
Jamie Heckert and Richard Cleminson (Editors)

Anarchism and Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power

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Reviewed by Keally McBride

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"The title links ethics and relationships to anarchism; a recurring theme throughout the volume is how to build communities that sustain truly free selves. Fascinatingly, I put down the volume and could not think of a single condemnation contained within it."

Anarchism and Sexuality is assembled from papers given at a multidisciplinary conference at the University of Leeds in 2006. Many of the essays published here refer to the unique experience of the conference, particularly the ways that the organizers remained true to their subject by creating alternative modes of relating, presenting works, and responding to one another's ideas. By including these stories, the volume editors ran the risk of making their readers feel like they had missed the main event when encountering the collection, but this reader made a mental note to be sure to apply to go to any future conferences organized by the same group--it sounds a lot more innovative than any gathering I have attended of late! But this conscientiousness pervades the spirit of the enterprise. How can one publish authoritative accounts of the relationships between anarchism and sexuality if the goal is to overturn authoritative power altogether?

Reflecting the spirit of the conference, the volume takes pains to break through established norms of academic writing, discourse, and self-presentation. There are poetic interludes that occur four different times in the volume, and most of the chapters begin with a personal testimonial. This approach provides a rich engagement with the topics of anarchism and sexuality; the combination of the two themes is intended to be mutually sustaining. By questioning our experience of sexuality, each person can come to see how thoroughly social conditioning pervades our sense of self and modes of subversive and/or intimate self-presentation. The introduction explains, "The radical decentering of the way in which people can live their lives recognizes that freedom cannot come through sex alone, rather it entails a critique that runs through all social relationships and attempts to reconstruct them in non-hierarchical terms" (9).

As living in Oakland, California the past year has reminded me, anarchists come in many different guises and run the gamut from those who are relatively cynical to those who are outrageously idealistic. The contributors to this volume fall toward the idealistic end of the spectrum even as they are interested in what I think of as total critique, meaning accepting the imperative to question absolutely everything. The

difference is that they subject themselves to the same rigorous critique that they apply to existing power structures. Rather than simply condemning the world and those who generally accept its precepts, they question themselves and their potential complicity in their own and other's alienation. There is no moment of clear transcendence or arrival in these pages; it is always an imperfect process that requires ever more thought, and most important, a community to be part of. The title links ethics and relationships to anarchism; a recurring theme throughout the volume is how to build communities that sustain truly free selves. Fascinatingly, I put down the volume and could not think of a single condemnation contained within it. This could be considered the book's greatest strength and weakness, placing it alongside a noble lineage of feminist philosophy that knows the personal is political but that can sometimes lack a clear path toward engagement with the world in addition to offering inspiration to self-critique.

This is not to say that the volume is not politically engaged, because it does have a very serious aspiration to make all of us more thoughtful about the values, relationships, and expectations we have of ourselves and others. I found the chapters that were the most personal the most successful in achieving this goal because the stories resisted the kind of closure that accompanies many kinds of theoretical explorations that drive one thesis, or engage one particularity, of a given text. The stories refer to the writer in the world, mirroring the aim of the book to help readers reflect upon their space in the world. This is no manifesto; it is more an anarchist diary. It invites you into the minds of these authors, and tries to create a space of solidarity between yourself and them. All that remains is for you to write your own entry.

Jamie Heckert's essay, "Fantasies of an Anarchist Sex Educator" best embodies the spirit of the volume as a whole. In this piece Heckert describes his work as a sex educator with students of different ages. He is able to create spaces where teenagers are able to describe their sexual insecurities to one another: as a mother of a teenager I find this a simply unimaginable feat. Through his interwoven descriptions we vividly glimpse the pain, terror even, of coming to perceive one's sexuality in such a fraught environment as our world. More important, Heckert recounts his own struggles with sexual identity, power, and pleasure and how they continue.

Jenny Alexander's essay, "Sexual Dissidence in the First Wave Anarchist Movement and Its Subsequent Narratives," explores Alexander Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* and his transformation from organizing on behalf of the less enlightened members of humanity to discovering a solidarity with and love for his fellow prisoners. Alexander makes much of Berkman's sexual feelings toward his fellow prison inmates, and wonders why more of the links between sexuality and anarchism have not been explored in the context of Berkman's life as they have in the work and life of Emma Goldman. Although I was not as perturbed by this lacuna in the scholarship as Alexander was, I found in the last section of this essay a scathing critique of the commodification of sexuality today that is positively brilliant. It serves as the call to resistance for the entire volume, pointing out, "We should be speaking about reinventing intimacy in the world out there, not simply in an anarchist ghetto, because intimacy *connects* people to one another, it forges networks, and in a sea of image-sex we are an increasingly lonely culture" (40).

Complementary to the focus upon personal narrative are the chapters that examine fictional works. Laurence Davis's "Love and Revolution in Ursula Le Guin's *Four Ways to Forgiveness*" is a riveting reading of this collection of stories. Davis finds revolutionary aspiration within relational entanglements a primary theme in Le Guin's stories, and pushes us to consider the limitations of love to deliver us into a new world of our own making. Davis pushes an acceptance of indeterminacy as the only appropriate revolutionary strategy in order to maintain ethical connections with one another. The essay makes a significant contribution toward linking ethical and revolutionary concerns when all too often one has been sacrificed in the name of the other.

The editors also include consideration of postanarchism in the volume. Many chapters include quotes from or references to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. In the volume's introduction, Heckert and Cleminson admit that the highly theoretical nature of poststructuralist theory has created some resistance to its inclusion in the anarchist movement. However, they find "this wave of radical French theory complements rather than replaces lesser known anarchist theorists who have also had sophisticated and nuanced thoughts on the nature of power, subjectivity and revolution" (7). If the objection were really

based upon the opinion that poststructuralist thought is too nuanced for anarchist communities, I would agree with their rejoinder. However, I would argue, particularly in the context of this volume, it is the removal from everyday experience that is dangerous for anarchist politics. Poststructuralist theory indeed has some important resonances with anarchism, but I am not at this point convinced it actually adds to the anarchist political project and may in fact create a lamentable detour from articulating political goals more clearly. Interrogation is not the same as resistance.

Anarchism and Sexuality is refreshing precisely because it does avoid the pitfalls of much contemporary political and feminist philosophy. It takes its readers' experiences and bodies under central consideration, and can do so because it is an unusual collection of academics who take their own experiences and bodies to be as important as literature reviews and scholarly debates. Not only are they seeking to link the personal and political, but they are bridging an even more formidable chasm: the academic and the personal. This is the element that is most frequently absent from much postanarchist work. Conceptually we may be able to understand the intricacies of subject-formation as subordination. But how can we feel the inspiration to find something else? This is the dilemma posed by *Anarchism and Sexuality*. There are no easy answers offered, but this is precisely why the collection is worth engaging on its own quirky--or kinky--terms.

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