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What is Gender?

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Gender is one of the most fundamental stories humans have created. It is a story about each one of us that begins being told even before we are born. It is told over and over again throughout our lives sometimes in ways that resonate with how we feel inside and other times not at all. Our gender story intersects with the other aspects of our personal experiences and social position, our physical and mental abilities, whether we're rich or broke, what racial categories we are perceived to be, our geographical location, and so on – all together these things hugely influence the opportunities we will have and the abuses we will suffer.

Gender is a means for society to categorize people along a masculine and feminine binary, reserving different forms of treatment on that basis. Being labeled as male or female is meant to dictate everything, from how you look and behave to who you find attractive, to the roles you take in family and society. The stories reinforcing the gender binary are socialized through institutions such as family, work, religion, law and healthcare as well as the constant barrage of visual messaging through various forms of media. They get in the way of understanding and engaging with the diverse spectrum

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of gender identities as we become completely caught up in trying to conform.

But gender is not just about an individual's expression, it's not simply a "choose your own adventure" kind of human experience. For individuals and communities who've been attacked by slavery and colonization, the project of reclaiming healthy gender traditions can also supersede questioning them altogether. And this goes hand in hand with reclaiming non-binary genders, such as two-spirited, which were almost erased by settler colonialism. In other instances, intentionally conforming to binary gender norms allows us to fund our projects through sex work or physically survive periods of incarceration.

These are also survival mechanisms against the relentless onslaught of patriarchal and colonial-capitalist violence. Within this system, anarchists have found a variety of ways to respond. For some of us the abolition of gender is a central project. Queerness is seen as a negation of not only the gender binary but of all gender categories. This perspective is especially important to combat the tendency of Liberal reformists to recuperate new identities into the status quo without fighting against or even acknowledging its fundamentally violent underpinnings. It is sickening to find our long traditions of queer and feminist struggle being twisted in to hiring campaigns for gay police or women CEOs. Therefore anarchist approaches to gender must also maintain an analysis of race, class, colonialism and power, and it must reject inclusion or representation in the mainstream. For other anarchists however, queerness is not a negation but a valid and true expression of our inner selves. Creation and experimentation with gender is meaningful and beautiful and even masculinity and femininity are an important aspects of this. Gender can be a way we build solidarity, create community, and celebrate our ways of being in the world.

Under Patriarchy the gender binary gets weaponized and gender becomes a system for categorizing the world and dis-

tributing power. It's a set of practices that we do with our bodies through capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy. Toxic masculinity, perpetrated primarily by Cis-Men serves the purpose of inflicting violence on gender transgressors in the form of domestic abuse and queer bashing. Those men in turn are kept in line by the threat of having male violence turned against them inside prison. This constant flow of threatened and actualized violence keeps people serving their various productive and reproductive functions and the flow of work and babies keeps capitalism alive. And just to be clear, although Anarchist scenes have always been places that allowed people some space from gender norms, we also reproduce heteronormativity and sexism, often in ways that are depressingly familiar to what is seen anywhere else. When this happens we employ a number of responses, from survivor retaliation to accountability processes, to women and trans only organizing.

But whatever we choose, our dealings with patriarchal behaviour are oriented towards doing it ourselves, without the police or courts. The intention is to learn ways of distributing care so that intervention into toxic gender dynamics happen before any harm ever gets done. So regardless of who you are, find comrades and accomplices, people you can trust and be vulnerable with. Learn to care for others in the ways you need to be cared for and share in all the different kinds of labour that keeps you alive. The fight to reclaim the telling of your own gender story will be a struggle that may last your entire life. Don't do it alone.