

Polyamory and Power

A Confession and Critique

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2013

It's not news that much of modernity is all messed up about sex. Contemporary culture fluctuates between moralistic repression and hypersexual expression. Prudes use religion to promote abstinence for unmarried heterosexuals and celibacy for LGBT folks, and the more extreme libertines turn everything erotic and beautiful into a casual commodity.

For much of the 1990s and leaking a little into the 00s, I wrote extensively for *Fifth Estate* on topics of sexual freedom from the perspective of a particular kind of libertine, a polyamorist and polysexual. These were not mere philosophical treatises but reflections from participation on the freaky fringes of sexually experimenting communities.

I bought full cloth the theory that humans are naturally evolved for multiple partners and free flowing libidinal expression. Anything that denied this ideal served the forces of repression.

I sought out bisexuals, pansexuals, heteroflexibles, swingers, polyamorists, sex workers, and more. I soon learned that what normative society calls sexual deviance includes variety and diversity which fluctuates freely despite the detractors of such lifestyle choices.

While I respected monogamy or celibacy as a choice that someone else might make, I couldn't fathom why they would. Where's the fun in that?

The "poly" community has many advocates, perhaps best summed-up by the title of the book, *The Ethical Slut*. But all my personal versions of sluttiness did not maintain their own ethical standards, and my sexual shenanigans caught up with me.

The speedy summary is this: Messed-up two successive long-term partnerships. Broke hearts, including my own. Thankfully, I did not contract an STD. Realized that I was an alcoholic, drug addict, and probably a sex / porn / intimacy addict. Quit porn, booze, drugs, and random fooling around, all cold turkey. Got divorced and remarried and have been practicing fidelity for the first time and am loving it.

For whatever it's worth, I offer the readers of this publication the following confession and critique concerning my participation in erotic subcultures. Sexual realities are all-too-often about power. And, lack of power. The sensate and spiritual power of erotic intimacy is all too easily misused and abused.

To some extent, the so-called sex-positive communities, although ostensibly feminist and filled with savvy critiques of the power of repression, underestimate the, at times, overwhelming and always mysterious power of erotic desire. Such experimental communities of freedom, too, may provide a safe cover where predators and addicts might hang-out undetected or undiagnosed for decades.

I base this claim on my own addiction, along with my ethical errors concerning honesty, transparency, and erotic coercion. That is, a so-called ethical slut is honest; I was not always honest. An ethical slut only engages in mutually consensual activities; on occasion, I learned after-the-fact that my partners did not always perceive our interactions as entirely consensual.

While psychologists and others have successfully argued that we're not really wired for monogamy, the moralists and others are more-correct-than-I-would-care-to-admit that we're not really humble, selfless, or mature enough to handle anything but monogamy.

Some critics love to speak passionately about the anti-female sexual repression they observe in conservative religious communities where this is easily noted by seeing women covering their entire bodies from head-to-toe. While such countercultures, which may not appeal to but a few, oppose the provocative hyper-sexuality that our culture exhibits, it's clear these traditions acknowledge the true power of sexual desire and the deep attractiveness of the human body to other human bodies.

The point I am trying to make here is that the hyper-sexuality of our media culture sometimes ends up incredibly dissatisfying and un-erotic while the modesty we perceive as repressive in conservative culture contains an element of deep reverence for the erotic. I am not trying to endorse or explain the patriarchal power-structures that often go hand-in-hand with modesty in such subcultures.

The deep wounds I experienced and caused as a sexually cavalier cad could be justified psychologically or deconstructed ethically from any number of angles. But they could reveal a critique of power, too. Writing as a feminist male, I fear that we as males in progressive or radical communities still have much more work to do in unpacking the inherent violence, power, and even hatred in unchecked male sexuality.

I've come to accept that as a male there are aspects of my biosocial reality that could be described as essentialist, and some of the essentials of modern masculinity are inherently problematic, power-driven, and sexually predatory. While I have never been macho per se, I previously allowed my libidinal proclivities a kind of power-over-me and others that not only fits my addictive personality but reflects problems of power and lack of power in our world.

The only human power worth preserving is the shared, social power of consensual and collective associations. Solidarity, community, or power-with others, as it's been described. Experiments in extended sexual relationships often reveal deep problems with power.

In fact, models for polyamorous open relationships usually involve hierarchies, revealed in vocabularies that distinguish domestic partners or primary partners from play partners. That is, the emotions affiliated with maintaining multiple intimate relationships are often hierarchical, even when we have interesting arguments to justify a more horizontal arrangement.

I've heard of group marriages that claim to get past those hierarchies, but these don't have a great legacy or track record. Patriarchal plural marriage, such as practiced by Mormons, doesn't offer much hope for freedom or equality either.

For those who choose romantic relations, long-term one-on-one collectives-of-two may be the enduring social norm for good reasons. Certainly, heterosexual marriage has a legacy of supporting male power in the social and economic sense, but the equal partnership model has made many gains in the last century.

In the '90s, it was fashionable for radicals to oppose the marriage equality movement from a left-libertarian and gender-queer perspective, but of late, it has become the civil rights issue of our time. Like the rapper Macklemore spits, "Damn right I support it."

If some radicals still see the gay marriage movement as a political sellout, I will let them take that up. As a person who recently came out as heterosexual (after identifying as bi- or poly- for years) and then got remarried, I could only hope the same privileges afforded to my spouse and me also be provided to our friends in the LGBT community. (Granted, the way that the marriage equality movement privileges the Lesbian or Gay citizens over the Bisexual and Transgender persons in that movement is a topic for a different day.)

Marriage could be seen not only as state or religious institution but as a community one. It's perhaps when one-on-one relationships become equal partnerships where actual romantic and erotic equality can be explored and true intimacy experienced; that doesn't necessarily have to be in the context of marriage, but marriage may redeem its historical roots in the contemporary period by its own transformation as a new kind of social norm.

It's a relatively conservative conclusion for a retired freak--and once card-carrying "lifestyle anarchist"--like me to reach, but one that I am quite happy to express and advocate today.

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/389-summer-2013/polyamory-power>
Fifth Estate #389, Summer, 2013

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