

Theoretical polyamory: Some thoughts on loving, thinking, and queering anarchism

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Sexualities

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Abstract

This article argues that queering anarchism means complexifying it. Concretely, we propose that we can apply some of the ways that we (might) love to the ways that we think about political theory. Thus, we build the metaphor of ‘theoretical polyamory’ to suggest that having multiple partners (or political theories) is a way of constructing more holistic and nuanced movements than might be implied by solely relying on anarchism for the answers to the complex questions surrounding the political project of undoing all forms of structured and institutionalized domination, coercion, and control.

Keywords

anarchism, non-monogamy, polyamory, queer

sexuality outside the field of monogamy well may open us to a different sense of community, intensifying the question of where one finds enduring ties.

Judith Butler

If, after all we’ve learned from queer theory about ‘identity’, we refuse to dispense with the idea of ‘political identity’ altogether, the least we can do is queer it, recognize its fluidity and, more importantly, recognize that it can be non-monogamous.

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Shortly after joining a social anarchist group, the two of us were asked to weigh in on a statement of principles in which the section on 'Gay Liberation' was being changed to 'Queer Liberation'. We were glad we were asked for our input and both put a lot of thought into our contributions to the discussion. We strategized, reflected, carefully crafted our responses and did everything in our power to make the suggestions palatable and understandable.

Queer theory, after all, has a lot to offer anarchism. It shows some of the ways that we become 'constituted as socially viable beings' (Butler, 2004: 2). It also addresses the many ways that we are denied that social viability through the discursive construction of identities that often function more as cages than descriptors. If anarchism is consistently to critique and dismantle all institutionalized hierarchies, then it must not only offer alternatives to capitalism and the state, it must also offer 'a radical reorganization of sexuality' – one that does not chain people down with supposedly stable identities as a result of their sexual and/or gender practices, then create hierarchies of value out of those identities (Heckert, 2004: 101). Further, we saw the opportunity as a way to expand our group's understanding of heteronormativity, to problematize ideologies of normalcy more generally, and to allow for an analysis that encompassed more than that which would fall under an 'LGBT' identity model.

But something went wrong in the dialogue. Shortly after mentioning the 'F-word' (that is, Foucault), one particular member in the group shut down. He sent out his objections to the email list complaining that postmodernism is so much intellectual junk. He explained that since to postmodernists the theory of class struggle is an oppressive grand narrative, then postmodernism is incompatible with social anarchism.

This certainly wasn't a new or unexpected reaction. Many folks from the libertarian socialist/anarchist tradition have criticized the 'posts' variously as 'tragedies', 'catastrophes', and the like (for two good examples, see Albert n.d.; Zerzan, 1991). That 'is at least part of the reason we spent so much time crafting our own contributions to the subject – better not to alienate one's audience from the outset! Again, however, unfortunately we made the strategic mistake of mentioning the 'F-word' and the resulting discussion was less than constructive (at one point we were accused of using the email list as a 'debating society for grad students' – effectively delegitimizing things we have experienced quite materially within our own bodies).

More importantly, it brought to mind a number of questions for our own political identifications. How do we simultaneously exist as anarchists and as people who are influenced by post-structuralism – or, for that matter, feminism, critical race theory, radical environmentalism, queer theory, various Marxisms, animal liberation, and so on? Why do our social anarchist comrades feel the need to police our political identity and which theoretical traditions we borrow from? More importantly, why do so many of our comrades feel comfortable dismissing entire theoretical perspectives, making sweeping denunciations and condemnations of them, rather than taking what is valuable from a variety of systems of thought and not limiting ourselves to one?

This essay attempts to respond to some of those que(e)ries. It is about creating an open-ended revolutionary project without easy answers and with a willingness – an eagerness – to ask uncomfortable questions. It is about having humility and being more willing to engage than to denounce and about building a recognition among us that we don't have to be trapped in a political partnership that does not suit us or confined by an identity that we did not choose. It is about anarchism, sexuality, and finding value in relating the ways that we love to the ways that we (might) think.

Queering anarchism

In queer theory, the very idea of the *queer* is a shifting terrain that cannot be pinned down to some single definition. Rather, as Halperin (1995: 62) writes,

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.

Thus, the theoretical space created by 'queer' allows us to go beyond LGBT identity models to examine the ways that '(h)ierarchies exist within heterosexuality as well' (Heckert, 2004: 111).

This leaves queer theory (and identification) open to a range of sexual and/or gender practices not covered under the LGBT umbrella. Further, it begs the question why some practices have historically come to constitute an 'identity' while others have not. As Sedgwick (1990: 8) writes:

It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones of sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, and so on) precisely one, the gender of the object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of 'sexual orientation'.

Thus, part of the project of queering anarchism is to widen anarchism's analysis of sexuality to include non-normative sexual practices that include, but are not limited to, those implied by markers such as 'LGBT'. After all, an analysis using an LGBT identity model often encourages thinking about heterosexuality as 'devoid of politics, embroiled in no relations of dominance and subordination, and to affect no form of coercion' (Brickell, 2000: 171).

Marriage rights, a major goal of LGBT (or, perhaps more correctly, gay and lesbian) identity-based groups, is an excellent starting point for showing the strengths of queer political practice. As Warner (1999: *passim*) eloquently explains,

marriage is based on exclusion. Indeed, the legal benefits of state-based marriage 'equality' are refused to *any* grouping, regardless of the grouping's sex and/or gender configuration, if the relationship is not dyadic/monogamous. This effectively creates an institutionalized hierarchy that could exist *within* heterosexuality that is made invisible using identity models that are organized primarily around gender. Queer politics, a politics based on difference, allows us space to analyze differences that could exist within heterosexual practices and create a political practice based on inclusion and critical of the state-enforced monogamy inherent in marriage.

Thus, non-monogamy as a site for theoretical exploration of anarchism and sexuality is a strategic choice for us. First, it is strategic because we want to participate in this larger process of queering anarchism and believe that a good starting point is including non-normative sexual practices that are *not* primarily organized around gender in our explorations. Secondly, non-monogamy *already* has a long history within anarchist theory and practice. Noted anarchists from Emma Goldman to Alexander Berkman to Voltarine de Cleyre practiced non-monogamy openly and many turn-of-the-century anarchist women 'condemned the institution of monogamy' outright (Leeder, 1996: 144).

Finally, non-monogamy also serves as a strategic metaphor for some of the conversations about politics and thinking that took place as a result of the incident we opened this piece with (among others). Thinking about political theory in terms of loving and romantic attachments is also nothing new to anarchism (see, for example, Ehrlich, 1981). Some of the questions that plagued our relationships with people (whether same-sex or not) began having increased significance for the way we thought about political theory (i.e. How could I possibly get everything I want from a single partner? Do I want a 'primary'? and so on). This particular formulation, then, is an attempt to apply some of those questions to how we think about politics, as we agree that '(s)exuality is not separate from these other issues which are more commonly considered political' (Heckert, 2004: 101).

Unpacking the divide between loving and thinking

Another aspect of the larger project of queering anarchism would be applying some of the insights of post-structuralist political theory to anarchism, as it undergirds much of the queer political project.¹ Again, this is nothing new for anarchism (see e.g. Day, 2005; Kuhn, 2009; May, 1989, 1994, 2009; Newman, 2001, 2007). However, this seems particularly salient for this theoretical project for a couple of reasons.

First and foremost, anarchism and post-structuralist political thought share the desire to break down borders (Heckert, 2010). While anarchism is typically seen to be concerned with physical borders (i.e. smashing the state), increasingly, and especially since the late 1960s and with the influence of the Situationists, many anarchists have applied this analysis of the state-form to the ways that we create

and maintain borders within our heads (for some examples in queer anarchist youth culture, see Ritchie, 2008). One of these borders that we wish to help smash by playing with theory in this article is the border in place between the way we love (or fuck, as it were) and the ways that we think about politics. Indeed, the way that we love has had (and continues to have) implications for how we think about politics, as should be clear by the end of this piece.

Secondly, post-structuralist political thought allows us to show how knowledge and power function alongside one another. Queer theory has borrowed heavily from Foucault in this endeavor, especially his work on sexuality, to show how discourses of knowledge are created, produce identities and docile bodies and, in some cases, reinscribe the very identities that oppress us. Further, post-structuralism criticizes knowledge claims that suggest a reaching of 'The Truth'. This has manifested itself as criticisms of the grand narratives through which past theorists have tried to explain an incredibly complex human history in some unified fashion as well as criticisms of claims at having 'The Solution' to the complex relations of ruling we have come to live in.

For us, this has meant that queering anarchism means complexifying it. Many of the criticisms we have gotten from (a rather loud minority of) comrades regarding queering our political project are focused around class struggle being THE instrument to bring about radical social change. Under this economic (and, in our opinion, more Marxist than anarchist) view, the struggle between workers and bosses and the replacement of capitalism with socialism will somehow magically bring about an end to environmental destruction and patriarchy. It will likewise end confining notions of gender or 'sexual identity' and hierarchies made out of those notions. As well, libertarian socialism will somehow ensure that 'disabled' people will be treated as if they are every bit a worthwhile human being as the 'abled-bodied' and it will end racism and white supremacy.²

These criticisms of economic reductionism are not meant to suggest that we see no need for class struggle (we do) or that we are not committed to socialism (we are). Rather, we are opposed to the suggestion that there is a single answer to a complex problem – that of institutionalized hierarchy and domination and our struggle to dissolve those kinds of social relations. This also means that, as anarchists committed to this struggle, our project requires a certain degree of humility. That is, perhaps other perspectives answer some questions better than anarchists can (or have). This has certainly been the case in our studies of feminism, critical race theory, Marxism, radical environmentalism, animal liberationism, queer theory, and so forth. This brings us, then, to theoretical polyamory and applying the lessons we learn from how we love to how we think about politics.

Theoretical polyamory: What it is and what are its benefits

Our intention here is to play with theory a bit through metaphor. We believe that play can be deadly serious, fun, and help move us forward – particularly playing

with the ways that we think and feel. Nevertheless, we also want to add an initial caveat before sketching out this theoretical space. One of the things we have learned through reading queer theory (and living queer lives!) is to be suspicious of labels. Still, we require a certain amount of signification in order to communicate our ideas. Thus, any labeling that we do within this piece should be recognized as fluid and not static. By the time the reader actually sits down to read this essay, we may well have developed new interests and political commitments. Like non-monogamous sexual practices, a non-monogamous theoretical outlook should recognize that relationships do not always endure.

First and foremost, the question that might come to mind is this: Why 'theoretical polyamory' and not 'non-monogamy'? Part of this is because the usage of 'polyamory' has come to mean a greater emotional connection among multiple partners. Taormino for example, defines 'polyamory as the desire for or the practice of maintaining multiple *significant, intimate* relationships simultaneously' (2008: 71, emphasis ours) while she also warns, however, that '(s)etting up false dichotomies such as sexual versus emotional, casual versus committed, or playful versus serious just gets us into a whole heap of trouble'. That said, we are fiercely committed to our politics and don't see them as mere dalliances. We want our political commitments to be significant and intimate.

Secondly, 'non-monogamous' practices have come to describe a range of sexual practices that sometimes includes unprincipled behavior. For example, a cheating partner in a relationship where there is prior agreement about not taking on lovers outside of the partnership could be said to be non-monogamous. We want principled, emotional, honest, and intense relationships with our political ideas. And we want to include an honesty about the ideas that we develop relationships with, never feeling like we have to hide that we might have political commitments and influences not shared by our comrades.

Theoretical polyamory, then, is the belief that we can have multiple partners when it comes to political theory.³ One theory could not possibly adequately describe the complexity of our relations of ruling. One theory could never hope to prescribe the 'proper' mode of resistance. Moreover, it is problematic to suggest that such a 'proper mode' could even exist given the ways that hierarchies emerge sometimes in very random ways. Those things said, there are benefits to having polyamorous relationships that illustrate quite well what this might mean for theory.

In polyamorous relationships, for example, one might choose to have a primary partner. Perhaps someone wants to share greater intimacy with a particular person. Some folks might feel more comfortable having relationships with others if they have the safety of a primary. Likewise, sometimes our personal attachments to a particular partner are so strong that it just makes sense to nestle in with that person and make them the center of our romantic attachments.

Our experience has certainly been similar with theory and political commitments. As we construct our own version of theoretical polyamory, we recognize social anarchism as our primary partner. Anarchism is the political theory that

radicalized us and we have a special bond and attachment with it because of that. Further, we believe in formal organizations, participation in mass movements, and struggles to alter the structures of society (though we keep in mind Foucault's (1980: 60) admonition that 'nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed'). All of these are hallmarks of social anarchist approaches to politics.

However, one of the benefits of polyamorous arrangements is having multiple partners to meet the needs that one's primary may not meet. In relationships, this has meant that we may value our time with a given partner because we are outrageously sexually attracted to them. Perhaps yet another partner is willing to sit and talk to us for hours about our favorite role-playing game or sport. Still another might share our love of obscure analog free jazz recordings from the 1920s. And so on.

Again, one can see the immediate connections between the ways that this benefits our relationships with how we think about politics. Perhaps it would not have been such a shock for us to mention that we are influenced by Foucault to our comrades if they were used to looking outside of a single theoretical perspective for questions and answers to the problems, as anarchists – as people concerned with social justice, that we all face. Further, as mentioned earlier, love affairs with other perspectives have been common within anarchism. It's time we start being more open, principled, and honest about these outside relationships!

Finally, one of the benefits of having polyamorous relationships for us is the chance to experiment in a variety of ways with desire. Perhaps one, for example, has some level of opposite sex/same sex/gender/genderqueer attraction but not at the level of complete sexual intimacy. Perhaps one is interested in making out with someone of the opposite sex, but not necessarily having penetrative sex. As Kinsey noted years ago, there is not some exact hetero/bi/homo categorical distinction. Rather, there are a range of desires within our sexual practices. As well, as the trans and intersex movements have shown and 'pomosexuality' (see especially, e.g. Queen and Schimel, 1997) demonstrates, there are possibilities for experimenting with these desires in nearly infinite ways.

Such is our attraction to Marxism, to name one example. For starters, Marx, although often economistic and reductionist, outlined quite well the position we have experienced for the vast majority of our adult lives as exploited laborers in a capitalist economy and the need for a struggle between classes to resolve this. Likewise, Marxists, especially neo-Marxists, have done some amazing work with ideology and culture that anarchists (and queers!) could learn a lot from. From Althusser's (see e.g. 2001) conceptualization of state ideological apparatuses to Gramsci's (1971) articulation of cultural hegemony to Habermas's (1987) idea of the colonization of the life-world, Marxists have given us tools to analyze the ways that assumptions about our social worlds become naturalized and a part of everyday reality. Nevertheless, the fetishization and uncritical acceptance of the state form as a guiding principle in social (re)organization within Marxism is certainly a

turn-off for us. Really, we can only see ourselves going *so far* with Marxism and typically prefer the company of our primary partner.

Concluding thoughts

This piece is an argument against dogmatism using the metaphor of polyamorous relationships to highlight how this might be applied to political thought. As anarchists, it is part of our ongoing contribution to queering anarchism and widening the field of struggle to give critical analysis to sexuality. It is also an argument for drawing connections between the ways that we love and the ways that we think and breaking down these divides between thought/action/loving, and so on that we have come to accept in a world organized on the principles of hierarchy, coercion, and control. Part of that control is made visible when we demonstrate how these categorical distinctions come to be naturalized and begin questioning the necessity of drawing distinctions between different methods of engagement with life and ideas.

Further, we hope to raise some questions in the process about our goals. For many of our social anarchist comrades 'the' goal is libertarian socialism to be achieved through 'the' instrument called 'class struggle'. But how will stateless socialism alone bring about an end to hierarchical social forms that do not necessarily emerge from structures such as the state and capitalism? How do we create a political practice that also opposes domination as it is enacted through the construction (and maintenance) of discourses, knowledges, and identities? How might we live our lives in ways that create new cultural forms and subjectivities that we build on our own terms (inasmuch as that is possible) rather than accepting the identities, cultures, and subjectivities that we have inherited from a sick and hierarchical world in which humanity is perpetually at war with itself, the environment, and the entire non-human world?

To answer some of these questions, we suggest that we step outside of anarchism and borrow liberally (radically?) from many perspectives. We suggest that we develop multiple relationships with a variety of theories so we can act creatively depending on the context of the struggle we are involved in. As feminists, anti-racists, radical environmentalists, libertarian socialists, and a host of other 'political identities' we are well aware of how inadequate any one perspective is to describe ourselves, our relationship with political ideas, and a complex and radical political project that could not possibly be contained within a single theory or identity. Perhaps in the end, this means a collapse of 'anarchism' itself and an embrace of a political anti-identity in much the same way 'queer' was meant as an answer (or, perhaps, a bigger question?) to questions about gender and sexual identity. We cannot foretell our own futures, though we are open, as always, to developing multiple relationships and recognize that they do not always endure. Let's just hope that our multiple partners can manage to get along!

Notes

1. Much has been made of whether it is correctly termed 'post-structuralist' or 'postmodernist' and in what contexts. We prefer to see postmodernity as a condition as outlined by Lyotard (1979) and the concomitant and diverse theoretical insights with this condition as 'post-structuralist' theory.
2. Lest we be accused of caricature, we want to mention that despite these experiences with a minority of comrades, 'social anarchism' is certainly made up of many ideas itself. This kind of reductionism is not inherent in social anarchist theory and politics, but does tend to come out of its more sectarian elements. For a particularly good example of this 'broad' social anarchism, see Franks, 2006. For a good look at historical struggles against reductionism within social anarchism, see Ackelsberg, 2005.
3. Because of both personal experiences and thinking, we want to make it clear that the authors do NOT ascribe to the view that monogamous sexual relationships cannot be queer, are bad, and so on. In fact, we think it necessary for anyone who identifies with queer positionality to take steps to ensure that new categories and identities that we develop in response to what currently exists do not become new normative standards within our own communities. Thus, some of what we believe about theory and politics does not necessarily comfortably sit within the metaphor that we have created about how we do relationships.

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