

Infinite Relationships

Relationships without bounds or boundaries, love without limits, without
ends

CrimethInc.

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This is about so-called “non-monogamous relationships,” about some of the benefits of trying out one of the alternatives to the formulaic dating/marriage/divorce model for love. Your response to this article will probably be similar to the one I had a few years ago when I read a discussion of the same subject by David Sandstrom in the Swedish zine *Handbook for Revolutionaries*: “good idea, but, uh, not relevant to me, of course...” It turned out I was wrong. Had I remembered a lesson I’ve learned over and over, I would have realized that often the ideas that make me the most defensive and uncomfortable at first turn out to be the most important for me in the long run. Not to say that I’m offering a program that you must all immediately adjust yourselves to... but we can’t remind each other enough to be open to new ideas, in case they do prove to be helpful in our lives.

A couple years ago I had a wonderful experience on tour, in which I finally experienced what it felt like for men’s gender roles to be dissolved: over the course of the tour everyone in the band and the people touring with us were all able to open up and become emotionally supportive and loving, and suddenly the experience of being with a lot of other boys was totally fucking different from anything I’d encountered before. In this safe, encouraging environment, all of us really felt fearless, free, ready to try anything, with no more doubt or need for walls to protect us. On the surface, it was just that we weren’t afraid to touch and hold each other, and that we stopped complaining and being selfish; but the implications beneath this were immense: I realized that there was no need for intimacy and emotional support to be confined to my romantic relationships—I could create and benefit from these things in every relationship.

This got me thinking about my romantic relationships... if there was no reason my friendships couldn’t be more like my love affairs, why couldn’t my love affairs be more like my friendships? When I thought about it, my friendships had a lot going for them that my love affairs never did: my friends were never jealous or possessive, my friendships didn’t tend to adhere to some strict socialized image of what they “should” be, and while my friendships generally continued on in one form or another through my life, once it turned out that a romantic relationship wasn’t storybook perfect it would end and I wouldn’t see the lover anymore.

All my love relationships had proceeded something like this: in the beginning I would meet a beautiful new person, we would broaden each others’ horizons and have wonderful experiences together, and thus fall in love. At first we would feel more free together than either of us ever had, and the world would seem full to overflowing with possibility and wild joy. But slowly, not trusting the rest of the world, or the future in which we might not feel such wonderful things, we would build our relationship into a castle, to keep out the cold and dangerous outside world, and protect our passion by turning it into an institution. Sex, which at the beginning had been something that came more naturally and freely than anything else, became jealously guarded as the seal sanctifying our love relationship, as proof that it was different than all our other relationships. [This seems, in retrospect, like a really strange role for sex to play.] Inevitably, I would wake up one day and realize that the free, feral passion that we’d been united by was gone, replaced by habit, routine, fear of change; the castle we’d built had become a tomb, sealing us inside and away from the outside world, which we’d actually needed all along to bring us each new things to offer the other and sustain ourselves. Inside the coffin, we fought more and more, each demanding that the other prove her love by sacrificing more and more—when love is supposed to enable you to live more, not disable you in return for an assurance of basic companionship, a companionship that often replaces your participation in larger communities anyway. Falling in love had been like finding a secret entrance to the garden of Eden, a gift economy in which we shared everything without keeping score or worrying about “fair trade”; but now we were back in the exchange economy, competing to see who could need more, who could control more. After all my attempts to transcend the stereotyped roles of people in romantic relationships, I suddenly found that I was a “boyfriend” again, with a “girlfriend” (which is not a healthy role for anyone to have to play in this sexist society!), with no idea how it had all happened.

I started thinking about how it is that we all keep falling into these patterns, and how we could avoid them. The issue of limitation kept coming up: the idea that some things had to be off limits for

the relationship to work. With my friends, nothing is off limits, and nothing is demanded either: we offer each other whatever we can, whenever we have it to give, and we don't demand anything that doesn't come naturally for the other (that's how my friendships go when they're healthy at least, and most of them are at this point). I decided to look into what other models for love relationships there were, and discovered that there is a long tradition of relationships without these limits and expectations: non-monogamous, or "open," relationships.

I'm not trying to say that monogamous relationships are bad, exactly, but there are a thousand kinds of relationships, and we generally only permit ourselves to try one format, which seems ridiculous. Let's explore a bit. Every time I hear about another wife/husband/boyfriend/girlfriend cheating and sneaking around, every time I hear someone speaking proudly about how (in the name of monogamy) he has managed to resist doing something he really wants to, every time I must listen to someone pathetically lamenting the feeling of being "trapped" in a relationship or unable to pursue her desires out of some kind of fear, every fucking time I have to witness someone leering voyeuristically ("it's ok to look if you don't touch"), it make me so furious about how we've trapped ourselves in this one-option relationship system, accepting these symptoms of suffocation as inevitable instead of experimenting with the other possibilities. More than anything else, our commitment to supporting monogamy as the only option (other than "casual sex," I guess, which is boring as fuck and bad in other ways too) keeps us from being honest with each other. We've got to dare to address all these complexities of life and desire openly, even if it is painful.

We punk rockers always act like we're such radical people, but when it comes down to acting, in practice, to try out radically different ways of living that might be more in line with our ideas (or just plain challenging, for once, not safe—nothing is more dangerous than playing it safe!), it doesn't occur to us to question our programmed habits. All too often our revolutionary ideas are just badges, a different ideology for us to vote for, not catalysts for transforming life. This is an issue that affects everyone, where anarchist values can be tried out in the real world, but thus far I've seen very little discussion of this subject in our community; if we're going to question the way the world works, we should take that home to our own personal relationships, and perhaps try out alternatives there first before proposing solutions to the ills of the world. That is—if we really have solutions to the ills of our society, let's put those into practice to solve the ills of our own relations. Healer, heal thyself.

WHAT AN OPEN RELATIONSHIP IS

The most important thing here is to get over the idea that a person's value is measured by whether she alone can be "enough" for another person. The world is infinite, and so are we—no amount of living, no number or depth of interactions with others should be "enough" for any of us, just as no amount of interactions with a person you love will ever be "enough." (To set borders on what another person can do or feel, as a condition for them to be able to receive my love and affection, goes against everything I believe as an anarchist and a human being; I want to trust others to know what they need, and never limit them—and I certainly don't think my life will be any richer from the limitations I place on others). We have to free each other to be and become ourselves. This isn't just about other lovers or sex partners or friends, it's also about other undertakings, needs, even the desire for space and solitude—it's heartbreaking how much of our selves our lovers often ask us to sacrifice to be with them.

I want to be valued for what I am, for what I do naturally, not how well I conform to some pre-set list of needs that someone has. If someone else can fill some of those needs, I wouldn't deny that to anyone, and I don't want to be jealous when others have something different to offer; I just want the chance to offer what I have to give to those I love, and to remember that those things are priceless and not comparable to whatever unique gifts others may have. None of us should ever be saddled with the role of sole provider for someone's needs (romantic or otherwise), anyway; our purpose on this earth is not to serve others, but to find ways to be ourselves in ways that also benefit others. By saying the rest

of the world isn't off limits to your partner, you free yourself of the job of being the whole world to your partner.

The monogamy system means that people hesitate to share themselves with others in certain ways, lest they become romantically involved—for since you can only have one romantic partner at a time, you have to make sure that your one partner is a good investment (and here we are back in the capitalist market even in our love relationships). Women check men out for financial means. Men ponder whether a woman's beauty is socially recognized enough to offer the prestige he hopes to get by having her at his side, and no one is able to experiment with partners who don't meet enough of these criteria to be potential spouses. For that matter—just as in your friendships, there may be people in the world with whom you can spend some wonderfully romantic time once or twice a month, but with whom you don't have enough in common to date steadily and then marry, etc (although you often see such mismatched couples, who would have been happy as more sporadic partners, making each other miserable in fifty-year marriages). Non-monogamous relationships make such things possible without paying any price of mutual unhappiness.

I've decided that I no longer want to have a hierarchy of value between my friendships and my love relationships: they're both crucial, irreplaceable in my life, and fuck anyone who wants me to choose between any of them. Not only that, but I've stopped classifying things as "love" or "friendship" according to arbitrary superficial details—the feelings I share with certain friends are so intimate, so beautiful, that it's ridiculous that I don't call them lovers just because we don't sleep together. It's fucking absurd that sex should be the dividing line between our relationships, between which ones take precedence, between who we play with, live with, sleep with, who we take care of first, who we die with at last.

By the same token, in open relationships, sex isn't weighed down with so many implications and restrictions. Love and desire outside the lines of the monogamy model are demonized and attacked on every front in this society—in the lives of women, at least, and those men who don't want to be monogamous but also despise the superficiality and sexist bullshit of the "player" scene are unlikely to find support in feminist circles, either. Sex should not be contained, and it should not be made symbolic of anything—it should simply be another way for people to be physically affectionate with each other, to give each other pleasure, to be intimate and emotionally expressive, taking equal responsibility for their involvement but without having to answer to some hypercritical mass, social expectation, or moral taboo.

An open relationship is just that: it is a relationship in which people can be open with each other, and with themselves—in which nothing need be hidden or suppressed or off limits, in which the whole world can be ours to explore without fear of transgressing imaginary boundaries. When we demand total openness and honesty from each other in relationships that include limits and taboos, we're setting ourselves up for betrayals and dishonesty: to say "be open!" without being receptive to all of the possible truths is fascist and preposterous. We have to be supportive of each other, in every aspect of our individual characters, if we want real honesty to be possible. Otherwise, we're like Christians at confession with each other, demanding that we reveal all out of some moral imperative, with the whip of shame ready for any straying impulse. We have to learn to embrace and celebrate anything that feels good for each other. If it's good for our lovers, it's good for us—are we really so selfish that we can't see this?

For one example of how this could work, let's go back to the story of our tour. On the tour, different individuals formed close bonds, and shared private worlds together like lovers do; but they also remembered that for the community to function, they couldn't withdraw from their relationships with everyone else. And whenever two people needed a break from each other or wanted to expand their horizons a bit, they would spend more time with others, because there were always others around them who also had things to offer. Everyone was safe and cared for, and no one was left out, because we weren't paired off in exclusive twos.

Conversely, the scarcity economy of lovers which we have right now makes each person hurry to pick another and chain her to him, before he is left alone forever. The alternative, which this fear of solitude

prevents us from seeing, seems more preferable: a world without borders, in which each of us would be part of a broader family of lovers and friends, with no distinction made between the two—and no set format for any relationship, so experimentation would be a constant feature of every one, and no relationship could ever get dull or overwhelming. To get to such a world, we just have to get used to not limiting each other, to not thinking of love as a limited commodity.

JEALOUSY, AND WHAT I'VE LEARNED FROM IT

Yes, I still feel jealous sometimes. I've had experiences before of being insanely jealous—not just of another man, but of other things my partners loved or experienced or were excited about. Being able to come to terms with these things has been very important in the development of my confidence and sense of self. It took me years to feel (not just understand) that if my lover loves other things or other people as well, it doesn't mean I am less valuable. Besides, if (he or) she truly loves me, it's not because I match up to some list of desired qualities that someone else can outmatch me at—she loves me for reasons that are unique to me, that no one else can compete with, so I have nothing to fear. Love isn't a scarcity commodity—it increases, just like joy, the more it is permitted and shared and given away. I don't feel like I have to hoard anyone all to myself now. I know that doesn't work, or help to project love (or me, for that matter).

I consider my jealousy a worthy adversary, one that can teach me a lot about myself if I confront it rather than trying to protect myself from it by controlling others. I've had experiences in relationships before where lovers of mine have limited themselves in order to protect me from my jealousy, and it has been catastrophic for both of us, you can imagine. It's just as important to me now that I help others to not be “afraid for me” as it is that I learn not to be afraid for myself.

One of the things jealousy has taught me about is my attitude toward other men. It's interesting for me to note that I've never felt threatened by women whom my partners were attracted to or involved with, but other men have always made me see red. In our society, men are conditioned not to trust each other, to hate each other, to try to “protect” women from other men (which often looks more like hoarding and protecting “property”), and this inclination makes sense when you look at how fucked up many men are when it comes to interacting with women. But for me to not trust any men to be something good for my partners (past the point of limited friendship) is outright paranoia and territorial bullshit. If I trust the judgment of my partner, I should trust her to know what and who is good for her, and to not let my each-against-all male conditioning interfere.

SOME OBJECTIONS I'VE HEARD RAISED TO OPEN RELATIONSHIPS:

“It sounds good in theory, but the way people feel is more important than these abstractions...”

Some people think that we come up with ideas and theories not as solutions to the real problems of our lives, but to show off what good ideas we can come up with. If it's not clear by now that I've been thinking about this as an attempt to solve rather than exacerbate the problems in my love relationships, then I apologize for doing such a poor job writing this article. And hey—if you think open relationships can be tough on your emotions, just try long-term monogamy. They're both hard sometimes.

“But human nature—“

Fuck you. Enough said. Human nature is what we make it, and you know that too, whether or not you want to own up to it—you cowardly excuse-mongering bastards.

“I guess that’s fine if it’s what you want to try, but luckily I only want monogamy for myself! I’m all set!”

That’s great for you, if it really is true—for the time being, at least. We’re always so thrilled when our desires happen to coincide with social rules; then it’s easy for us to feel proud of our desires, to think they’re beautiful, since they are universally accepted (indeed, everything around you is reinforcing the idea that what you are lucky enough to feel for the moment is perfection itself)... but you might not always be that “lucky,” you know. Should you (or someone else) ever feel a need that isn’t satisfied by the monogamy system, if you haven’t already made the effort to get others to understand and accept the idea that there are many different acceptable kind of relationships and desire, you’ll be back at ground zero, finding yourself misunderstood, hated, called slut and whore. Nobody should have to go through that, ever, so whatever you personally need, you have a stake in promoting non-monogamy as a viable option too. Otherwise, we’ll all live in fear of waking up one day feeling a desire that is unacceptable—and that fascist power of moralism over our lives is exactly what I thought we were trying to fight in punk rock.

That’s why I consider myself non-monogamous right now, even though I’ve only had sexual relations with one person over the past five months: I do what I do not out of a commitment to monogamy, but rather a commitment to meeting my own needs and those of others, with no fucking regard for social norms—and to supporting others who do the same thing, whether or not they do it in the same way. Non-monogamy isn’t about sex, anyway—it’s a general approach to relationships with people, as I discussed above.

“Open relationships are bad for women—it’s just another way for men to be selfish and absent when women need them...”

This is the kind of sexist remark I’d rather not have to deal with, but I’ve heard it before. It reminds me of the old myth that all [“good”] women want “responsible” monogamous relationships, and the ones who don’t must be confused [so it’s OK for us to doubt them or look down on them, just as misogynist pigs call them sluts]. First of all, women have been the ones who introduced me to most of these ideas. Besides the women I know personally, the very best book I’ve been able to find on this subject (*The Ethical Slut*, by Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt, on Greenery Press), which I would strongly recommend to anyone interested in this issue, is written by women [if you can’t find it, write me and I’ll lend you my copy]. Second of all, a lot of the men and women involved in pioneering different models for relationships over the past few decades have not been involved in heterosexual relationships, so in those cases this a totally unfounded criticism. Third—people who say this make it sound like they think men are only emotionally nurturing to women who are paying them off for it with sex... and denying them access to any other sex as a way to be sure the payoff will always work. God, I hope that’s not the best we can hope for in heterosexual relationships...

Finally—yes, it’s true that men have been conditioned to be selfish and somewhat less than nurturing in their relationships, and just shifting relationship models is not going to cure that. But that’s going to be a problem in whatever kinds of relationships they have, not just open ones, and has to be dealt with as a separate issue. A loving, caring boy is not gong to go running off for sex with some stranger when his lover (or one of his lovers) really needs him. There are so many landmines hidden in our sexuality, since so much of it has been programmed by our enemies; we men need to unlearn the pressures that make us seek out superficial sex as a way to avoid real intimacy and support. That brings me to the third objection:

“So does this mean you’re giving up on your romantic dreams, your hopes for living happily ever, just trading them for a series of sexual episodes with acquaintances?”

No, not at all. I'm not interested in evading personal commitments and long term relationships—rather I want to protect them from being unnecessarily at risk. I want to secure my romantic relationships, so they won't be at risk from trivial things like temporary boredom or attraction to others, by creating relationships that are sustainable through changes in my life and needs. That way I can hope to have my lovers as long as I have my friends, 'til death do us part for real, and no old taboos (or jealousy, insecurity, etc) will interfere. Sure, this will be hard sometimes, just like everything is hard sometimes—but the rewards of making this work will be greater in every way, I think.

What I'm hoping to do here is free us from the unnecessary tragedies of our love affairs, the insecurities and possessiveness that deny us the commitment and pleasure we could have together. In order to be ready to remove those obstacles, we have to be ready to face the real tragedies head on, with great courage: we can't demand that others protect us from our insecurities by limiting themselves, and we have to face the fact that there will be moments when we are alone. The price of not doing this is absurd—today, we suffer both the necessary and unnecessary tragedies in our relationships, because of the courage we lack. Is it too much to ask that we try something new?

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