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Relationship Anarchy is not About Sex or Polyamory

The Thinking Aro

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Some months ago, blogger Rotten Zucchini published an excellent series of posts about relationship anarchy, and I've been meaning to write a response. I was excited to read the whole series because I admire RZ as a writer and thinker and because there's not enough good content on relationship anarchy.

When I wrote "Relationship Anarchy Basics" three years ago, I did it largely from an aromantic asexual perspective. I spent a lot of words illustrating how and why asexuals and aromantics could use relationship anarchy to experience love, intimacy, and commitment while not having sex or not engaging in romantic relationships. I tried my best to communicate that relationship anarchy could actually be a way that people who aren't asexual or aromantic could center nonsexual and/or nonromantic relationships in their social life or explore alternative relationships with atypical combinations of sex, celibacy, touch, emotional intensity, commitment, attraction and lack thereof. I wanted to demonstrate that relationship anarchy provides the opportunity to experience more love, affection, companionship, and touch by removing the restric-

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tions that amatonormativity and relationship hierarchy place on them, limiting those things to one (or even multiple) romantic/sexual relationships.

So imagine how hard I rolled my eyes when I discovered that there are straight men out there calling themselves “relationship anarchists” in order to smoothly get away with casual sex. I mean, really? Really? You think fucking somebody you’ve known for less than 24 total hours who you met on a hookup app makes you a “relationship anarchist”? Or that you can make that sexual encounter sound progressive and radical by invoking the “relationship anarchist” label? Please.

I guess nothing about fuckboys or men in general should surprise me, but I honestly never imagined relationship anarchy being used as an excuse or a trendy framing of casual sex when I wrote my original post on the subject. I never imagined that somewhere on this earth, a real live male would look into someone’s eyes and earnestly say that being a relationship anarchist means “having sex with multiple people and not labeling those contacts as [romantic] relationships.” And I don’t mean to have such an inflated sense of my own influence that I take credit for this asshole’s self-identification as a relationship anarchist—he may not have any idea that my blog exists and heard about RA from some other source—but because my post has been shared and linked as many times as it has, I do feel a bit of secondhand embarrassment, reading what is clearly a moment of misappropriating relationship anarchy for the purpose of keeping casual sex casual.

Let me be clear: the problem is not two adults enthusiastically having sex, without any interest in getting to know each other further. The problem is not that men everywhere want to fuck people without commitment, without love, without friendship, without meeting any other expectations or assuming any responsibility. It’s not necessarily bad or wrong to include casual sex as a possibility in relationship anarchy; I think that at least in theory, a person who practices politically grounded RA can have sex outside of ro-

mantic relationships that looks and feels and functions differently than most of the casual sex that happens in the world.

The problem here is that people, especially straight men, are creating a false impression of what relationship anarchy is and what it means by misusing the term because they think it sounds cool or “progressive” or whatever. It’s essentially the same problem I see with nonhierarchical polyamorists calling what they do “relationship anarchy” and themselves “relationship anarchists.” Relationship anarchy is not just a shiny, new label that people get to use when they want to sound different or special or better than everyone else. It’s certainly not a label that fuckboys get to use when they want to make themselves sound enlightened for having casual sex or get away with having casual sex that they don’t have to negotiate emotionally with their sexual partners.

If you want to have casual sex, fine. If you don’t want to be romantically involved with anyone, fine. If you’re polyamorous, fine. But the term “relationship anarchy” is not here for you because it’s not just a label. It’s not a fucking identity. It is a set of principles that informs the structure of a person’s relationships and how they experience emotional connection, affection, and commitment with people they care about. Originally, it was the logical result of political anarchists applying their politics to their relationships. (Notice where Andie Nordgren’s RA Manifesto is hosted: theanarchistlibrary.org.) Relationship anarchy doesn’t have to include sex at all, and sometimes it doesn’t. It doesn’t have to include romance at all, and sometimes it doesn’t. What it does have to include, as a practice that is legitimately different from polyamory and other forms of consensual nonmonogamy, is a politics that actively resists relationship hierarchy as a coercive structure reflective of our culture’s value system. That value system includes amatonormativity, compulsory sexuality, heteronormativity, the sexualization and romanticization of touch/affection/emotional connection (for the purpose of reinforcing hetero-patriarchy via homophobia and on the basis

of the sexualized inequality between males and females), individualism of the neoliberal sensibility, and above all, capitalism.

My original post on relationship anarchy got pretty popular for some reason, and I haven't written a whole lot about the subject since that post. Apart from my post calling out polyamorists who erroneously call themselves RAs, I've pretty much only alluded to relationship anarchy in passing on this blog. I'm certainly not the only person who has written about it and I'm not an authority on the lifestyle, if anyone can be such a thing. My primary motivation in writing "Relationship Anarchy Basics" was to flesh out, more for myself than anyone reading, what relationship anarchy is in a structural sense, how it differs from polyamory and monogamy, and how it can work for people who don't do sex or romance. Andie Nordgren's pamphlet inspired me and got me really thinking about how intentionally single, celibate people could pursue relationships differently than the typical "single without any intimate or committed relationships and a bunch of superficial 'friendships'" model.

What I haven't written much about is the ethos of relationship anarchy, the philosophy behind it that must ultimately be at the basis of a person's daily life if they're going to attempt RA. I think that Rotten Z did a great job at tackling some of that ethos and the principles that should ideally drive relationship anarchy in their series of posts, and I recommend them to anyone who's serious about practicing a relationship anarchy that goes deeper than unconscious polyamory.

It does concern me that people out there are doing polyamory or pseudo-"relationship anarchy" without spending any significant time or energy critically thinking about principles, ethics, personal politics, etc. Then again, I can say the same about the conventional monogamists. Most people, whatever their lifestyle, don't think about their relationships beyond the interpersonal level. They don't contextualize the sex and romance and friendships they have into the big picture of their national culture and

teaching the public that friendship is worthless and money is more important than community.

So don't tell me that you're entitled to call your polyamory or your casual sex "relationship anarchy," as you conduct your social life with anti-anarchism principles and the same amatonormativity that all the coupled up monogamists preach and believe in. Don't tell me you're a "relationship anarchist" when you don't give a fuck about friendship or community or political resistance, just sex and romance and your freedom to be nonmonogamous.

Relationship anarchy is not a cover for fuckboys. And it is not nonhierarchical polyamory.

is usually inclusive of sexual nonmonogamy. Relationship anarchy is not polyamory sans the obvious hierarchy of romantic partners. It's about doing relationships with community-centric values, not couple-centric values. Above all, it's about relating to other human beings without coercive authority in play and without hierarchy in your group of relationships or in any relationship itself.

I fucking cringe when I read about polyamorous people defining "relationship anarchy" using nonhierarchal polyamory's terms, just as I cringe when I hear stories of men pulling the RA card on their casual sexcapades. Not just because of how unbelievably inaccurate, apolitical, and ignorant it is but because in both cases, "relationship anarchy" is falsely used to describe the kind of romance supremacist, friendship-excluding, sex-centric lifestyles that are diametrically opposed to authentic relationship anarchy.

The capitalist, heteronormative, patriarchal state promotes relationship hierarchies based on romance supremacy and amatonormativity. It endorses treating sex like a product, protects heterosexual men in their consumption of female bodies as sexual objects, promotes the buying and selling of women's sexualized bodies. The capitalist heteronormative patriarchal state WANTS you to invest all of your free time, energy, resources, and emotion into romantic couplehood, into marriage, into sex. It WANTS you to devalue friendship, to stay isolated from everyone who isn't your romantic partner, to be a self-interested individual with no ties or commitments to anyone but your spouse. Why? Because friendship could lead to community and community could lead to collective political action, which could turn into revolution. And because friendship and community are almost impossible to commodify and harness for the purpose of feeding into the capitalist economy and creating bigger profits for the wealthy elite. Sex and romance make rich people money all day every day. They sell it to you every waking moment. They can't use friendship and community to sell you shit. They can't turn friendship and community into products. If they could, they would've spent the last century doing so, instead of

economy, their society's politics, etc. They don't even think about their own personal motives and principles, when it comes to their lifestyle choices. They never get past the apolitical, purely individual desire-and-feelings level. They stop at "I want this because it'll make me happy" and don't even interrogate why they believe monogamy or polyamory or casual sex or a traditional marriage is the source of happiness and what it means to live your life serving those desires.

I deeply appreciate the information RZ provided on anarchism and relationship anarchy's natural roots in anarchism. I don't think you have to be a full-blown political anarchist in order to be a relationship anarchist (I may be wrong), but I do believe it's worth learning about anarchism and its principles, for the purpose of approaching relationship anarchy with that information in your consciousness. I myself haven't yet done the extensive reading I want to do on anarchism, but even back when I wrote "Relationship Anarchy Basics," I had a crude understanding of the politics behind RA, if only because I knew about the political basis of everything that is not RA. Now, I understand even better, despite not being educated on anarchism, because I have a greater grasp on how monogamy (and polyamory) is shaped by the capitalist hetero-patriarchy we all live in. For that matter, I now have a better understanding of how friendship, and friendship in opposition to romance, is shaped by the capitalist hetero-patriarchy.

Real relationship anarchy is political. There's just no way around it. How could it be otherwise, when it has roots in political anarchism? Relationship anarchy is not about getting your dick wet and looking cool while you do it. It's not about sounding hipper than all the other polyamorists. You can do polyamory without any political consciousness whatsoever, and you can definitely do monogamy without it. You can be mono or poly in service of the capitalist hetero-patriarchy. Most people are. But you can't do relationship anarchy without some awareness of the socio-political context you're operating in and how you're

attempting to go against that grain out of a genuine belief in certain concrete principles. Those concrete principles are nothing so basic and shallow as “freedom” (to fuck) or “honesty.” They’re the kind of political principles that you can base an effective social movement on: a movement that offers an alternative to the capitalist hetero-patriarchy’s commodification of bodies, sex, and love; to the sabotage of female solidarity in friendship and romantic love; to neoliberal capitalism’s goal of the isolated couple and nuclear family; to the homophobia and toxic gender crap that prevents even nonsexual/nonromantic connection and intimacy between members of the same sex.

According to Rotten Z, if we base relationship anarchy on political anarchism’s principles, then relationship anarchy is fundamentally about:

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The rejection of all interpersonal coercion, including state intervention

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Community Mutual aid

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Commitments made as communication, not as contracts

Looking at that list, it dawned on me that relationship anarchy resonates with me so much because its principles amount to a friendship ethic. The word “friendship” is widely used as a broad, vague, often meaningless term, but to me, friendship as this deep, intimate, important, positive bond between humans is described really well by the above set of principles. Friendship leans away from interpersonal coercion by default and can’t survive under the burden of it for long. Mutual aid and cooperation are in friendship’s very nature; you could even define friendship by those qualities: helping and supporting each other out of desire and not duty. And when friendship is committed, that commitment is done in a spirit of communication, not drawn up as a contract, which what marriage is: a legal contract binding romantic partners.

I love how the blogger queeranarchism defined relationship anarchy:

“Relationship anarchism then, to me, means community. A community of two or of many. A community that rejects the ‘rules’ of relationships, of enforced heterosexuality, enforced monogamy, of partners being entitled to sex, of marriage, of childcare being a two-person job and of the idea that we need a romantic or sexual relationship to be complete. A community that instead chooses care, cooperation, equality, acknowledgement that we are more than our relationship and that we all have different needs. And in that community, we make the rules that suit us, and end them when they no longer suit our community.

By that definition, an anarchist relationship is first and foremost one of cooperation and setting our own rules. By that definition, it is not self-serving but always mutually beneficial.”

I think that’s something I was trying to express in “Relationship Anarchy Basics” but couldn’t quite put my finger on at the time: relationship anarchy is fundamentally about community, as much as monogamous and polyamorous lifestyles are fundamentally about the couple. That doesn’t mean couples can’t exist in relationship anarchy, but it does mean that the focus of a relationship anarchist’s life and emotional energy is not a couple relationship by default, the way it is for monogamists and polyamorists. It also means that two relationship anarchists having a romantic relationship are most likely not doing it the same way most non-anarchist people do couplehood, even if the RA couple is sexually monogamous in the moment. Being a relationship anarchist doesn’t mean you have to fuck more than one person at a time, because relationship anarchy is not about sexual nonmonogamy, even though it