Anonymous
For your safety and security…
October 5, 2014

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these problems, because there are at least as many problems with other words. I use the word 'victim' where I am discussing victim-blaming and the maxim 'believe the victim', and also when what is at issue is a person's suffering a particular wrong, rather than their having survived past wrongs.

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against becoming what we hate. But recognising that we are in a double-bind seems more promising, as well as more honest, than sticking to the line that we just aren't ostracising hard enough.

The oppressive social relations we struggle against are inevitably reflected in us, individually and collectively. We are scarred, and our relations with each other are scarred, though obviously we are not all scarred in the same way. To fight and organise, together, against the world as it is, we must fight *to be* together in ways which challenge and subvert, rather than perpetuate, the modes of domination, exploitation and violence which create us as subjects. All I have been trying to show is that it is not *so obvious* that *every aspect* of safer spaces politics is taking this fight forwards – not *so obvious* as to justify the assumption that *any* opposition warrants hatred and denunciation by all right-thinking radicals. On the other hand, maybe the incidents of bullying and scapegoating, the 'miscarriages of justice', which I have pointed out are not indicative of any *general* problem with the politics of safer spaces, or with its conception of justice. Perhaps they are just examples of safer spaces practices and language being abused, unfortunate lapses in an otherwise healthy project. If this is the case, though, then that means more than ever that dissent needs to be understood as not *necessarily* reactionary or victim-blaming or misogynist. Otherwise there is no mechanism for preventing the abuse when it does happen, and there is no way for those who suffer from it to speak out.

- There are plenty of problems with using the term 'survivor' to describe people who have experienced sexual violence against them, for some do not feel themselves to have 'survived'. This may be because they feel that in some crucial ways they did not continue to live after those experiences, or because the abuse is ongoing, or conversely because they feel that the experiences did not threaten their existence in the first place, and they do not want to define themselves in terms of them. I've used the word, despite

Radical collectives are premised on the rejection of the liberal conception of politics. We recognise that the liberal concept of 'reasonableness' is a mask for the white, bourgeois man, and that those voices dismissed as irrational, as hysterical, are precisely the voices of the oppressed. The perpetual danger of utopian projects, though, is that they replicate what they set out to oppose. The politics of safer spaces has done a lot to challenge oppression, but in the process it has codified a series of prohibitions on opinions or actions which are labelled 'unsafe', and a prescription that anyone accused of being unsafe be excluded from the sphere of political engagement. The liberal demand that you go about your dissent in a 'reasonable' manner seems worryingly to be mirrored in the demand that you go about your dissent in a way that does not make anyone feel 'unsafe'. In both cases, some genuine political disagreements are being excluded from political spaces, being transformed into an apparently prior moral issue of whether you are conducting yourself in a permissible manner.

To raise this concern is *not* to say that no-one, and no opinion, should ever be excluded. Of course we need to distinguish between cops and comrades, and not all those who police our oppression wear a uniform. Equally, the idea that we can simply 'not act' is a liberal illusion – so-called 'non-intervention' just upholds existing power relations, and does not provide a solution. However, anyone committed to revolutionary change must believe that it is legitimate, and even necessary, to oppose existing wrongs without being able to provide a fully worked-out alternative. (This is partly because our ways of thinking are so shaped by oppressive power structures that we cannot totally transcend them when we imagine alternatives, and partly because alternatives need to be collectively determined in the course of transformative struggle, not decided on by a small group in advance and then imposed upon others.) There is no straight and narrow path of righteousness out of this double-bind, only the constant struggle against what we hate, and

"This safe space policy is designed to ensure that meetings take place in a considerate and relevant manner, without participants being undermined for discriminatory reasons. If someone violates these agreements three times, they will be asked to leave the space. The three-strike policy can be bypassed if a serious infraction of these agreements happens, to the extent that someone feels unsafe. Examples of serious infractions include, but are not limited to, harassment, bullying, theft, sexual harassment, sexual assault and threatening or violent behaviour."

Safer Spaces Policy for National Campaign against Fees and Cuts

"We want to emphasise frank communication whilst always prioritising the stated needs of those experiencing oppressive behaviour. No one should criticise others for how they respond to oppression – anger and violence can be completely valid responses. Immediate ejection from the social centre may be the right thing to do if people feel immediately unsafe. […] Lively discussion is great but no matter how passionate you are, it isn't OK to talk over others or raise your voice aggressively at others."

Safer Spaces Policy for House of Brag, The London Queer Social Centre

"Our staff are entitled to work in a pleasant environment without fear of verbal abuse, attack or harassment. Lewisham Homes will take the strongest possible action against any intimidating or abusive behaviour that may result in a criminal prosecution or you losing your home."

Notice in Lewisham Homes office

Light a candle

The term 'safer spaces' is increasingly used as a short-hand for a loosely interconnected set of concepts and practices developed to challenge oppressive power dynamics within radical

collectives. The historical roots of these ways of thinking and doing politics lie primarily (though not exclusively) in feminist struggles against rape, and LGBT struggles against queer- and trans*-phobic violence. I know more about the former of these than the latter, and this is just one example of my limitations. What I'm presenting here is not supposed to be a comprehensive or definitive account of safer spaces politics. It is based on my own experiences of the lefty political 'scene' in London, and on experiences recounted to me by others. Still, I hope it will resonate with enough people for it to count as an analysis of some general tendencies in the politics I am talking about.

Safer spaces politics is, among other things, a radical response to rape culture. It recognises that we live in a society in which rape and sexual abuse is not prohibited, but regulated. Whether coercive sex counts as rape is not a question of the victim's experience but a question of property ownership, with all the racism that entails. Transgressing any of the contradictory norms of gendered propriety – engaging in 'inappropriate behaviour' – makes you a slut and asking for it, or frigid and needing it. Conversely, 'perverts' are incarcerated, occasionally for violating a human being, but more importantly for violating the rules of who owns what, and what business is to be conducted where. Many survivors* say they feel raped again and again, at the police station, in the court room, if it ever gets there, but equally by family and so-called friends: forced to repeat the intimate details of their violation, offering up their trauma to the masculine face of Authority, interrogated, disbelieved, and blamed. No wonder so many of us never speak out at all.

The characteristic ways in which safer spaces politics seeks to challenge this culture of oppressive violence are:

- accountability processes/panels, and mandates for the exclusion of people on the grounds that they have been judged 'unsafe' or make others 'feel unsafe'

I imagine that using the example of the Bolsheviks seems quite over the top, so I should explain what I'm doing with it. I'm certainly *not* saying that what is being done in the name of safer spaces is remotely comparable in its horror to the actions of the Bolsheviks. I'm not saying that advocates of safer spaces are 'secretly' Leninists, or anything like that. I've chosen it as an example, firstly, because I'm sure everyone I'm addressing is in no doubt that what the Bolsheviks did was not good politics, to put it mildly. On the other hand, I want to show that their authoritarianism was actually not so *obviously* wrong from where they were standing, in that it was a response to an objective situation which made that ruthlessness appear necessary to some people who did not have purely malevolent intentions. I want to bring out the *logic* of the position, and to use that as an object of comparison in trying to understand how it can come to seem as though, out of a commitment to feminism, you might be morally required to treat your fellow-oppressed with such callousness. There is a problem with the logic, though. It did not follow from the horrors of Russian tsarism that if you were a committed revolutionary then you had to be committed to every aspect of the Bolshevik programme. And it does not follow from the horrors of rape culture that if you are committed to challenging oppression and sexual violence then you must be committed to every aspect of safer spaces politics as currently articulated and applied.

Since I've been slating Leninists I may as well make it clear that liberals are at least as bad. They go on about 'reasonable debate' and 'tolerating dissent' but they actually exclude serious challenges to the *status quo* from the sphere of the political, by labelling them unreasonable, mindless, violent, criminal. Your dissent is permitted, as long a you *behave appropriately,* as long as you do not engage in behaviours which would cause a person of reasonable firmness present at the scene to fear for his or her personal safety. (Public Order Act 1986)

anti-Semitic. Claims of complexity are neither inherently good nor bad politically – it surely depends on whether the 'simple' narrative they are 'complicating' is true or not, and what consequences sticking to it is having.

Solidarity forever

It is worth analysing further why the question of what solidarity demands is so fraught. We know all too well that just because someone says they're a feminist doesn't mean that what they are doing is actually helping to dismantle patriarchy. When the Bolsheviks began shooting their own fellow-revolutionaries for departing from the party line, they were motivated, at least in part, by the sincere belief that those who did not adhere totally to the programme were, whether wittingly or unwittingly, contributing to the ever-imminent danger of counter-revolution. Defeat by counter-revolutionary forces would mean, literally, the massacre of the revolutionary movement, and the loss of all that had been gained. The people they shot called themselves revolutionaries, but the people doing the shooting called them tools of the bourgeoisie. Apologists, if you will. Pre-revolutionary Russia was hell, and the Bolsheviks thought they had found the only path out. No wonder any tarrying by the wayside, any perceived attempts at *derailing* the process, marked you out as a devil. But the more people they denounced, the more their road led nowhere. Or rather, we all know where it led. I do not say this in order to delegitimise the concepts of 'apologism' or 'derailing', which certainly *are* rightly applied in many cases (and there really were White agents among the Russian revolutionaries), but to highlight the problem when *any* disagreement is taken to warrant the application of these labels, no matter what the politics of the disagreement.

- less formal campaigns, which often operate through rumours/spreading the word about people judged 'unsafe', resulting in social exclusion or expulsion from spaces without an 'official' accountability process
- use of trigger warnings, and a particular theoretical vocabulary to talk about traumatic experience
- the idea of safety as a goal of overriding importance to oppressed people
- concepts like silencing, apologism, victim-blaming, tone policing, and derailing, which have been developed specifically by the safer spaces movement
- more mainstream or institutional concepts like appropriateness/inappropriateness of conduct or 'behaviours' (often plural), harassment, abuse, abuser/perpetrator, vulnerability
- maxims like 'believe the victim' and 'do not engage with the perpetrator' (these being treated as two sides of the same coin).

However, from *within* the same broad project of challenging violence against women and others perceived as disruptive to the hetero- and cis-sexist patriarchy, the effectiveness and political direction of various aspects of the safer spaces approach are disputed.

In terms of 'big names', queer theorist/activist Jack Halberstam and political philosopher Wendy Brown have raised critical questions about elements of the safer spaces project, asking how they relate to the dominant neoliberal project and state power. Last year a book came out by Christine Hanhardt called *Safe Space: Gay Neighbourhood History and the Politics of Violence*. Focusing on LGBT movements in New York and San Francisco from the 60s onwards, it looks at the complex relation

between campaigns against queer- and trans*-phobic violence and calls for 'safe space', on the one hand, and urban policing and gentrification on the other. The book is particularly concerned with the splits between different LGBT experiences depending on who, for reasons of class and race, benefitted from the growing recognition of LGBT people as subjects vulnerable to violence, and who, for reasons of class and race, continues to be constructed as a threat to safety and targeted for removal from newly claimed LGBT areas.

What the 'big names' have to say, though, is unimportant compared with the discussions which are taking place all the time, in a multitude of forms, as we fight to live and organise together. For example, there are arguments over whether ostracism or safer spaces policies are working to erode hierarchies within political groups, and over how trauma should be understood. There is also disagreement over how safer spaces practices and language are to be applied or interpreted in particular cases. For example, while I don't believe there's any feminist who would deny that victim-blaming is crucial to upholding the violent hierarchy of gender, there are still disagreements among feminists about whether the actions of a particular person or group amount to victim-blaming, and what the response should be.

Which side are you on?

The different 'sides' in these arguments do not map onto a division of people into good and evil, into those who want to challenge oppression and those who want to hold onto their privileges by oppressing others.

So, to start with, there are people of all genders on both sides. Actually, it's worth trying to be more specific. In my experience, it is primarily white women by whom or on whose behalf accountability processes, whether formal or informal, have

comes an instrument of abuse. Like I said, this is the nature of *all* revolutionary movements. Saying that the safer spaces movement is contradictory does not amount to an attack on all that it has achieved and aims to achieve, or to a demand that it be jettisoned. But, and this is the point I want to make, if it is to remain revolutionary rather than sliding into authoritarianism, it *must allow for internal dissent* – that is, genuine political disagreements about safer spaces concepts and practices in general and about what is to be done in particular cases.

The difficulty, of course, is that what is to count as 'internal dissent', as opposed to attack by the forces of reaction, is usually exactly the contested issue. Who is 'with' us? Who are 'we'? I don't have answers to these questions, and anyway it's not just up to me. I would not want to define the rules of a collective, even if I could. I just think we need to acknowledge that these are difficult political questions, and that *some* (though by no means all) of what is happening at the moment in the name of safer spaces is not pushing towards the best answers.

I imagine someone might object that pointing to the complexity of an issue is a common derailing strategy. To say how complicated or difficult an issue is can be a way of stalling attempts to do something about it, thereby upholding the *status quo*. For example, a standard response to calls for a boycott of the Israeli state is to say 'oh, but the Israel-Palestine situation is so *complex* – we can't possibly take sides'. This response refuses to recognise the power dynamics of the situation and the urgent need for action. However, the fact that claims of complexity are sometimes used for this purpose does not mean, obviously, that there are no complex issues, or that we should pretend that all political questions have simple answers. On the contrary, saying 'it's more complicated than that' might be a necessary part of responding to those who think that the actions of the Israeli state are automatically justified because Jewish people suffer oppression, or because Israel is a victim of attacks, or because some opposition to Israel definitely is

tion is pursued in its name *appear* to be based on some kind of communally decided (hence legitimate) law, and any criticisms of that line of action *appear* as a (legitimately punishable) crime against the community.

Going off the rails

My worry, then, is that maxims like 'believe the victim' and its corollary 'don't engage with the perpetrator' are operating in ways which go against their original radical intentions. I'm just not sure that women, or survivors of all genders, or people suffering oppression, are always being listened to and respected more as a result or their application. It seems, rather, that we are listened to and respected more only when we make certain kinds of claims, in a certain language, and have certain friends.

This is all very ironic, of course, because the whole point of safer spaces is supposed to be to make things more inclusive, to challenge power imbalances, bullying and silencing within political groups. To say the road to hell is paved with good intentions, though, does not really capture the situation. For the fact is that we were already in hell. The hierarchical systems of gender, race, and capital, and the violence which constructs and perpetuates them: that is hell. Rape culture is hell, and rape culture persists within radical collectives. The safer spaces movement *has* challenged rape culture. Yet it has also labelled a 'rape apologist' and a 'well-known misogynist' the first person to ever really listen and believe me when I told them about my experiences of being forced into sex.

As with every revolutionary movement, the safer spaces movement carries the marks of what it fights against. It inevitably contains contradictory moments, impulses, tendencies, whatever you want to call them. It fights power but also becomes an instrument of power; it fights abuse but also be-

been instigated, and the issue has usually been some kind of sexually inappropriate behaviour. Disputes over whether particular kinds of language or imagery are oppressive have also generated exclusions. For example, a person I know was excluded from some queer spaces for disagreeing with a decision to exclude a DIY feminist band on the grounds that the vagina image on their logo was trans*phobic. In this dispute there were trans* people on both sides. Another example: a comrade of mine with a long history of severe mental health problems has told me she feels upset and excluded by the decision of the AFem2014 organisers to include in their safer spaces policy an instruction to 'Avoid ableist language… e.g. "nutter", "mental"…' She is worried that ruling these words intrinsically ableist and hence unacceptable, regardless of context, erases an important history of activism by disabled people who have proudly called themselves 'nutters', using humour and the long-practiced (albeit often precarious) strategy by oppressed groups of reclaiming derogatory language to overcome suffering and confront stigma. She is united with the organisers on the need to confront ableism while disagreeing over what counts as ableist.

The most vocal supporters of accountability processes have been people of all genders, and the targets of these processes have been people of all genders. In quite a few cases, the named 'perpetrator' is a white cis-man, but the people who come to be most strongly denounced, as apologists or victim-blamers, are women, and it is at them that the most hatred is directed. Women who are, or have been, the lovers of men named as unsafe or inappropriate are often primary targets. Meanwhile, being a safer spaces 'bulldog' can provide an outlet for white men whose dominating voices might otherwise be viewed with suspicion. This is a dynamic that deserves some attention.

Racism is mentioned on every safer spaces policy, and racism, including its gendered and sexualised forms, is ubiquitous within radical collectives. However, accountability pro-

cesses have not, in my experience, been pursued on behalf of individual people suffering racist oppression. Christine Hanhardt's arguments in the *Safe Space* history mentioned earlier suggest that this may have to do with racialised constructions of who is dangerous, and who is vulnerable and in need of protection. Charges of racism *have* been brought against groups such as the AWL on the basis of public statements which were identified (rightly, in my opinion) as racist. However, in disputes over whether individuals should be driven off campus on the basis of membership of these groups, there have been people who have directly experienced racist oppression on both sides.

There are also survivors of sexual violence on both sides (unsurprisingly, given how common this is). There are people who have had all sorts of traumatic experiences on both sides, whether or not they want to speak about this in the psychiatric vocabulary of PTSD. There are people who have experienced or are experiencing mental health problems on both sides, although again, people have all sorts of different relations to the language of 'mental health'.

This means, just to spell it out, that it is often happening that people who have been raped are being publicly denounced as rape apologists, even told they 'love rape'.

It is often happening that people experiencing serious mental health problems are being thrown out of political and social spaces because their presence is claimed to be triggering to others. In some cases, people have suffered mental breakdowns as a direct result of campaigns against them in the name of safer spaces. There has been at least one suicide attempt, and this is hardly surprising, really, given that the punishment which ostracism is intended to inflict is social death. If a person makes every space they enter unsafe, where *on Earth* are they supposed to go? So to put it bluntly, no side can have a monopoly on trauma, or to use a less loaded term, on suffering.

any particular wall. The policy provides a sense of decisiveness and legitimacy while masking the exercises of judgement and operations of power which are necessarily a part of its implementation.

Take, for example, the policy quoted at the start from House of Brag, which I chose because it is *more* thoughtful than many safer spaces policies (the NCAFC offering lying at the other end of the spectrum). It states that violence on the part of those experiencing oppressive behaviour cannot be criticised. It also states that it is never okay to raise your voice or talk over someone. Both of these statements come, at least in part, from a good place. But the fact is that whether someone is experiencing oppressive behaviour and therefore privy to the exemption from the broader policy of enforced civility (colonial overtones intended) is often precisely the contested issue. And contesting an issue does sometimes involve raising your voice. Yet if someone feels 'immediately unsafe' then 'immediate expulsion' (by force?) may be the answer. Presumably someone might feel immediately unsafe if someone is being angry and violent towards them. But, as the policy itself acknowledges, a person being angry and violent may not be in the wrong. They may be responding to bullying, to oppression, to less overt but more damaging forms of threat and victimisation from the other person. If so, then according to the policy, they should not be open to criticism at all, never mind immediate expulsion.

The fact is that the policy does not specify any course of action, and it simply comes down to the political judgement of those involved. This is not in itself a bad thing. Of course we need to make political judgements, and weigh considerations which may pull in different directions. *The contradictions are there in reality, and the policy reflects them rather than creating them.* The problem, though, is that in *appearing* to give an actually applicable formula for how to be 'right on', and therefore *appearing* to relieving us of (at least some of) the burden of judgement, the contradictory policy makes whatever line of ac-

scribed, with any richness, depth, or detail, how I felt about what they did. If I then decline to provide further information about what happened on the grounds that it is too triggering, that may be perfectly understandable, and I certainly should not be forced to. On the basis of this kind of almost contentless disclosure, though, it can be difficult for you to form any well-grounded beliefs about what actually happened and how to react to it. To insist that you are morally obliged to instantly and without question place the accused into the generic category of 'abuser', along with Martin Smith and the murderer of Sarah Payne, is to insist on belief being detached from any aspiration to track the contours of what the world is like. Certainly, patriarchal assumptions about what counts as a 'well-grounded' belief should be rejected, and our understanding of what constitutes a patriarchal assumption constantly deepened. There must be no questions asked about lengths of skirts, for example. But this does not itself settle the issue of what to believe and what to do.

Policy vs. Politics

The term 'well-known' stands out in enforcement discourse: so-and-so is a *well-known* trans*-misogynist, a *well-known* rape apologist, a *well-known* unsafe person. I suspect that the repetition of this term – which is interestingly ambiguous between a belief being justified and a belief being held by lots of people – masks an uncomfortable (hence suppressed) awareness of the fact that *knowledge* is often precisely what is lacking. It seems that, in practice, uncertainty about the basis for belief is being compensated for by extreme decisiveness about what to do – the kind of decisiveness that a policy provides. I mean here not only actual safer spaces policies but the 'policy' of enforcing the kind of rules which feature on safer spaces policies, whether or not there is an actual piece of paper stuck on

Of course, it's a sad symptom of the state we've got to that I'm even talking about 'sides' here at all. It's because I'm hoping that we can break down these 'sides' and open up a more free and nuanced discussion that I'm writing about this, rather than just hiding in a corner – which I know is what a lot of people feel like doing when 'safer spaces' comes up, because the whole issue has become, frankly, *terrifying*. There are more and more people scared to be involved in political organising, scared to go to social events, look on facebook or twitter, for fear that they may be excluded or denounced in the name of safer spaces, or for fear of being reminded of previous, deeply upsetting – some might even say 'traumatic' – experiences of exclusion or denunciation. This is not just misogynist rape apologist evil-doers crying into their glass of privilege: boohoo I hurt too. That is a caricature which ignores the reality I have just been describing.

Cast out the rotten apples

On the other hand, it is also true that all the people who have been outed as 'unsafe' really *are* that. They are all, to some extent, misogynist. They have all treated others badly, and they are all, to some extent, complicit in rape culture among other shit things. But then, this is true of absolutely everyone, including the people enforcing safer spaces. This is not to say that everyone is as bad as everyone else, that we're all guilty so we can't make any judgements anymore. Actually, I think we need to be making *more* judgements, more complex and nuanced judgements, and resisting the tendency to think (hope) that the world is going to divide neatly into victims and perpetrators. There is a serious question whether actions undertaken in the course of enforcing safer spaces are okay even though, in other contexts, they would be understood as straightforwardly abusive – for example, as has happened, men calling women 'scum'

on twitter, or shouting over them when they try to speak. Before we even get to that issue though, there is the fact that, in most of the formal and informal accountability processes I have witnessed, it has been the case that at least some of the people enforcing safer spaces have at some point *in the past* done something similar, something comparably oppressive or hurtful or stupid, to what the person being excluded in the name of safety has done.

Obviously, this is gross hypocrisy, but that's not the main problem with it. To say that someone is hypocritical – that they do not practise what they preach – is not yet to say what should be changed, the practice or the preaching. Where what is being preached, though, is social ostracism on ostensibly principled grounds, simple hypocrisy becomes something else. An example is made of someone who, sure, is far from perfect, but in many cases (not *all* cases, but many) is not *so much worse* than anyone else. Though the denunciation of the example, the forcible excision of the unsafe tumour in the communal body, everyone else attempts thereby to purify themselves. This is the definition of scapegoating. The process never ends, though, because it disavows (despite paying constant lip service to) the oppressive tendencies in all of us, rather than honestly confronting them. The communal body, unsurprisingly, remains ill, so yet another tumour must be identified and the accountability surgeon called again. The taboo spreads, farcically at times. Someone can be labelled a rape apologist for being friends with someone who refused to disinvite from their party someone who once shared a kebab with someone who was sighted on campus with someone who… The result of all this is that people are so scared of becoming the next scapegoat that they cannot confront their own faults openly, or can do so only superficially and with ever-increasing bad faith.

women. I am saying we need to think about the role of social power in determining whose narrative carries the day.

On the other hand, the features of safer spaces language which enable it to function as an instrument of power in this way are some of the very features which have enabled it to fight established forms of power with some success. Dominant society (for want of a better word) enforces further trauma on those who experience oppression with its patriarchally inflected demands that we 'prove' our abuse. In response, the feminist and queer liberation movements out of which safer spaces politics emerges have contributed to the development of a language for disclosure which makes it easier to indicate the harm that we have suffered without tearing ourselves up once again for the benefit of those who stand in incredulous judgement over us. Thanks in part to these movements we now have words like 'abuse' and 'sexual harassment' to draw on to gesture towards our ill-treatment. The requirement that we trawl through all the gory and distressing details can be counteracted by appealing to the theory of triggering, according to which we may be incapable of speaking about our trauma without incurring further harm. The vagueness of words like 'abuse', the fact that they lack any precision, any indicators of scale or context, helps make disclosures of some kinds of trauma easier. It helps us to reject the patriarchal understanding of sexual assault, according to which it only counts as 'real' rape if some racist news item can be spun out of it.

The difficulty is, though, that this same vagueness – this ability to convey condemnation without any need to bother about the details – makes these words amenable to misuse as instruments of in-group power. For example, if I simply tell you that so-and-so abused me, I haven't yet said much at all about what happened, except that I had a bad experience and judge them to have done something wrong, to be culpable for my bad experience. I am not lying about this. But I haven't yet said what they did, or how or why or in what context. I haven't even really de-

language generates a kind of immunity from criticism. Having been called out as a perpetrator, the other person is not supposed to be 'engaged with', and anyone who comes to their defence is liable to be labelled an apologist, a derailer, a misogynist, defending an abuser, etc. It is treated as 'problematic' even to ask for that person's perspective on the accusation against them, except in the context of a confrontation or accountability hearing, in which their status as a 'perpetrator' who needs to be 'held responsible' is taken for granted.

Yet all sorts of possibilities are excluded by fiat when 'believe the victim' is interpreted and acted upon in this way: the possibility that *both* people are traumatised, or (and this is not incompatible) that both have been, perhaps in different ways, abusive to each other, or that one person suffered trauma even though the other person did not do anything particularly heinous, or even that one person has been consistently abusive and the accusations they are making against the other person are a continuation of this abuse. It is also possible, and in some cases definitely true, that the named perpetrator has done something terrible and is genuinely dangerous. But to act as though this is true in every case is to ignore the operations of social power. We seriously need to ask whether being *au fait* with a certain discourse, as well as both wanting and feeling able to throw your intimate experiences onto the very public mercies of the accountability mill, necessarily corresponds to being the most wronged.

It is really important not to take this point out of context, as often happens in these discussions. The tendency to take phrases or sentences out of context is perhaps understandable given the distressing subject matter, but context really does matter here. When I ask 'who gets to claim the title of victim?' I am not saying that survivors are grabbing after social prestige. I am talking specifically about cases where there are two people, each of whom feels they have been abused by the other. In several cases I know of, the people involved were both queer

Please believe me

I have emphasised that those who are critical of safer spaces, or who are targeted in the name of safer spaces are often survivors of sexual violence themselves, or suffering mental health problems. I am not saying, though, that *therefore* they are necessarily or automatically right, and what has happened to them is necessarily or automatically wrong. Quite the opposite. Survivors do not agree, so to hold up some survivors as unquestionable authorities just means that other survivors cannot have their perspectives listened to. Unfortunately, this is what is sometimes happening at the moment.

To really be listened to, to have your experience acknowledged, to be taken seriously and supported when you try to articulate your trauma – that can in itself be profoundly transformative. A commitment to this is a basic requirement for radical politics. The maxim 'believe the victim' expresses this commitment. It poses a direct challenge to rape culture, and I do not for a moment suggest that we should not stick to it. The problem, though, is that it is not always so clear what sticking to it means.

Here's the first issue: believe the victim about *what*? As I have already said, it is absolutely necessary to acknowledge someone's trauma, to take seriously their articulations of their own experience. Perhaps people do occasionally lie about these things, fabricate trauma for ulterior ends or whatever, but that possibility is nowhere near as significant as the problem of people having their experiences dismissed. The fact that I should be taken seriously when I speak of my trauma, though, obviously doesn't mean that I should be treated as correct about *everything* (and nobody would claim this), so what is it that I am supposed to be believed about?

One common view is that I should be treated as correct if I call someone out as an abuser and that I should be treated as at least presumptively correct about what should be done to

or about that person, for example: that person should be excluded from spaces, or subject to an accountability hearing, or made to undergo therapy. You could call this the 'weaker' interpretation of the maxim. There is also a stronger interpretation, which is only rarely explicitly defended but still implicitly relied upon in many arguments over safer spaces. This is the view that I should be treated as an authority on the topic of abuse, trauma, and oppression *in general.* Being treated as an authority here means that anyone who disagrees with me is taken to deserve labels like 'misogynist' or 'rape apologist'. This is because my authority derives from my status as someone who has experienced abuse so disagreeing with me (disputing my authority) is seen as amounting to an attack on my experience (the source of my authority).

Treating survivors as automatic authorities in some general sense is obviously contradictory, though, for the simple reason already given that survivors do not agree. Yet what about the weaker version of the maxim? Is it really true that *any* questioning of my interpretation of what happened in the particular case(s) where I was traumatised, and of my opinion on what should be done, amounts to disrespecting my experience? A look at right-wing calls for 'victim-led justice' should raise concerns about this interpretation as well. We all agree that it is possible to respect the trauma of someone whose child has been killed without supporting their call for the drunk driver responsible to be imprisoned for life. I have chosen this example simply because the driver might be culpable without being an embodiment of evil, and without the proposed punishment being a good thing. Of course I am not saying that demanding someone be excluded from a social space is equivalent to calling for them to be incarcerated by the state. The point is just this: if you recognise the *possibility* of respecting the trauma of the person calling for the driver's lifelong imprisonment *without* supporting that call, you have to recognise that agreeing totally with a victim's interpretation and proposed solutions

cannot be a necessary condition of respecting them and their traumatic experience. We need to be able to raise and frankly discuss what respect for experience and acknowledgement of trauma might mean, starting from the premise that we do not yet have all the answers.

There is a second problem, though, which applies equally to weaker and stronger interpretations of the maxim: 'believe the victim' cannot function as an instruction *at all* until you have decided *who* the victim is. We could interpret it as meaning: you should believe any claim of the form 'I am a victim', or 'So-and-so abused me'. However, this leads directly into a contradiction. Suppose you have two people (just to keep it simple) each saying that they are victimized and naming the other person as the perpetrator, or abuser, or to blame for their trauma. This is not some hypothetical scenario invented for the sake of argument. Cases like this are not at all rare, especially (though not only) when intimate relationships end. In these cases, 'believe the victim' gives absolutely no guidance about what to do. Nevertheless there is still a tendency for it to be invoked, and the way in which it operates is troubling.

Double-edged words

What has happened in several cases I know of is that the person who gets to claim the title of 'victim' – the person who, according to the directive, *must* be believed – is the person with the confidence, the social power, and the inclination to go public with their accusation. In these cases, as so often, social power is bound up with language. The person who gets to be the victim, in these cases, is often the person who is more comfortable wielding the language accepted within the safer spaces movement for talking about victimhood. It is the person who is most vocal, who gets in there first to say: 'that's my abuser', 'I'm triggered', 'I feel unsafe'. Mastery of an in-group