

OCCUPY LSXual Harrassment



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This past year has undoubtedly seen a rebirth of activism. **The student tuition fees protests, Arab Spring, and recent global Occupy movements** are all examples of a widespread dissatisfaction with a global economic system that promotes the interests of the few and marginalises the needs of the many, as well as a belief in the importance of direct action as a political tool. I have been a strong supporter of the protests and share their demands for a reformed banking system, the introduction of **the Robin Hood Tax**, and for the end to the cuts which I believe to be **ideological rather than inevitable**. However, I was disgusted and appalled to learn that recently in several Occupy movements around the world there have been several serious incidents of sexual harassment and **the rape of female activists**. I had imagined that in an environment that exists to demand equality and freedom for 'the 99%', there would be no room for misogyny and violence. I had assumed that the plight of gender equality would inherently be at the heart of any activist movement. This is sadly not the case.

What disturbed me even further were the reactions of the occupiers themselves. So far there have been reports of rape in the camps of **Occupy movements of New York, Philadelphia, Dallas, Cleveland, Glasgow, and Baltimore**. Accompanied with these incidences have been reactions of denial, victim blaming, and stereotyping. It all seems like a very familiar aspect of rape discourse and, indeed, it may be naive for me to have hoped for a different reaction within the occupations to that of the rest of the world. In Occupy Cleveland a 19-year old student of a school for children with autism has alleged that she was raped by a man who shared her allocated tent at the protest. The response of the group was to say that their allocation of her tent was just a 'suggestion', that each protestor had made an individual choice to participate in the movement, and therefore any incidences of violence were **the responsibility of the individual alone**. In other words, it was her own fault for choosing to share a tent with a man she did not know.

It is important not to conflate socialism with anti-sexism. There has been a lot of criticism over the presence of Julian Assange at Occupy LSX **due to the charges of rape that have been made against him**. By trying to present itself as an inclusive movement, the Occupy movement risks ignoring other issues including women's rights and it is important not to let an ethos of freedom of speech and thought be confused with permission for sexist behaviour. Elsewhere in the world there are reports of Occupy groups asking women not to report incidents of sexual harassments to the police in order to **avoid the appearance of collusion**. Moreover, women who have tried to report illegal violence to the police have had to suffer threatening and violent behaviour **as a consequence of this reporting**. In his speech Assange himself said **"this movement is not about the destruction of the law, but the construction of the law"**. Sites of protest should not live completely outside of the law and be able to act in total opposition to the police as the fundamental point of the Occupy movements is to demonstrate that a new, fairer way of living is possible for 'the 99%' who live ordinary and lawful lives.

Many Occupy camps have now introduced women-only 'free' spaces for women to sleep and live in apparent safety. On face-value this seems like a sensible way to ensure the safety of female protestors, although it strikes me as strange that these are 'women-only' spaces rather than 'rape-free' spaces. In the Occupy Wall Street camp in Zuccotti Park the women-only sleeping tent is a **"large, metal framed"** tent that is **"guarded by an all-female patrol"**. So are these 'protection'

measures necessary to ensure the safety of potential victims, or are they a reactionary step that reinforces gendered notions of rape and responsibility? It is extremely problematic to me that a freedom movement has been hijacked by a discourse of female vulnerability and helplessness that replicates the unequal social structures that they are trying to oppose. That women have been portrayed as needing to be protected from men and as having separate aims for the movement to that of men in terms of furthering a feminist agenda that is seen as only relevant to females perpetuates an out-dated notion of sexual difference that completely ignores interests outside the male-female binary and in particular those of homosexual and trans communities.

The question that arises out of this issue is therefore the decision whether it would be beneficial for the gender equality campaign to disaffiliate with the main Occupy movement. The Occupy Patriarchy movement has previously existed within the anti-capitalist framework of the Occupy LSX group, but with the creation of women-only spaces also comes the assumption that all women support a feminist campaign, in which no men can participate. Yet from a Marxist-Feminist standpoint the two campaigns are inherently linked, as “there is no theory which accounts for the oppression of women – in its endless variety and monotonous similarity, cross-culturally and throughout history – with anything like the explanatory power of the Marxist theory of class oppression” (Gayle Rubin 1975: 160). In this school of thought women not only act as a cheaper reserve labour force for capitalism, but they embody the unequal nature of capitalism.

Gender equality should assuredly be a main aim of any anti-capitalist movement, but it is important to emphasise it as a campaign that does not exclude men. Women are going to be adversely affected by the cuts – **more so than men** – but this is not necessarily an intentionally gendered outcome. **Women are more likely** to be care providers than men, more likely to work part-time, are the primary recipients of housing benefits, and make up 65% of the public sector where jobs are most threatened. While this is perhaps demonstrative of a patriarchal framing of female roles in society, it doesn't mean that the small minority of male care-givers and part-time workers will not be affected too.

As well as highlighting the devastating reach of sexual violence into all political and social worlds, the incidents of sexual harassment in the Occupy movements has led me to reconsider the way that we stereotype – for better and for worse – people from different ideological groups. I had previously believed any political activist above sexism, racism or any other anti-freedom mentality. The rightwing media often depicts the political activist as lawless, lazy and violent. In an attempt to challenge the latter construction, Steven Greenstreet created a video entitled '**Hot Chicks of Occupy Wall Street**'. It has been heavily criticised as a **sexist hijacking of a movement**, but Greenstreet defends his choice of 'Hot Chicks' as relating to the level of empowerment and inspiration he felt from the women in his video, as opposed to a patriarchal and consumerist understanding of beauty.

Overall there have been many – often contradictory – messages that have emerged from the Occupy movement, but the reality is that they can all be encompassed in the general demand for a better society. In an ideal world, women should have the right to protest without fear of being victimised nor idealised. In an ideal world gender would not influence our ability to engage with democracy. But this is not an ideal world, far from it. And that is exactly what the occupiers – of all genders – are there to protest.



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