

On “Monogamy”

Rotten Zucchini

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The other day, in the midst of some anti-monogamy critique (that was described to a baby anarchist as “pushing the envelope”), someone asked me what I meant by “monogamy”. I ended up spelling it out in a lot of detail.

TLDR:

- Monogamy is the framework that constructs people-as-property (with all its implications) as well as the structuring of society around “couples”.
- The one-and-only one aspect of romantic/sexual relationships most commonly labelled “monogamy” is the most superficial manifestation of that “institution”.
- Polyamorous or otherwise “non-monogamous” practices that continue to treat people-as-property (just with slightly different access rules) and which centre “couples” are participating in / enacting Monogamy’s institutions just like nominally “monogamous” relationships/practices do.
- Monogamy is inherently coercive but alternatives aren’t necessarily less coercive.

What is monogamy?

Monogamy is set of institutions, practices and social structures centred around:

- privileging sets of dyadic romantic/sexual relationships
 - that are placed atop a hierarchy of value (and presumed intimacy) as the “One Important Relationship” people normatively should have
- and invoking various restrictions, obligations and entitlements governing partners’ behaviour toward each other and others in the goal of protecting that “One Important Relationship” from various “threats” (typically posed by “less important” relationships)

Monogamy frames relationship-mates and their social/emotional resources as the “property” of the other partner, wherein they might “owe” each other or “be entitled to” from each other certain levels of emotional support / attention / resources, etc. This includes the construction of people’s bodies as the legitimate “property” of their relationship counterpart, wherein they might “owe” (or be “entitled to”) sexual access to their counterpart’s body. (Those kinds of obligations and entitlements make genuine consent impossible, even before conversations about how desires are constructed and by what social pressures, expectations and regulatory “punishments” etc.)

Restricting the behaviour of relationship-mates toward other people ensures that their “resources” will not be “siphoned away” from their “legitimate owner” (i.e., their partner). Under this system, relationship-mates are limited to having all romantic, sexual and intimacy needs strictly from each other (setting people up to be overly-dependent on each other for the fulfilment of basic social needs), and conversely, they are held responsible for meeting these needs for their relationship-mates.

(This is extremely isolating and creates a situation of artificial scarcity of intimacy, while also preventing people from seeking intimacy through other avenues, including through friendships, while directly devaluing non-romantic forms of intimacy. There are some exceptions made for

non-romantic intimacy which functions to support exclusive couples and help people survive the normative emotional poverty of coupledness, especially hetero-coupledness— for example, the trope of sisters or “girl friends” providing each other the emotional support that their husbands don’t provide and which renders their marriages tolerable or even “happy”.)

“Cheating” is therefore a matter of either:

1. a relationship-mate sharing access to their own body and emotional resources with someone other than their stated partner (which “cheats” the partner in question out of being able to fully access those “resources” that “belong” to them)
2. a relationship-mate sharing in someone else’s emotional resources or access to that person’s body (in ways that might meet certain desires or needs and therefore undermine the isolation-caused dependence involved in the first partnership, thereby potentially “disincentivising” that one relationship-mate to remain as committed to the first partner(ship) in an imbalanced way compared with their partner whose dependence upon that relationship remains unchanged)

This translates in practice to a 1-on-1 relationship structure that is not only exclusive of other people but more importantly where rules and restrictions are in place to keep things in that 1-on-1 setup. And in this respect, society—in all aspects, from state institutions and sanctions to community norms— is structured around monogamous partnerships as the only form of “legitimate” intimate/important relationships for adults, around which all “legitimate” adults are supposed to structure their lives (i.e., excluding people who are left out of adult personhood, for example, for reasons of disability and ableism).

Monogamy ascribes value to persons based on their “desirability” and/or ability to “attract and/or keep” a monogamous partner. Monogamy is deeply connected with constructions of the nuclear family and, in that, intimately tied in with capitalism through providing the basis for nuclear family consumer units. And monogamy is systemically used as a tool to uphold and enforce amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality, and the ways these systems are used to enact and justify racist and colonial agendas as well as rape culture. Monogamy is often also used as a tool to uphold the institution of heterosexuality as well as homonormativity.

Additionally, monogamy as a structure is nominally limited to focusing on romantic and/or sexual relationships since these are the only ones viewed as “significant” enough to pose substantive “threats”. By extension, “overly close” friendship (especially between people of different genders in a hetero context) are constructed as “unhealthy” or “destructive” because of their capacity to edge into romantic or sexual territory and ultimately pose a threat.

What is coercive and destructive about monogamy isn’t that it involves two people having one and only one significant romantic/sexual relationship in their life: it’s how individuals are framed as each others’ property, and how individuals enact structures and practices of restrictions, obligations and entitlements in order to preserve/protect/immortalise that relationship set-up.

Various approaches to “non-monogamy” (especially in forms of polyamory) reject the superficial manifestation of monogamy, namely its 1-on-1 exclusivity, while typically simultaneously avoiding any rejection of the things that make “Monogamy” coercive. Typically, “non-monogamy” merely changes *the terms* under which relationship-mates can behave while still remaining each other’s “property”— the terms under which they can “owe” or be “entitled to”

emotional support/attention/resources or sexual access to their bodies, etc. In other words, non-monogamy typically eschews only the *superficial manifestation* of Monogamy's deep framework which approaches people and their bodies and emotional energy/attention/resources, etc. as "legitimate property" of other people.

For example, under hierarchical non-monogamy, primary relationship-mates still *belong* to each other, but there are specific rules to govern the sharing of access to their resources and bodies— when, how, under what circumstances this access is "allowed", as well as what relationship-mates are "allowed" to tell or withhold from their primary relationship-mates about these encounters. Often there are even specific rules governing whether/how relationship-mates can weigh-in on or limit (i.e., have "veto power" over) each other's interactions with *other* people. (This is all with the goal of protecting the primary relationship from any potential threats and preserving its "primary status".)

[A real-life example was discussed in the context that prompted this conversation about a poly group having to enforce a rule against one (poly-inclined) partner in a monogamous relationship bringing their (monogamy-inclined) partner to a poly group in the for the purpose of having folks at the poly group work together to coerce the monogamous partner into "changing the rules" of the heretofore monogamous relationship. To be clear, that does not in any way challenge the framing of the partners as property of the other. Instead, it's using coercive tactics to try to "change the rules of access" governing people-as-property while explicitly accepting the framing of "people-as-property". Not only is that a problem from an individual-level coercion perspective (which is reason enough to avoid this behaviour!), but it's also non-sensical because it reinforces the very formulation that monogamy is based on in the first place!]

Non-hierarchical polyamory is explicitly based on rejecting the formulation of relationship-mates as each others' property (though it doesn't necessarily work that way in practice); however, it does typically accept and even actively welcomes the social structures that centre and privilege romantic/sexual relationships. It approaches monogamous structures with a reformist approach to them, aimed at broadening them just enough to allow for more than one set of romantic/sexual partnerships or romantic/sexual partnerships involving more than 2 people. It is assimilationist by its very nature. It doesn't aim for more radical changes, nor does it aim to abolish monogamous structures.

My objection to Monogamy

With that understanding that "monogamy" is fundamentally about so much other than two people who are romantically/sexually involved with each other and only each other— with the understanding that **the exclusivity that is the typical hallmark of "monogamy" is simply a superficial manifestation of much deeper structures of people as property which limit their behaviour according to pre-determined mutual obligations and entitlements...**

My problem with monogamy isn't about the situation of someone having one and only one partner of a certain type. And I would not describe a relationship as "monogamous" where people happen to be romantically/sexually (or otherwise intimately) involved with each other and only each other *and* where they are simultaneously actively resisting the partner-as-property construction and all its implications (including the imposition of obligations and entitlements).

But I also don't know how likely that is to actually happen, especially in a social context shaped by the institution of monogamy.

Also, to be clear, I'm not against people intentionally and voluntarily taking up commitments generally (as I've discussed before [hyperlink in original text])— it's just that I would not frame "commitments" in this context as a "contract". (i.e., A contract is a type of static, often-coercive agreement that exist under capitalism and other economic systems too with the goal of ensuring one party certain resources/services/access to things etc., typically in exchange for other resources/services/access to things by another party, etc. by limiting what people do in the future and promising to invoke some violent intervention— typically from the state— to enforce the terms of the contract if necessary). I'd want to see commitments framed as forms of communication— about communicating where people are at in relationships, etc. And I am extremely critical of ways that people might take up banners of "non-monogamy" or "relationship anarchy" to justify people with more power avoiding various types of commitments while rendering invisible a lot of taken-for-granted work that people with less power are still expected to do (as I've discussed before [hyperlink in original text]).

I am wary of the way people fall back onto liberal "to each their own" / "you do you" / "individual choice!" / "all choices are equally valid" default position when it comes to monogamy and critiques of monogamy. But even I have some difficulty navigating that in practice. While Monogamy is inherently coercive, alternatives to little-m monogamy— especially the ones that still rely on the institution of Monogamy's framing of person-as-property— are not necessarily any less coercive. And I recognise that resisting the institution of Monogamy and its framing of persons is very difficult to do. Not everyone can or wants to do that, and trying to force people into it will almost certainly incur more harm for them. But I also want to acknowledge that just by doing what people are doing "apolitically", they are reinforcing the current system and that has harmful consequences for other people too.

For example, within a social context centred on and structured around couples, it's not possible to be part of a "couple" and interact socially as "a couple" or as "part of a couple", and to enjoy the social access that goes along with that at the expense of the systematic devaluation of friendships and other forms of intimacy— to even accept a "plus 1" invitation without commentary— without contributing to the normalisation of the couple form. And while, strictly speaking, I do believe it would be theoretically possible for two people to be engaged in some sort of romantic relationship (whether or not it's also sexual in nature) with each other (and even only with each other) without that in any way being a "couple"... That's overwhelmingly not what people are doing when they're doing romantic relationships, especially when there are explicitly restrictions in placed on the relationship to keep it "exclusive".

Having said that, it's not always easy to tell by looking at a relationship from the outside whether those things are happening. Certainly people do need to be doing work to unpack whether they "want" to connect romantically/sexually (or otherwise intimately) with *only each other* **because** there aren't other potential connections available to them at the moment that would benefit their lives, **or because** they're actively shutting down any of those possibilities before they develop due to having internalised ways of behaving from existence in a monogamy-centred society and immersion within all Monogamy's institutions that construct & shape desires, etc. And I think people often behave and react along these lines without necessarily intending to. So the idea of a romantic/sexual (or otherwise intimate) relationship that is between two (and only two) people (who aren't connecting in those ways with other people)— especially if they

are taking any steps to make sure things stay that way... they're going to need to be working very hard to be actively resisting Monogamous structures (and if they're not, it's almost certainly Monogamy).

But also as a caveat, that doesn't mean that straying from the superficial manifestation of monogamy by engaging in multiple romantic/sexual relationships is participating any less in monogamy's framework of treating people as property and entailing certain predetermined obligations and entitlements. People can and often do enact Monogamy's destructive foundations when they're involved in (or open to or seeking) multiple romantic/sexual relationships— and the harm is often compounded in those situations for the simple reason that there are more people involved to hurt and get hurt.

What I'm going for isn't non-monogamy: it's anti-monogamy— a complete rejection of Monogamy's framing and foundations with respect to all things, including the limitation of focus to romantic and sexual relationships, and including the framing of persons-as-property.

What does that look like in practice?

Once the “couple” is completely de-centred and society is reorganised around other things to close the gap it leaves, friendships (no longer being actively devalued) will rise to fill a more primary role in people's lives. People will acknowledge and engage in intimacy within friendships that is rarely afforded the opportunity to be acknowledged or to thrive under the current system. With more intimacy from friendship and more substantive community connections (community is a big piece of this picture for me), people won't be so isolated and basically deprived of emotional connection. (I don't agree with the necessarily socially-busy post-revolution utopia that a lot of folks seem to assume is the goal or outcome of anti-monogamy— and I think it's straight-up ableist— but I do still think community and friendship will be part of that picture.)

Under those circumstances, I think many fewer people would choose to pursue romantic relationships at all (or even specifically strictly sexual relationships, because sexual intimacy wouldn't be partitioned off into the domain of romantic relationships or special “friends-with-benefits” relationships). I think some people will still do those relationships. And some people might still do very important relationships that are romantic (and sexual). And some people might even engage in only one (at a time?) and with someone else who is also only involved in that one (at that time?). And without the artificial scarcity of intimacy that the institution of Monogamy enforces, people likely won't be so dependent on these relationships, and won't be pulled to navigate artificially-created-scarcity by treating each other as property. And more importantly, without the entire system set up to push people in that direction and deny them basic intimacy and social needs from other avenues... that will be far less “overdetermined”. And within that context, a 1-on-1 romantic (possibly sexual) relationship where participants don't have other 1-on-1 romantic (possibly sexual) relationships wouldn't be “monogamy”.

The rejection of monogamy I'm talking about doesn't really “make sense” within a context that's still centred on “couples” (whether or not individuals are expected to be participating in 1 or more of them) *unless people are willing to start building alternatives from the ground up as they go* (which isn't for everyone). I do think there is harm in participating in monogamous practices beyond the harm that comes to the individuals directly relating to each other— on the level of how normalising harmful structures contributes to the harm those structures can ultimately effect.

But there are different kinds of harm and different degrees of contributing to them. For example, there is no ethical consumption under capitalism but that doesn't mean we can, for instance, either stop eating or start growing all our own food without causing harm in other ways. (And while monogamy doesn't enact harm on quite the same scale except insofar as it is deployed as tools of capitalism, white supremacy and so many other powerfully harmful systems—which is still a big deal!), there is no ethical relating under Monogamy. That doesn't mean we can't build alternatives— we can, even if the best we might be able to do (for now) are the metaphorical equivalent of temporary autonomous zones. **I think those alternatives are worth building.** But it can't be limited to individual choices. And individual choices aren't magically “apolitical” when they're about personal relationships.

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