

Sex & Anarchy

Because real social change includes a sexual revolution

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One of the things most appealing about the anarchist tradition is its scope and subtlety. Not only do anarchists have big ideas and great plans for transforming the large-scale cultural, economic, and political structures of our societies, we also address the everyday questions of how we live our lives.

Because of this, anarchism may be seen as a practical ethics: exploring how we relate to each other as free and lively equals. Capitalism, the state, patriarchy, white supremacy, etc., are all patterns of relationships. We find them so painful, so difficult, because they involve treating humans and other beings as objects to use (for labor, for pleasure, for identity, etc.).

If we get caught up in our own desires, it's easy to forget that others are equal participants in the world. If these patterns encourage us to forget, anarchy encourages us to remember. To re-member. We are all members of the world.

Anarchy is a practice. We don't get it right every time. We can forgive ourselves, learn from our mistakes and carry on learning.

When hierarchy is assumed, freedom is imagined to come from privilege. In anarchy, freedom is relational. We help each other learn to be free, without fantasies of superiority or inferiority.

Power relations can be fluid. Leadership emerges and inspires others by doing your best and encouraging others to develop their capacities, as well. In short, being a good example of anarchy in action.

For each person this will look different. For some it may be facilitating meetings with great sensitivity and focus. For others it might be developing anarchist theory or throwing really incredible parties or raising children. For someone else it may be behind the scenes work of quietly encouraging everyone they meet to listen to what is really right for them, introducing them to others for mutual aid and inspiration.

And, for another person, it might involve harm reduction through undermining sexual violence, militarism, and other life-damaging forces. These few examples are only the tip of the anarchist iceberg. Many types of skills are needed to nurture a functioning, vibrant anarchy.

Anarchist relationships might also, ideally, be based on listening with care to each other rather than speaking for each other. Listening is a skill which can become increasingly subtle. We might hear the words people say, and also listen to the emotions and desires behind the words.

We can listen to our bodies and sense what they need to be well. We can tune into the bodies of others, to work or play together. We can listen to the land, learning how an ecosystem functions and what it needs. We can even learn to listen to the quiet, wise voice of our own hearts.

Sexuality can be one of the most challenging areas in which to put our anarchist ethics into practice. Perhaps this is because sexuality both touches the heart of who we think we are (our identities) and is so often intertwined with intense feelings of desire and pleasure, shame and fear.

Besides, sexuality is often presented as somehow exceptional, different from other social relationships. But the same possibilities exist—for hierarchy or anarchy, manipulating or listening, fearing or loving—in any relationship whether we call it economic, political or intimate.

Seeing sex as exceptional is a consequence of the artificial separation of the personal from the political, the private from the public, the feminine from the masculine, the social from the natural. Double standards exist across all these divisions. We are taught that who we (want to) have sex with, and how (or even if) we (want to) have it, tells us what kind of person we are. Gay or straight or bi, kinky or vanilla, poly or monogamous? These categories can be great tools of control if we allow ourselves to be fixed by them. Or, if out of our own fear or confusion, we attempt to manipulate others by shaming them about how we think they should be.

Instead, we might help each other out of the subtle mental prison of trying to live up to who we think we are or should be. This even includes thinking our desires should break out of all the boxes! Desires can overflow without needing to be forced.

Making sex a special case leads to all sorts of problems. For one, it may not be taken seriously as political. Or, its politics can be recuperated for hierarchy. The politics of sexuality is also a politics of race and nation. For example, Western governments are currently using gay rights language to appear liberated and advanced in relation to those other nations on whom they wish to drop bombs or from which they want to slow immigration.

Sexuality is part of life and anarchism is about the liberation of all of life. No exceptions.

Ah, but what is liberation? Corporations sell an individualistic notion of sexual liberation to sell products. By selling a particular idea of what sexual liberation should look like, people become self-conscious and ashamed that their lives don't compare to artificial standards of airbrushed bodies and adventurous (but still normal) sex lives.

This is a great mechanism for a society of control and a growth-economy. Not sexy enough? Buy this. And, this. And, this. (Or deny yourself: food, compassion, love.) Ashamed of your desires? Keep quiet and be afraid.

Even more anarchic popular ideas of what sex can be like—playful, egalitarian, experimental, desired, agreed, loving (in the broadest sense), listening, etc.—are hard to experience when we believe that care is control in disguise, that freedom means privilege and equality is under the law. We can learn otherwise, with practice.

What if care means listening with groundless compassion, freedom means following our own hearts and equality means seeing through the performances of superiority and inferiority (perhaps even while enjoying them)?

As Kropotkin and Colin Ward and so many others have taught, anarchy exists everywhere. We could even say it's the reason good sex is possible.

Anarchism has a long tradition of seeing that sexuality, too, is political. Emma Goldman, Voltairine de Cleyre, and others in the US promoted women's reproductive and sexual freedom around the turn of the 19th into the 20th century, while anarchist groups in Spain in the 1930s demanded and distributed contraception. Sexuality, gender, marriage, the body and the family were topics of discussion among anarchists around the world.

Literary and philosophical figures like Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Edward Carpenter and Daniel Guérin made links between sexual freedom and libertarian socialism inspiring anarchist participation in homosexual liberation movements from the 1920s onwards. Anarchist women in Spain and elsewhere from the 1930s to today advocate an understanding of politics which includes the intimate, from sexual violence to sexual pleasure, from domestic violence to collective living, from medicalized bodies to autonomous selves and much more.

Women's liberation and gay liberation movements from the 1970s onward have continued to have significant overlaps with anarchist movements and anarchic ethics. For example, ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) has used direct action, affinity groups and consensus decision making to address the politics of HIV over the past 25 years.

Today, anarchists continue to participate in queer autonomous zones, LGBT prison solidarity, radical sex education, anarchafeminist health projects and so much more.

Our history is rich with playful, thoughtful, and erotic experimentation.

Born out of this history of radical sexual politics, queer theory doesn't so much question the inequality between genders or sexualities. Instead, it looks at the identities themselves.

It is impossible to maintain hierarchies and borders without divisions of us and them and subtle mechanisms for keeping people in their place. Rigid identities are perfect, especially if they are taken for granted as natural and unquestionable. It's not politics, it's just who we are. But, what if it's not who we are? What if we are so much more?

Both sex itself and other ways of anarchist(ic) relating can help us experience this fullness of life. By allowing desires to be there without letting them define us, control us, or contain us. By letting emotions pass through our bodies without holding them, or being held by them. By listening with an open heart and open mind to others and to ourselves.

By looking for what makes us take our identities seriously and letting them become role-play. By relating as equals and seeing hierarchy for the fantasy that it is.

Surprising connections occur.

Movements flow.

Life evolves.

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