

A Response on Polyamory

“Monogamy doesn’t work; non-monogamy doesn’t either.”

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

2013

No comment can be made about the writings and ideas of Andy Smith without first recognizing the enormous contributions he made to the *Fifth Estate* for almost twenty years. During the first years of the century he and his comrades in Tennessee were the mainstay of this publication, and it is easy to say, that without his stewardship during that era, this magazine probably wouldn’t exist today. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment was our 40th anniversary edition which at 102 pages, tracing our intense history beginning in 1965, was the largest and most colorful issue we’ve published. Long thought to be out of print, we recently discovered a cache of them and now have it available again.

It’s good to get Andy’s reflections on the wild life he led and anyone who knew him during his years in Detroit publishing zines, rocking at punk clubs, living communally, working on the *Fifth Estate*, and taking part in the anarchist, and peace and social justice movements, also saw a lot of what he self-describes in his essay.

After a move to a polyamory commune in rural Tennessee, his intensity and apparently his demons grew. As he says, he went “cold turkey,” and is now happily engaged in a conventional marriage and is a respected academic.

All said, I’m not sure what his experiences tell us although there is some advocacy here. On their “London Calling” album, the Clash sing, “You grow up and you calm down; working for the clampdown,” suggesting that youthful exuberance gives way eventually to quieter later adulthood; “mature” is what it is often referred to as.

I would be more than hypocritical suggesting that being in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage is working for the clampdown since I’ve been in one for decades. However, can you generalize about the consequences of attempts to go beyond what is socially acceptable from one’s own experience?

Another long-term *Fifth Estate* staffer once glumly offered, “Monogamy doesn’t work; non-monogamy doesn’t either.” So, where does that leave humans, or for that matter most species, that are polysexual by definition of being?

With all that we overwrite on our urges for sexual expression about love, family, companionship, and what we desire for a life of happiness, we are ultimately only genetically driven to reproduce. Period. The rest takes different forms depending upon the culture of a society in which we happen to live.

No society lives without rules regarding reproduction, i.e., who, when, even how in some cultures. Anthropologists think women devised the original structures of family and kinship to assure the nurturing of children and reduce conflict within reproductive social units. Essentially so men wouldn’t mate with their daughters, and there was a regularity of expectation in terms of relationships that excluded sexual jealousy and competition.

With the advent of patriarchal society, whose sexual rules were designed to suppress the power of women and guarantee the sanctity of property were, by their very nature, psychologically destructive to men as well as women. However, they left males always eager to circumvent the imposed strictures while prohibiting women from doing so.

But, the rules were always hard to maintain. Conventional patriarchal, religiously and legally enforced, restrictions on broader desire were upended in ecstatic communities as far back as the Middle Ages, in American inten-

tional communities in the 19th and 20th century, and most recently during the so-called Sexual Revolution of the 1960s. And, always by radicals as well as the “cads” and “libertines” of which Andy speaks.

Radicals have always correctly seen the sexual repression demanded by the state and religion as a major element in the impediments to revolution. Radical psychologist Wilhelm Reich and others saw the thwarting of desire as a key component in the creation of authoritarian personalities, building toward a mass psychology of submission, the psychoanalytic bulwark of the state

However, as Andy relates, his wild phase of polyamory was a personal disaster for him even though he gave it a good try and for many years. It's hard to live outside of society's norms and activity that does is mostly identified with one's youth. It is during this period that the young can and do activity that normally doesn't work as well as one ages.

And, not just in sexual affairs. Living communally and financially on the edge, train hopping, fighting the cops at demos, excessive intoxication, and a host of other activities is generally associated with young people, but maintaining those into one's 50s or 60s usually doesn't work too well.

So, maybe Andy just grew into later adulthood, and maybe the heartbreaks and broken relationships were more a product of his admitted addictions than anything inherent in polyamory. Excess in intoxicants can make any relationship fail regardless of the number involved.

Polyamory and other non-conventional sexual bonding forms are extremely difficult to maintain and usually are not of long-term duration in the manner of conventional partnerships.

But, does that tell us not to try; to take Andy's experience and failures as a cautionary tale which will warn young [and some older] people to only accept what we know works—monogamous marriage? But, whoa! Wait a minute; those don't work very well either.

Andy is the second *Fifth Estate* staffer who has regretted his non-conventional living arrangements. Another, who was so regretful that he had published a book on group marriage, *Sexual Scarcity: The Marital Mistake and the Communal Alternative*, that he spent a year trying to buy up every copy in existence. Unfortunately for him, it's still available from Amazon, but at five times its original cost.

I doubt whether admonitions or warnings coming from religionists or anarchists are going to prevent people, particularly younger ones, from finding ways to express their sexuality other than in prescribed ways. In the 1950s, Frank Sinatra sang, “Love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage.” Not much of a recommendation.

In Nathaniel Hawthorn's, *The Scarlet Letter*, not even the righteous Rev. Dimmesdale and Hester could hold back the flood of desire that swept over them which was supposed to be rigidly constrained. If those repressed Puritans couldn't, do we really want to counsel others, particularly radicals, to not even make attempts at bursting sexual boundaries?

Let's affirm all forms of sexuality between consenting partners including the ones Andy and I have chosen, and for the ones who try the wildest, most anarchic, wish them the best in their attempts.

None of us want to work for the clampdown.

fifth Estate

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

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