

Anarchism, Sex and Freedom

The Fight against Capitalism, Patriarchy and Repressive Religious Morality

If there is one subject that radicals and revolutionaries alike evade, mouth platitudes over, or casually brush aside, it is that of sexual politics. Issues like strikes, global warming and poverty are far less intimate, personal and controversial. Yet in spite of our continued economic and political disempowerment, our sexuality remains the one area of our lives over which we still exercise a high degree of personal expression and control. It is also one of the few subjects of universal interest, affecting literally all of us.

Part of the reason that sex and sexuality are so rarely discussed, even in political forums, is because we have been socially conditioned by those in power to suppress this most basic, but often complex facet of our identities. Over the course of history, the state as guardian of our morality has consistently dictated where, when and how we express our sexuality. The established religions still propagate the idea of sex other than for procreation and outside of marriage as sinful. Little surprise then, that for many the idea of sex has become synonymous with repression and guilt. But the religious establishment isn't the only culprit. Political regimes (of both left and right), the nuclear family, education, media, psychiatry and various other institutions have all distinguished themselves in reinforcing authoritarian morality where personal relationships are concerned. In so doing they have collectively exercised a profound form of social control.

★ Constructing and Enforcing 'Normality'

The choice of friend or partner(s) is a fundamental right that many of us take for granted. Relationships open the door to intimacy, companionship, love, affection, self-esteem, emotional fulfilment and belonging. Having a wide range of relationships provides opportunities for personal and social enrichment. Nevertheless, the society we live in judges some types of consensual relationship as preferable to others.

Under capitalism, relationships are founded upon inequalities of social, economic and political power; maintained and enforced by the institutions of the state. These inequalities and the values that underpin them infest all areas of social life, from the bedroom to the workplace. We are systematically conditioned, (often unconsciously) from an early age to conform to an artificially constructed reality designed to serve the interests of the ruling classes, rather than our own.

Constructing and upholding a particular view of 'normality' has always been a primary control tactic of ruling elites. This contrived 'normality' exists to encourage both social conformity and to sell products on the premise of aesthetic perfection: a perverse form of body fascism is reflected throughout the modern mass media because of the latter. 'Normality' is further represented and reproduced in the nuclear family: husband, wife and 2.4 kids, the perfect social unit of production and consumption.

The ideal of the nuclear family operates as a powerful curtailer of sexual expression according to radical psychoanalysts. As an institution, it supports capitalist society by reproducing power relationships following the perceived norm. Wilhelm Reich articulated how the internalised repression of our childhood and adolescent sexuality by our parents generates a kind of mass intellectual prison. In the 1930s Reich used this analogy to explain how workers became receptive to

ideologies such as fascism, even though rationality would suggest strongly that this acted contrary to their economic interests. The authoritarian family, Reich concluded, in repressing our natural sexual development, creates a subconscious dependency on powerful figures within the adult psyche.

The family's rigidly defined gender roles, which are further reinforced by the education system and other mediums, serve the economy by providing a clear-cut division of labour between the sexes. From an early age we are conditioned to adopt distinct behavioural attributes according to our gender. But cross-cultural studies show that far from being genetically determined, these roles are socially ascribed. Although we culturally bear witness to an increasing blurring of the traditional stereotypes, they are still very much with us. Single-parent families, same sex relationships, and other departures from the perceived norm are all subject to social stigmatisation to a greater or lesser degree.

Homosexuality, despite being prevalent throughout the animal kingdom, is portrayed by political and religious control freaks as being contrary to the 'laws of nature'. Being gay is also still routinely punished by death in some parts of the world. It was not so long ago that the Tory government passed Clause 28, prohibiting the 'promotion' of homosexuality within the education system. The fact that gay villages exist in some UK cities reflects that gays have felt it necessary to create safety in numbers in an often-hostile society: a society in which only recently same-sex partnerships have been legally recognised and sanctified.

Conventional psychiatry, which traditionally has served as a powerful agent of social control, up until quite recently employed aggressive and unpleasant aversion techniques to 'treat' homosexuality and other 'deviations' in the UK. Further, there are still women in health and social care services today who were admitted to psychiatric facilities years ago for such heinous acts as sexual promiscuity and having a child outside of marriage.

The bizarre ambivalence of capitalist morality is epitomised by the corporate gutter press which on the one hand delights in exposing the infidelity and aberrations of its subjects: On the other, its pages abound with adverts and imagery designed to titillate and sell sex.



★ Sexism, Sexual Abuse and Class

The atrocious repression and exploitation of female sexuality still reigns supreme across the world. A recent case was highlighted in Islamic Saudi Arabia where a woman was sentenced to 200 lashes after being gang-raped by seven men. In some African and Asian countries, women are still subject to routine genital mutilation. Amnesty International estimate that some 2 million girls and women a year suffer this vile and barbaric act. Honour killings also continue to this day, where-in females are murdered by their own families for supposedly bringing shame by the perceived misuse of their sexuality. Even in more 'liberated' western cultures, women fare little better. The sex industry is characterised by the trafficking of women and girl children into lives of virtual sex slavery. (The figure for girls and women trafficked into Western Europe alone is estimated at 120,000 a year). Most pornography in western society reduces sex to a mechanical act devoid of feeling, rendering women's role to that of subservient sex objects: commodities to be bought and sold for men's pleasure. The feminist argument that porn = theory and rape = practice has some conviction. But this viewpoint must also be interpreted within the context of a society where institutional sexism and exploitive relationships are ingrained. Women are more likely than their male counterparts to be victims of rape and domestic abuse. They are harangued outside abortion clinics by religious zealots for having the temerity to exercise control over their own bodies. They are statistically paid less than men, less likely to be promoted and tend to work in industries that are traditionally devalued financially and socially.

In looking at oppressive (economic and sexual) relationships, we need to consider the sexual abuse of children by adults. Paedophilia, the sexualised exercise of adult power over children is understandably a highly charged and emotive subject. Abuse is usually committed by an adult that the victim knows, and often trusts, rather than a total stranger. Although recognition and action on abuse is increasing, it is not routinely taught as part of the school curriculum. To make matters worse, systematic child abuse has been covered up by institutions such as the Catholic Church in Ireland, exposed for operating an unwritten policy of relocating rather than reporting paedophile priests. Money also plays a big part in abuse. According to the United Nations, there are estimated to be 100 million children worldwide living or working on the streets, with 1.2 million girls under 18 trafficked into prostitution each year. Sex tourism has become big business, with rich western males travelling to countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Philippines to systematically abuse children.

★ Freeing Ourselves and our Sexuality

Although our sexual tastes may be distorted by the dominant power relationships we are all exposed to, they still reflect our uniqueness and individuality. Some choose monogamy, others polygamy, some bisexuality, some S&M and so on. Our tastes, identity and orientation can change over time, and most of us will choose to experiment at some point in our lives. Some will have many partners, others only one. For some experimentation is a lifelong experience. It would be wrong to suggest that we should advocate mass orgiastic indulgences any more than we should advocate the monogamy of heterosexual married life. Even some of the most fervent champions of free love (such as

the anarcha-feminist Emma Goldman) have confessed to pangs of jealousy and possessiveness on occasions. What suits one person does not suit another, and we must forever guard against the tyranny of imposed 'norms'.

A mature, informed, approach combined with improved access to clinics, contraception and healthcare resources, will lead to more healthy and rounded adults, better able to exercise real choice and control. One of the reasons that the UK has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe is because it fails so miserably on this score. And rather than pontificating about some far-off revolution, we can all recognise, act and respond to the ways in which we have been manipulated, conditioned and controlled in the here and now. Whilst pushing to rid the world of the ruling elites, we must never neglect to challenge the policemen, patriarchs and priests inside our own heads.

★ The Economic, Social and Sexual Revolution

As we have seen, a hierarchical society maintains itself by manipulating and controlling our morals and sexuality. Economically capitalism exploits men, women and children on the basis of social class. Although legislation now prohibits discrimination on the grounds of age, gender and sexual orientation, no such legal frameworks exist to deter maltreatment on the basis of social class. The reason for this is obvious. Class provides the overriding abusive power relationship in capitalist society; though it is over simplistic to argue that all power relationships are subsumed by economic ones (patriarchy and religion predated capitalism, after all), economic and political hierarchies sustain all others. The whole sex industry is underpinned by market forces. Sex workers, whether child or adult, rarely choose their profession: many work the streets, bars, brothels and massage parlours to escape poverty, or simply just to get by. For some, there is simply no other option. Businesses that sell sex, and the trafficking rackets which supply them, are motivated in the final analysis by profit. Sex is big business. In exploiting our insecurities and selling sex, capitalism distorts and alienates our desires beyond all recognition.

But capitalism has not been seriously threatened by allowing gays and women to populate its positions of power; liberalised capitalism cares little if the boss is male, female, gay or straight as long as they keep the rich, rich and the poor subservient.

Che Guevara's adage that the revolutionary is motivated by great feelings of love may sound sentimental, but is essentially correct. Whilst humankind continues to be enslaved by capitalism, patriarchy, authoritarian morality and other forms of oppression, we can never be truly free. Recognition of our common humanity, suffering, and the forces that inflict this, provides the seed of lasting revolutionary change. Meaningful and fulfilling relationships are founded upon us realising our common needs, wants and desires voluntarily as equals, without interference. We must assume control not only of our workplaces and communities but our hearts, bodies and minds too.

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