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QUEER – AN ANARCHIST DECONSTRUCTION

Anarchist Federation

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So to be queer by its original meaning¹, isn't something necessarily offensive, yet still the term evokes great reaction from both supporters, who view the word as self-empowering and those who view the word as somehow offensive. But there is an overt and positive movement that seeks to reclaim what it is to be queer; removing from it, its old meanings of peculiarity and its homophobic connotations and replacing them with a coherent socio-political and intellectual theory that has shaped the politics of gender and sexuality immeasurably.

Growing out of the sexual-radicalism of the 1990s (in the USA namely) the word queer has come to adopt more contemporary, positive and radical meanings. It is these definitions of queer that has come to stir gender and sexual politics. Queer has come to embrace two notable meanings, firstly it has come to be used as an umbrella term encompassing all those who define outside of exclu-

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¹ Webster dictionary for example defines Queer as 'At variance with what is usual or normal'.

sive heterosexuality.² Secondly the term has come to refer more specifically to those individuals who divorce themselves from distinct gender and sexual identities (gay, male, female, trans etc.) – it is this definition that this article will concentrate on.

Queer theory stems from attempts to deconstruct concepts of both gender and sexuality. Rigid concepts of sexuality such as gay and lesbian for example don't have much bearing on many of our lives, similarly many of us come outside of the false dualism offered by the binaries of male and female. It is becoming painfully obvious that such 'closed' definitions that these labels carry don't accommodate everyone and indeed many people can be more than one at a time, can be between two or three different labels and even change their preference regarding sexuality and/or gender as their life continues. Those who buy into essentialism however would have us believe that for any specific kind of entity (in this case gays, women, trans people etc.) there is a distinct set of properties or characteristics which they must possess. But as queer people we recognise that sexual orientation and gender are not naturally binding and essential, but fluid concepts. In that vein, queer is less an identity, than a critique of identity; recognising that for those labelled with terms of gender and/or sexuality, there are no specific or general traits. Even if there are stereotypes.

If the word queer has come to denote the exploration of categories of gender and sexuality that is rapidly shaping 21st Century gender politics, then this brings into question how far concepts of male and female are applicable. Whether gender is innate, and how reclaiming queer identity is consistent with an anarchist-communist understanding of gender, sexual identity and capitalist distortions of reality.

² Unlike the acronym LGBT(Q) it also covers those who define outside of traditional gender roles and those with sexual anatomy that their gender presentation may not conventionally match. This includes pansexual, intersex and gender-queer individuals for example.

So queer identity is compatible with our understanding of a better world in that queer theory is the adoption of the attitudes of what we hope a post-revolutionary society will manifest itself as in the here and now. Our job as revolutionaries is to embrace this, but to bring that argument of gender and sexual identity as fluid to the conclusion of anti-capitalism and anti-statism.

Ann Oakley stated that ‘Gender is a matter of culture. It refers to the social classifications “masculine” and “feminine”‘ if this is true, then it would imply that gender is a social construct, relative and applicable only to a given culture. If this is taken as correct then it validates queer identity, which suggests that binaries of male and female offer a false dichotomy insofar as the norms, values and traits identified with these labels are perpetually passing into one another. There are a variety of examples to illustrate gender then, as a social construct

Stereotypes of males and females would have us believe one cannot be gender-blind, that everyone is born into a gender. This however would imply that the mind is gendered, that the brain is an organ of sex. This we know not to be true. So what would define gender? Clothes perhaps, or genitalia? Where one shaves or maybe one’s feelings on the colour pink? Gender is meant to represent both physical and psychological attributes which is expected by a given culture. This manifests itself most notably in modern stereotypes of males as strong, honourable and having integrity and females as caring, vulnerable and shy. But just as anarchism is a philosophy that rejects the confines of capitalist society, queer theory questions the validity of gendered roles and stereotypes. Such stereotypes of gender show that the concepts of male and female exist only in their differentiation from the other and are therefore open to critical analysis.

This is not to suggest that gender is irrelevant in the here and now, on the contrary, gender is indeed relevant to many people and the belief that gender and sexuality are fluid concepts in no way invalidates the identity of those who define contently with binaries of gender and sexual orientation. But as anarchists we want a society where differentiation between people based solely on who they sleep with, the genitalia they were born with or how well they fit stereotypes isn’t a concern. We view queer theory as a contemporary understanding of what the society we envisage will look like.

If gender and sexuality is a social construction then, we as anarchist-communists can offer an explanation as to why this is so, who seeks to benefit from the gender binary and provide a radical critique of rigid sexuality.

Queer-anarchism is a happy marriage of two philosophies that break down barriers in pursuit of freedom and liberation. As both anarchist-communists and as individuals oppressed by larger heteronormative culture we believe that coming outside of sexual and gender binaries is inherently political; we recognise that the confines of sex, sexuality and gender are mere labels that treat individuals as nothing more than part of an easily defined homogeneous grouping; without an identity of their own. This is just not the reality. But moreover we realise that our rulers seek to gain from the enforcement of gender and sexual binaries upon us and that our fight against sexual restriction is a fight against the very people that maintain it.

Anarchist-Communists view the existing society then as conservative, patriarchal and heteronormative not as an incidental occurrence, but shaped as such by those who wish to maintain power for the few not the many. We know that sexual liberation cannot and will not be fulfilled under capitalist society, the bourgeoisie can not meet this demand, we therefore view the logical consequence of gender and sexual liberation as anti-capitalism.

Capitalism constantly teaches us that our affairs must be regulated, that we must be ruled wisely and accept authority. To accept authority however and to be accepting of the ruling classes rule requires a docile workforce exhausted of class-consciousness, one way in which this is achieved involves the labelling of our genders and even sexual preferences, dividing us into set groups. Furthermore we believe that the market (the world of commercial activity where goods and services are bought and sold) isn't, as some Marxists assume, an abstract and amoral mechanism – insofar as it consciously needs to target particular sections of society to purchase the goods made to produce the lifeblood of the market

– capital. Gender enforcement (and sometimes segregation) then isn't just a way to fragment society further, but also a necessary market-driven phenomena that needs to sell products and ideas at 'men' and 'women' differently. The consequence of this is a society where gender expression and experimentation is frowned upon unless it is consistent with the gender assigned at birth; a society where those who are not attracted exclusively to others who were differently gender-assigned are thought of a deviant.

Why then is it in the interests of our bosses and the state to enforce gender roles when they are so evidently not applicable to all, are incorrect in their generalisations, and cause division? To ask that question is to answer it... Imagine the political potential of a unified working class; united in their exploitation and desire to end the monotony of work and life under capitalism, this is not an easy task in a society fragmented along so many different lines. But in our division, lies our weakness and it is no accident! A united working class consisting of workers united in pursuit of freedom from the confines of a homophobic, violent and exploitative society is of course capitalism's greatest threat. The response of the capitalist class then, is to divide and rule; setting male against female, heterosexual against homosexual etc.

Anarchists envisage a different society, where social and personal identity are individual concerns and artistic and sexual expression are not regulated. We don't want a society where you have to choose to be consciously masculine or feminine, we don't appreciate a society that fetishises 'male' dominance and presumes a norm of violence and aggression. Whatever your self-defined gender identity, we all seek a world where how you dress, the people you sleep with and genitalia you possess do not embody who you are, we feel that the fight for a better world necessitates the overthrow of the very system that perpetuates gender myths and heterosexual supremacy. Sexual freedom will only be achieved in the pursuit of freedom for all, and not just freedom for our rulers and our bosses!