

Against Monogamism, For Liberation!

Anti-Monogamy as Anarchist Praxis

Your friendly local anti-monogamists

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This piece is for all who envision a world without scarcity and hierarchy. It speaks most directly to anarchists (and other politically-motivated individuals) who could more fully apply their anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian politics to their close interpersonal relationships. However, it is relevant to anyone who dreams of liberation.

Read on for insidious ways that Monogamism (the system which creates the conditions for monogamy) constrains how we relate to each other, how its dominance is upheld by social and legal privileges, and an intersectional framework that integrates Monogamism with other systems of power. We dream of communities where boundless queer joy and abundant access to resources that let people thrive (housing, food, emotional support, health support, time) are the norm instead of the exception, and hope to build praxis towards that liberatory future.

What is Monogamism?

Monogamism is a system that permeates our daily lives and privileges certain kinds of intimate relationships (specifically, those on the “relationship escalator” that leads from dating to exclusivity, marriage, and cohabitation) over other forms of relating. Similar to other systems and institutions, Monogamism affects the structure of our society, and shapes our interpersonal interactions and relationships. Our social world is built around monogamous relationships and there are high social, legal, and survival costs to challenging Monogamism or refusing to arrange one’s life by the dictates of monogamy. Both by its punishments directly, and by pushing us away from radical communalism in favor of isolation and complacent consumerism, Monogamism harms all of us.

Anti-Monogamy is a political position that opposes the harms of Monogamism. This includes analyzing the society-level systems of power that restrict our freedom to relate to others as would best meet our needs, as well as the interpersonal harms we enact on others by bundling closeness with exclusivity and restriction. This typically manifests as monogamy (a couple-unit with exclusivity rules) or polyamory (exclusivity rules among multiple people or sets of couples), both of which could be described more broadly as rule-based relationships, since they prioritize establishing agreements to control behavior and desires. Opposition to Monogamism involves challenging the basis of all rule-based and coercive relationships, even though neoliberalism would have us believe they are “private” arrangements, divorced from systems of power or material conditions. Anti-monogamy critiques not only monogamous dyads, but also polyamory, the nuclear family, and conceptualizations of friendship that promote obligation, entitlement, and coercion.

Monogamy: A Beloved Public Institution

Monogamy primarily exists not as a personal choice, but as part of a sprawling public institution. To start with the most obvious ways it is institutionalized, monogamy has privileged legal status. Marriage is a legal contract which grants over 1,000 privileges not afforded to people the government classifies as single. These benefits include citizenship rights, healthcare access, tax reductions and federally-subsidized loans, the automatic right to act as a proxy decision-maker, protection from having to testify in court against a spouse, and many more. Property and financial laws privilege married individuals in a variety of ways. These privileges create a coercive incentive to marry and a disincentive for divorce. Since legal measures entrench monogamy as the

explicitly privileged social standard, people understandably build relationships aimed towards securing the privilege and status afforded by a monogamous married relationship rather than cultivating relationships that would best meet their needs outside of this artificially-constructed scarcity.

Beyond just marriage laws, marital and family status are used to control where people live and their eligibility for State-sponsored assistance. Many cities and towns limit the number of “unrelated occupants” who can live in a single building; this restricts intentional co-living, communal child-raising, senior housing, residential recovery or detox programs, and every other group of people who are not legally or biologically related. Congress has repeatedly diverted funds from anti-poverty programs to instead promote marriage as a solution to poverty (which, studies have shown, it isn’t). Variations from monogamous norms are used to justify removing children from their homes, revoking custody rights, denying housing and food assistance, and restricting opportunities for adoption and foster care.

In so-called criminal cases, people are prosecuted and judged in ways that explicitly enforce monogamy. In many states, adultery is on-the-books illegal. Allegations of “cheating” (especially with evidence) can be grounds for seizing financial and other assets during a separation. In some states, this evidence could be required to divorce at all, as some form of “fault” must be demonstrated to the court.

In many cases, Monogamism provides a legal basis to justify and excuse violence. Raping one’s spouse is considered a less serious crime than other forms of sexual violence in many places and, in some places, is not a crime at all. There have been many assault and murder cases in which a jealous partner or spouse receives lesser charges because the victim was cheating or helping someone else to cheat. The intersection with systems of gendered violence is clear: it is most often men killing women they perceive as their property. This is not an exceptional case of monogamy-gone-wrong; rather, the idea that someone is entitled to total and lethal control over their partner’s body is an extension of the expectation that dating and marriage entitle someone to control how their partner relates to other people. This follows the same logic as the “trans panic defense” used to justify cis-sexist and transphobic violence: if someone is surprised or hurt by another person’s anti-normative choice of what to do with their own body, their fear or anger justifies even extreme physical violence. In both cases, we enforce conformity by punishing behaviors that threaten the existing hierarchical social order.

This is not to say that laws should govern what we consider right or wrong, or that any government or court system could deliver justice. However, pro-monogamy laws are part of the extensive bureaucratic machinery that supports the oppressive social hierarchy under capitalism and penalizes deviation from it. It’s no coincidence that couples and the nuclear family are legally privileged. The ways we share intimacy with others deeply affect the social fabric of our communities, which is the source of our political power; a system seeking to control us must control how we associate and build community. No government should tell us how to do that.

In addition to legal enforcement, Monogamism is upheld by many extra-legal traditions and systems. Partner relationships and wedding announcements are praised, while breakups and divorces are rarely celebrated. (Though not never! Divorce and breakup parties exist, and can encourage people to escape a couple-unit through community celebration.) Housing is often only affordable with multiple incomes, and the norm of structuring housing around romantic relationships means that breaking up often leads to immediate homelessness. Social planning usually assumes people will bring a “+1.” Partners and spouses are rarely invited to things separately, which

reinforces the near-complete overlap of their social circles and strong social disincentive for a breakup – especially a controversial one, where people may be asked to take sides or punish one of the parties. Additionally, as shared assets and life patterns accumulate, separation becomes more logistically and emotionally costly.

When relationship rules exist, we are all expected to police each other. Ever heard, “I don’t know if I can do that, I have to check with my partner first” or “Are you sure your partner is okay with this?” People who (allegedly) break relationship rules are branded as “cheaters”, and shamed and punished by wide swaths of their social circles. Even people who seek emotional support or closeness without the approval of their partner may be stigmatized and condemned as “emotional cheaters,” and the people who help them as untrustworthy seducers (see “Cheat to Win”). The rightness of the partner relationship and wrongness of relationships that might challenge its exclusivity are assumed. This pushes us towards isolation into couple units at the expense of connection and community. Monogamism, both as a broad social system and as reflected in individual performance of monogamy (and other rule-based relationships), maintains this coercive hierarchy; anti-monogamy seeks to challenge it.

Monogamy is privileged, even in “non-monogamous” spaces

In mainstream US society, monogamy is presented as the default–or only–way of relating. Most people have not seriously considered non-monogamy in any form, and may have never seen it represented positively, if at all. If a “non-monogamous” option is considered, it is some form of polyamory, in which one can have multiple “partners,” but all parties still value and define relationships on the basis of rules, exclusivity, and control. There is little revolutionary about having more than one partner; polyamorous social norms are still explicitly Monogamist. In most ways, polyamory is simply monogamy with more people.

In subcultures or spaces where non-monogamy is widely accepted or even the norm, this is seen as a personal choice or “relationship style.” Even when someone considers themselves a Relationship Anarchist (or other brand of unpartnered hooligan), this is regarded as an individual choice or identity rather than a political position or strategy. This makes it harder to recognize that the prevalence and systemic power of monogamy significantly influence our choices, and that people who oppose monogamy cannot choose at all whether they are exposed to or indirectly governed by others’ rule-based relationships.

Even people who aren’t participating in monogamy or other rule-based relationships are expected to prioritize and uphold Monogamist agreements. Guides on polyamorous dating advise asking questions like “Do you abide by hierarchy in your relationships?”, “What are your rules with existing partners?”, and “How do I know you aren’t cheating?” When there is conflict between pro-monogamy and anti-monogamy perspectives, the ethical rightness of choosing monogamy is assumed. Deviation from monogamy is so routinely assumed to be unethical that many people in non-monogamous relationships feel the need to address this without prompting through adopting the label of “ethical non-monogamy.”

If people participating in monogamous arrangements (or vocally supporting them) want validation or support for their behavior, they can look essentially anywhere around them. The dominance of Monogamism assures that there will always be somebody (usually many people, including authority figures) loudly saying that they are right and good for supporting monogamy.

Monogamist messaging abounds in every kind of media and field of discourse. Even in the most deviant spaces, it is exceedingly rare for monogamy to actually be marginalized; meanwhile, anti-monogamy is suppressed and subject to near-universal disdain and ridicule.

The personal is political... and what is “personal” anyways?

The neoliberal ideal of private life is that people freely choose what (supposedly) “works for them,” and everyone else in the community is expected to validate and support their “personal” decisions. This approach, promoted relentlessly by individualist consumer capitalism, ignores the broader political context and interpersonal consequences of our “personal” decisions. This is by design; denying the existence of these structures stifles our ability to identify and mitigate the harms we do to each other while making these choices. In practice, a super-majority of us “choose” monogamy under great institutionalized and interpersonal pressure, and attempts to analyze these pressures or critique the harms of this “choice” are lambasted as a campaign against freedom.

To protect the artificial, system-stabilizing divide between “public” and “private” spheres, neoliberalism has privatized intimate relationships themselves. When frustration or worry is expressed about a partner relationship, the response is often: “what they do is their business” — even when it negatively affects the whole fabric of our community. This denial of the inherent political interconnectedness of our intimate relationships facilitates abuse and division, both between the members of a couple and between the couple and their community. An anti-monogamy lens lets us see how Monogamist ideals push people away from mutualism and communal struggle by pretending that the ways we pursue intimacy and build households are unrelated to our political power.

Imagine an anarchist (or other flavor of politically-engaged collectivist) applying the neoliberal logic of personal choice to Capitalism and other systems of power:

“I know you hate Capitalism, but I really like my job. If you don’t like it, just don’t participate in it, and I’ll keep doing what’s right for me.”

“You say pipelines are harmful, but I like using oil and gas. You can get solar panels if it’s important to you! It’s just a personal choice.”

“It’s equally valid to support the police as it is to oppose them. Maybe you’ve had bad experiences, but cops have always been helpful to me. Just pick what works for you.”

This should feel absurd. Capitalism, policing, energy systems, and climate destruction are bigger than our individual choices—and so is Monogamism. This is not a matter of simply choosing between two equally accessible options: it’s a constant fight against the ways those systems restrict our lives. Those of us who oppose the restrictions of Monogamism cannot opt out of the ways it dominates our social scripts, legal affairs, and modes of resource distribution.

Monogamism intersects with other systems of power

Our lives are intersectional and Monogamism is not the only system that matters. For people who date or marry, it’s obviously not their sole identity or activity (though their “relationship

status” is treated as a key part of their social status, dictates the ways other people are “allowed” to interact with them, and is often the subject of great preoccupation). A critique of Monogamism, like other anarchist critiques of institutions and systems of power, illuminates the ways that the social mandate of monogamy denies many people the material and social resources they need. From an anti-monogamy perspective, many problems central to anarchist struggle (economic inequality, generational wealth, gendered violence, immigration and citizenship, oppression of children, homophobia, racism, etc.) work in concert with Monogamism.

For example, consider how Monogamism intersects with the role of the nuclear family under Capitalism. What better way to sell more products than to isolate people in small, controllable consumer units and equate success to purchasing things for them? Advertising shows us which gifts represent affection, date and vacation packages that promise connection, homes or cars one must have to be a desirable potential partner, and home accessories that shore up a perfect family.

The couple itself is romanticized and marketed to us as a proposition of ownership: a person who is “just yours” and meets your emotional and domestic needs, especially with women and femmes stereotyped into caretaker roles. Success under Monogamism requires possessing a good partner, which opens paths to higher social status, opportunity, and happiness itself. To critique these modes of relating is not to demonize individual people struggling to meet their needs within the current coercive social system, any more than to critique Capitalism is to demonize workers. All the same, it is important to be critical of Monogamist harms, and to create supportive community that allows us to resist them together. Building relationships that challenge Monogamism is key to building resilient communities that can fight back against Capitalism and the State.

Considering how Monogamism intersects with other systems of power suggests questions that can inform our liberatory praxis:

- **Monogamism + Ableism:** Who is expected to provide care for someone when they are sick or injured? What if they have a chronic illness or disability? What bundled expectations will someone with chronic illness be unable or unwilling to provide in order to get the care they need? In what ways are they pressured or coerced to please a primary caregiver? If care work is privatized, how will people know when it is inadequate or harmful? Why is it so common for people to be divorced once they become sick or disabled, and how can we support them when this happens?
- **Monogamism + Racism & white supremacy:** Most couples in the US are not mixed-race. If resources are hoarded within the couple unit and nuclear family, how does this affect cross-racial bonding and resource distribution? When in a group, who will people stand up for or support? Are both members of a married couple US citizens or is one dependent on the other for legal status? How do legal and social pressure to appear more normative affect inter-racial relationships, or relationships between US citizens and non-citizens? How do settler-colonial ideas of family limit expansive ideas of kin or community?
- **Monogamism + Patriarchy & gender:** How does the dominant ideal of Straight couples restrict the ways Queer people relate to each other? Why are the most celebrated Queer relationships the ones that look the most like Straight relationships? In so-called Straight couples (see “Straight Ally is an Oxymoron”), why do women and femmes still take on the majority of domestic and child-rearing responsibilities? Who is expected to do (more) care work, and why is it often one-sided? What work could be shared more effectively in

community than in couple units? When relationships are “private,” how can the community know when gendered violence is happening and provide support? If desirability is linked to acceptable gender performance or presentation, how will people’s freedom of expression (and sense of self) suffer? Why are so many people seeking gender-affirming hormones or surgeries afraid of their partner “losing attraction” to them?

- **Monogamism + Capitalism & property:** With whom do we share resources? What are we supposed to buy to demonstrate affection? Is it affordable or possible to live somewhere without a second person? Is there housing available that supports co-living outside the nuclear family? How do families prioritize their own generational wealth at the expense of community? How does economic dependence on family restrict who we can relate to and how we meet our needs? In what ways does “dating” lead us to view people (including ourselves) as marketable items, or encourage us to possess them?
- **Monogamism + Amatonormativity:** How do people meet their needs and desires for touch? What expectations are bundled with those? Are people required to participate in complex social rituals around romantic dating to meet their basic needs? Whose idea of “romance” is used as the script for our relationships? What resources, opportunities, and support will be denied to people who pursue intimacy in ways stigmatized under monogamy? How do we build deep and intimate friendships without normative scripts around sex and romantic love? What do community ties look like when attractiveness and desirability don’t shape webs of material support?
- **Monogamism + Prison Industrial Complex & policing:** Who is expected to support someone who is arrested and held in prison? Who bears the brunt of the negative effects of incarceration? How do institutional systems favor those in normative romantic relationships? Due to deplorable conditions and intentionally restrictive institutional policies, how are people excluded from reciprocal care and connection while incarcerated? In the context of the “rules” in rule-based relationships, how do people police and enforce those? How do people react punitively to broken relationship rules?

Monogamism is not separate from these other systems of power; they all work together. To approach monogamous relationships as if they are somehow insulated from these systems of power, or have no effects besides interpersonal ones, is to deny all of these intersections. In doing so, it pushes us further from discovering new ways of caring for each other and meeting our needs together.

Worlds of infinite possibilities

There are many ways we can incorporate anti-Monogamist tactics into our ever-evolving anarchist praxis. Anti-monogamy is not inherently a wish for a utopian anti-monogamous monoculture in which all interpersonal relationships look the same; of course, people are unique individuals with diverse needs, desires, and abilities. That being said, in the present world people’s choices are restricted by Monogamism (even while neoliberal myths about “freedom of choice” try to convince us this isn’t true), and—in line with anarchist principles—we wish for that to be different.

Given the realities of this Monogamist world, people who oppose Monogamism must remain open to building affinity and collaborating with people who have been harmed by Monogamism (all of us), including those currently participating in rule-based relationships. To be coerced into monogamy doesn't make people bad or wrong, any more than all workers are traitors for participating in Capitalism or all people holding state citizenship are nationalists. While there are identifiable harms associated with all of these, to avoid engaging with people who perpetuate harm is both impossible and anti-abolitionist. We can and should share skills, identify common causes, and continue to care deeply for each other. Though their material situations and ideological loyalties may mean they are poorly positioned to collaborate with us on some liberatory projects, this does not mean they are excluded altogether from meaningful political organizing (or even much of ours, given their relative prevalence and the magnitude of the systems we aim to oppose).

Even in anarchist communities and otherwise-radical spaces, Monogamism shapes our interpersonal interactions and friendships. We must support each other in organizing practical, direct anti-monogamy work (both on structures surrounding us and within ourselves), just like we support each other in anti-Capitalist work, anti-State work, and anti-discrimination work. Building supportive anti-Monogamist community spaces can show people that stepping outside of Monogamist relating doesn't have to mean total isolation, destitution, or social death. If the dominance and coercion of Monogamism are thoroughly dismantled in our communities, descriptors like "monogamy", "dating", or "partners" may no longer even be meaningful ways to describe our relationships (see "Down with Partners"). We don't seek different names for the ways we dominate and control each other, or to reform these practices, but to build relationships without ownership and exclusivity.

Conclusion

We wish that we lived in a world where the harms of Monogamism did not exist, where the ways we relate to others were freely chosen from many options to joyfully meet our needs. If we lived in that world, we wouldn't be writing this! However, we live in a world where Monogamism is a dominant system of power that coerces our interpersonal relationships to fit a normative mold based on rules and limitations. Monogamist voices and relationships are privileged by the dominant culture; anti-monogamy organizing is marginalized and suppressed. Monogamism intersects with other systems of power to alienate us into consumer units blinded by scarcity, through social and legal coercion that shapes both mainstream and otherwise-radical spaces.

Isolating ourselves into couples and family units breaks down possibilities for radical community. People who can't or won't participate in rule-based relationships are often denied resources they need, and excluded from anarchist communities or spaces that have similar values except on this issue. People in monogamous (and other rule-based) relationships are conversely denied access to many forms of intimacy and community. Even those who identify ways that monogamy "works" for them (like those who identify ways that their job, their assigned gender, or climate-destroying technologic systems "work" for them) are ultimately harmed by the ways it limits how we relate to and collaborate with each other. Liberation will only come with radical cooperation.

Critiquing Monogamism is a necessary focal point of building communities that challenge these harms; this is complementary to anarchist praxis against other systems of power. The idea

that the choice to support monogamy or oppose it should be based on personal preference or innate identity rather than political analysis is a neoliberal myth which stifles dissent and prevents change.

We are proudly and sincerely anti-Monogamy, just as we are anti-Capitalist, anti-Statist, anti-Racist, anti-Sexist, and anti-Ableist. We believe it is possible to build communities that challenge normative expectations around affinity building, care work, touch, pleasure, gender, ability, and everything that keeps us from living our free, autonomous lives. We're working hard to nurture the radically interconnected communities we need to thrive. Let's move together towards a world without Capitalism in our relationships, the couple-cop in our heads, and love jails that equate intimacy with exclusivity. Divorce Monogamism, embrace community!

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