

An Anarchist View of the Marriage Debate

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For anarchists, marriage is defined not by the sexuality or gender of spouses, but by the presence of the Church and State. However, marriage, the legal and religious sanctioning of interpersonal relationships, rarely receives much attention in anarchist feminist circles. Major collections of anarchist writings cover many areas of social life but usually have no essays dealing with marriage. Those chapters in which important institutions and social relations are dealt with do not even include marriage as part of the discussion.

As an institution or practice which, at least in Western liberal democracies, is largely related to the state, marriage is often (though not uniformly) rejected by anarchists as yet another undesirable intrusion by authorities into people's lives.

At the same time, marriage, despite its many problems, remains an institution which has some appeal for large numbers of people. Likewise, governments, recognizing the moral, social and cultural appeal of marriage, regularly use marriage as a means to wield political agendas.

One need only think of the ongoing moralization, indeed demonization, campaigns directed against single mothers, especially those relying on social assistance in one form or another, to recognize the political significance of marriage discussions. Such moral regulatory uses of marriage have been particularly popular among neo-conservative governments in the US, Canada and the UK. For anarchists to ignore marriage in such contexts would seem to be a mistake.

Even more, the question of marriage has recently become an area of some debate among queer anarchists and anarchist feminists in various national contexts.

In the US, battles have been pitched at high levels of rhetoric with state referenda asserting marriage as hetero-exclusive practice even as some jurisdictions recognize same sex marriages. In Canada, the federal government has opened the possibility for legal sanctioning of gay and lesbian marriages by agreeing not to interfere with a Supreme Court decision in favor of recognizing these relationships. The outcome of this decision is far from complete since the feds have decided to turn responsibility for official legal authorization over gay and lesbian marriages to the provincial governments, while Conservative back benchers rumble about restoring "traditional" arrangements.

As a result, some anarchists are debating how they should participate in movements to secure the full recognition of same sex marriages. This is especially important for anarchists who have long been involved in queer movements and politics, locally, at provincial and state levels and federally, in Canada and the US. Indeed perspectives on this question can serve to position us, and our involvement, within these broader movements.

Part of an anarchist worldview, dating back at least to the famous debates in the 19th century between Marx and Bakunin within the First International, insists that the future anti-authoritarian and egalitarian society must be prefigured in the relationships and institutions that give rise to it. Thus, anarchists have always tried to build alternative institutions such as free schools, workers' cooperatives, communal gardens and theatre.

Anarchists have not limited their efforts to creating such alternative institutions but have also experimented with new forms of relationships. Anarchists, no fans of property, have been especially interested in removing those aspects of interpersonal relationships which take on a possessive character.

In this, there has been much overlap between anarchist and queer sexuality. Open relationships, multiple partnerships (or polyamory), and polysexuality have been among expressions of queer and anarchist sexual practices.

Queer anarchists, thus, often opposed state recognized marriage out of concern that it represents, and indeed, encourages a limiting of loving relationships, the diversity of which is so important in lesbian and gay communities, and the further legitimation of monogamy, the nuclear family and the possessive in interpersonal relationships.

Dennis Fox writing in 2001 in *Social Anarchism* notes, "Wedded to spontaneity, openness, and the complete transformation of intimate relationships within new forms of community, card-carrying anarchists reject not only marriage's legal framework but its traditional link to monogamy and nuclear family primacy."

While marriage may offer something in the economic realm, and this is certainly not to be disregarded given the lower socioeconomic positions endured, especially by many lesbian couples, it offers little for anarchists as a starting point for building non-hierarchical relations more broadly.

For most anarchists, then, "the issue of homosexual marriage is akin to the issue of conscripting women. No, homosexuals should not 'be allowed' to marry, but then neither should heterosexuals, and no one should be drafted. Sorry, but 'living together contracts' are also impolitic," according to Ruthann Robson in *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*.

The fact that states grant benefits to married couples and not to others makes marriage a fundamentally inegalitarian and hierarchical institution. The solution is not to allow a few more people into the institution but to do away with it all together. When it comes to marriage, anarchists might well be abolitionists.

Anarchists feel there is no point in lobbying for equal opportunities in marriage if social structures, including legal systems, workplaces, welfare systems and families, remain largely unchanged. Anarchists are oriented towards more active political struggles and towards fundamental social transformations.

Even the economic argument around access to spousal benefits, tax breaks, and pensions is not particularly compelling for most anarchists. Attempting to win social benefits through access to the same benefits given to heterosexual couples is a rather privatized approach to social programs.

Rather than try to open up access to privileges for those who choose to register their relationship with the state, while leaving the marker of such privilege intact, queer anarchists argue for a broader mobilization to win universal social benefits which would address people's economic needs without reference to relationship status.

End all of the benefits that go only to married couples and make provisions available to all who need them. End the pension, disability or inheritance laws that favor the married and exclude the unmarried. No benefits must accrue simply from a state sanctioning of one personal relation over another.

Recognition of same sex marriages will still only cover each discreet couple, thereby reinforcing the pairing up of the nuclear model. A great variety of peoples' relationships will remain without legitimacy. This normative privileging violates the rights of those who are unwilling or unable to subscribe to it and it serves to enhance the moral regulatory creation and enforcement of laws.

Is it possible, given this perspective, for anarchists to move beyond essentialist or polarized depictions of lesbian and gay marriage to recognize the specific limitations and opportunities provided by marriages in a context of unequal distribution of rights and opportunities?

While not a situation involving same sex marriage, the relationship between the anarchist William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, an early women's rights advocate, is illustrative of a situational anarchist approach to marriage which responds to personal circumstance rather than an essentialist view of marriage. Wollstonecraft had suffered miserably at the hands of late eighteenth century English social prejudice over the birth of her daughter out of wedlock.

So tormented had she been that she twice tried to kill herself. When she became pregnant again with Godwin's child, fearful of further ostracism, she asked Godwin to marry her. Although he had publicly declared marriage as the "most odious of all monopolies," he consented.

This should not be considered a reversal. According to Peter Marshall in *Demanding the Impossible*, "Godwin, however, as a good anarchist believed that there are no moral rules which should not give way to the urgency of particular circumstances. In this case he submitted himself to an institution which he still wished to see abolished out of regard for the happiness of an individual." There is nothing to suggest that the marriage ceremony did anything to bind Wollstonecraft or Godwin any more than they were before.

Indeed, anarchists are able to recognize that there is in fact a tension between the critique of marriage and people's material, social or psychological needs. At the same time this situational view of marriage probably remains a minority position among anarchists, including among queer anarchists. Most anarchists agree with Emma Goldman's view that moral opinion is no reason to succumb to marriage.

Against marriage, Goldman counterposed relationships which rested not upon state or church authority but upon love alone. "Love is that most powerful factor of human relationship which from time immemorial has defied all man-made laws and broken through the iron bars of conventions in Church and morality, she wrote.

From these loving relationships can be glimpsed the future anarchist world. Where people's affections change they are not bound by any law or obligation but are free to build new loving relationships. Anarchists seek and work towards the transformation of human relations.

With the abolition of patriarchal families and marriage laws and the rights of inheritance which they protect, greater opportunities may exist for all, equally, to share free unions with each other.

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