

Strengthening Anarchism's Gender Analysis

Lessons From The Transfeminist Movement

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Transfeminism developed out of a critique of the mainstream and radical feminist movements. The feminist movement has a history of internal hierarchies. There are many examples of women of color, working class women, lesbians and others speaking out against the tendency of the white, affluent- dominated women's movement to silence them and overlook their needs. Instead of honoring these marginalized voices, the mainstream feminist movement has prioritized struggling for rights primarily in the interests of white affluent women. While the feminist movement as a whole has not resolved these hierarchal tendencies, various groups have continued to speak up regarding their own marginalization – in particular, transgendered women. The process of developing a broader understanding of systems of oppression and how they interact has advanced feminism and is key to building on the theory of anarchist feminism.

Transfeminism builds on the work that came out of the multiracial feminist movement, and in particular, the work of Black feminists. Frequently, when confronted with allegations of racism, classism, or homophobia, the women's movement dismisses these issues as divisive. The more prominent voices promote the idea of a homogenous "universal female experience," which, as it is based on commonality between women, theoretically promotes a sense of sisterhood. In reality, it means pruning the definition of "woman" and trying to fit all women into a mold reflecting the dominant demographic of the women's movement: white, affluent, heterosexual, and non-disabled. This "policing" of identity, whether conscious or not, reinforces systems of oppression and exploitation. When women who do not fit this mold have challenged it, they have frequently been accused of being divisive and disloyal to the sisterhood. The hierarchy of womanhood created by the women's movement reflects, in many ways, the dominant culture of racism, capitalism and heteronormativity.

Mainstream feminist organizing frequently tries to find the common ground shared by women, and therefore focuses on what the most vocal members decide are "women's issues" – as if the female experience existed in vacuum outside of other forms of oppression and exploitation. However, using an intersectional approach to analyzing and organizing around oppression, as advocated by multiracial feminism and transfeminism, we can discuss these differences rather than dismiss them. The multiracial feminist movement developed this approach, which argues that one cannot address the position of women without also addressing their class, race, sexuality, ability, and all other aspects of their identity and experiences. Forms of oppression and exploita-

tion do not exist separately. They are intimately related and reinforce each other, and so trying to address them singly (i.e. “sexism” divorced from racism, capitalism, etc) does not lead to a clear understanding of the patriarchal system. This is in accordance with the anarchist view that we must fight all forms of hierarchy, oppression, and exploitation simultaneously; abolishing capitalism and the state does not ensure that white supremacy and patriarchy will be somehow magically dismantled.

Tied to this assumption of a “universal female experience” is the idea that that if a woman surrounds herself with those that embody that “universal” woman, then she is safe from patriarchy and oppression. The concept of “women’s safe spaces” (being women-only) date back to the early lesbian feminist movement, which was largely comprised of white, middle-class women who prioritized addressing sexism over other forms of oppression. This notion that an all-women space is inherently safe not only discounts the intimate violence that can occur between women, but also ignores or de-prioritizes the other types of violence that women can experience; racism, poverty, incarceration and other forms of state, economic and social brutality.

The Transfeminist Manifesto states: “Transfeminism believes that we construct our own gender identities based on what feels genuine, comfortable and sincere to us as we live and relate to others within given social and cultural constraint.”¹ The notion that gender is a social construct is a key concept in transfeminism, and are also essential (no pun intended) to an anarchist approach to feminism. Transfeminism also criticizes the idea of a “universal female experience” and argues against the biologically essentialist view that one’s gender is defined by one’s genitalia. Other feminisms have embraced the essentialist argument, seeing the idea of “women’s unity” as being built off a sameness, some kind of core “woman-ness.” This definition of woman is generally reliant on what is between a person’s legs. Yet what specifically about the definition of woman is intrinsic to two X chromosomes? If it is defined as being in possession of a womb, does that mean women who have had hysterectomies are somehow less of a woman? Perhaps, if we reduce the definition of “woman” to the role of child-bearer. That seems rather antithetical to feminism. Gender roles have long been under scrutiny in radical communities. The idea that women are born to be mothers, are more sensitive and peaceful, are predisposed to wearing the color pink and all the other stereotypes out there are socially constructed, not biological. If the (repressive) gender role does not define what a woman is, and if the organs one is born with do not define gender either, the next logical step is to recognize that gender can only be defined by the individual, for themselves. While this concept may cause some to panic, that does not make it any less legitimate with regards to a person’s identity.

It is important to note that not all transgender people chose to physically transition, and that each person’s decision to do so or not is their own. The decision is highly personal and generally irrelevant to theoretical conceptions of gender. There are many reasons to physically change one’s body, from getting a haircut to taking hormones. Some reasons might be to feel more at ease in a world with strict definitions of male and female. Another is to look in the mirror and see on the outside (the popular understanding of) the gender one feels on the inside. Surely, for some, it is the belief that gender is defined by the physical construction of one’s genitalia. But rather than draw from speculation as to the motivations for the personal decisions of trans people (as if they were not vast and varied), it is more productive to note the challenge to the idea that biology is destiny.

¹ The Transfeminist Manifesto by Emi Koyama (2000)

Thus far, gender and feminist theory that includes trans experiences exists almost solely in academia. There are very few working class intellectuals in the field, and the academic language used is not particularly accessible to the average person. This is unfortunate, since the issues that transfeminism addresses affect all people. Capitalism, racism, the state, patriarchy and the medical field mediate the way everyone experiences gender. There is a significant amount of coercion employed by these institutions to police human experiences, which applies to everyone, trans and non-trans alike. Capitalism and the state play a very direct role in the experiences of trans people. Access to hormones and surgery, if desired, costs a significant amount of money, and people are often forced to jump through bureaucratic hoops in order to acquire them. Trans people are disproportionately likely to be members of the working and under classes. However, within the radical queer and transfeminist communities, while there may be discussions of class, they are generally framed around identity – arguing for “anti-classist” politics, but not necessarily anti-capitalist.

The concepts espoused by transfeminism help us understand gender, but there is a need for the theory to break out of academia and to develop praxis amongst the working class and social movements. This is not to say that there are no examples of transfeminist organizing, but rather that there needs to be an incorporation of transfeminist principles into broad based movements. Even gay and lesbian movements have a history of leaving trans people behind. For example, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act does not protect gender identity. Again we see a hierarchy of importance; the gay and lesbian movement compromises (throwing trans folks under the bus), rather than employing an inclusive strategy for liberation. There is frequently a sense of a “scarcity of liberation” within reformist social movements, the feeling that the possibilities for freedom are so limited that we must fight against other marginalized groups for a piece of the pie. This is in direct opposition to the concept of intersectionality, since it often requires people to betray one aspect of their identity in order to politically prioritize another. How can a person be expected to engage in a fight against gender oppression if it ignores or worsens their racial oppression? Where does one aspect of their identity and experiences end and another begin? Anarchism offers a possible society in which liberation is anything but scarce. It provides a theoretical framework that calls for an end to all hierarchies, and, as stated by Martha Ackelsberg, “It offers a perspective on the nature and process of social revolutionary transformation (e.g. the insistence that means must be consistent with ends, and that economic issues are critical, but not the only source of hierarchal power relations) that can be extremely valuable to/ for women’s emancipation.”²

Anarchists need to be developing working class theory that includes an awareness of the diversity of the working class. The anarchist movement can benefit from the development of a working class, anarchist approach to gender issues that incorporates the lessons of transfeminism and intersectionality. It is not so much a matter of asking anarchists to become active in the transfeminist movement as it is a need for anarchists to take a page from the *Mujeres Libres* and integrate the principles of (trans)feminism into our organizing within the working class and social movements. Continuing to develop contemporary anarchist theory of gender rooted in the working class requires a real and integrated understanding of transfeminism.

This article neglects to address another important concept: the idea that biological sex is somewhat socially constructed as well. Given the high prevalence of intersex folks, it is worth re-

² Lessons from the Free Women of Spain an interview with Martha Ackelsberg by Geert Dhont (2004)

evaluating whether or not there are only two supposed biological sexes. This is a whole additional discussion, and one that would require a bit more research. Recommended sites for more information are www.isna.org and www.eminism.org.

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