, we hope our readers may consider the virtues and challenges of building alternative social structures. We offer this text as a guide for friends and comrades looking to form the basis of a new post-capitalist society.

The ritual of mutual criticism has been performed differently by different groups, and yet the overarching structure is fairly consistent. In mutual criticism:

- The individual must be transformed into someone upon whom the group can depend. This is an essential element in the survival and functioning of any collective.
- The community helps the individual achieve openness and authenticity — a means for the “real self” to break with the hypocrisies of the past, leaving behind old norms and values for a more honest life.
- A group identity, superseding individual desire, is produced.
- An outlet is provided for the acceptable expression of individual feelings, opinions and frustrations within the dictates of group identity.
- The group may find itself susceptible to a charismatic leader, who may use the ritual to enforce social control.

II. ORIGINS OF MUTUAL CRITICISM

Mutual criticism first emerged in the mid-19th century, in intentional communities established during the violent transition of the Industrial Revolution. Such communities attempted to create an alternative, financially viable mode of collective living in a world turning away from an agrarian, handicraft economy, toward an industrial, capitalist one.

THE ONEIDA COMMUNITY

As a formalized public practice, mutual criticism was first articulated by John Humphrey Noyes, an American pastor and founder of the Oneida Community, established in Oneida, New York, in 1848. Noyes espoused a doctrine called Perfectionism or Bible Communism, which called for the total abolition of all property relations. This extended to a prohibition on marriage, which he considered a form of ownership. In the Oneida Community, all kinds of “special love” were forbidden, including romantic involvements and family ties. Communal nurseries and complex marriage (later called free love) provided part of the solution. Mutual criticism was central to the society’s workings.

THE BRETHREN

In his youth, Noyes had been a member of the Brethren, a secret society of students at Andover Theological Seminary during the early 19th century. According to Noyes, in the Brethren’s secret meetings they submitted to “the frank criticism of each other’s character for the purposes of improvement.” A former member explained: “At each

meeting, the member whose turn it was to submit to criticism, according to the alphabetical order of his name, held his peace, while the other members, one by one, told him his faults in the plainest way possible.”

The Congregational Church, to which these pastors-in-training belonged, had its origins in the Puritan Reformation. In a rejection of the bureaucratic hierarchy of the Church of England, each specific congregation operated autonomously, answering only and directly to God. Individual members were then accountable to the spiritual body of the congregation. Suzannah Lipscomb describes the emergence of Calvinist faith-in-practice as defined by such a covenantal theology, the “sense of mutual responsibility for sin and morality.” For a member to be publicly denounced by his fellow congregants suggests the belief “in the corporate nature of guilt and the right of the community to be involved in rectifying it.” Biblical precedent for such a model of “moral discipline” can be found in Matthew 18:15, in which Jesus recommends that “if your brother and sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.” If he or she does not listen, bring a few others, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” If that fails, the matter should be brought before the witness of the whole church.

The Brethren had a long-term impact on its participants. Asked to reflect on his experiences 40 years later, the Reverend John A. Vinton reported:

The process was severe and scathing in the extreme. Most of the remarks were just and kindly intended; some of them were, I have always thought, unjust, and rather too severe at least [...] The immediate result was to drive me to the blood of sprinkling, the fountain opened for sin and uncleanness [sic]. After I went to my room I could but weep before God over my numerous faults they faithfully exposed.

ONEIDA, CONT’D

Upon founding the Oneida community, John Humphrey Noyes extrapolated his early experiences in the Brethren to establish Mutual

Criticism as a central tenet of Bible Communism, “one of the greatest means of improvement and fellowship,” taking the place of “backbiting.” Mutual Criticism might fail for those in whom “egotism and vanity are stronger than their love of truth,” but is “always acceptable to those who wish to see themselves as others see them.”

In his book, *Mutual Criticism*, published in 1876, Noyes shares his guidelines, which were loosely:

Criticism must be tempered by love.

Criticism must be delivered without condemnation. The goal is “to destroy the husk which conceals his inward goodness.”

Criticism must be sincere, plain and truthful.

Criticism must be given and received in the spirit of meekness, without combativeness or pride.

Meekness does not exclude “godly anger,” which may be a necessary weapon against entrenched fault.

We must not criticize under the “compulsion of annoyance.”

It is best to wait until criticism is “cordially invited” by the subject.

We need not wait until we are free of fault to criticize others; “[l]et giver and receiver look simply at the evil [...] and demolish it.”

However, we should not criticize others until we can first see our own faults. “When one is blind one should not criticize.”

We should be “tender and genial” towards those we criticize. The aim is to “bring the person criticized nearer to God and give him a new happiness.”

In sessions, communards confessed their jealousies and petty vanities to the group, ensuring a well-functioning collective. Members also would receive acknowledgment of their strengths as well as criticism of their weaknesses. Overall, the ritual of mutual criticism enforced

group identification through the policing of behavior. One contemporaneous observer noted that any bitterness in members toward each other “was likely to be dissipated by the free utterance.” The ritual was believed to have purifying and curative effects, healing members from illness and cleansing members who made any contact with the outside: after daily visitors left the Oneida grounds, members most exposed to them would submit to mutual criticism so as to be “freed from contamination by worldly influences.”

THE AMANA COLONY

The Oneida remain well-known for their formalized use of mutual criticism, but they were not the only group of their era — or the first — to engage in a version of it. The Amana were contemporary group, who practiced a similar kind of mutual criticism.

Formally known as the Community of True Inspiration, this splinter sect of Lutherans followed the teachings of 17th Century Mystics and Pietists, formed in protest against the dogmatism and formality of the Lutheran Church. In 1842, led by charismatic leader Christian Metz (who was called *Werkzeuge*, or “Instrument”, by the community) they escaped religious and financial persecution in Germany and landed in New York State’s “Burned Over District,” a region overrun with idealist communities, alongside the Oneida, the Shakers and early Mormons. In 1855, the community moved to Iowa, where they founded seven villages and renamed themselves the Amana, a Biblical name conveying their commitment to faith. They lived communally until 1932.

The Amana’s take on mutual criticism, called the *Unterredung* or *Untersuchung*, played out as an annual spiritual examination led by the *Werkzeuge*. It was performed as early as 1833, decades before Noyes wrote down the principal beliefs of his practice. This purifying event would prepare the community for *Liebesmahl* (lovefeast), an annual celebration of the Lord’s supper that was the most solemn ceremony of the year.

Every man, woman and child in the entire seven-village settlement would be subjected to the *Unterredung*. Each member made a public

confession to the elders of the village. The community would then help each individual member enter more fully into the objectives and purposes of the whole, acknowledging their virtues and then targeting any failings — from a member’s lack of industriousness, to their profligate spending habits, to their compromised spiritual state:

“Oh, weep over your ill-spent squandered time! Esteem the grace of your God more highly and go out of yourself [...] Strive for your salvation. Oh, make better use of your time; go forward with careful step and seek with tears for thy lost grace.”

Barbara Heinemann, who inherited the title of *Werkzeug* after Metz’s death, formulated these questions to trigger confession in 1851:

Soul what is thy purpose! Why has thou joined this Community? For what art thou longing and seeking?

How and in what manner hast thou recognized and found the work of mercy or of True Inspiration? In how far dost thou agree with the ways of sanctification and the testimonies through which I (the Lord) have hitherto led my servants and my Community?

Art thou agreed in matters internal and external with the grace of common possession and the ways and precepts thereof, not after the faults and disorders which creep in and intermingle through the weakness and disobedience of men, but after the sacred ordinances?

In both the Amana Colony and the Oneida Community, we see the Puritan ideal of spiritual perfectibility placed in service of a community’s economic survival through a time of worldwide industrial transformation.

III. COLLECTIVE LIVING

While spiritual enlightenment remained central to 19th-century mutual criticism, by the early 20th century, people used mutual criticism to counteract the newly entrenched system of laissez-faire capitalism. What followed was a period of secular or explicitly anti-theological iterations of mutual criticism that directly confronted the pressures of industrialization.

BITANIYA ILLIT

In 1915, a group of young Jews with secular aspirations left Galicia for Vienna, where they were dropped into the ferment of political and intellectual innovations: Weininger, Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, anarchism, spiritual socialism, and German youth culture. They returned home, formed the socialist-Zionist group Hashomer Hatzair (“The Young Watchmen”), and moved to Palestine, where in 1918, a group of their elite *chalutzim* (pioneers) founded a collective farm, called “Bitaniya Illit,” on a hill above the Sea of Galilee.

Bitaniya only lasted eight months, but the legend that grew around it became the soul of the 20th-century kibbutz movement. While its legacy and impact remain mostly symbolic, it provides an instructive synthesis of the most important debates in European thought responding to the anxieties of modernity and industrialization.

BITANIYA’S INFLUENCES

In 1887, Ferdinand Tönnies articulated the social impact of industrialization with his definitions of *Geimenschaft* versus *Gesellschaft* — the

former referring to smaller-scale, more intimate communities and associations based on family and neighborhood ties, the latter referring to the modern industrialized “aggregate of isolated, competing individuals.” One response to this formulation was the emergence of German Youth culture, *Wandervogel*, where young people would hike, camp, and do various nature activities together. This evolved into *Bund* — small groups (*eda*) based on shared interests and emotional bonds, that would attempt to reinstate a form of humanist *Gemeinschaft* against the fragmented, isolated life of the *Gesellschaft*. Regina Bendix describes how the field of folklorist studies, which also emerged during this era, was “oriented towards the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity.”

During the Vienna years, *chalutzim* encountered Martin Buber’s influential *I and Thou*, a text which placed any potential for spiritual connection into the sacredness of encounters and relationships with things and people. At the same time, they came into contact with the revolutionary power of psychoanalytic practice (then seen as a process of rooting out irrational thought via discursive self-examination).

All of this left a strong mark on early Zionism, whose ideals were then guided largely by the idea of *return* — a negation of the Jewish diaspora through collective life in a Jewish state. These ideals included a deliberate and principled approach to land use — particularly through communal agriculture, archeology, and the study of flora and fauna — as well as the production of folk dance, music and poetry. Authentic, honest communication also became a part of the movement.

BITANIYA (cont’d)

Everyone knew that in Bitaniya life begins in the evening, with the soul talk, that public confession and lengthy, pain-filled dialogue about life, the individual, society[.] [...] The talks were conducted in semidarkness, in a dense and spiritually tense atmosphere, which bordered on lunacy.

The *chalutzim* believed in solidarity and organization anchored in dialogue, which took place in nightly *sihah*, or soul talks, an intense

form of group formation based on self-exposure — absolute fellowship requiring absolute confession.

In direct contrast to the Protestants of the Amana and Oneida, Bitaniya Illit’s form of self-criticism was based on the ecstatic experience of intimate revelation. Bitaniya members wished to mystically merge with the group, forming one spiritual entity. Zeev Bloch describes them dancing, Dionysian, in the light of the campfire. As the fire died out, dancers rushed to their tents, grabbed their wooden cases full of clothing and threw them into the fire to keep it burning — “here a collective dawned and solidified, as the members stripped off the rind that was their ‘I’ and merged into a regenerating collective.”

This total surrender of self included the sharing of sexual experience. Sexual intercourse between two individuals — to the exclusion of the rest of the group — was considered a despicable act of selfishness unless the lovers later verbally shared their feelings with the entire commune. Although the Oneida’s version of “free love” expressed itself within a more bureaucratic structure than the rapturous self-exposure of Bitaniya Illit, in each instance sex is acknowledged as a space of intimacy that has to be accounted for in the successful workings of a larger group.

Bitaniya achieved legendary status in large part because of a document called *Kehiliyatenu* (Our Commune), a group diary which was published and widely disseminated to Hashomer Hatzair groups back in Europe. The document revealed that the Bitaniya were deeply conflicted, especially about the nature of speech itself. Tamar Katriel writes that “a central theme is the tormented discussion of their expressive difficulties, their yearning for human contact, and their keen awareness of many barriers to true dialogue.” These barriers included the group’s charismatic leader, Meir Ya’ari, who was accused of turning soul talks into “constant social criticism and judgement by the group, to the point of spiritual cruelty,” what member David Horowitz described in his memoirs as “invasive, tyrannical dramas of group coercion.”

Bitaniya was an experiment in the belief that one doesn’t need an institution for communal governance — only dialogue. As such, it perhaps represents a failed experiment; but its influence presages more successful structures.

IV. REVOLUTION AND THE STATE

While mutual criticism began in small, agrarian communities responding to industrialization in the mid-19th and early 20th century, it soon developed into a system that could be deployed on a much larger scale — for example, in the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. No longer part of the intimate inner workings of a tight-knit community, mutual criticism instead evolved into a full-blown mechanism of state power. In communist ideology, mutual criticism functioned both as a tool to combat bureaucratic hierarchy and a mode of collective self-surveillance. It both inculcated new belief systems in large groups of people, and compelled loyalty in the face of purges.

BOLSHEVISM

Marx wrote, optimistically, that proletarian revolutions would be set apart by their ability to engage in constant self-criticism, to “return to the apparently accomplished in order to begin anew [...] deride with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts.”

By 1904, Lenin had turned this into a dogmatic point, stressing that Bolshevik superiority was based in the Party’s “work of self-criticism and merciless unmasking of [its] own deficiencies,” also asserting that criticism could and should come “from the bottom to the top, and from the top to the bottom, without exempting anybody.”

With the birth of the Soviet Union, leadership began to assess *samokritika*, Russian for “self-criticism,” as a more concrete technique, acknowledging a one-party system’s need for some feedback mechanism. They also acknowledged that the scientific and cultural

advancement necessary for a rapidly industrializing nation to become a modern world power depends on allowing some form of critical discourse. In both cases, *samokritika* was seen as a potential way to stage dialogue, while allowing the Party to maintain absolute control over both truth and power.

The first official *samokritika* campaign in 1928 stated that the Party could not uphold a proletarian dictatorship alone, proposing that the working masses openly share their opinions on “the weaknesses in Soviet [...] administrative apparatus and life.” This approach became popular so quickly that a subsequent pamphlet cautioned workers “to imagine, before saying something critical of a manager, that the body he was kicking was not somebody else’s but his own, since in the Party view he was assaulting a corporate body of which he was a part.” Bosses would soon learn to shut down worker criticism with instant repentance — the performance of *alliluishchina* (hallelujah singing).

This initial campaign died down quickly, though Soviet leadership would occasionally return to it. Open criticism “from below” was used to shame, test the loyalty of, purge, manipulate, or reorganize party secretaries, regional functionaries, and middle management — the “top” deploying the “bottom” to specific ends. For the most part, the masses were redirected to blow off steam about their workplaces, colleagues, and communities not in public hearings but in the form of *samokritika* letters to the Soviet press.

With the rise of Stalinism, *kritika i samokritika* became something new entirely — a formalized ritual, part of the 1930s show trials and purges of the Great Terror, even at the highest echelons of the Central Committee. As outlined by historian J. Arch Getty, this followed a standard script: A report would be read, criticizing a member. The member would then admit to the accusations, assert that the Party was “completely correct” to criticize him, restate the criticism in first person, and provide a “political evaluation” of his sins. Then all the other members would repeat and agree to the findings of the initial report. “No one defended the accused; speaker after speaker rose to condemn him.” After a “concluding word,” the group unanimously adopted the report’s disciplinary recommendations.

This performance “had a transactional component, in which the self-criticism paid ‘symbolic taxation’ to a higher authority,” that of

the Party. Everyone agreed to pay this taxation. Historian Alexei Kojevnikov writes that “even Communist oppositionists who faced the death penalty were still proving their insider status by admitting imaginary crimes and accusing themselves in the public performance of Moscow trials, while denying their guilt in their last private letters to Stalin or to the Party.”

After the worst of the Terror and Stalin’s death, *kritika i samokritika* continued through *glasnost*, as a slightly more benign, pro-forma sham apology ritual, “extracted from Soviet citizens in various organizational group contexts — Party, factory, farm, school, etc.” As such, it educated party members in the loyalty requirements of membership: “Subordinating one’s personal views to those of the collective, accepting criticism and delivering self-criticism in the proper way, were the proof of successfully internalized cultural values and of one’s status as an insider.”

MAOISM

From Bolshevism came Mao Zedong’s version of self-criticism. Having consolidated its power by 1949, the Chinese Communist Party, or CPC, was failing in its attempt to organize a populous nation around communism by the early 1960s.

Mao decided to attempt mass indoctrination by mobilizing young people, particularly teenagers, against their elders, taking aim at the basic organizing principle of Chinese family life — filial piety. The Party then empowered China’s youth to obliterate thousands of years of culture and history. This was called the Cultural Revolution, or “thought reform.”

Chinese culture traditionally held a deep belief in “saving face,” maintaining a tight social hierarchy based on age, class status, and family structure. Interpersonal relationships were meant to exist in harmony, and without conflict. Its effectiveness in undermining all of those structures may be why an entire chapter of the Little Red Book was devoted to self-criticism and mutual criticism. For example:

The proverb “Running water is never stale and a door-hinge is never worm-eaten” means that constant motion prevents

the inroads of germs and other organisms. To check up regularly on our work and in the process develop a democratic style of work, to fear neither criticism nor self-criticism, and to apply such good popular Chinese maxims as “Say all you know and say it without reserve,” “Blame not the speaker but be warned by his words” and “Correct mistakes if you have committed them and guard against them if you have not” — this is the only effective way to prevent all kinds of political dust and germs from contaminating the minds of our comrades and the body of our Party.

In practice, Maoist self-criticism was rigorously ritualized. On the more intimate scale, much of the values-training of mutual criticism occurred in the “study” meetings, which became a ubiquitous community requirement. Elected leaders taught government-approved pamphlets, and, in the spirit of dialectical materialism, made study members express honest viewpoints which would then be criticized by the group.

Larger, more spectacular exercises in public humiliation and abjection via mutual criticism evolved in stages. Speak Bitterness meetings in the 1940s and 1950s encouraged Chinese peasants to publicly detail the oppressive behaviors and misdeeds of their landlords; this allowed the CPC to raise class consciousness and redistribute land to the masses, thus decentralizing power previously held by rural landowners.

More serious charges were tackled at Struggle Sessions, occurring as early as the 1930s in party meetings, where counterrevolutionaries would be brought in with their hands shackled, and be publicly accused of reactionary thinking and behavior. These sessions also helped train viewers of the community in their own roles, following a script alternating between accusations, shouted slogans, exhibits being shown, moans of the accused being heard, ultimately leading to punishment and sometimes execution.

Speak Bitterness and Struggle Sessions merged into public self-criticism, which followed a similarly precise script (Revolutionary Song, Accused Enters, Slogan Shouting, Criticism, Slogan Shouting, Accused Exits, Revolutionary Song).

The accused wore placards listing their crimes as meeting leaders publicly berated and criticized them. This was a stilted dialogue — the leaders spoke in short, imperative statements while the accused performed scripted responses (“Yes, yes it’s true, I admit”). The audience was allowed to chime in with prescribed slogans (“Hang your head down!”). The slogans themselves followed a strict order — first, drawing class lines between the criticized member and the pious masses (“[Accused’s Name] must hang his head and admit his guilt to the revolutionary masses!”); then goading a confession (“Leniency to those who confess their crimes. Severity to those who refuse to!”) and finally, proclaiming general revolutionary ideology and Maoist loyalty (“Carry the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution through to the end!”).

After Mao’s death and Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, the practice of mutual and self-criticism ceased, but there have been revivals of these public meetings — sometimes televised — in the past few years, as President Xi Jinping attempts to maintain control of a China facing financial liberalization and out-of-control corruption.





V. THE UNITED STATES

After World War II, the practice of mutual criticism in the United States entered a fallow period. Early American utopias were forgotten in a culture of unchecked consumerism and individualism. The practice of mutual criticism underwent a resurgence in the 1960s. Mao's *Little Red Book* became an instruction manual for baby boomers rebelling against their parents' bourgeois values.

THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND

The Weather Underground Organization was founded in 1969 as a radical faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the broader antiwar movement, with the explicit goal of fomenting revolutionary activity and overthrowing the US government. *Prairie Fire*, the Weathermen's 1974 manifesto, devotes an entire section to the practice of self-criticism. The chapter itself functions as a kind of written, group self-criticism session, both declaring the necessity of criticism for the revolutionary cause: "We have to learn from our mistakes. Unsorting errors and correct understandings, reassessing strengths and weaknesses, are a revolutionary responsibility," and accounting for the collective errors of the past: "In the course of preparing for armed struggle in late 1969 we began mistaking friends for enemies [...] We did not learn from the meaningful criticism of our comrades."

Cathy Wilkerson was a Weatherman from 1969-'70, participating in the Days of Rage and subsequent bombings. In her memoir, she describes her induction into the group via Maoist mutual criticism, which she found surprisingly hierarchical and sexist — the male leader directing, female followers speaking up occasionally to support his

points. She was attacked for her ideas about the role of women in the antiwar effort, and when she tried to explain herself, “I was told that in a ‘criticism session’ I had to respond to what others said, and that by arguing with them, I was being defensive and evasive, fearful of looking at the truth.” Any deviation from the official Weatherman position was seen as a sign of “personal failure and weakness.” Despite these initial reservations, it was this experience that ultimately convinced Wilkerson to join the cell:

Suddenly it seemed urgent that I get myself accepted, if I really wanted to make a contribution to the revolution. The criticism indicated that I was inferior to the other members of the collective, and I wanted to prove that I had a substantial history of work and ideas, and that I should be considered an equal.

If the process felt humiliating or unfair, that was the price that would have to be paid. For Wilkerson, mutual criticism represented a rejection of her privileged upbringing, “we were ‘remaking ourselves’ into ‘new men and women.’”

THE SYMBIONESE LIBERATION ARMY

The Symbionese Liberation Army was a small left-wing radical group active in Oakland and Los Angeles from 1973 to 1975. They saw themselves as a vanguard army fighting against capitalism, imperialism, racism, and the patriarchy. Although they committed several murders and bank robberies, they are best remembered for kidnapping Patty Hearst in 1974. At the time of the kidnapping, Patty Hearst was a sophomore at UC Berkeley and the 19-year-old heiress to the Hearst publishing fortune. During her abduction, the SLA released a series of recorded tapes in which Hearst renounced her former life and declared her allegiance to the SLA cause.

In her 1981 memoir, *Every Secret Thing*, Hearst describes the SLA’s use of mutual criticism as a brainwashing technique. Like Wilkerson, Hearst describes a version of mutual criticism that was hierarchical, organized, and directed by a male charismatic leader. Hearst describes

the atmosphere as formal and serious. Her role in the criticism sessions was to abjectly agree with every accusation leveled against her:

I was not serious enough about my training. I did not try hard enough. I was lazy and sloppy in the drills. My attitude was not positive enough. I was not comradely with all the sisters and brothers. I would echo back to them the very same points of criticism. Finally, I would thank my comrades for trying to help me.

Hearst’s autobiography gives us one of the clearest understandings of the psychological structure that undergirds mutual criticism. Her indoctrination into the SLA was “reinforced on a daily basis by our criticism/self-criticism meetings in which I was obliged to renounce my former bourgeois life, my family and friends, and all the values with which I had grown up.” Her psychologist told her that all of this “was based on the psychological theories underlying Chinese thought reform [...] [which] holds that if a person is forced to recite certain ideas, even without believing them at first, he or she will come to in time. Psychologically, no one can long believe one thing and say and do another.” Even if logically you disagree with something or someone, the act of participation in the criticism session creates psychological buy-in. This is why (if we take Hearst at her word) when given the opportunity and means to free herself, she found herself incapable of breaking out of the patterns of behavior she had learned.

HERESIES

Heresies, a collectively organized and edited feminist magazine, emerged from the New York art world in 1977. Over the following 16 years, it introduced groundbreaking art and ideas into larger critical discourse, connecting women’s lived realities to the politics of aesthetics, activism, patterns of communication, architecture, music, traditional arts, sex, performance, ecology, racism, and the media.

Each issue of the magazine coalesced around a single theme. To produce the magazine, a main or “mother” collective would guide groups of volunteers and once the issue was published, the mother collective would hold a public “evaluation meeting.” Sara Marcus writes how

these in-person sessions allowed *Heresies* to build “a real-life community that could survive critique and incorporate it.” The evaluation would end with a round of criticism and self-criticism in which every participant honestly acknowledged how they felt the meeting itself had gone. Sabra Moore told Marcus, “You couldn’t respond to anything. So it wasn’t a debate; it was a final airing. While it was painful and unpleasant, it was also a way people got to leave the room having said what they needed to say.”

In one of these meetings, volunteers challenged the whiteness of the “mother collective.” This led directly to the publication *Heresies*’ next issue “Third World Women: The Politics of Being Other,” edited entirely by women of color, featuring art, poetry, critical theory, journalism, photo essays, criticism, and conversations by and about Chicana, Native American, Asian, and black women. The issue radically expanded concepts of hierarchy and otherness, racial exclusion and colonialism, and same sex eroticism.

VI. CULTS

As this political upheaval played out, utopian communities began to re-emerge in the United States, re-appropriating mutual criticism as a tool for religious and spiritual advancement, and ultimately, manipulation and abuse. The Peoples Temple and Synanon — two of the most influential cults of their era — promised followers a new, more spiritually fulfilling life.

Both organizations began within three years of one another. Both were founded and led by a male charismatic leader engaged in systemic domination and exploitation. Both considered mutual criticism central to the success of their organizations.

THE PEOPLES TEMPLE

The Peoples Temple began as a church founded by Pastor Jim Jones in Indianapolis in 1955. The group advocated for a fully racially integrated, communist community with a focus on the collective care of the poor and the elderly.

Jones idolized Mao and saw his church as a vehicle for spreading Marxist ideals to a larger community. Key to this transformation was community indoctrination that would “re-train” members out of the self-centered, elitist individualism inculcated by capitalism. This began in Indiana as “corrective fellowship,” where anything that interfered with true fellowship between members would be addressed; corporal punishment was introduced with what Jones termed the “Board of Education,” a two-foot long plank of wood.

After the Temple’s move to Northern California, these events were renamed “Catharsis Sessions” and increased in number, scope and

duration, sometimes lasting all night. Members, including children, could be called “on the floor” for a range of transgressions: laziness, sexist behavior, sexual crimes (from homosexuality to pedophilia), rudeness to elders, smoking and drinking, or failing to attend services. Any petty crimes by members that might attract attention were brought to the floor as a preventive measure, aimed at minimizing the involvement of law enforcement or public welfare officials in church business.

It also quickly became a site for Jones’s control. One Peoples Temple history describes members spying on one other and feeding the information to Jones so he could perform “mystic” awareness of his followers’ private behavior during catharsis, blurring the lines between “surveillance and discernment, threats and prophecy.”

Catharsis was the means by which the Peoples Temple developed collective consciousness. Individuals were meant to face “reality” — they were “self-centered, racist, and homosexual, living in a world full of injustice, hate, and racism.” Dominic A. Nesci chronicles the psychological impact of these public spectacles: by turning church members “into accusers or passive spectators of the moral lynching of their relatives and friends,” forcing them to sacrifice interpersonal loyalties, Jones consolidated the group’s allegiance.

Catharsis sessions grew in intensity to the point where the targets would not only be made to apologize, they would be punished by enforcers in the group; reports include descriptions of being beaten with rubber hoses and paddles and being made to engage in physical fights. While Jones clearly manipulated and stage-managed these affairs, publicly at least, he confined himself to announcing the “family’s” decision — not deciding on the punishment nor carrying it out, so that he did not appear to be involved. Once the Peoples Temple moved to Jonestown in Guyana in 1977, punishments increased to solitary confinement, hard labor, and group humiliation

Ultimately, the control instantiated through the catharsis rituals contributed greatly to one of the most infamous mass killings of the 20th century. In 1978, Congressman Leo Ryan led government officials and journalists on a fact-finding trip to Guyana on behalf of concerned relatives of Temple members. When a group of Jones’s followers defected during Ryan’s visit, Jones ordered the entire delegation

murdered, leading to a shooting ambush of the airstrip as they were about to leave. Congressman Ryan and four others were killed.

Jones then convinced his followers they had no choice but to commit “revolutionary suicide” by poisoning themselves, a ritual that had been rehearsed over previous months during “White Night” drills. Over 900 of Jones’s followers, a third of them children, died.

SYNANON

Synanon began as a drug treatment organization by Chuck Dederich, who was said to have coined the phrase, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life.” Dederich felt that AA didn’t work for him, perhaps because AA employs confession to a group without a reciprocal response. From its founding in 1958, Synanon grew quickly from a drug addiction recovery center into a utopian community — and later what would be thought of as a cult — with branches in Santa Monica, Tomales Bay, and Oakland.

At the heart of the Synanon utopian experiment was The Game, a wildly unstructured mutual criticism session. Members, seated in a circle, focused on a particular resident, bombarding him or her with criticisms about attitude and behavior, such as: “You like to present yourself as a middle class white woman with a little drug and alcohol problem who some stuff happened to and now you’re here to get your life back — but you are a homeless dope fiend with no education who chose drugs over your kids.”

Unlike other forms of mutual criticism, the target was encouraged to fight back verbally, so that the group could then, in turn, destroy the rationalizations and defenses that help perpetuate irresponsible thought patterns and behavior. Sometimes this was called “Attack Therapy,” and sessions could last up to 72 hours.

The Game developed its own tactics with its own glossary. You can lob an Engrossment (exaggerate fact), Carom (indict another person in the Game other than the person to whom you’re speaking), or Clap the Other Hand (give another point of view). The Game had rules and techniques, referred to as: “Cataracts of verbal hostility, colossally exaggerated insults, unjustified accusations and provocations,

scorn, ridicule and snide allusions.” Dederich published his own list of favorite techniques:

1. Defend vigorously
2. Indict everybody; the Game is on the human condition
3. Employ theatrics
4. Tap into your prejudices
5. Use metaphors and analogies
6. Exaggerate
7. Lie
8. Drag up old indictments (review history)
9. Ridicule
10. Allude to authority
11. Allege subversion
12. Involve several people in one indictment

Dederich believed that the Game “toughens a person. It gives them a very flexible ego that can dodge, duck, bounce around, and recover.” Calling back to Oneida self-scrutiny Dederich stated that it provides participants “the miraculous gift, to see ourselves as others see us.”

The Game was not only seen as a form of therapy, it was Synanon’s central operating and administrative tool. Chuck’s wife Betty, an early member and a main architect of Synanon once said, “If you want to do something about prejudice in Synanon, we have a form of government that is fantastic, and we have had it for 14 years, and that’s the Synanon Game.” Synanon deeply influenced Cesar Chavez, who even attempted to bring the Game to La Paz, the estate in California where he spent his last years. During its almost forty years, the Game and the organization were subjects of hundreds of newspaper and magazine profiles, and even inspired a movie called simply *Synanon*, starring Eartha Kitt.

Journalists have connected Synanon’s legacy to the explosive growth of rehabilitation industries over the past 40 years, from military-style or extreme wilderness “boot camps” to private “emotional growth boarding schools.” Organizations founded by Synanon alumni include Delancey Street Foundation, Phoenix House, Pathway Family Center, and CEDU.

To this day, most rehab facilities throughout the United States depend on group therapy tough-love techniques based on the Game. Although widely used in drug rehabs in the current opioid epidemic, this variant of mutual criticism has been found to be particularly ineffective in the treatment of chemical dependence.

VII. THERAPY

At the same time Synanon was claiming to use the Game for therapeutic purposes, mutual criticism appeared in other forms of therapy.

GESTALT

Gestalt, a systems approach to psychotherapy that plays out in a group setting, was developed by Fritz and Laura Perls in residence at Esalen in Big Sur. Gestalt attempts to locate the potential for an individual's capacity to change and grow at her "contact boundaries" — between where she, as an individual organism, exists, and what is, Laura Perls put it "the coping with the other, the not-me, the different, the strange."

The Gestalt therapist pays attention to the entire social structure in which individual experience is embedded, as all these parts are interdependent. The goal is not necessarily to be happy, but to "heal the splits" between mind, body and soul to ensure that all parts can respond fully to their external environment.

Perls performed individual therapy in an almost theatrical mode, believing that the audience could also experience change through "vicarious therapy" or "silent self-therapy." Theatrics were also at play with the exercises Perls developed, like the "hot seat" and the "empty seat," in which the analyst enacts two sides of herself that are in conflict, or acts out a conflict between herself and a person in her life. People would move between the hot seat and an empty chair, playing out their anger and fear in an imaginary dialogue with themselves. This performance literalizes the idea of the individual transforming into two or three. In Gestalt, you become a society.

Group Gestalt therapy, which developed later, attempted to help individuals experience what it means to be a member of a healthy, functioning social system, so that, as leading Gestalt therapist Elaine Kepner wrote, "[t]he polarities and dilemmas of separateness and unity can be experienced in the context of personal growth." Intimate revelation leads to group cohesion, which itself leads to more trust, which then leads to the potential for deeper intimacy. A good group dynamic should lessen an individual's feelings of isolation with her problems, which then allows her to feel more empowered in her choices, and to find more creative and effective solutions.

Here is an example of an actual session shared by Kepner in her classic essay, "Gestalt Group Process":

One of the women begins the session by saying, "Wow! This is going to be fun, there are so many strong women here!" Sam replies, "Your statement makes me feel angry. I feel excluded here just because I'm a man." Another woman, Alice, seated across the room from him, says in a trembling voice, "I want to exclude you. I want to exclude all men from my life now." When Sam asks her, "But why me?" Alice goes into a long list of complaints about his behavior with her (or, more accurately, about the meaning she is making out of what he said to her and how he has behaved with her in their encounters both in and outside the group). She ends her tirade with, "I'm angry with you because you are not being forceful enough with me, and I end up doing all the work of relationship building, and I'm goddamned sick and tired of doing that!" As Alice finishes, a third woman bursts out, "And I'm angry now because you and some of the other women here are making demands that men be a particular way here and I don't like that."

Kepner goes on to describe how the Gestalt therapist can now intervene in this interaction on any one of three systems levels, depending on the group's therapeutic priorities.

- On the intrapersonal level, Alice would work on her anger toward men in general or perhaps toward Sam in particular.
- On the interpersonal level, Sam and Alice would explore

their perceptions of one another, their communication patterns, and their differences.

- On the group level, the leader would call attention to this interaction as standing in for a larger group dynamic.

Gestalt wasn't a fringe movement. As it came to its peak influence in the 1970s, Gestalt group techniques and its mutual criticism tactics were often absorbed into traditional religious communities as a way to reach out to young followers and keep them in the flock. Up to the present day, it remains the basis for group therapy, "encounter" groups, T-groups, and sensitivity training.

VII. CONCLUSION

Throughout its history and its many permutations mutual criticism has retained some recurring motifs: an emphasis on authenticity, a willingness to regularly bare oneself to group scrutiny, and the danger of such honesty being used as a mechanism for centralized control. The failure of many of the groups who used it as a practice might make it seem like a lost cause. Capitalism, with its focus on the individual, presents itself as the only viable alternative.

More precisely, capitalism trains us to instinctively revolt against the violence embedded in mutual criticism tactics — particularly, the denial of the self for the good of the many.

And yet capitalism also operates as a collective mandate and deploys mutual criticism tactics. To perform our self correctly for a group often means buying the right product; or taken one step further, turning ourselves into a product. On social media platforms, we expose ourselves constantly in the marketplace of collective social discourse. Capitalism has taken mutual criticism from us, rebranding it as endless market consumption, which only benefits the few — mostly white, cis men.

The notion of experiencing pain or sacrificing ourselves in the service of a collective good (as opposed to in service of individual success) has fallen out of fashion. Faced with the prospect of a future defined by instability and crisis, mutual criticism offers a way to assert a different set of values. We must train ourselves to think and act collectively again, to begin the hard work of repairing the social fabric.

This work is not meant to be easy or pleasurable. But it is necessary and must be ongoing. The stubbornness of white supremacy and misogyny in our culture can be partly ascribed to the inability of those

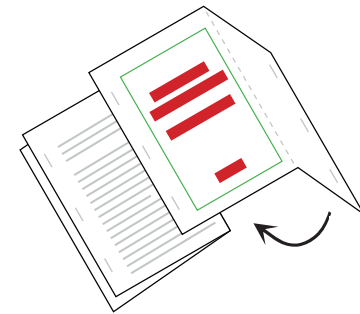
with power to face their flaws. Perhaps power itself can be defined as the ability to avoid one's own responsibilities in contributing to an unjust social framework.

The Oneida Community and Amana, both of which lasted successfully for decades, used mutual criticism to keep the workings of a communal society open and transparent. Group Gestalt therapy re-inscribes systems-thinking into how we see ourselves as individuals and provides sympathetic therapeutic relief for its participants. Heresies found expansive new avenues for early intersectional feminist discourse by opening up their work to repeated evaluation meetings. Bitaniya provided a framework for individuals striving to remake themselves and was the spiritual guide for the emergence of kibbutzim, one of the most successful collectivist communities of the 20th century.

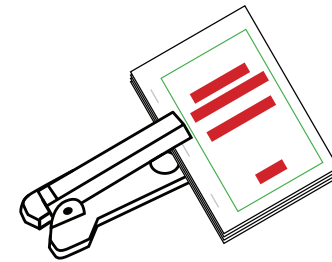
All of these movements put a powerful tool to use, some to their own detriment. You can think of this booklet as an instruction manual, with warnings and dangers and conditions for use. Nonetheless, it may prove helpful. Utopian groups were founded on the ideal of collective service for collective survival in chaotic times. In the coming years, when you find yourself forming new, post-capitalist communities, please remember this tool. Use it in good health, comrade.

HOW TO CONSTRUCT THE BOOKLET:

1. Print the booklet single-sided and landscape.
2. Fold each page on the dotted line.



3. Staple.



4. Voilà.

