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Conflict, Safe Spaces and Removing People: A letter

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July 2012

*“All at sea again And now my hurricanes have brought down this
ocean rain To bathe me again My ship’s a sail Can you hear its tender
frame Screaming from beneath the waves ” — Echo and the Bunny-
men ’ Ocean Rain’*

To all of us engaged in groups in general:

If you will allow me a minute – I haven’t paid attention to all of the chatter and conflict et cetera, of your particular group, but I bet it is similar to many other places. I wanted to take a moment to address anarchism and open groups in brief. I believe our spaces have value to them, and we have all learned and shared things over their existence. Flame wars have happened since the dawn of the interwebz and personal conflict has happened at least since we could open our mouths – but sometimes we have to say Ya Basta! (Enough!)

I have been an anarchist in the real world for a long time, and I do not believe in large open groups for much more than short-term organizing. They always fall into trouble over the long haul due to not having enough cohesion, collective input and shared power. I actually mostly only work in small closed collectives with people I can develop intimate shared ideals, principles and actions.

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May 2015 www.scottcrow.org

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Our Spaces, Our Places

Anarchism is not about all of us getting into one big boat and heading towards the horizon, and all getting along singing Kum-baya. This is the mess we are in now: this 'boat' is filled with the lowest common denominator of ideals/principles of all the participants. The way I see it, the horizon is the goal (follow me on this for a minute), and instead of all getting into one big stupid boat, we can each get into our own boats, rafts, ships or whatever and head towards the horizon without sinking each other's boats. Some will get there faster, some will not make it, and some will go in armadas. The key is that we get there, individually or collectively how we can, without sinking each other's boats.

I also believe in, and practice, protecting the spaces we have carved out within groups, workplaces, meetings, housing et cetera. I am not a liberal who believes we have to (or can) accept everyone. It's why I am an anarchist. We need multiple small accountable groups that can federate and/or network – or not. If we can't get along, then we form other groups and don't try to sink the others boat! We don't have the capacity to deal with everyone's personal issues – whether its drugs, alcohol, mental health or just assholes looking for a fight. There is plenty of pie to go around for all of us, plenty of problems to solve and lots of disagreements to be had with people we like or love without the added stress. Find the place that fits and work in it.

Conflicts will happen and can be constructive, but if they are damaging we must weed people out, or the groups will falter and everyone suffers. That said: if people are assholes, KICK THEM OUT of your group – it's ok! At my work, we fire them! We all have enough trouble getting along with those who are committed to the same values and beliefs, why make it harder? It's not easy, but it's necessary for all of us.

Here are a few things we have used as guidelines for our political training camps over the years in dealing with infiltration and disruptive unaccountable people:

- Be clear internally that you have created a safe political and social space in all your communications with everyone there.
- Recognize you have the moral, social and political right to remove ANYONE who is disrupting that space. Do not be afraid to use it. Democracy takes practice, and doing the dirty work of removing people is also part of that.
- Don't be dramatic/over hype infiltration – It happens ALL the time, all over the place. Treat it like you would a medical malady with clear reasoned, measured steps. If they disrupt us, they win. They are flies on the windscreen. Have an accountable security team that investigates and keeps watch of unusual stuff.
- Remove people – I cannot emphasize this enough. These are OUR events we have the duty to remove those who are disruptive – even those from our same ideological spaces i.e. wingnuts. This is healthy for the group. That said, remember a couple of things: Do NOT be hasty in the decision OR do not lag in process too long either.
- Also, when removing people do not call them out as cops – because they may not be. They could just as well be corporate lackeys, private security or misinformed people. To be clear, when we are at this stage it is NOT a debate with them: they ARE leaving our site. We never accuse them of being 'cops' or whatever, we tell them that we are “removing them because their interests and intentions are not the same as ours, they are disruptive to the event and it is time to leave”. Then we assign people from the security team to go with them to gather their stuff and watch them until they are gone.

Lastly

Just and sustainable worlds are going to be built by tight relationships built on trust, not bigger groups. Challenging ideas and debating them is one thing; destructive conversation is a waste of everyone's energy and time. We only have a little time on this planet – let's make the best of it.

These are just some thoughts. Take what you want and leave the rest.

scott crow 06.12