

# Some Thoughts on the Failures of Relationship/Lifestyle Politics

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**Communism is a (never quite) total transformation of our relationship to our means of producing the world, our labor; the contribution of Marxist Feminisms, among other things, has been to demonstrate how our relationships with each other are a part of our means of producing the world. As such, our conceptualization and experience of relationships with each other are valid objects of communist political critique, ones that ought to be acted on, clarified, critically assessed, and mobilized as a resource for material practice.**

**What would it mean to bring a communist political perspective to bear on paradigms like Relationship Anarchy, polyamory, and other practices of non-monogamy that claim to critique or “subvert” hegemonic power relations as they play out in interpersonal relationships?**

**These are thoughts from a former “Relationship Anarchist” (and political anarchist) towards a conversation concerning a communist retrospective: here’s what I learned, here’s what I think needs to be improved. This document is an attempt at an immanent critique of RA principles as revolutionary principles. Fundamentally, I want to say that RA has severely overestimated its “subversive” or “radical” potential while failing to critically assess its own political intuitions about the world and apply those conclusions to its own self-reflective practices. Relationship anarchists share values**

with communist goals and communists in general; these values need to be assessed and politicized. As communists, we want better intuitions about how the world works, so that the path to transforming the world becomes clarified.

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In general, terminology and language alone will not save or liberate. Language is one sphere in which material struggle plays out, but struggle does not reduce to language or changes in language. One of the important merits of RA as a discursive paradigm is its fashioning a critical language to dissect and communicate needs, power dynamics, boundaries, consensual structures, and individual dignity and worth. But it cannot be claimed that merely *calling* yourself a “relationship anarchist” (or a “relationship communist,” or even a “communist,” for that matter) has political potential *in itself*. Indeed, those of us who practice non-monogamy frequently hear stories of the rhetoric of relationship anarchism and polyamory used to justify abuse, gaslighting, or evasion of interpersonal responsibilities. This is an inherent weakness of situating political struggle at the level of conceptuality; instead, we must ground our conceptualization in material practices. What follows is my own thoughts that are borne out through my own material practices with partners, comrades, and everyone in between. My hope is that by beginning this conversation, we can bring lessons learned

**to bear on our own practices and continue to think critically about the merits and shortcomings in them.**

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**What would it really mean to make revolutionary struggle the goal of a personal relationship? Not just to assert or believe this, but to truly ground one's practices in this goal and make it a driving force? Not to reduce oneself to a liberal lifestyle-ism, but to let this goal change your life and relationship to the world?**

**We must necessarily conclude that this goal would require us to look beyond the relationship itself, and ask about how that relationship is integrated into a broader political community. Relationship anarchism as I have seen it articulated cannot or will not do this.**

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**To put my cards on the table: in what follows I describe what I have come to understand as the ethics and conceptualization of Relationship Anarchism as it frequently conceives itself. This is a description of the kinds of ways I described RA as a one-time adherent.**

- RA is a paradigm for ethical and consensual relationships that are non-hierarchical, non-**

**oppressive, and non-monogamous. It refuses the value of heterosexual monogamy as a dominant relationship paradigm, and seeks to develop alternative relationship arrangements.**

- RA places its values in consent, in verbal or otherwise explicit communication and negotiation, and personal boundaries. At its best, it deploys powerful language (much of which is borrowed from feminist critiques of heterosexist patriarchy) such as emotional labor and its distribution among partners, independence/autonomy, self-determination, boundaries, consent, relationship values, mutuality, compromise, communication.**
- RA does not distinguish hierarchically between friendship, romance, platonic affection, or any other kind of relationship paradigm except insofar as such distinctions reflect a negotiated structure that is immanent to that relationship. In other words, RA relationships are not bound by any rules or distinctions that are not explicitly articulated and agreed upon by members of the relationship.**
- RA teaches that all relationships are unique, equally worthy of consideration and emotional presence; RA teaches that love is abundant or unlimited, and is not to be reserved for some unfairly at the expense of others (RA has roots in the earlier “free love” movement)**

- **RA values the autonomy and dignity and boundaries of individuals above all else. It places strong emphasis on consent, not just with respect to sexuality, but in all aspects of relationships.**

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**Overall, the above represents a powerful stand on relationship ethics that are certainly worthy of communist consideration. But this immediately raises the question of what kind of political commitments attend these values.**

**In my personal experience, I was always frustrated with many relationship anarchists who eschewed political anarchy, or indeed any kind of reflection on broader political goals. There is certainly an entire cadre of “relationship anarchists” who are primarily white and heterosexual, insist on banal “love is infinite” sloganisms and refuse to take the conversation any further. There are white men who apparently go around collecting relationships with thin, white women, and call it radical and subversive while lecturing queers and people of color who practice monogamy for not being “radical” enough. So needless to say fuck *that*.**

**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.**

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**However, my intention is not to point fingers at the ways RA as a paradigm is abused, or to unfairly critique it in terms of a few vocal and misguided adherents, but to think through its central concerns from a communist lens. I want to say that it is not a coincidence that RA is so readily used to justify abuse rhetoric, banal liberal identity politics and lifestyle-ism, and evasion of ethical responsibility towards the people who surround us.**

**Love is abundant, yes, but it is not infinite. It is a tragically finite political resource; as such, the ways and the people with whom we share love are just as important as the fact that we love at all. Love carries with it responsibilities.**

**There's valid political work to be done in fashioning a loving relationship among ourselves. And that obligation and labor simply cannot be recognized and carried out in a paradigm that pretends to believe its own clichés about love as a way of disavowing the radically contingent, situated, contextual, interpersonal, social, economic, and political structures by which love is permitted or constrained.**

**As communists, we take these constraints as part of the problem of relations of (re)production and the economic system of private ownership. We do not just interpret the world, but set out to change it. Without an articulation of not only the norms but the economic forces that constrain love, RA can never hope to make them the object of political struggle.**

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**Second, the notion that each relationship is unique and needs to be given individual determination fails to note the ways in which broader political and communitarian relationships come to bear on each individual partnership or friendship. RA relationships determine themselves from the 'inside' out, by focusing on the autonomy and uniqueness of each relationship taken as a given. As communists, we recognize that interpersonal relationships already reflect the relations of the community (whatever**



**you want to call it), and as such are constrained and determined from the ‘outside’ before they can even exist.**

**Relationships are not atomic ethical units, and not all concerns reduce to singular relationships. As communists, we recognize the broader stakes in each relationship as it reflects our needs, values, and political struggle. The dignity of the individual relationship and the individual herself are indeed communist concerns, but they are situated in context and understood to be radically and fundamentally communal and political in nature.**

**Communism values the individual by bringing her into a collective movement for collective power. The individual is not the beginning but the end of communist struggle.**

**Individual autonomy can only exist with a change in relations of production.**

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**Many relationship anarchists (and you can count my past self among them) exhibit a knee-jerk reaction to and fear of structure. However, many strive beyond this to find ways to make structure explicit, consensual, negotiated and negotiable, and subject to development and change. However, even this striving is insufficient insofar as it remains constrained to the hyper-individualist paradigm of that particular relationship. As communists, when we develop these interpersonal agreements and structures we**

**need to integrate them with each other, rather than maintain their separation. The communities of care and support that surround and sustain communist organizing exhibit a distributed responsibility towards all our comrades. The ways we work in solidarity and distribute and share the emotional labor, the labor of caring for each other in times of need, and indeed our economic relationships to each other, are of fundamental importance (and no doubt many communists fail in this regard, too).**

**Relationship anarchy's focus on the individual and her autonomy fails to approach more structural and strategic questions of long-term organizing: how are we to raise children? How do we ensure that our political movement is sustained across generations and maintains an inter-generational memory? How do we pedagogically orient ourselves towards struggles of the future? What kinds of bonds between comrades best sustain our political engagement? RA is unfit to even ask any of these questions. Indeed, while I have found RA principles tactically useful in navigating interpersonal conflict and maintaining consensual conversations about individual relationships, I have found it to be totally lacking in strategic resources about more profound change, particularly in thinking about domestic arrangements and cohabitation, group living and sharing of economic resources, child rearing and pedagogy, issues that strike me as central to a sustained proletarian movement.**

**In the past sections I have been challenging relationship anarchy to come to terms with communist strategies for the realization of the values that RA holds, and also to note the way these values are coopted or go astray. I have posed some far-reaching questions in order to provoke a discussion of the uses and inadequacies of this paradigm on communist grounds. But RA also fails on its own terms and even with the best of intentions.**

**To demonstrate this failure, it is enough to center the ways RA's lack of attentiveness to communitarian concerns and economics of support and care networks can be fatal to realization of relationship anarchists' ability to negotiate healthy relationships. Consider a relationship with someone who is impoverished, and who is socially isolated. This person could be queer or trans and cut off from familial systems of support. Lacking such support and networks of concern, this person will have tremendous needs and yet a very narrow venue for meeting those needs. According to RA, I can still ethically maintain this relationship by establishing emotional boundaries and being explicit about my own needs and the limits of my abilities to care for that person. But this quickly becomes impossible.**

**Hegemonic monogamy fails because it constrains support, care, emotional labor, and reproductive labor (including domestic labor, housework, cleaning, and sexual labor) to a single relationship. This requires an overwhelming level of accountability to a single person's needs. Relationship anarchy similarly fails because it does not attend to the need of the individual for a community, a distributed network of support. No one can be everything to someone else. And it is not enough to say "I can't support you in all the ways you need right now," insofar as this ignores the fact that those needs are created and sustained through social isolation and exclusion, which highlights the need for a transformation of society in order to sufficiently support the individual.**

**Further, one does not need to be totally isolated for this problem to arise. In general, RA does not attend to the ways in which the needs of individuals are realized communally, and considers its introspective account of ethical relationships sufficient to address these needs. "I can't meet that need, so go find someone else to meet it" is an insufficient response to the needs of individuals. Our responsibilities for each other extend to forging the kind of communal contexts that can *actually* support and sustain healthy relationships. A dismissive hand wave or throwing one's arms in the air are not a sufficient response to this problem. We must assess the limiting factors of the realization of the distributed needs, responsibilities, and**

**labor of care and support in our communities, and act on these factors directly.**

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**My relationships and my community are not separate. My obligations to others extend beyond the people I'm fucking. My feelings of love, including romantic affection, are a basis and resource for building community and communism, not just relationships. These feelings and values must be assessed and politicized towards building revolutionary communism.**

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**Relationship anarchy entails that no relationship or group of relationships is privileged above others. In RA, I can have just as “ethical” a relationship with my spouse as with my boss. Communism rejects this as obviously absurd. In RA, there can be no “in” versus “out” group in terms of those who are committed to particular relationship structures and those who are not. Theoretically I can navigate relationships equally and ethically no matter who they are with, according to RA. Further, I'm obligated to do so.**

**“Relationship communism,” on the other hand, would respond that there is a need to draw a line between those**

**existentially and politically committed to the survival of the proletarian movements in which we find ourselves, and those who are not. Communism sees that there are those fundamentally opposed to our flourishing as human beings and our loving relationships to one another insofar as they are sustained by a commitment to building communism.**

**I feel more and more strongly the need to ask people whether or not they can ‘commit’ (a very scary word in RA) — not to ‘me’, or to a particular relationship style, but to a way of life we co-create together. It is not enough for relationships to be consensual, though we must strive towards consent in all aspects of our life among ourselves and our comrades. But the bourgeoisie will not consent to being systematically divested of their tools of subjugation, nor will the police and military consent to having their machinery of domination occupied, their prisons abolished, and their organizing structure and function disbanded.**

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**It is not enough to negatively reject dominant relationship paradigms, or distance ourselves from the most blatant features of heterosexist norms (such as monogamy) in order to be “radical”. There is a need to create positive alternatives. As communists we have a responsibility not only to each other but to the world — we affirm**

**communism as that economic system that best sustains all the values that relationship anarchy holds dear. But these positive alternatives cannot be practiced on an individual basis. There must be a sustained and distributed responsibility to support and care for each other.**

**In the place of relationship anarchy's emphasis on non-hierarchical relationships, I posit a communist commitment to "care" for those among us (perhaps including ourselves) severely lacking in resources; in the place of RA's emphasis on individual autonomy, I posit the recognition of our radical dependence on each other.**

*"In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly — only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" (Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program)*

**Relationship anarchy's failure to assess its own values critically and to discover the material means to their realization in communism makes it vulnerable to a liberal**

**cooptation and betrayal of those values. Here, I have systematically outlined the distance between Relationship Anarchism and “Relationship Communism,” making clear the goals, values, and practices that necessitate a more developed departure from functional relationship norms, in terms of a materialist analysis of how those relationships are economically and politically situated. In conclusion, “Relationship Communism” as a counter to RA is nothing more than communism itself.**

**It is possible that RA as a paradigm could accommodate itself to these realizations; it is possible that RA does the work for some that I found impossible for myself. Labels are not to be confused with politics. Nonetheless, I hope this document can start a conversation about how to better structure relationships in terms of communist goals.**

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**In critiquing RA, I have emphasized its values as a motivating factor to communist commitments. How do we draw power from each other in the realization and practice of our shared values? In what ways do we utilize those affective resources as an approach to changing the world? What kind of collective power do we unleash via the loving, living bonds that sustain us? A more interesting cliché than “love is infinite” that relationship anarchism draws from is the notion that love is a kind of power, loving is an exercise**



**of power. But power never rests or sits at the level of contingency that RA requires by paring down our analysis to particular relationships. On the other hand, drawing from this intuition about the power of love, we can come to understand that love as a power does not situate itself in individual bonds, but in the many bonds that sustain and form a proletarian movement.**

**As a one-time relationship anarchist, it was my gradual education as a communist as well as thinking through the difficult questions that emerged from my relationship practices, and their failures, that motivated me to thinking the materiality of relationship practices through a communist lens, in order to develop resources for thinking about how the radically oppressive conditions all around me constrain any relationship practice immensely. Revolutionary communism was simply the only solution to resolving the impossible deadlocks relationship anarchism led me to on its own terms.**

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**How can love best sustain a proletarian movement? RA begins to ask the question of how our relationships produce the world. Communism continues the conversation by further asking: how can we materially produce the conditions that sustain ethical relationships? How can we do that within capitalism, as a way of actively**

**producing and building communism in the world? In other words, if relationships are a means of producing the world, then how can we produce the conditions for the ethical production of this world? An article by June Jordan in the anthology *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (edited by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams), entitled “The Creative Spirit,” neatly highlights the stakes:**

“Vast changes will have to be envisioned and pursued, if any, let alone all, of us will survive the destructive tradition of our species. Enormous reversals and revisions of our thinking patterns will have to be achieved, somehow, and fast. And to accomplish such lifesaving alterations of society, we will have to deal with power: we will have to make love powerful” (p. 12).

**How can we, as communists, make love powerful?**

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