

Relationship Anarchy and its Discontents

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Once considered the cool, edgy version of polyamory, a sort of polyam++, relationship anarchy is increasingly coming under scrutiny because it is being used to justify a specific kind of harmful behavior in relationships.

This behavior is probably best described in blunt terms: (mostly) cis guys are fucking around with (mostly) femmes, and disconnecting from them the moment there's any mention of romantic feelings, hopes for a more entangled future, expressions of obligations or deepening responsibilities. These people are, basically, having sex with people for as long as it takes for their partner to develop an attachment, and then leaving them with no guilt or consideration because they're a self-proclaimed relationship anarchist, which means they're "not responsible for anyone else's feelings" and/or they "had already agreed on the level of connection that was going to happen" and/or they "don't believe in relationships that restrict autonomy in any way." As Zoe Belinsky focuses more on how autonomy is being used as a justification in her critique of RA: *"There are also those who think RA is mainly about personal autonomy, to such an extent that they truly believe that any person who asks for their emotional presence, or asks them to do emotional labor, or in general to attend to personal and emotional needs of other people, is perceived as infringing on that person's autonomy. 'I don't have to talk to you about your feelings because those are your responsibility, not mine'. I have seen them in queer subcultures, collecting the most vulnerable partners and jumping from relationship to relationship while those people slowly drift to the fringes, eventually realizing this person doesn't give a shit about them except as a sexual object. This isn't relationship ethics, it's relationship consumption. It doesn't produce community, but conditions of disposability."*

I agree with Belinsky's assertion that if enough people use "I'm a relationship anarchist" in this way, it suggests there is a serious problem with some part of the underlying ideology. RA can't be a useful value system if it leads people to feel justified in harming others. Unlike Belinsky, who jettisons the concept altogether in favor of something she calls "relationship communism", I believe that RA can be properly redefined. We can do this by having a clearer picture of what anarchism means before we start applying it to relationships. If we do this, we'll see that the majority of critiques of RA are actually criticizing one very specific kind of anarchism — the individualistic, *libertarian* type. This is the type that is accompanied by an absurd conception of personal autonomy. We can rescue RA from these selfish individualists by looking more closely at *social anarchism*. Understanding relationship social anarchism as distinct from relationship

libertarian anarchism (which I'll collapse to *relationship libertarianism* for brevity's sake) will allow us to keep the central insights of RA.

First, a recap: What makes RA a valuable perspective on relationships? The two key insights that RA brings to relationships are:

1. There are explicit and implicit structures of oppression and domination between individuals in relationships, and these ought to be made explicit, interrogated, and flattened wherever possible. Oppression and domination restrict personal agency, and *the promotion of agency is a core value of anarchism*.

2. Society also generates hierarchies and power structures between different types of relationships and encourages individuals to value monogamous, romantic, heterosexual connections (like the nuclear family) over all other types. *RA practitioners reject claims of objective value in relationships and demands that each individual has the right to prioritize any kind of connection they personally feel invested in*. Friendships, collaborations, sexual partnerships, domestic partnerships, and romantic connections (to name a few) are all equally appropriate sources of meaning and value in a person's life.

The main issues with relationship anarchy come from an individualistic reading of these two principles, which falls into line with libertarian thinking.

Obligation, oppression, and social norms

Relationship libertarians, in their pursuit of conditions that maximise their personal agency, interrogate power structures for oppression and domination because to be oppressed just means to have your possibilities restricted. The individualistic relationship libertarian wants to remove these oppressive systems because they want more power over their own life, and for them, this means removing as many restrictions as possible, including feelings of personal obligation.

One way this happens in an RA framework is by asserting that social norms around relationships and life trajectories don't apply to them without their consent. There is no legitimate obligation to form a monogamous connection with another person, marry and raise children, just social pressures that should be resisted and actively subverted. In doing this, everyone becomes more free as they are no longer trammled into one narrative of the successful life.

"The liberty of man consists solely in this, that he obeys the laws of nature because he has himself recognized them as such, and not because they have been imposed upon him externally by any foreign will whatsoever, human or divine, collective or individual." – Mikhail Bakunin

Feeling obligated also restricts the sense of possibility – if I promised to do something, I'm going to feel bad if I choose not to do it, and likely suffer some social consequences that further restrict my possibilities in the future, like the loss of affinity or respect from whoever I made the promise to.

It's easy enough to see how highly individualistic readings of obligation and oppression overlap, such that feeling obligated as such turns into a feeling of oppression. Many self-proclaimed relationship anarchists therefore seek to feel as few obligations as possible, and in the worst case they do this by refusing to take responsibility for how the people they are connected to feel *as a direct result of their actions*, as Belinsky points out above.

Autonomy and the free market

Underlying this anxiety about being made to feel less free is a conception of the best people as "rugged individualists" – autonomy describes a kind of sovereign, self-possessed rationality

that is inborn into all of us and that gets diluted the more we get drawn into the world of society and its obligations. A valuable world for these libertarian anarchists is a world where we can exercise our agency fully, except for minimal laws that allow for negotiation within free markets of ideas and connections as well as goods and services.

Social anarchists and libertarian anarchists disagree over the possibility of free markets. The former argue that a free market is a fiction — any personal property will ultimately create power imbalances. The latter claim that if we can get away from systemic oppression, the free market allows people to enter negotiations that should benefit everyone. A truly free market is founded on transparency and consent — nobody gets more or less than they bargained for, and everyone is in a position to bargain based on what they as an individual can demand and supply. If an individual wants more than they have, they should rely upon themselves to get it.

Relationship libertarians apply the same free-market ideals. Emotions and time are best thought of as property that an individual owns and has the right to dispose of as they see fit, including exchanging it for other desirable experiences (like sex or other shared intimacies). Interfering with my choices in how I dispose of my emotional resources, the argument goes, is restricting my autonomy. Such interference should, therefore, never happen without my explicit and negotiated consent. If I ask for nothing but a loose connection and occasional sex from you, and you agree now but then later express an expectation that I regularly listen to you talk about challenging things in your life, you've failed to honor our deal. You're asking for more than I agreed to give you. Worse, you're trying to restrict my agency by placing a sense of obligation on me, which as we've seen, is basically the same as oppression for relationship libertarians.

Seeing autonomy as a kind of property leads to a commodification of interpersonal relationships. Murray Bookchin made a similar point in 1968:

“Capitalism, far from affording “privileges” to the middle classes, tends to degrade them more abjectly than any other stratum in society. The system deploys its capacity for abundance to bring the petty bourgeois into complicity with his own oppression—first by turning him into a commodity, into an object for sale in the marketplace; next by assimilating his very wants to the commodity nexus....Bourgeois society has brought all relations between people to the highest point of abstraction by divesting them of their human content and dealing with them as objects. The object—the commodity—takes on roles that formerly belonged to the community; exchange relationships (actualized in most cases as money relationships) supplant nearly all other modes of human relationships.”
— Murray Bookchin, *Post-scarcity Anarchism*

Social anarchists are suspicious of the idea of a free market. Freedom for individuals has to be part for freedom for everyone — as Bookchin explains, although revolutions have to start from and never lose the action of the individual self, selfish individuals can't create the conditions of freedom for everyone. Only a community can ensure that agency is maximized for those of us with fewer resources. The conception of autonomy that inspires this kind of anarchism is fundamentally more hospitable to ideas like relationality, interdependence, and mutuality than is the individualism of libertarians.

Both libertarians and social anarchists agree that the cis-heteronormative, monogamous, amorous norms and values society enforces around our interpersonal relationships are oppressive and a barrier to human freedom and flourishing.

Relationship anarchists do not see them as oppressive simply because they are a non-consensual set of obligations, as relationship libertarians do. Instead, RA practitioners reject these norms because they limit freedom and because they are barriers to creating new intima-

cies and support systems that align better with individuals' and communities' definitions of flourishing.

The revolutionary potential of RA

The libertarian flavor of RA is not only theoretically flawed, its revolutionary potential is bankrupt. All it does is allow people to translate the worst parts of free market capitalism into their personal lives, under an alluring banner of “anarchy.” No wonder it’s so popular among cis het techbros who believe, incredibly, that their individual intelligence and hard work alone is responsible for them “deserving” six-figure Silicon Valley salaries.

Relationship libertarians can practice their version of relationship anarchism with little effort in the Bay Area. Housing options make it relatively easy to live alone (albeit in a shared dwelling) or with a group of people; religion has relatively little social impact, and more people than ever are identifying as non-monogamous. There’s not much for relationship libertarians to do to secure the conditions of their individual agency, except assert their personal boundaries and demand that their connections ask for no more than they are given. There’s an ironic tension between the RA claim that love is abundant (and therefore it doesn’t matter if I take it away from you, because you can just get more from someone else) but autonomy is fragile, limited, and under constant assault, such that it needs to be protected even from the incursions and obligations of love.

To realize the possibility of relationship anarchism requires a revolution along the same lines that social anarchism does — based on co-creation, mutual aid, and recognizing that we’re not free as a given or a state of nature. We need a radical departure from the isolationist ethics of libertarian RA; one that actively strives to create the conditions of agency for everyone. That means voluntarily taking on obligations to care for each other, share our resources, and show up even when it’s harder than you expected.

Within queer communities especially, we need to recognize that we are all constantly shaping the environment around us and the experiences of others as well as ourselves. We are, in a very real sense, responsible for everyone’s feelings including our own. Other people and the obligations they make us feel don’t represent an assault on our agency, they are necessary for us to co-create it.

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