

Safer spaces, false allegations, and the NYC Anarchist Bookfair

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Contents

Criticisms of the letter	6
Beyond safer spaces: what do we do when..?	8

The Free Hetherington is striving to be a permanent autonomous space where everyone can feel safe + comfortable. To make this happen, we have a Safer Spaces Agreement. By being here, we agree to respect the following ideas.

So on we go:

The basic tenet is RESPECT - respect each other (our backgrounds, identities, ideas, bodies + personal space) and respect the space we're creating together.

So on we go:

- Respect + look after the building as a physical space and a resource for all; try to leave it better than you found it. Extend the same to our neighbours.
- Different areas within the building may be designated for different uses; please take care to consider these guides.
- Everyone has an equal right to be heard, an equal responsibility to listen, and an equal opportunity in making decisions.
- Those who are used to doing the talking may find it benefits them to do more listening, and vice versa.
- However strongly you feel about a particular topic, do not accept that a discussion gets abusive.
- Any behaviour - physical or verbal - that demeans, marginalises or dominates others, or perpetuates hierarchies, is not welcome.
- If someone is feeling uncomfortable, do not hesitate to say so.
- Identify your own privileges - the things that sometimes give you an easier ride than others - and actively challenge them.
- Be prepared to be actively challenged; it should be a positive encounter.
- Be aware of the range of different identities (gender, race, class) that people may identify as, and avoid making generalisations, or assuming you know someone's identity. Be aware that anyone in the space could be a survivor of a particular form of oppression, e.g. violence or racism.
- It is everyone's responsibility to challenge prejudice and oppression, and if we ignore it we are complicit in it.

This list is not exhaustive, and it is up to all of us to help create a space where everyone feels safe and included.

So on we go.

Free Hetherington, February 2011.

(Written based on the safer spaces agreement of the Okasional café, thank you!)

I've written this blog in response to a previous discussion of the safer spaces policy at the NYC Anarchist Bookfair 2012, and why I'm not convinced we need to be too preoccupied with the possibility of false rape accusations.

I didn't want to get into the conversation or to post on the thread in question. In the past eight months, I've had so many private and public discussions about sexual assault, and specifically assaults carried out within the radical left and perpetrated by (mostly, but not entirely) men who would call themselves comrades and indeed feminists, I felt too exhausted and apathetic to add my voice to the discussion. I disagreed with a lot of what was being said by good friends of mine, and I'd rather ignore it, and just go off on my holiday to NYC and forget about it.

I'd been in town for about 24 hours when I got to the anarchist bookfair, and one of the first people I saw there was a man who sexually assaulted a friend of mine. At this point I realised that discussions about safer spaces, sexual violence, and our response to these issues as a community aren't something I am going to be able to avoid any time soon. The shitty reality is that sexual assault, as well as sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, queerphobic and other socially conditioned, oppressive bullshit (intentional or not) is not unusual. As communists, we can all agree that this kind of behaviour is A Bad Thing,¹ but the disagreement comes when we're talking about what we do about it.

Disagreement came pretty quickly once someone reproduced a letter sent by the Safer Space² team at the NYC Anarchist Bookfair. The letter read as follows (emphasis added):

Hi [REDACTED].

I am writing to you on behalf of the 2012 NYC Anarchist Book fair Safe(r) Space Group to let you know that a request has been made that you not attend this year. The policy at the event, posted at <http://www.anarchistbookfair.net/saferspace>, is in place to create a supportive, non-threatening environment for all. This means that anyone may be asked to not attend. *No blame is placed, no decision is made*, we simply ask that you not attend to prevent anyone from feeling unsafe.

We understand that being asked not to attend is not easy, and we don't take it lightly. You may not know why you are being asked not to attend or who all is requesting this, or you may feel the situation is totally unfair. Our goal is not to decide right or wrong but to maintain safety at the fair. Some situations are gray and sometimes based on simple misunderstandings, but regardless of the reasons, no matter what your defense, we still ask that you not attend this years book fair. Not attending is not an admission of guilt. In fact, you not attending is a statement that you respect everyone's safety at the fair and are taking a positive step to uphold that principle.

We also understand your need to know why you are being asked not to attend. However, the book fair is not the place to resolve conflict. Please, do not approach anyone at the fair who you think is responsible for the request that you not attend, or anyone that you think may have made this request before the fair. This violates our commitment to keeping everyone safe.

¹ although some people may wish to defend their right to make racist, sexist, homophobic etc jokes, because we all know they're a communist and don't really mean it. Luckily, Polite Ire has taken the trouble to explain exactly why that's bullshit.

² People have been questioning the use of "safer" vs "safe"—afaik the reason "safer" is used is because even with all these policies and communist awareness and so on, discriminatory behaviour and violence continues to occur, and nowhere can quite be guaranteed as "safe."

We realize that this email is formal. We chose to email you because we want to remain as neutral as possible in this position and situation, as well as to give you the space in which to process this request in whatever way is most comfortable and safe.

If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me. Again, do not contact anyone without their consent, especially any survivors. You can field all questions through me or I can put you in contact with other safer space members.

Thanks for helping us keep it safe,
[REDACTED]/ NYC Anarchist Bookfair Safer Space Team

Responses on the forum thread were initially negative, it was called “ridiculous,” “insane,” and was said to “give insight into a collective mental process that is fundamentally at odds with even the most basic notions of justice and reason.”

The main line of criticism seemed to me to be that the letter

- Doesn't detail allegations and could be confusing for the recipient
- Doesn't give the recipient a right to reply or provide their side of the story
- By providing anonymity to the person who requested the recipient be asked not to attend the bookfair, this letter paves the way for abuses of power and a slew of false allegations.

I don't think the letter is without fault, nor do I think that people objecting to it are apologists for sexual assault by default, and I'd like to make that quite clear. I decided to go and chat to the safer spaces team at the bookfair. They weren't some shadowy clique plotting people's downfall in a backroom somewhere, I met a few women sat at the very entrance to the main room, with a clear sign indicating who they were, and arm bands making them easily identifiable. They had formed a group called Support New York who are

dedicated to healing the effects of sexual assault and abuse. Our aim is to meet the needs of the survivor, to hold accountable those who have perpetrated harm, and to maintain a larger dialogue within the community about consent, mutual aid, and our society's narrow views of abuse. We came together in order to create our own safe(r) space and provide support for people of all genders, races, ages and orientations, separate from the police and prison systems that perpetuate these abuses

They were friendly and constructive, and gave me a whole load of resources about responding to sexual assault in radical communities, as well as email contacts, and the possibility of hosting some kind of workshop or talk in Scotland over the summer. They confirmed that the letters were sent out ahead of the NYC Anarchist Bookfair at the requests of survivors of (almost always) sexual or domestic violence.

Criticisms of the letter

I'm going to focus on the final criticism I outlined above, because I think the first two are fairly easily dealt with by noticing that a) the letter does not seek to publicly defame anyone, or

limit their participation in anything other than the bookfair, and b) a contact name and email is provided, with an invitation to raise any questions or concerns. I agree this could be made clearer, and perhaps a hint at the kinds of processes the recipient may be able to engage in should they want to clear all of this up would be useful.

The letter isn't perfect, but nor is it the Inquisition, or particularly Kafkaesque—there's no trial, no never ending process, no anonymous unreachable state bureaucracy: it's a letter from a person with a name and an email address that welcomes a response, that asks someone to not go to a two-day event.

Onto false allegations then. It's clear from reading the responses to the letter that the fear of false allegations of rape strike a chord, and it's easy to see why. The rape culture we all live in is supported by a media that loves to go to town on rape allegations, and makes heroes of men accused of rape (Assange, Polanski...). The vindictive, crazy woman who wrongly accuses an innocent man of rape and ruins his life is a long standing trope, rooted in misogynistic assumptions and rape myths, given another airing recently by Plan B on his last album. Even women whose rape allegations do make it through court are often disbelieved (for some more pop culture misogynistic vitriol, have a look at the #JusticeForChed hashtag on Twitter, or google "Free Mercston").

So I can see why a letter like this makes people nervous, or worried that false accusations of sexual assault might start to become a way for anarchists etc to undermine each other.³ Loads of false allegations that will then be made public and be used to irreparably damage innocent men's reputations. I find this conclusion both really problematic, and really unlikely.

Having said that, I can see why people might be worried about false allegations of sexual assault, but it frustrates me that this seems to be such a high priority when pro-active measures are taken to tackle sexual assault within the radical left. Because surely, by now, there is a better understanding of the kind of shit someone has to go through to make an allegation of sexual assault. False allegations of sexual assault are not common, for lots of reasons, and it would take a hell of a lot more than a small group of sympathetic radicals at a bookfair to change that.

Speaking out about domestic and sexual violence is really hard, and the majority of assaults go unreported—anyone who read any of the #ididnotreport hashtag on twitter⁴ a few months ago will have been moved by the sheer number of people having the same reasons for never telling anyone about sexual assault. Rapists and abusers are more often than not our friends, associates, even family members and lovers. Sexual assault can involve so much power-play and coercion the survivor can often be unclear about exactly what happened. A survivor will often blame themselves (after all, there's a whole society to back up the abuser when they tell you it's your fault, or that you enjoyed it, or that what they did was normal and acceptable, and that no one will believe you anyway). When people do disclose abuse, the pressure to self-censor, to not *make a fuss*, is fucking overwhelming. When you're trying to get through something that traumatic, the idea of having to constantly explain yourself, justify your actions and responses over and over again (but why didn't you punch him? Why did you sleep in the same bed afterwards? Why have you only said this a year later?), and to eventually face down your abuser and their supporters

³ I originally quoted a post from the thread here from Steven, which was out of context as he points out below, so I've removed this to avoid confusion

⁴ many of the tweets have been collected here

when they say you're full of shit and you can't prove anything anyway, that's enough to make you think very carefully indeed about speaking out.

And speaking out for what? If a survivor does go to the police, they're going to face all that shit and worse, plus the possible disapproval of comrades for getting the police involved in the first place. Worse still may be the police's response if you happen to be queer, trans, sex working, a drug user... Even if your case does get to court (maybe after an internal physical exam, after all your clothes have been taken in for DNA testing, after you've had to answer over again exactly how much you had to drink that night), the court is almost guaranteed to be a nightmare, your chances of securing a conviction are slim, and they'll probably be out in 2.5 years anyway. If you don't go to the police, there'll be another group of people who take that to mean you're making it up, and as far as I know in the UK, there are not many people in the radical left who are experienced or confident in facilitating accountability processes.⁵

I could say a lot more about how stressful and ultimately unrewarding speaking out about sexual assault is, but I hope you get the point I'm trying to make. There are so many barriers to speaking out, the idea that one small group of people sending a letter asking someone not to come to a bookfair would "encourage loads of false allegations" seems so many, many steps away from the situation we find ourselves in right now, where we as a movement are desperately ill equipped to respond to disclosures of sexual assault. I can only try to reassure you that this hypothetical day where your comrades who are the most likely to suffer sexual violence are so numerous and confident and powerful and supported enough to do damage with false allegations even if we wanted to (we don't) are a long way off—we can't even deal with really straightforward cases of assault. No one wants to make false allegations of sexual assault.

Beyond safer spaces: what do we do when..?

Drawing up a safer spaces policy for your event, organisation, or space is easy enough,⁶ but deciding what happens when someone violates that agreement is clearly a controversial issue.

I don't think anyone has, yet, come up with a clear, easily replicated model for dealing with these issues in our communities and networks, and recent events over the last few years in the UK have led to lots of positive, productive discussions about our collective response to sexual violence. This weekend I was at a national meeting for the Anarchist Federation, where both the women's and queer caucuses discussed a need to gather resources and think carefully about how these issues might be tackled in the future should they need to be; discussions about safe space and responses to its violation have been going on in Edinburgh, Glasgow and London of late in response to various events including a gang rape at Occupy Glasgow.

We're all learning, none of us quite know what we're doing. Letters like the one sent out before the NYC Bookfair are not perfect, but if your main concern when you read it is that rape culture will be so powerfully overturned that women will not only start to speak out about sexual assault, but also *make it up*, your priorities are wrong. How many incidents of sexual assault and discriminatory behaviour within the radical left do you know about, and how many false

⁵ if you are, PM me, I can think of a shitload of people who'd want to talk to you

⁶ although don't be surprised if you find people resisting this, dismissing the need for it, or ridiculing you for being activisty/a feminist/a liberal/any other damning anarcho insult, there's a whole lot of unlearning yet to be done

allegations have you ever heard of?⁷ The real, immediate and fucking serious problem here is abuse. Maybe, just maybe, some false allegations might come about as a result of this. As I've said, I find this pretty unlikely, and I don't see how a letter like this would make dealing with false allegations any harder than it (hypothetically) would be already.

I'm not arguing for all responses to sexual violence and other oppressive and discriminatory behaviour to be beyond criticism or debate, but for those of us who live every day with the effects of past attacks on our bodies and autonomy, and continue to be in public spaces where we are confronted with our own abusers and those we know to have abused others, there's a certain urgency to this issue that (with all due respect) may not be felt by those who are not particularly vulnerable to discrimination and violence, or those whose involvement in radical politics does not involve a lot of face to face interaction.

In my experience, the kind of uncritical, **DO SOMETHING!!!1!!** responses I hear most often are along the lines of "why don't we just kick his head in?," "cut his fucking balls off," to the milder "why don't you just go public and make sure no one works with him again?," or combinations of the above. Tempting as these may be, they don't solve anything. And besides, no one's head ever gets kicked in, and attempts to excommunicate people never quite seem to come off either. Our responses remain inadequate and abuse continues, often unchallenged.

At some point, we as a movement will hopefully grow beyond a relatively small network of people who all know someone who knows someone, and we might not be able to deal with these issues through mutual contacts and informal channels as we currently (ineffectively) do, and we are going to need to find ways to do this. So why are we wasting time thinking up hypothetical ways that something like this might possibly maybe be abused and then throwing the whole thing out, instead of thinking about how we might use this model or improve it to deal with issues we have all dealt with in our communities?

No one wants to talk about sexual violence, and even fewer people would be willing to mentor an abuser through any kind of accountability process, restorative justice, or any of the other models of dealing with abuse beyond the castration/excommunication model. There will no doubt be people who already knew, or inferred from the above that I have survived several incidents of sexual violence and would perhaps politely suggest that maybe I am biased or not objective. But then you'll need to make your minds up: either you want women and queers and people of colour to take the lead on prioritising and tackling this stuff, in which case you'll have to accept that our lived experiences of violence and discrimination will of course inform our views, *or* you're going to have to get your hands dirty and engage in proactive discussions, which may well lead to you actively confronting and following up the people who perpetrate violence and discrimination.⁸

⁷ the woman in the movie *Matewan* doesn't count, she's a fictional character

⁸ Or preferably do both of these, actually

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