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Conceptualizing tranarchism

A libertarian critique of cishnormativity

Cello Latini Pfeil

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supposedly ‘cisheteronormative’ anarchism, which would not consider ‘identity’ issues to be relevant to the popular struggle. However, anarchist movements have grown largely as a result of feminist and queer organizations in their strategies to confront State domination. It is in opposition to this separatism that our thoughts on tranarchism — an anarchism that does not reproduce the institutional normativities of modernity — are based.

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In this essay, we intend to analyze the connections between some fundamental anarchist principles — such as direct action, mutual support, self-determination, revolutionary violence — and initiatives in trans movements to depathologize transsexuality and oppose institutional violence. Far from assuming essentialisms regarding “being trans” or “being an anarchist”, we have identified similarities between the political strategies of trans movements and the aforementioned libertarian concepts. Our inclination, given this assimilation, is to elaborate on tranarchism as a way of illustrating the practical proximity between the libertarian claim for self-determination, self-government and the indivisibility of freedom, and the trans arguments for depathologization, for a rupture with the State’s institutional policies and for an affront to academically legitimized knowledge about transsexuality.

Furthermore, we point to negative receptions of anarchist movements to offer considered ‘identitarian’ issues (JEPPESEN & NAZAR, 2012) — such as gender issues — and claim that such receptions are not consistent with anarchist principles that oppose any imposition of authority. Despite common disagreements within the movements, there are libertarian tendencies in trans movements, especially when it comes to confronting the oppressive forces of the State and confronting intellectual oppression (BAKUNIN, 1975). So, using an anarchist theoretical framework, we present certain intersections between anarchism and trans movements, with the concept of tranarchism, as stated by Herman (2015).

On pathologization and institutional violence

Elis L. Herman (2015) reviews the “tranarchist literature,” studies that associate transgenderity with anarchy. Herman disagrees with an inherent relationship between being trans and being an-

archist, arguing that such an assimilation would require an exact definition of transsexuality — something undesirable, given the plurality of trans existences. However, the author recognizes the transgression and subversion in gender dissidence, as well as its historical resistance to State violence. According to Herman (Idem, p. 78), “gender non-conforming people have a rich history of resisting state oppression”. Pointing out cisgenderity and its norms inside and outside academia reaches the heart of libertarian opposition to intellectual oppression. In light of this, we conceive so-called tranarchism as an extension of these libertarian strands, as a recognition of trans movements that confront institutional violence. In our analysis, our focus centers on institutionalized sites of knowledge production. In order to understand tranarchism from this point of view, it is necessary to understand our object of critique — cishnormativity in academia.

European and North American biomedicine/psychiatry in the mid-20th century was characterized by the emergence of the terms ‘transsexualism’, ‘transvestism’ and ‘transsexuality’. Since the 1960s, the ‘transsexual phenomenon’ has been named in reference to diagnoses of transsexuality. The impact of these elaborations on the lives of trans people is clear: at the same time as making it possible to institutionalize medical care for hormone therapy and surgical procedures — considered, even today, to be ‘transsexualizing’ — an ‘ideal model’ of ‘trans individual’ is established. In general terms, “trans individuals had their narratives reduced to the ‘transsexual condition’; their anguish, psychic suffering and other conflicts were attributed to transsexuality” (Pfeil, 2023, p. 4).

As one stage in this process, the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association was founded during the second half of the 20th century. In the 1980s, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), now in its eleventh version, and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), now in its fifth version, included transsexuality among their lists of pathologies and disorders. And in 2008, Brazil’s public healthcare system instituted

the different and imposes itself authoritatively in order to legitimize the Law. The fragility of the law is revealed by exposing the existence of an intellectual oppression that pushes us to the ‘outside’ of universities, since our presence on the ‘inside’ is far too damaging. If Malatesta (2009, p. 04) defines a government as “[...] an authoritarian organism which, by force, even if it is for good ends, imposes its own will on others”, it is clear that trans movements oppose precisely the imposition of gender and sexuality norms — which, as we have seen, are reiterated by the forces of the State.

Our preferred definition of tranarchism would elucidate the proximity between anarchist principles and trans emancipation strategies. Another concept that stands out in this proposition is self-determination. If, as Pfeil (2020, p. 146) writes, “the freedom of a people is its capacity to govern itself, in the anarchist perspective, to define its own future, then the freedom of a body is its capacity to self-determine [...]”. Self-determination is dear to both trans movements, in the sense that we do not need institutional legitimization to affirm who we are, and anarchist movements.

Tranarchism highlights individual and collective self-determination as a fundamental trait in the struggle for liberation. As Bakunin understood that one’s freedom is not limited, but expands with the freedom of others, likewise we understand that one’s self-determination only expands with the self-determination of others. Not surprisingly, mutual support is notable among trans movements in LGBTIAP+ shelters, autonomous care initiatives, orientation programs to facilitate access to health care and the modification of documents (Idem, 2020).

Just as, according to Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin (1993, p. 23), “Anarchists believe the first step toward self-determination and the Social revolution is Black control of the Black community”, the same is reflected in trans movements for social emancipation and combating State violence. Despite these remarks, Jeppesen & Nazar (2012) observe a scission between feminist/queer anarchisms and a

It is not uncommon for insurgencies by trans movements to be dismissed as violent, as attacks on society or on the heterosexual bourgeois family. However, a distinction must be made between State violence and revolutionary violence — the latter being a form of self-defense. When Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera threw bricks at New York police officers during the StoneWall Riot (1969), they were defending themselves against the everyday racist and sexist violence that prevented them from freely walking the streets of the city. Not surprisingly, numerous trans movements with political strategies aligned with revolutionary anarchist ideals, especially self-determination, direct action and mutual support (Kropotkin, n.d.), emerged and/or received greater visibility after 1969. Furthermore, the naming of cisgenderity is a clear affront to this institutional power. If, until the mid-1990s, the antagonism of transsexuality was normality, from that moment on, with the term ‘cisgenderity’, this antagonism dissolved — and this term was rejected by scientific academia, especially in gender studies. The transfeminist movement was largely responsible for introducing the concept of cisgenderity in Brazil, motivating the union of countless trans organizations against intellectual oppression.

Intellectual oppression, for Bakunin, seemed to be one of the most arduous to overcome, for what determines an individual’s intellectual capacity are scientific academies whose institutional power exceeds the individual’s power to question them. It is this same institutional power that determines what ‘true’ transsexuality is, in its numerous and biased diagnostic criteria. The direction that trans movements adopt in relation to scientific academies is not to claim legitimacy or freedom, because “the one who restrains is just as trapped as the one whose movements are hindered by the ropes” (Preciado, 2020, n.p.).

It would not be coherent to plead for freedom, as freedom should not be granted, since it is, according to Bakunin, indivisible. By naming cisgenderity, we confront an academy that determines dichotomies between the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’, which inferiorizes

the Transsexualization Process, based on the diagnostic criteria set out in the ICD, signed by the World Health Organization, and the DSM, signed by the American Psychiatric Association.

If, on the one hand, transsexuality was conceptualized as a pathology within academia, under the legitimacy of cisgender doctors, sexologists and psychoanalysts, cisgenderity, on the other hand, was conceptualized in the late 1990s, within autonomous trans movements, without institutional legitimacy, on the outside of mainstream academia. At no point in the history of the ICD and DSM is it possible to find definitions of heterosexuality and cisgenderity — not even before 1990, when homosexuality was still included in the ICD. The norm does not name itself, but names the ‘other’, in contrast to which the ‘self’ is constituted. The expression of the cisgender and heterosexual norm — or, in short, cisheteronormativity — is identified by Bento (2006) in the protocols that regulate trans ambulatories both in Brazil and abroad.

Elis L. Herman observes how this normativity operates in highly guarded spaces, such as airports and border highways; these are spaces in which trans bodies are constantly subjected to scrutiny, having to validate their gender identities, or camouflage themselves, ‘disappear’ into the crowd, so as not to be barred for possessing an ID that doesn’t match the ‘truth’ of their sex/gender. These are material demonstrations of a norm that, while subjective, is expressed quite objectively and violently in the name of the security of the national State, the protection of the traditional family, or the reaffirmation of a scientific knowledge that is considered to be neutral.

By questioning the norm and affirming that the “Self” is nothing more than an “other”; by pointing out the bias of scientific knowledge; by identifying the socially constructed and normative character of cisgenderity and heterosexuality, one often encounters reactions of rejection and denial. Pfeil & Pfeil (2022) describe this phenomenon as the offense of naming, as when a trans individ-

ual names cisgenderity, thereby denaturalizing it, it is common for cisgenderity to be offended at being removed from its perceived position of normality. The naturalization of the cisgender and heterosexual body, as well as the white and non-disabled body (MELLO AND NUERNBERG, 2013), is institutionally supported, so that any attempt at denaturalization is seen as a threat to scientific authority. The academic assumption of impartiality in the production of knowledge comes up against trans narratives that reveal the cishnormative, patriarchal and culturally imbricated bias in the diagnosis of 'transsexualism' – or, as it currently appears in the ICD-11, 'gender incongruence'. Considering such institutional domination over the notion of transsexuality and its material implications, it seems appropriate to carry out an anarchist critique of intellectual oppression, since it is due to this oppression that trans individuals have never been considered researchers in academia, but rather objects of psychiatric and psychoanalytic elaborations on transsexuality.

On tranarchism and intellectual oppression

In November 2019, at the École de la Cause Freudienne's annual conference in Paris, Paul B. Preciado presented a speech to around 3,500 psychoanalysts. By stating "Can the monster speak?", Preciado (2020, n.p.) invited an academy of psychoanalysts to recognize the norms that psychoanalysis produces and reproduces, despite its subversive character in relation to modern biomedicine/psychiatry. In his words, "it is the normative heterosexual psychoanalysts who urgently need to come out of the closet of the norm". Preciado poses as a trans body,

to whom neither medicine, nor the law, nor psychoanalysis, nor psychiatry recognize the right to speak with expert knowledge about my own condition, nor the possibility of producing a discourse or a form of knowledge about myself. (Idem, n.p.)

Preciado's critique is addressed to academic rigour which, despite claiming to be neutral, operates as an exclusionary instrument that nullifies knowledges produced by 'others'. No wonder, then, that during his speech, several of the psychoanalysts in the auditorium began to react verbally and to turn their backs and leave, refusing to exercise what underpins the psychoanalytic clinic – that of listening. This is the expression of Otherness (Kilomba, 2019), associated with the idea of Other (Morrison, 2019), whereby the modern self grants itself the ability – or the authority – to inferiorize the one it designates as Other.

It is worth wondering whether, during the drafting of the ICDs and DSMs, the trans individuals taken as research objects had a voice in defining transsexuality, or in conceptualizing cisgenderity in the official documents. Similarly to the national State defending its fictional borders with militarism and legislation, biomedical knowledge materializes, in its official documents and care protocols, the naturalization of cisgenderity and the pathologization of transsexuality. An example of this is the current Brazilian legislation up until 2018, according to which, in order for a trans person to change their name and sex on their civil documents, they had to present psychiatric and psychological reports attesting to their transsexuality.

As Bakunin (1975, p. 48) pointed out, "what is true for scientific academies is equally true for all constituent and legislative assemblies". Only on the basis of pathology would a non-normative gender identity be legitimized. Another example of universalist science being used to legitimize State violence is Operation Tarantula, which took place in 1987, when police forces took to the streets of downtown São Paulo (Brazil) to arrest transvestite sex workers, claiming, although without any evidence, that they were committing the crime of venereal HIV infection. This is 'scientific' knowledge being used to legitimize institutional violence against trans people.