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Article List

Sunday, January 9, 2011

Safety is an Illusion: Reflections on Accountability (2011)

http://www.anarchistnews.org/?q=node%2F13205

I was asked by a dear friend to write this piece about accountability within radical communities- offer some insight in light of the years we've spent fighting against rape culture. Except I don't believe in accountability anymore. It should be noted that my anger and hopelessness about the current model is proportional to how invested I've been in the past. Accountability feels like a bitter ex-lover to me and I don't have any of those... the past 10 years I really tried to make the relationship work but you know what?

There is no such thing as accountability within radical communities because there is no such thing as community- not when it comes to sexual assault and abuse. Take an honest

- Post List, Alphabetical

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survey sometime and you will find that we don't agree. There is no consensus. Community in this context is a mythical, frequently invoked and much misused term. I don't want to be invested in it anymore.



I think its time to abandon these false linguistic games we play and go back to the old model. I miss the days when it was considered reasonable to simply kick the living shit out of people and put them on the next train out of town- at least that exchange was clear and honest. I have spent too much time with both survivors and perpetrators drowning in a deluge of words that didn't lead to healing or even fucking catharsis.

I am sick of the language of accountability being used to create mutually exclusive categories of 'fucked up' and 'wronged.' I find the language of 'survivor' and 'perp' offensive because it does not lay bare all the ways in which abuse is a dynamic between parties. (Though I will use those terms here because its the common tender we have.)

Anarchists are not immune to dynamics of abuse, that much we can all agree on but I have come to realize more and more that we cannot keep each other safe. Teaching models of mutual working consent is a good start- but it will never be enough: socialization of gender, monogamy- the lies of exclusivity and the appeal of "love" as propriety are too strong. People seek out these levels of intensity when the love affair is new, when that obsessive intimacy feels good and then don't know how to negotiate soured affection.

That's the thing about patriarchy its fucking pervasive and that's the thing about being an anarchist, or trying to live free, fierce and without apology- none of it keeps you safe from violence. There is no space we can create in a world as damaged as the one we live in which is absent from violence. That we even think it is possible says more about our privilege than anything else. Our only autonomy lies in how we negotiate and use power and violence ourselves.

I really want to emphasize: there is no such thing as safe space under patriarchy or capitalism in light of all the sexist, hetero-normative, racist, classist (etc) domination that we live under. The more we try and pretend safety can exist at a community level the more disappointed and betrayed our friends, and lovers will be when they

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experience violence and do not get supported. Right now we've been talking a good game but the results are not adding up.

There are a lot of problems with the current model- the very different experiences of sexual assault and relationship abuse get lumped together. Accountability processes encourage triangulation instead of direct communication- and because conflict is not pushed, most honest communication is avoided. Direct confrontation is good! Avoiding it doesn't allow for new understandings, cathartic release or the eventual forgiveness that person to person exchanges can lead to.

We have set up a model where all parties are encouraged to simply negotiate how they never have to see each other again or share space. Some impossible demands/promises are meted out and in the name of confidentiality lines are drawn in the sand on the basis of generalities. Deal with your shit but you can't talk about the specifics of what went down and you can't talk to each other. The current model actually creates more silence- only a specialized few are offered information about what happened but everyone is still expected to pass judgment. There is little transparency in these processes.

In an understandable attempt to not trigger or cause more pain we talk ourselves in increasingly abstracted circles while a moment or dynamic between two people gets crystallized and doesn't change or progress. "Perps" become the sum total of their worst moments. "Survivors" craft an identity around experiences of violence that frequently keeps them stuck in that emotional moment. The careful nonviolent communication of accountability doesn't lead to healing. I've seen these processes divide a lot of scenes but I haven't seen them help people get support, retake power or feel safe again.

Rape breaks you- the loss of bodily control, how those feeling of impotence revisit you, how it robs you of any illusion of safety or sanity. We need models that help people take power back and we need to call the retribution, control, and banishing of the current model for what it is- revenge. Revenge is OK but lets not pretend its not about power! If shaming and retaliatory violence is what we have to work with then lets be real about it. Let's chose those tools if we can honestly say that is what we want to do. In the midst of this war we need to get better at being in conflict.

Abuse and rape are inevitable consequences of the sick society we are forced to live under. We need to eviscerate and destroy it, but in the meantime, we can't hide from it- or the ways it affects our most personal relationships. I know in my own life an important process in my struggle for liberation was making my peace with the worst consequences of my personal assault on patriarchy. Dealing with being raped was an important part of understanding what it meant to chose to be at war with this society.

Rape has always been used as this tool of control- proffered up as a threat of what would happen if I, in my queerness and gendered ambiguity, continued to live, work, dress, travel, love or resist the way

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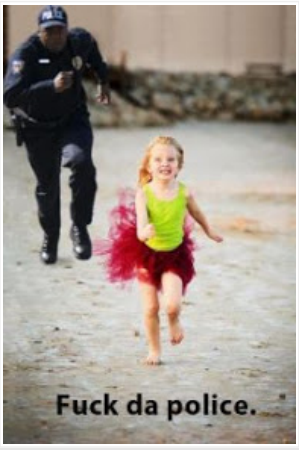
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that I chose to. Those warnings held no water for me- in my heart I knew it was only a matter of time- no matter what kind of life I chose to live because my socially prescribed gender put me at constant risk for violation. I was raped at work and it took me a while to really name that assault as rape. After it happened mostly what I felt, once the pain, rage and anger subsided was relief. Relief that it had finally happened. I had been waiting my whole life for it to happen, had had a few close calls and finally I knew what it felt like and I knew I could get through it.

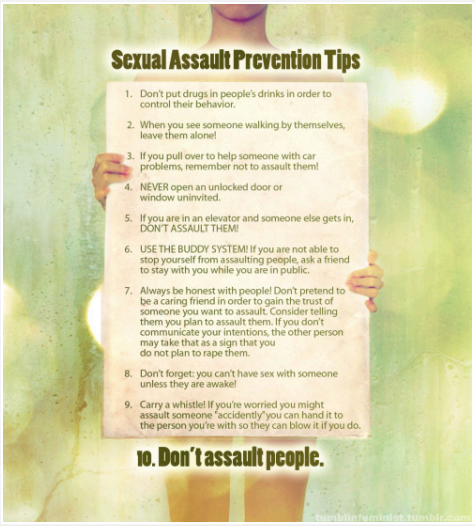
I needed that bad trick. I needed a concrete reason for the hunted feelings that stemmed from my friend's rape, murder and mutilation a few years back. I needed to have someone hurt me and realize I had both the desire to kill them and the personal control to keep myself from doing it. I needed to reach out for support and be disappointed. Because that's how it goes down- ask the survivors you know most people don't come out of it feeling supported. We've raised expectations but the real life experience is still shit.

I was traveling abroad when it happened. The only person I told called the police against my wishes. They searched the "crime" scene without my consent and took DNA evidence because I didn't dispose of it. Knowing I had allowed myself in a moment of vulnerability to be pressured and coerced into participating in the police process against my political will made me feel even worse than being violated had. I left town shortly thereafter so I didn't have to continue to be pressured by my 'friend' into cooperating with the police any more than I already had. The only way I felt any semi-balance of control during that period was by taking retribution against my rapist into my own hands.

I realized that I also could wield threats, anger and implied violence as a weapon. After my first experience of 'support' I chose to do that alone. I could think of no one in that moment to ask for help but it was OK because I realized I could do it myself. In most other places I think I could have asked some of my friends to help me. The culture of nonviolence does not totally permeate all of the communities I exist in. The lack of affinity I felt was a result of being transient to that city but I don't think my experience of being offered mediation instead of confrontation is particularly unique.

In the case of sexual assault I think retaliatory violence is appropriate, and I don't think there needs to be any kind of consensus about it. Pushing models that promise to mediate instead of allow confrontation is isolating and alienating. I didn't want mediation through legal channels or any other. I wanted revenge. I wanted to make him feel as out of control, scared and vulnerable as he had made me feel. There is no safety really after a sexual assault, but there can be consequences.

We can't provide survivors safe space- safe space, in a general sense, outside of close friendships, some family and the occasional affinity just doesn't exist. Our current models of accountability suffer from an over-abundance of hope. Fuck the false promises of safe space- we



ll never get everyone on the same page about this. Let's cop to how rd healing is and how delusional any expectation for a radical ange of behavior is in the case of assault. We need to differentiate tween physical assault and emotional abuse- throwing them gether under the general rubric interpersonal violence doesn't lp.

clical patterns of abuse don't just disappear. This shit is really ally deep- many abusers were abused and many abused become users. The past few years I have watched with horror as the nguage of accountability became an easy front for a new generation emotional manipulators. It's been used to perfect a new kind of edatory maverick- the one schooled in the language of sensitivity- ing the illusion of accountability as community currency.

So where does real safety come from? How can we measure it? Safety comes from trust, and trust is personal. It can't be mediated or rubber stamped at a community level. My 'safe' lover might be your secret abuser and my caustic codependent ex might be your healthy, tried and true confidant. Rape culture is not easily undone, but it is contextual.

People in relation to each other create healthy or unhealthy exchanges. There is no absolute for 'fucked up', 'healed' or 'safe'- it changes with time, life circumstance, and each new love affair. It is with feelings of unease that I have observed the slippery slope of 'emotional' abuse become a common reason to initiate an accountability process...

Here is the problem with using this model for emotional abuse: its an unhealthy dynamic between two people. So who gets to call it? Who gets to wield that power in the community? (And lets all be honest that there is power in calling someone to an accountability process.) People in unhealthy relationships need a way to get out of them without it getting turned into a community judgment against whomever was unlucky enough to not realize a bad dynamic or call it abuse first. These processes frequently exacerbate mutually unhealthy power plays between hurt parties. People are encouraged to pick sides and yet no direct conflict brings these kinds of entanglements to any kind of resolve.

Using accountability models developed all those years ago to deal with serial rapists in the radical scene has not been much to help in getting people out of the sand pit of damaging and codependent relationships. Emotional abuse is a fucking vague and hard to define term. It means different things to every person.
If someone hurts you and you want to hurt them back- then do it but don't pretend its about mutual healing. Call power exchange for what it is. Its OK to want power back and its OK to take it but never do anything to someone else that you couldn't stomach having someone do to you if the tables were turned.

Those inclined to use physical brutality to gain power need to be taught a lesson in a language they will understand. The language of

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Anarcha: Mother of Gynecology

It was after being part of anarcha.org that I learned of a woman named Anarcha, having nothing to do with anarcha-feminism, but whose story is very relevant. I was reminded of her recently by my friend Will who wants to study

midwifery. Anarcha was a slave who was experimented on by a gynecologist numerous times without anesthesia.
Anarcha: Mother of Gynecology
Anarcha's Story



physical violence. Those mired in unhealthy relationships need help examining a mutual dynamic and getting out of it- not assigning blame. No one can decide who deserves compassion and who doesn't except the people directly involved.

There is no way to destroy rape culture through non-violent communication because there is no way to destroy rape culture without destroying society. In the meantime let's stop expecting the best or the worst from people.

I am sick of accountability and its lack of transparency.
I am sick of triangulating.
I am sick of hiding power exchange.
I am sick of hope.
I have been raped.
I have been an unfair manipulator of power in some of my intimate relationships.
I have had sexual exchanges that were a learning curve for better consent.
I have the potential in me to be both survivor and perp- abused and abuser- as we all do.

These essentialist categories don't serve us. People rape- very few people are rapists in every sexual exchange. People abuse one another- this abuse is often mutual and cyclical- cycles are hard but not impossible to amend. These behaviors change contextually. Therefore there is no such thing as safe space.
I want us to be honest about being at war- with ourselves, with our lovers and with our "radical" community because we are at war with the world at large and those tendrils of domination exist within us and they affect so much of what we touch, who we love and those we hurt.

But we are not only the pain we cause others or the violence inflicted upon us.

We need more direct communication and when that doesn't help we need direct engagement in all its horrible messy glory. As long as we make ourselves vulnerable to others we will never be safe in the total sense of the word.

There is only affinity and trust kept.
There is only trust broken and confrontation.
The war isn't going to end anytime soon
Let's be better at being in conflict.

If you would like a copy of the zine please email downtothis@riseup.net

Topics: abuse, accountability process, anarchist movement, criticism, pdf, safe space, self-defense, sexual assault

3 COMMENTS:

Anonymous 3/1/11, 9:11 PM

yeah. unless you have kids with the person. people need to start thinking about that and including it in their language. some anarchists have kids even though you don't see us at shows and conferences anymore because we are putting our kids to bed or there's no childcare at said conference. Most parents don't have the option to have the person's ass kicked and send him out of town. I don't with my kid's dad who physically assaulted me. My kids have a relationship with him and I can't take that from them. And if you think different then maybe you'll have to admit that if you aren't a parent you don't actually know. Accountability process is all I have and it's hard enough to get people to stay involved with it considering my increasing invisibility and marginalization in radical community as a parent. Lots of self involved and priveledged people I know would just love to have the excuse to flake because they read somewhere that accountability process doesn't work and they can instead throw a brick though his window fast and easy without stopping to wonder how that helps me AT ALL. Maybe if accountability processes aren't working we need to change them but throwing them out the window (when for some people that's all there is)in favor of fun heroics on the part of supporters like shit kicking and brick throwing-well if that's how things start going, I'm fucked and no one will know anyway because you won't see me at the next workshop with no childcare provided.

Reply

Anonymous 8/5/11, 2:55 PM

i can see that (cmment above) and think that this is one of many examples that people also become very isolated. the lack of child-care and lack of recognition that there is no single, universal process. Also, someo of us who are confronted by physical abuse may not have the language to respond (i.e. the capacity or skill for violence back). When i have tried to fend off physical violence i have done so with the goal of merely trying to minimize the damage. And have, even then, been accused of hurting the person who has attacked me. And i have let myself be hurt and endangered rather than fight back. I don't want to hurt back. I want a context in which wev can learn new tools for expression or anger or fear and find better ways of accessing power - not power-over-other but power-over-one's-own-life. I want them to heal if that's what they want, and i want both of us to be safer. I don't want to fear what will happen to others who i introduce or implicate in this. And i don't want to fear my own isolation or ostricization if i chose to try to find ways to not abandon people who abuse me. I completely understand why folks might want to do that, but i wish there was some recognition of the fact that it might not simply be pathological to want to see through a relationship that might feel revolutionary and transcendent at times, if it also feels violent and abusive at others. But as long as people insist that the only respectable thing to do is leave, and that there is one perpetrator and one victim, and as long as so-called communities will pass judgements and draw lines about people and behaviours (and yes, highlight some sorts of relationships over others, and some sorts of abuse or violence over others) then there is no possible accountability structure for me, nor are there bricks that will be thrown. There will just be me, interfacing with my so-called community, and with someone who has physically and emotionally

abused me (and has experienced abuse by me as well) while i am standing terribly, terrifyingly alone.

Reply

Anonymous 8/15/11, 10:43 AM

hmm. i think, possibly, that smashing 'the accountability process' is great. i think smashing the paradigm is as important as physical violence, and other than that, i'm at a loss. no, there are no 'safe spaces' (and damnit, i wish people would stop saying that places are 'safe'. or at least own up to it when a safe(r) space is violated and do something about.)

I was raped. I was quiet about it for a while. when i started to talk, some people listened and were involved because they wanted to do something to build their community in a way that didn't tolerate rape. those are the people that i now trust. because they weren't listening and acting in a way to protect me or cater to me feelings of having my body and mind torn apart by the continued power abuse and silencing by the person who raped me afterwards, they were acting for themselves and their desire to actually build a safer community. in that context, i got REAL support. because we all wanted the same thing.

Yeah, there were a ton of places and people that i got facilitator-speak from which i found mostly silencing and demeaning, especially since the person who raped me used that language to further their ability to control and manipulate me after the rape. it became my fault. it became my problem. in a lot of ways, i wish i had of just beaten the shit out of the rapist when i had the chance. fuck talking, get that person away from me, as afraid of me as i am of them, as i am of strangers, as i am afraid of friends touching me, as i am of being outside of my house, driving or biking down the street, going to work, playing in the park with my kid, etc. It wouldn't be so bad if the person who raped me felt as though they had to RUN if they came across me instead of the other way around. let the rapist be scared and alone and strangled by fear and anxiety and let me hold my head up and walk down the street.

i've found, i think, the best way to hold someone accountable after rape (which isn't necessarily that far when in an emotionally abusive relationship, and yeah, getting the fuck out is definitely a good idea instead of getting embroiled in power structures and struggles,coming back to it when /if the people involved can shed those dynamics) is to say their name. so often we hear "this person got raped" i want to hear "this person raped somebody/is a rapist". that's all i need to know. let's give the people who were raped a bit of space to heal under the anonymity that we afford rapists. it's not gossip to talk about sexual assault and those who commit it. and if they're so-called "committed to the accountability process" than they have to be prepared to hear their name and the word 'rapist' in the same sentence for the rest of their lives.

my 2 cents. hope it made sense.

Reply