

Relationship Anarchy

Dreaming In the Belly of the Whale

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It's easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine [SPACE LEFT INTENTIONALLY BLANK].

It's *hard* to imagine. A lot of what passes for imagination is a small shift in perspective. It's taking the bird's-eye view on a personal confessional. Or, the other way around, it's practicing empathy when statistics are quoted at you. A shift in perspective can bring fresh air into a debate, but *imagining* can change the terrain of the debate altogether.

Another thing we substitute for imagination is craving to return to an idyllic past that never happened. "The good ol' days". Literary critic Fredric Jameson calls this "postmodern nostalgia". We imagine that the future will finally do justice to what we had intended to achieve, in the past, but failed.

Signification stands in the way of imagination.

The words we use approximate what we mean. The word "apple" is never everything an apple is. The distance between the word and the apple is signification.

We can try to bring together experiences, knowledge, aesthetic and emotion under a single noun — let's say, "music". We can reappropriate words that have been used to harm. All of this is infused with imagination. And yet, the result, the signifier, digs its feet down into the ground and refuses to move.

What stops us from reaching further is a shortness of temper, a rush to understand "which side are you on". Signification leads straight into polarisation. It's useful to pick up on a dogwhistle — a signifier that doesn't refer to an object, but to something that can't be said. It's useful to hear certain words and understand whether or not you are safe.

There is no moralising wrap-up coming soon, in the next paragraphs. We struggle to truly imagine, and we struggle to trust, and it's within this context that I try to find a way to say things.

I should have started by saying: "Relationship Anarchy is a term that is usually associated with the way in which people chose to date and build relationships. But I want to write about the potential to achieve more than a small deviation. I want to describe more than just a useful label. I set the stage by explaining why it's difficult to imagine a radically different future and then invite you, dear reader, to imagine Relationship Anarchy as another future. An expansion of care into all directions."

There is a tradition of defining relationship dynamics as either monogamous or ethically non-monogamous. Polyamory and open relationships fall into the second category. There are already many good discussions out there, about whether the terms do justice to what they describe, and I will not repeat those.

The term "polyamory" appeared in a magazine as early as 1990, and was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006. Andie Nordgren posted the Relationship Anarchy manifesto online in 2012, while the term had been used as early as 2010.

Relationship Anarchy isn't the opposite of monogamy. Nor is it the opposite of polyamory. The term stands orthogonal to relationship dynamics, yet it does have something to say about human connection, bonds, and care. This is what drew me to it.

Was It All Political? All Along?

The dominant political ideology of today is one that claims to be post-ideological.

We have been disappointed by political leadership, so political involvement has become synonymous with the intention to deceive. We have been excluded from decision-making, so we expect that the people who represent us will invariably abandon our needs.

We no longer talk about which ideology should shape political actions. We claim, cynically, that no public policy is shaped by principles anymore, but rather by interests. With repetition, this lack of overt ideology becomes a thing of its own — an empty space where ideology used to exist. Nobody has higher goals, everyone is chasing the bottom line.

When we no longer believe in politics, we transfer the work of believing to those whom we elect. At the same time when we suspect politicians are all driven by self-interest, we nonetheless want them to behave as though they are guided by an ideology.

But if we no longer believe, we can no longer oppose. If there is no ideology in politics, there is nothing to disagree with.

The thing we lose when we stop believing in politics is action, participation, involvement — showing up in the public sphere.

In a world where we have retreated from politics, our energy and restlessness, our desire to make a difference, go to work on the private sphere, instead. This gives birth to stories of mastering one's self, knowing one's self, discovering one's true core, instilling discipline, productive habits, grinding, self-care.

It sounds familiar, and it's the ideology that grew in the void left by the death of political action in the public sphere. The focus on the individual self.

The story is reflected back at us from the politics as such. Privatising more and more elements of the public and social services, means that healthcare, transportation, ecology and the reproduction of life become individual concerns. The shrinking social safety net mimics the myth of self-made success.

When we perceive a world through a fantasy of individual lives, the bridges all seem to have been burned.

We come together as individuals. We chose our friends and partners based on how they fit into our life, how they address our needs, whether they align with our goals. If we grow closer to someone, or walk away from them, our own self remains intact. Above all, it's this self that dictates whether or not we want to pursue togetherness.

The stories we tell about human connection are personal, not collective. The story of a family is the personal history of each member. A group of friends is a collection of individuals — yes, devoted to each other, but, ultimately, defined first and foremost through themselves.

The individual is the form that shapes what we imagine to be possible.

In movements, the politics of identity are also fragmented into individual struggles. When the political involvement of a person hinges on their individual identity, what is left unsaid is the story of their entanglement with others. Their inter-dependence on other political struggles.

When we only feel affinity towards others like us, solidarity must be earned.

The individual, as a form, is, at its essence, about borders, difference and hierarchy. When the self is the lens we use to view the world, the differences between others and ourselves are infused with meaning.

Bridges are Built Over a Lack of Bridges

I won't attempt a complete and correct definition of anarchy. For our purposes, it's enough to say: anarchy opposes control, coercion, hierarchies imposed on others. It opposes constraining people into wage labour. It rejects illegitimate authority.

Anarchy is often defined in terms of what it opposes.

The word “anarchy” is sometimes used as a synonym of “chaos”. This makes the word a signifier that works a lot like the “post-ideological” politics. It points to a lack (of governance — in the case of anarchy, of overt principles — in the case of post-ideology). When we give the lack a name, we create a “positive” object (built on the skeleton of the-lack-of-something).

Given how this is a zine about Relationship Anarchy and I've just described the rejection of authority at the heart of anarchy, I will say that everything before and after this line of text is intended to be an offering, not an imposition. No definition is final. The entire object you are holding — or scrolling through — is an invitation to imagine alongside the author.

Maybe a better disclaimer is this one: this zine isn't in the business of being right — it only wants to take you on a little journey. These disclaimers are piling up right before the point where I finally get into the essence of what I want to propose because I'm scared. If you write things and publish them for others to see, you may have felt that you're walking on eggshells, too. I peaked behind the curtain just to say: maybe, one day, we won't have to be so afraid to speak our minds. I have hope.

Anarchy is an ideology *qua* ideology — something that exists as theory. The work of putting it into practice feels exciting, but difficult to start. Taking the leap into liveable anarchy is as much an act of the imagination as it is work.

A revolution would be necessary to topple a political regime. But, if your starting point is the rejection of authority, if you don't need “permission”, you don't need the revolution either. Anarchy starts *not with a bang, but with a whimper* — not with an announcement on public television that it is the time to dismantle hierarchies, but with our collective work to slowly build something on the lack of the hierarchies themselves.

Living in the spirit of anarchy is prefigurative politics. We shape our lives, our choices, our relationships, according to the principles that we ultimately want reflected back into politics. Retreating into individualism has prefigured a politics of control. Bursting out, back into the social sphere will push politics into a new configuration. *I would be lying if I said I knew where it will go, but I can assure you it's worth trying.*

We can end the chapter of individualism. We turn our gaze outwards, towards other people, society and the inter-connected struggle of all creatures. Our preoccupation can shift from difference to connection, from the story we write about ourselves to the story we write collectively, with others.

One interesting inflexion point is created when we put together committing to not exercising illegitimate authority over each other with the fact that we hold different, often contradicting views, opinions. How do we solve our differences, if there is no authority to give precedence to one set of principles over another?

The Obstacle is the Way

There is a situation, familiar to us, when we live with difference, not only in a way that respects the autonomy of the other, but also in a way that supports the other. When we are in love with someone, difference is elevated to the status of necessity.

Love is not immune to ideology. Individualistic love thrives on “borders” and hierarchy. Post-ideological love is having complete freedom to love anyone in a world of diminishing stability and increasing precarity. Freedom becomes toxic once we infuse it with pressure to enjoy, to make the optimal choice for one’s self. If you have fallen out of love, if love doesn’t feel good, it is a personal failure that you have to fix. You have to do better. Chose better. Chose again.

The Relationship Anarchist wager is that liveable anarchism is based on a process of love that thrives on difference. On otherness. On the Other.

The freedom to love anyone, and express it in any way that makes sense to us, is another gap from which something essential has been torn away. This freedom is rooted in the neo-liberal freedom to chose between a high number of options — of products, of relationships — where we nonetheless can not refuse to chose. When we can see that we don’t option to say “no” to the freedom of choice, the illusion dispels. We are not truly free.

The anarchist ideal is freedom without coercion. A freely-chosen action has to include the possibility of simply negating the need for action altogether. True freedom, and truly free love must allow us to love as though there was no choice but to love, and also to step outside the logic of love altogether. For this, we need to expand how it is possible to love.

I am aware of how painful difference can be. There are people doing truly tragic things in the world right now, and I am not suggesting that “ah, they are just different”. Nor am I advocating for the kind of love that religious dogma describes, a martyring love, loving thy neighbour and such. What I am describing are parts of a puzzle, one that can not be completed in a single zine — or by one person. Nobody has good answers for every question. I’m just hoping to offer one good answer — at most.

Relationship Anarchy isn’t loving difference, it’s allowing difference into love.

Hierarchy: a Detour

When I decided to write this zine, I envisioned writing about non-hierarchical relationships, under the banner of Relationship Anarchy and calling it a day. However, the more I tried to define hierarchy, the deeper my feet sank into quicksand. It turns out that it’s not just difficult to imagine non-hierarchical relationships, or to practice them — it’s hard to describe what hierarchy is.

The quickest way to show you what the quicksand of hierarchy looks like is to ask: do hierarchies exist in every situation where people are different, and split into categories? What kind of difference is not, in fact, a result of hierarchy, but of something else? Hierarchy is a signifier so sticky, so intoxicating, that it infects everything it touches.

Let’s stick to the domain of relationship practices. Is living with a partner, but being emotionally and physically intimate with others a description of hierarchical relationships? Does the age-old adage that family comes first create a hierarchy between one’s family and all the other people in their life?

I think you understand my plight. I need to make this detour to honour my original intention — and share with you how far I've gotten.

David Graeber, anthropologist and anarchist, makes an attempt to trace the origins of hierarchies, in “Manners, Deference, and Private Property” (the first essay in the “Possibilities” collection). He starts by saying “This is an essay about the nature of hierarchy” and continues, in the next paragraph, “This is also an essay about the origins of capitalism” — if this sounds exciting to you, dear reader, I recommend the essay.

Graeber uses comparative ethnography to try and trace the origins of hierarchy. He presents us with two categories, called “joking relationships” and “relations of avoidance”.

Joking relationships are marked by playful aggression. People are expected to tease each other, make fun of each other, playfully attack each other — all this implies an equality of status.

Relations of avoidance separate people through rituals of deference, even interdiction to look at each other or address each other at all — an avoidance that generates hierarchy. If a person misbehaves, failing to show reverence, the emotion they are meant to feel is shame. Whereas, with joking relationships, the humour isn't only funny — it is shameless!

Graeber then goes on to also define two different types of hierarchies: those that work based on inclusion and those that work based on exclusion. Hierarchies of inclusion rank objects into groups, each group being more inclusive than the one below. “Lions are a kind of cat, cats are a kind of mammal, mammals are vertebrates”. Hierarchies of exclusion rank objects according to a single criteria — social status, sanctity, etc. These hierarchies are linear and each rank excludes all objects in the rank beneath it.

If you erase the importance of the difference — if you take away the meaning in the ranking criteria, the hierarchy can be dismantled. As Graeber puts it, “If one rejects the principle of avoidance altogether, if nothing is set apart of sacred, hierarchy cannot exist”. Difference is stoked by individualism, by the focus on the self, and evaluating others through the lens of one's identity.

We can not — and should not — erase difference itself. Instead, we can view difference as the universal, and the individual as an object in an inclusive hierarchy, at the very bottom, in the most particular, most clearly-defined rank. We can build our understanding of the difference that set us apart from others in the shape of a hierarchy of inclusion.

We'll end our detour on two more phrases from the same essay, that come towards the end. Graeber notes: “There will always be nested sets of categories, and people will always have a tendency to rank some things as better or worse than others. [...] A million different modes of discrimination is, to all practical intents and purposes, identical to no mode of discrimination at all.”

Can Freedom Get Us Off?

Another word with similar properties to “hierarchy” — hard to define precisely — is “freedom”. If we live according to the anarchist ideology, we want to be free. And it turns out that this word — like all signifiers discussed so far — gets coloured by ideology. Even when we think we all mean the same thing when we say “freedom”, our desires are already shaped by the lens we view the world through.

The neo-liberal freedom, reproduced opportunistically under capitalism, is individualistic. It is a freedom to decide for one's self, according to one's own desires. It's freedom from authoritarian

control — but, in order for it to be enacted, it already requires authority. In order to solve the conflicts that rise from individuals acting freely, they must first be made unfree and subjected to a rigid logic that allows them the experience of freedom, but not the thing itself. This gives birth to carceral logic, to the preservation of private property, and to the wide inequality we see around us.

A freedom seen through the lens of anarchy requires that we accept and affirm that we are inter-connected. Without this affirmation, any process of seeking and actualising freedom will bring the same practices of excluding some for the benefits of others.

Freedom in an inter-connected world can only be achieved under the sign of difference, of constant tension. The push and pull of our desires will come into conflict for sure, but we don't need to give up yet.

The “relationship escalator” is a good example of an authority — a Big Other — that saves us from our freedom. The escalator is a set of stages that describe how closeness between people should progress. These unwritten — and often unspoken — expectations trace their roots from the ideology of private property and ownership. The escalator teaches us how to perform relationships in the eyes of The Other so that our relationships can be recognised as legitimate.

The Other is patriarchy, gendered and racialised subordination, the consumption of some bodies for the benefit of others. The literature on the damage that the gaze of the Other and its perverse desire has done is plentiful, and I invite us to learn about the harm in order to never repeat it. But, at the end of it all, I invite us to trust that another way is possible.

Relationship Anarchy as a practice of connecting with people through the lens of liveable anarchy, recognises the tension within inter-connected freedom. If we are truly free to choose how we connect to each other, we can shape our relationships, our boundaries, our rituals, in conversation with each other. If we recognise that The Other doesn't exist as such, that the power of the Other is in how we submit to it and fulfil its desires, then we can exercise freedom to choose another Other for ourselves.

If this were a movie, we would cut to a montage of serene landscapes. A voice-over would read Andie Nordgren's Relationship Anarchy Manifesto. “Love is abundant”, “Find your core set of relationship values”, “Trust is better”, “Change through communication”. The entire theory that I've been stringing together is put in practical terms by Andie's words.

Relationship Anarchy is what we can do to imagine another future. It's bringing ideology back into our beds, and at our dinner tables, as care and solidarity. As communication. And, more than anything else, it's a lot of patience. Because tension is inevitable, patience must be there to embrace it.

There is no checklist for Relationship Anarchy in the final pages of this zine, but perhaps, at this point, you don't even want one. Perhaps you have found a thought, here, that planted a seed for being together with others in liveable anarchy. Perhaps you were longing for this, intuiting that it's possible, edging closer. Perhaps you've been doing it all along.

We're facing a world that is better at dividing us than it's ever been. But we can draw from previous attempts at coming together: through class struggle, through intersectional politics, through climate action and so on.

This text has used the method of reading the content hidden within the form of ideology, gathered from the writings of **Slavoj Žižek**. His writing on revolution, freedom, progress, difference, and especially the critique of ideology form the base of my imagination when I reach for liveable anarchy.

The book that first showed me the radical power of imagining a different future is **Victor Vilisov's "Post-Love"**. At the time of writing this zine, December 2024, Vilisov's book is only available in Russian. I hope that a translation will be published one day, as this book a tightly-packed collection of radical ideas, excellent references and tender personal confessions. **Post-Love** addresses the themes of family, kinship, sex, the body, love, relationships and so much more, and does so with lucidity.

Other writings that expand the themes of these zine are:

- The essay **The cruel optimism of sexual consent** by Alisa Kessel;
- The essay **What are Sex and Gender and what Do We Want them to Be?** by Ásta;
- The zine **Undoing Sex** by C. E., available on the Anarchist Library;
- The essay **Total Liberation**, available on the Anarchist Library.

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