The Fundamental Requirement for Organised Safer Space

ANARCHIST AF FEDERATION

The Fundamental Requirement for Organised Safer Space

from *Organise!*

an **Anarchist Federation** Publication

★ ★ ★

WWW.ZABALAZABOOKS.NET

This article will be a very basic introduction to the foundations of safer spaces, community accountability and transformational justice that arise from elements present from the very inception of anarchism as a political philosophy. These concepts are responses to verbal, physical and sexual abuse that have always been present within radical communities and continue to present a challenge to this day. As such this article will touch on all forms of abuse from problematic language through to rape and physical violence. An example of one such policy can be seen at http://bit.ly/1207uq8

I am writing this from my perspective as a white trans*, queer, able-bodied individual who was socialised as a straight, cis-gendered male. My role within some of the struggles I will describe is one of support when it is called for. Safer spaces thinking has come about through survivors of abuse determining the form that their struggle must take and the ways in which they wish to receive support. For every person who has been able to speak out there are hundreds of thousands that could not. We should remember that while the voices we hear may seem few, they carry with them a truth that, if ignored, will render any attempts towards social revolution a futile gesture.

▶ Rape Culture

Looking at the world today we can see that it is full of prejudice. Gender, sexuality, age, physical ability, social class, skin colour and being part of a specific ethnic group are all used as excuses for society undertaking and accepting a catalogue of abuses against people. They can be subtle, such as in cases where a speaker is ignored or not taken seriously, or can be as blatant as a murder taking place in front of a crowd and not one person present stepping forward as a witness. We have all been socialised not to rock the boat; to partake in acts of oppression and also receive abuse

as a matter of course; to ignore or minimise those people who need our support; to put on trial those who seek justice; to internalise the blame when we have been abused, if we even allow ourselves to recognise the issue at all. While these cultural norms can be seen wherever oppression takes place, I would argue that one of the most pervasive and widespread of these affecting all our radical spaces today are carried over from our dominant culture's acceptance of rape and sexual violence.

We are constantly surrounded by language and images that validate and perpetuate rape. Everything, from the comedy we are expected to enjoy through to the legal framework imposed upon us by the state, is predisposed to rape being something that is just part of life. Rape is minimised within our culture to the point that when someone sits at a computer and posts up stupid messages on Facebook with another's log-in, they are linguistically presented as being of the same level of injustice and abuse as having been sexually assaulted. Sure, if we put people on the spot they would rate rape as being far worse than posting a message to embarrass a friend, but this is just one small example out of an overarching pervasive system of misogynistic language, objectification, belittlement and trivialisation. This leads us to the point where rape is not only ignored as normal but can also be encouraged and celebrated by those around us. Don't believe me? Type "Steubenville rape" into your search engine of choice, and then keep in mind I can find hundreds of examples like this from the past year alone.

The truth about sexual violence is constantly hidden behind myths that attack those who have survived such violence and protect the perpetrators of such abuse from scrutiny. The idea is that a perpetrator is going to be a stranger, loner or fringe acquaintance comes up time-and-time again. Rapists are perpetually characterised as monsters or some unthinking instinct-driven beasts. Both of these stereotypes are rarely the case. A rapist can be anyone you know. They can be your best friend. They can be nice person that seems like the salt of the earth. They can be an otherwise good comrade. They are not a sex-crazed maniac who always stands out in a crowd, but instead they are someone who is looking to exert control through sexual violence, usually in very private settings, over someone they know well. They can use reason to convince those they attack that it is a one-off or that it wasn't their fault. This ties in with the false idea is that cases of rape are always clear and obvious – that a man has overpowered a woman in some way in the pursuit of sex and the survivor is immediately clear about what has occurred. While this can be the case, it is not the only way. Those with experiences that fall outside of this black & white narrative often find themselves maligned or under suspicion. Questions are raised about why the survivor "let it happen" or "didn't speak up sooner". No thought is given to the full spectrum of typical responses to a threatening situation. This may be the familiar

providing spaces that do lend the support being requested, rise up to the challenge and take their place.

While the initial aim of safer spaces processes is to provide survivor-led community accountability, we know that a lot of the paths we take will have to be corrected and refined as we go. As we learn from these mistakes, our theory can become better at reflecting the realities of oppression and abuse and understanding how it works. As these theories become better, the structures we build from them will also be better suited to responding to oppression, in a strong and resilient fashion. Organised safer space is not a magical land, perfect in every way. We need to be aware that pitfalls could form from our thinking and acknowledge any unexpected difficulties before we can overcome them.

As this cycle of improved theory based on action and improved action based on theory, this leadership of ideas, carries on, we will be able to move beyond simply protecting our communities and begin taking steps towards implementing a form of justice that can someday reintegrate perpetrators of abuse back into our spaces. While the processes and requirements that our communities and, more importantly, the survivors of abuse require may not always be met within a lifetime, we should not close the door automatically. As was mentioned before, perpetrators of the most horrific acts in our society are not usually wild beasts or monsters; they are humans, and as anarchists we should look towards their well-being, just never at the expense of another.

what a survivor of abuse requires. Support and respect a survivor in this choice. One day we will feel ready to deal with these problems and others will feel ready to put their faith in us to do so; let's start small and work our way up.

"Who are we to determine guilt? Doesn't this unfairly place blame on the accused perpetrator?"

In most cases we don't determine guilt or innocence – we simply don't have the means or knowledge to do that. What we are able to do is act in a way that ensures that our spaces are made safer for everyone who wishes to use them. I see this as the responsibility that comes with opening up a space for others to use.

"Isn't this just a set of rules that will eventually be broken?"

No. The expected behaviour may be the most widely read and distributed part of the policy, but it is far from the bulk of it; an organised safer space also includes the processes which will be used to guide any report of abuse.

(Just for the record, every single one of those comments has been presented to me in all seriousness, often by otherwise sound comrades)

▶ Towards a Future of Transformative Justice

The practice of organised safer space is not something that has been developed in an isolated theoretical bubble. It has come about through thousands of groups looking at ways to explain the problems they have worked on solving in their own communities and then spread the best practices they could on to others. Seminal in this work was "Taking Risks: Implementing Grassroots Community Accountability Strategies" by a collective of women of colour from Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA). The ideas outlined in this work can be seen to be that basis for much of what is going into action throughout our social centres, bookfairs, groups and internet forums today. Safer spaces collectives have sprung up to provide advice and help to other groups around about them. Organisations that do not demonstrate that they are taking the problems of oppressed groups seriously are likely to find that they will be boycotted, side-lined or unable to grow beyond a mainly white, mainly able-bodied, mainly straight, mainly cis-gendered, mainly male audience, as those

fight or flight, but could also lead to the lesser known freeze, submit or attach response. Our culture turns this all around and starts to ask what the survivor did, that could have invited being raped. Were they inebriated? Wearing "inappropriate clothing"? Had they not taken steps such as carrying a whistle or something to protect themselves with? Did they act in a way that caused the perpetrator to act the way they did? Had they had sex with the perpetrator in the past? Let's be entirely clear – nothing causes rape apart from a rapist.

These myths all act to empower perpetrators of abuse and disempower the survivor. They lead those who have survived abuse to question their own judgement about a situation, placing blame on themselves for the actions of another. They cause crippling feelings of shame and guilt in those who need to reach out for our solidarity and support. At the same time they cause those structures built supposedly to help the survivor, to be anything from unreceptive through to providing outright hostility.

Similar myths and misguided beliefs also surround other groups that suffer oppression, to undertake the same cycle of pinning blame on those being abused. You have to have a keen eye for mainstream media to see how pervasive the misinformation and hatred it helps perpetuate is. As I write this piece, it emerges that a large factor in the recent suicide of Lucy Meadows was the Daily Mail's decision to publish a hate-filled personal attack on her. Examples such as this are merely the public tip of a massive iceberg.

▶ Radical Spaces, Revolutionary Solutions

As anarchists, we should work to make ourselves aware of these systems of oppression and how they intersect, listening to the experiences of those who have been oppressed and lending them support in the struggles that they face. We should also be critical of the systems of response that we hold over from the world at large and look to prefigure the world we would hope to live in. We should also be realistic about the resources and abilities we have to hand. When we provide spaces, be they gatherings in physical space or virtual forums of discussion, we must recognise the responsibility we have to make all that use the space aware, that in order to be accepted in this particular community there will be certain behaviours we require and others that we will not tolerate. At the same time we may have additional requirements, or even state, that someone is unwelcome within our spaces, in order to allow the community as a whole to feel safe. Far from being authoritarian, this is a prefigurative step towards realising the concept of Free Association, where individuals

and communities have a directly democratic say in who they allow into their space and how people are expected to behave whilst there.

At the moment the most common attempt to make out spaces safer than the word at large is to create a "safer spaces policy". This is often a list of principles that we hope everyone using a space will adhere to and behaviours that are expected in our spaces. Unfortunately, turning our spaces into something safer than the world around them takes far more than a goodwill wish-list of things we hope predatory individuals will or won't do. Just as laws do nothing to deter crime; simply having a code of conduct on the door of your event is pretty redundant if not accompanied by procedures of what to do when (not if) someone contravenes it. What is required, to paraphrase Errico Malatesta, is organisation, organisation and more organisation. This comes in many different forms.

▶ Open and Clear Processes for Everyone

In first aid there are processes that are drilled into medics so that when an emergency situation arises, they are able to put most of their emotion and panic to one side and ensure that the situation is properly handled. The same principle can be found in the preparation and organisation required to make our spaces safer. When someone acts in a way contrary to the "notice on the door", there needs to be a clear set of instructions upon what course of action is open to someone who has survived abuse, to someone who has witnessed oppressive behaviour and to those it is being reported to.

Having a clear set of principles about how we will act, as well as an open account of the processes and procedures that everyone maintaining the space is trained to follow when a problem occurs, means that everybody involved has their expectations set as to what will happen when the issue of abuse occurs. Survivors can be put more at ease and feel like order can be found in an emotionally chaotic situation, as they will know before even raising an issue what will happen. Those of us maintaining a space will have documentation to both help us move forward in a way that will protect the community at large, while holding us back from taking any rash actions that would disempower a survivor or in themselves be abusive. For those who may possibly be perpetrators of abuse, it shows up-front what to expect and explains why certain action may be required from each person involved.

Multiple processes will be required to deal with all the different types of abuse that can be reported. For example, how we handle reports of

"This isn't anarchism."

I would argue that this is part of the prefiguration of free association which is one of the very strongest concepts within anarchism. It is the structured move away from a society based upon conceptions of state-imposed law. It is a directly democratic non-hierarchical means of acting within our communities. If this isn't anarchism then what is?

"Why did no one tell me about these problems before?"

Implicit in this question is the idea that if someone doesn't see it with their own eyes it may be a lie. People in an oppressed group may not want to share their oppression with everyone; they may not feel safe doing so. By putting in place these structures we are not only saying we are safe to approach but that we are willing to leave the reigns of the struggle in the hands of those affected. See also the response to claiming to not having any problems before.

"What if someone gets falsely accused?"

Well, first up, thanks to the response that is normally received, false accusations of rape or sexual assault are rare. But let's humour this for a minute - a case of sexual assault is reported and we have two options being put on the table for how to handle it, each with a downside. The first is a system where we focus on the survivor making the claim and put in place structures that protect the community as a whole. The downside of this is that we may inconvenience or exclude one individual while we look into actions that may lead to them re-integrating with the community. The second approach means that in lieu of definitive proof, we just let things carry on as normal. The downside here is that a likely predatory or abusive individual is allowed free reign within our spaces, while those who feel unsafe are driven away. If we go for option two after thinking that over then well done – we're all arseholes.

"We aren't equipped for this. Some of these things are just too complex for us to handle."

I agree some problems will be too big for us to effectively handle. In other instances the survivor may not have trust in our structures and will call upon the aid of the state. By putting the focus on the needs of the survivor we should also be supporting them in times where they feel the need to involve the police in these matters. They have the biggest gang in town, and all the good-will and solidarity in the world may not provide

"Surely everyone can all act like grown-ups..."

Grown-ups rape. Grown-ups fight. Grown-ups oppress and exploit and abuse. The problem isn't with people not acting like grown-ups; the problem is with our communities not having a different approach to the world around us. If we are serious about creating social revolution, then we need to work on the structures and organisational methods that entails, not throw them out.

"If there is a problem I'll deal with it. Simple."

Sure, if there is a fight or violent assault happening right in front of one of us, it is something we will want to break up. I've yet to see a safer spaces process that doesn't allow for this in some way. However, if by dealing with the problem we are further removing the agency from the survivor, then we are not causing social change but becoming another facet of the problem. Also without a process to rely on, others will be forced to take this same line of reasoning and take direct action to remove those seen as unsafe from our spaces.

"We're all equal here already."

Lifestylists putting their fingers in their ears can just bog right off. Please. Their communes are rife with sexual abuse and informal hierarchies of oppression. In fact, our radical spaces can be worse than the dominant society, because we can frown on survivors who feel the need to involve the state. Shame on those who feel this is acceptable: to malign someone for engaging with state services which, at present, we cannot provide ourselves. By pretending that we have magically left the problems of the world behind, we simply doom ourselves to repeat its mistakes over. What is needed is acknowledgement of the problematic behaviours we have been taught and an effort to listen to those who have been oppressed as to what is required to solve problems in our communities.

"By excluding someone you are restricting another's freedom."

Known abusers being allowed into our spaces is exclusionary of others – by making no choice and taking no action when matters of abuse are raised, we are in fact making the choice to enforce our dominant society and back the abuser.

physical violence will differ greatly from how we are expected to deal with a case of someone using a slur in conversation. No process is set in stone as each case is unique, however the most common eventualities can be covered, and our processes can be reviewed after the fact to include better practices as we develop and share them.

► Survivor-Focus and Community Accountability Processes

The world at large treats abuses in very different ways. When someone comes forward to report that something has been stolen from them, our first reaction isn't to question whether this has happened or not. We accept the claim on face value and then work from that point on. The same is not true in cases of sexual violence. While investigation into number of false accusations in these fields shows time and time again that it is extremely rare for an accusation to be made without basis, the typical initial reaction of the dominant culture is to deny or discount the survivor's account of what happened and attempt to minimise or erase the abusive behaviour. If this cannot be done, it attacks those who have been able to stand up and search for justice; people coming to us for help and support are put on trial. When we do believe the person, we often perpetuate the removal of agency they have suffered by storming off to deal with the problem ourselves, heedless of what the survivor needs or wants from us.

Almost universally, our spaces do not have at hand the ability to investigate truth or guilt behind most claims of sexual violence or severe abuse. However, we do have the ability to take claims of abuse seriously and look at implementing strategies to protect our communities. When we do nothing in the name of "not taking sides" or because we appeal to the concept of being "innocent until proven guilty", the implicit message we broadcast to those surviving oppression is that any claims of abusive behaviour are unimportant to the running of our spaces, that the claim might as well be a lie for all we care and that we have no interest in making our spaces welcoming to those who may feel threatened by a possibly abusive character.

By taking a focus on listening to the needs of the survivors of abuse and basing our actions upon empowering their choices, we are going a small step towards keeping the agency that assault can remove in their hands. We are also working to make sure that everyone that is coming into our spaces is being held to a high level of accountability, in terms of the required and prohibited behaviours that have been communicated in advance. We are often not able to say whether someone is innocent

or guilty, instead we are looking at what actions are required to ensure everyone coming into our spaces feels safe.

▶ Education & Socialisation

When we decide that we are anarchists, we are not suddenly and mystically absolved of all the ills and prejudices that society has instilled in us. It takes a lot of work to ensure that the ideals we profess and the actions we undertake are aligned. To this end, we can be open to criticism of our patterns of behaviour and listen to those people and collectives who have been in a position to have survived abuse and want to guide our communities towards a better way of handling future problems. The clear creation of processes is part of that; discussion about incorporation of new ideas and situations where the process will be implemented, while imperfect, is needed to keep things fresh and reflexive. We should also look at the language we use and be open to changing it away from phrases that survivors advise are oppressive.

Through use of education, we can inoculate those coming into our spaces against undertaking or accepting abuse and on the correct way to act when a problem becomes apparent. When someone complains about our actions, we need to train ourselves to hold back the reflexive defence mechanisms society has taught us and instead take some time to critically evaluate the situation. We must recognise that it is not the place of the person complaining to educate us about our abusive behaviours; it is our duty to seek out forms of education and take the best practices learned back into our spaces. If someone who has suffered oppression first hand is in a position to offer commentary upon what form our processes should take, their advice will often be invaluable. Anarchist praxis has for a long time said that an oppressed group must lead their struggle; when someone warns you that you are acting in an abusive fashion then they are doing just that. We need to listen.

▶ The Strawman Army

When matters of safer spaces come up, there is often a flood of arguments about why these concepts should be ignored. In my experience, those making these arguments are almost always white, able-bodied, cis-gendered men and not people from the groups being oppressed (coincidently often the strongest voices calling for implementation of safer spaces processes). Most of these responses do not even address the actual safer spaces thinking being called for but instead attack the misconceptions and misunderstanding that an individual has heard second-hand or created in their own mind. We can all be guilty of this at one time or another, so I would like to take a moment to run through the common list of arguments against safer spaces policies, burning any straw men to the ground and clearing up any confusion or misunderstanding that has arisen:

"Isn't this all just asking for trouble?"

Preparing for the problems that permeate the world over is not asking for trouble; it is making a realistic assessment of what could happen and putting in place sensible structures to handle abuse as it comes to light. If we see an increase in problems after putting processes in place and having them used in a responsible way, then we shouldn't be asking if the structures created the problem but why we were not aware of these problems before they were put in place.

"We've never had a problem before!"

Correction: we have never been made aware of any problems before. This is possibly because we don't appear to take matters any more seriously than the dominant culture, due to our lack of solid survivor-focused community accountability processes. Even if there have been no problems up to now, that isn't to say one won't happen in the future; if we have to work out what to do in the heat of the moment our actions will be worse than if we had a well thought out - if imperfect - policy.

"Safer spaces policies are flawed."

Yes, they often are. This isn't a reason not to have one. It is a reason to have one, and share best practice with others who are doing the same. We are trying to grow a better world in the shell of the old; not everything will be right first time. Not having a clear procedural policy is far more flawed.

"We are not responsible for others' actions in this space."

Correct – they are responsible for their actions, but you we responsible for making them aware of what is required to freely associate within our space. We are also responsible for our actions when someone else decides to break from these codes of conduct, and so it is best to have a guide to what we should be doing and to have practised our responses in advance.