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Strategic sexuality: Polyamory, queer self-identification, and consent-seeking as activist interventions

One of my earliest personal exposures to anarchist philosophy came in 2004, when I was a college student in Michigan. I'd heard vaguely of anarchism before, of course—I had friends who played in punk bands and listened to the Sex Pistols (a band whose most famous single is “Anarchy in the UK”). But, as I became immersed in feminist theory in college, I decided to write a paper on critiques of marriage, and the name Emma Goldman began surfacing in my research. Coincidentally, while I was working on that paper, I went to see a friend's band play at an anarchist infoshop in Lansing. Like most infoshops, the space was used for multiple purposes. It housed a small library of books and pamphlets, but to pay the rent it put on shows by local musical acts. While watching the bands play, a rack of photocopied booklets caught my eye, particularly one with the title “Marriage and Love” by Emma Goldman.

The pamphlet was a reproduction of Goldman's essay written in the early years of the twentieth century. Though the phrase “the personal is the political” would not become widely familiar until several decades later with the burgeoning of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, Goldman's views expressed a deep belief in the close relationship between the personal and the political. She argued that the institution of marriage was a tool of capitalism, patriarchy, and the state, and that these structures were contributing to the oppression of women by controlling them in the most intimate spheres of their lives. Goldman advocated the practice of “free love” in which women's bodies would not be “owned”

by their male partners, but rather would be under the autonomous control of women themselves. Free love was a way of subverting the oppressive ideologies of monogamy and marriage and helping all emotional and sexual relationships to be experienced more anarchistically, that is, apart from hierarchical power. The practice would not only free individual women (and men) from hierarchical relations, but would also serve as a symbolic challenge to the hegemony of ideologies that linked love with the marriage institution.¹

A century later, Goldman's ideal endures in some contemporary anarchists' embrace of polyamory as an ideal structure for romantic relationships. Anarchists also bring their political principles into other aspects of their sexuality. Like their forerunners in previous anarchist and radical feminist movements, many of today's anarchists militantly hew to the idea that even the most personal of one's practices can be—even must be—used as sites of political expression and action (Greenway 2009; Kissack 2008). Sexual “preferences” may be problematized—or subjected to self-reflection and ethical scrutiny (Foucault 1990b: 10)—much as are the other aspects of lifestyle I've discussed in this book. Sexuality is a unique aspect of lifestyle to consider in the context of political strategy however, because it is less widely understood as a matter of choice in the way that other aspects of lifestyle (such as dress or consumption patterns) might be. While sexuality is experienced as intensely personal, sexual practices also have multidimensional motivations and implications, including moral, activist, identificatory, and social ones (to invoke the categories I developed in Chapter 2). This chapter explicitly documents and analyzes some of these dimensions of sexuality among anarchists, by focusing on three expressions of anarchist sexuality: polyamory, queer self-identification, and consent-seeking.

Polyamory

At the 2010 Los Angeles Anarchist Book Fair, I picked up a pamphlet titled *Complicated Relationships: Conversations on Polyamory and Anarchy* (Ardent Press 2008). The back cover of this publication asserts that “Anarchists have always challenged whatever seemed rigid and assumed in daily life within an authoritarian system, and relationships have certainly been up for debate.” As described in the pamphlet, one of the “rigid and assumed” aspects of daily life debated by anarchists is participation in institutionalized monogamy. Polyamory, as used by contemporary practitioners, describes a romantic or sexual relationship in which partners have an open and conscious agreement not to be romantically or sexually exclusive. In other words, sex and romantic attachments are permissible outside the couple. It may even be that the individuals involved do not think of themselves as a couple at all, but are involved in a triad or other larger group.² In some

cases, a couple may be “primary partners” with each other, but sleep with other individuals who are known as “secondary” partners. In other cases, an individual may have sex with several people without considering oneself to be in a committed relationship with any of them. As the *Complicated Relationships* pamphlet explains, polyamorists are, “people who expect to get their intimacy and sexual needs met by many people, who have lives more independent of their partners, both temporally and spatially” (Ardent Press 2008: 5). In short, having a sexual or romantic relationship with one person does not preclude maintaining ongoing sexual and romantic relationships with others. An essential element of polyamory is the awareness and consent of all involved. Polyamorists are very clear on the point that polyamory is not cheating or infidelity or adultery, which would imply deception and violation of the terms of an exclusive partnership. This is why polyamory is sometimes also referred to as “ethical non-monogamy.”

The critique of monogamy remains prominent in contemporary anarchist discourse, as evidenced, for example, by the recent publication and distribution of the *Complicated Relationships* pamphlet. Consider also that there is a chapter on how to maintain non-monogamous relationships in CrimethInc.’s (2005a) book, *Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook*, which is an instruction manual of sorts for many of the most common practices taken up within anarchist subcultures (other chapters initiate readers in the arts of dumpster diving, bicycle collectives, and shoplifting). Polyamory also came up frequently during my interviews: when prompted by me to talk about their dating practices, interviewees commonly brought up polyamory, taking it as a given element of anarchist lifestyle politics, whether or not they practiced it themselves. Interviewees found it salient to specify whether they were or were not monogamous without me explicitly asking for this piece of information. They thus seemed to take for granted a generally accepted connection between anarchist politics and polyamorous dating practices.

Importantly, non-monogamy is often approached as an identity or orientation, rather than a straightforward description of actual sexual practice. Polyamory can be “used as a descriptive term by people who are open to more than one relationship even if they are not currently involved in more than one” (Ardent Press 2008: 8). Thus, a relationship may be characterized as polyamorous even if, in practice, the individuals never have sex outside the partnership. In these cases, the understanding and intent of the partners is that sex outside the partnership is permitted. For example, interviewee Joel’s relationship with his long-term partner was for a time technically monogamous in practice, insofar as neither of them had sex outside the relationship. But, he said, “we always identified ourselves as open because it was like, we understand that that’s a good thing to do.” By the same token, an individual may identify as polyamorous even if they are not currently involved in any sexual relationship. As the “Nonmonogamous Relationships” chapter of CrimethInc.’s (2005: 404) *Recipes for Disaster*

puts it, “there’s nothing that says you have to go to bed with more than one person at a time to be non-monogamous.” Just as one can identify as gay or straight even when one is not currently sexually active, the identity “polyamorist” indicates an individual’s stable preference or need or ideological commitment to become involved in polyamorous relationships.

What does polyamory have to do with anarchism? Certainly, not all polyamorists are anarchists, nor do most non-anarchist practitioners of polyamory see the practice as being political. The vast majority of literature on polyamory does not invoke explicitly political themes, in the sense of associating the practice with specific political philosophies such as anarchism. However, as I mentioned above, there is a long-standing affinity between anarchism and the rejection of compulsory monogamy. Goldman (1977: 73) opposed monogamy because she felt it mirrored the relation of private property within capitalism: in monogamous relationships, people are “possessed” by their partners, to the exclusion of all others. Thus, monogamy treats the individual’s body, love, and sexual intimacy as if they are exclusive economic goods, whose exchange values are depleted or negated when they are accessible to multiple partners. Gayle Rubin (1997) in an article titled “The Traffic in Women” (the title of which is borrowed from a Goldman essay), points out that the cultural injunction to monogamy is a side effect of the capitalist division of gendered labor, in which men and women are trained for different types of work and are thus dependent on each other and encouraged to form paired bonds (Rubin 1997). Furthermore, the critique of monogamy is also often informed by a feminist analysis that recognizes the ways in which monogamy has historically shored up arrangements in which men exercise ownership or control over female bodies (who may effectively be treated as sexual chattel, hence the “traffic in women” referenced by Goldman and later Rubin). To reject monogamy, therefore, is to challenge the legitimacy of patriarchy, capitalism, and the state.

Many contemporary anarchists espouse a critique of monogamy that encompasses all these factors. For example, an interviewee named Grant, a twenty-something man who lives in Washington, DC, articulated the connections he sees between his practice of polyamory and his commitment to an anarchist society:

I think polyamory for me has to do with anarchism being more than just a non-state solution to state capitalism, but a complete assessment of all forms of hierarchy . . . it has personally helped me address aspects of my patriarchal socialization. It’s a tangible way to express that I really don’t feel ownership over my partners, and it contributes to a level of openness and honesty you often don’t find in monogamous relationships. Additionally it helps me avoid codependent relationships which I think contributes to one of the great successes of capitalism, namely dividing people from each other.

If monogamy is seen to support capitalism and patriarchy, then state-sanctioned marriage is perceived even more negatively by anarchists, since it further institutionalizes hierarchical relationships and reinforces the power of the state. Interviewee Josef stated the case emphatically: "I think, like, being married and all that is, like, that's just a whole 'nother prescribed, uh, uh, subscription to patriarchy and it's bullshit, it's like property management, and I don't, I don't believe in that, you know?" Grant also expressed frustration that "the ultimate individual goal in a capitalist society is to find a husband or wife and sequester yourselves off from the rest of society in a toxic family unit," offering this as one of the reasons he practices polyamory.

The anarchist response to the contemporary gay marriage debate further illustrates the anarchist position on marriage in general. A zine put out by queer anarchist network Bash Back! argues that, "For queers to appeal for marriage is to desire assimilation into a heteronormative conception of sexuality, gender, and relationships, things which the state should have no business regulating or legislating in the first place" (BAMF! Productionz 2009). The Bash Back! zine goes on to say that, "State recognition in the form of oppressive institutions such as marriage and militarism are not steps toward liberation but rather towards heteronormative assimilation." Elsewhere, anarchist essayist Ruthann Robson (1996: 325) asserts, "For anarchists, the issue of homosexual marriage is akin to the issue of conscripting women. No, homosexuals should not 'be allowed' to marry, but then neither should heterosexuals . . . Sorry, but 'living together contracts' are also impolitic."

In theory, anarchists' opposition to institutionalized monogamy is less about advocating for particular sexual desires (for multiple partners, say) than it is about a radical commitment to the individual's freedom to determine the nature of one's own sexual practice, without coercion by the market or the state. Within the discourse of polyamory, "free love" expresses the idea that sexual activity should not be constrained by repressive social conventions, particularly not when those conventions are simply an ideological product of capitalist and patriarchal conditions. Proponents of free love argue that sexual partnering ought to be undertaken only in pursuit of mutual pleasure, not as a means of attaining power (either institutional or interpersonal power). Polyamorists often advocate the ideal that sexual practice should express one's true or natural desires rather than those that have been imposed by repressive ideological systems. As a participant in one discussion of non-monogamy put it in the *Complicated Relationships* pamphlet:

[people] are most often too willing to adjust their lives to some idealized way of living that they think is right but that isn't how they really feel. Conforming to what is socially imposed. People are so confused and have never had a chance to grow up in a normal environment. Normal in the

sense of not being restricted and having to go through all the authoritarian institutions of sexuality. They don't have the opportunity to freely relate to other people and freely be sexual. (Ardent Press 2008: 3)

The practice of free love is supposed to create a social environment in which people can learn to cultivate sexual relationships free of coercive, hegemonic values.

Some of the anarchists I spoke with alluded to the fact that monogamy didn't feel right or just "didn't work" for them at a personal level. Minty, for example, said she has "never been monogamous" because "it's not in my blood." Importantly, though, Minty did not necessarily use "blood" to invoke a naturalizing defense of polyamory—she followed up her comment by acknowledging that her reasons for not being monogamous are "both personal and political." This is where anarchist polyamorists depart somewhat from most advocates of polyamory. While many defenses of polyamory make recourse to evolutionary arguments about the nature of human sexuality (e.g. Ryan and Jethá 2010), anarchists perceive ideological dimensions of sexual experience and explicitly recognize their sexuality as a medium through which to struggle against oppressive, hegemonic forces. In this, polyamory is constructed similarly to other anarchist lifestyle practices, as a way of unsettling one of the many social and cultural norms "we might be taking for granted" (Ardent Press 2008: 6) due to our interpellation within ideological discourses. The project of destabilizing cultural norms of sexuality is what aligns polyamory with queer critique, a discourse whose relationship to anarchism I will now discuss.

Queer self-identification

Institutionalized monogamy is just one dimension of hegemonic sexuality which anarchists oppose. State- and market-sanctioned marriage is one of a whole "network of norms" that works to privilege heterosexuality (Jakobsen 1998: 518; Berlant and Warner 1998). As opponents of social hierarchy of all kinds, anarchists are against this social privileging of heterosexuality. This brings them into alliance with the queer political project, which is committed to radically critiquing and subverting the hegemony of heterosexuality. The identity designation *queer*, once a derogatory term used to mark the deviance of homosexuality, was reclaimed by homosexual activists by the early 1990s, in the wake of the gay liberation movement of the 1970s and gay men and lesbians' radical response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s.³ The concept of heteronormativity describes the normative order in which individuals are interpellated and often coerced into conformity with practices that maintain the dominance of heterosexuality (Warner 1993). Activists who take on the label of queer take their political project to be the radical destabilization of

heteronormativity, which, given that heterosexuality is “deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions” (xiii), involves their challenging mainstream institutions and discourses at nearly every turn. Anarchist sexuality, insofar as it can be thought of as a coherent type of sexuality at all, is itself usefully understood as a kind of queerness, since it shares a commitment to challenging a wide range of normative institutions.

The discursive articulation of anarchist politics and queer sexuality is probably owed in large part to the work of activist groups which identify themselves explicitly as both anarchist and queer, an identification sometimes contracted to “anarcha-queer.” The group Gay Shame, for example, advances a radical alternative to the liberal discourse of gay rights and gay pride, suggesting that queer sexuality is best nurtured not by assimilation to mainstream culture or the winning of privileges through consumerism and statist campaigns, but by direct actions that aim at more autonomy and a better quality of life for queer people (Sycamore 2008). United more by a networked, multi-sited ethos than by an official organizational structure, Gay Shame activists explicitly position themselves against capitalism and engage in creative, spectacular demonstrations that attempt to shatter the myth of heteronormative (and homonormative)⁴ consensus.

Since the inception of Gay Shame in 1998, other anarcha-queer actions, organizations, and publications have emerged with similar missions and tactics. A recent example is Bash Back!, which formed in 2007 in preparation for protests at the 2008 mainstream political party conventions in the United States, and has spawned the formation of active local chapters across the country as well as a recurring Radical Queer Conference. A zine about Bash Back! states, “We oppose heteronormativity, assimilation, capitalism, the state, and all other oppressions,” and defines queer as “a threat to authority and hierarchy everywhere” (BAMF! Productionz). There are many other organizations, zines, blogs, and message boards that advance similar viewpoints.⁵ As one anarchist blog puts it:

Queer-anarchism is a happy marriage of two philosophies that break down barriers in pursuit of freedom and liberation. As both anarchist-communists and as individuals oppressed by larger heteronormative culture we believe that coming outside of sexual and gender binaries is inherently political. (Anarchist Federation 2009)

We can see queer sexuality as a democratic or libertarian kind of sexuality, one in which the individual’s autonomy is valued above all other factors, including social mores. Interviewee Miles’ experience with his female partner offers an example of the valorization of the transgression of repressive social binaries: “what was best about our relationship was just how non-gendered it was. Not that we shared each others clothes and called each other ‘ze/hir’⁶

or anything, but just that it wasn't caught up in what seemed to be the same patterns and habits of the world at large in our practices of heterosexuality." Though the hegemonic discourse of sexual identity would categorize Miles and his partner as having a "straight" relationship, they experienced it as something other than this, since straightness would imply conformity with dominant patterns of heterosexual relating, which Miles did not feel they were in conformity with.⁷

A key way that the discursive and political alliance between anarchism and queer is manifested is through the tendency for some self-identified anarchists to also personally identify with queer sexuality. The use of the term queer to describe one's sexual identity is, for many, a means of resisting the way that sexuality has, for ideological reasons, been parceled out into discrete categories which are assumed to be fixed and essential characteristics of individuals (Jagose 1996: 125). When taken as a self-claimed identity label, queer is a dramatization of one's resistance to hegemonic narratives of sexual identity. To illustrate the way that queer identification troubles the dominant assumption of a straightforward and determinate relationship between the gender of one's partners and one's sexual identity, consider my experience with two interviewees in particular. Both Alyssa and Minty told me that they identified as queer. Both also refrained from providing a definitive designation of the gender identity of their sexual partners, though the opportunity to do so presented itself during our interviews. In Alyssa's case, she implied that she was sexually attracted to women and explicitly referred to one former lover using a feminine pronoun and name. In the months following our interview, I learned that Alyssa had had both male and transgender partners. Based only on what she shared during our interview, a logical assumption might have been that Alyssa's sexual activity was confined to women. Certainly, Alyssa was under no obligation to specify the gender identity of each of her former and current partners, but I think it is telling that she only explicitly made mention of her attraction to women. In the context of our interview, the heterosexual aspects of Alyssa's sexuality were "closeted," though I can't say whether this was intentional on Alyssa's part. As a researcher, I cannot make claims as to why Alyssa's own account of her sexuality included some details and not others. I can only point out that it might be consistent with a practice of linguistic activism that attempts to privilege and make visible queerness, as a subversive move against conditions in which queer desires and practices are normally suppressed or not talked of, even when they exist. This would be an inversion of the more conventional practice of "covering," in which an individual obfuscates the aspects of one's identity that might signify queerness, in order to allow a heterosexual identity narrative to be assumed by his or her audience (Yoshino 2007).

In Minty's case, her response when I asked, via email, if and how her sexual identity was related to her anarchism was: "My gender identity as queer is not a recent development. I knew from a very young age that I loved womyn

and [this] is very tied to my sense of self.”⁸ Other than this statement, she did not provide any direct information about her sexual identity, though she did on several other occasions throughout the interview mention former partners and lovers. Interestingly, she always used gender-neutral pronouns to refer to these individuals. Further complicating her statement that she “loved womyn,” I later ran into Minty at an anarchist event she helped organize, where she was publicly kissing and holding hands with someone who visually presented as a man (though not knowing this individual personally, I do not know if “he” self-identified as such). The tactic of evading the specification of one’s sexuality is a common one in queer cultures; one linguistic theorist, in describing her circumlocutions to avoid identifying herself as a lesbian by naturalizing the gendered pronouns referring to her female partner, calls this the “recognizably gay tactic of avoiding pronominalizing anaphora” (Morrish 2002: 186). Morrish notes that this “recognizable tactic” works to indicate her gayness to those in the know (who have experience with this tactic) and keeps her sexuality indeterminate for everyone else. I would argue that Minty and Alyssa’s avoidance of “pronominalizing anaphora” functions analogously though not identically: by circumlocuting the identification of partners whose gender might imply a heteronormative identity, Minty and Alyssa avoid reifying the dominant assumption of heterosexuality. Just as, in certain repressive contexts, the mere mention of homosexuality is taken as “promoting” a queer lifestyle, it could be that Minty and Alyssa, and other anarchists who don’t identify themselves as straight, believe that by mentioning their heterosexual practices and relationships they might be seen as promoting or privileging heterosexuality above the queer alternatives, which, as anarchists, they do not wish to do.

I offer these observations not in order to call into question the authenticity or sincerity of Alyssa and Minty’s self-narratives, but rather to recognize their self-narratives as moments of *production* of a non-normative sexual identity. While it is possible to see their accounts of their own sexuality as a repression of practices and desires which do not fit a particular queer narrative (a queer narrative that conflates queerness with homosexual orientation), I prefer to see their accounts as actually corresponding to a different queer narrative (a queer narrative that embraces the indeterminacy of identity categories). Their own accounts, in combination with my observations, “dramatize incoherencies” (Jagose 1996: 3) in the often taken for granted relationship between sexual orientation, practice, and identity. These anecdotes about Alyssa and Minty illustrate that there is no simple way to characterize their sexual identifications, nor did either woman attempt to offer me a straightforward representation of their erotic desires through their assumed identity categories. The closest either came to labeling their sexual identity was to use the term queer, which no doubt they understood to be an inherently indeterminate category. That they identified as queer actually told me very little about the precise nature of their romantic partnerships.

Indeed, their ambiguous identity performances enact the idea(l) that sexual identification is not a simple representation of desire or activity. This is in keeping with the queer project of troubling fixed and determinate identity labels (Butler 1990).

Queer, for all its erotic indeterminacy, is not *politically* indeterminate for the anarchists who identify themselves with it. Queer may be an “anti-identity” as far as sexuality is concerned (and even that is debatable) but it is most certainly a coherent, if not fixed or essentialist, political identity (Jagose 1996, Seidman 1993). Queer definitely refers to a specific and well-defined political project (albeit a fluid and historically contingent one), and thus there is little question that anarchists, by identifying themselves as queer, wish to ally themselves with that project. Alyssa, for example, was clear about the fact that her queerness is a political orientation in addition to being a sexual identification:

I’ve identified as queer on and off since high school, or maybe junior high, depending on whether you track queerness alongside desire/sex with women. But I think that I began to think of myself as queer in a more settled way maybe ten years ago, and that is definitely political—not just about desire and who I have sex with but also about an orientation against capitalist heteropatriarchy.

Many anarchists are similarly explicit on the point that they identify themselves as queer for self-consciously political reasons.

Alyssa’s insinuation that queerness doesn’t necessarily track with her homosexual desires and practices is particularly important for thinking about the complex relationship between practice on the one hand and identity on the other. One anarchist essayist poses a similar distinction between practice and identity: “Being bisexual does not mean that we [anarchists] engage in sexual relations with everyone; it just means that we recognize the potential to so engage” (Robson 1996: 325).⁹ Anarchist sexuality in this respect is not about having sex with particular kinds of people, but rather entails an openness to the queer notions that erotic desire is and ought to be fluid, and that sexual identity ought to reflect and allow for that fluidity. For example, when asked to talk about her sexual identity, Tina responded, “I identify as no preference. Um, I think I lean towards, like, um, heterosexual, like, relationships because that’s what I’ve been primarily involved with, but I don’t like to identify as straight. I find it oppressive.” Indeed, the majority of interviewees indicated that they had been mostly involved in heterosexual romantic relationships. Yet, even those who were mostly or exclusively involved in heterosexual *activity* showed a reluctance to completely identify themselves as heterosexual *people*.

Recall that a similar dynamic of disidentification often plays out in relation to monogamy. Even those anarchists who are currently monogamous voice

support for the idea of polyamory or have practiced polyamory in the past. Rilla, for example, was an interviewee who said that she always “ends up being monogamous” though she understood the political motivations behind polyamory: “If I think about it critically, I could see why people advocate it [polyamory], you know? It sounds good but I just, I tend to always end up in monogamous relationships with men.” I think Rilla’s language here is important. By describing her habit of having monogamous relationships with men as something she “just ends up doing,” she does not imply that monogamy (or heterosexuality for that matter) is any more natural or justifiable than polyamory. She puts herself at a critical distance from hegemonic sexual normativity. Similarly, Leo expressed support—and even longing—for polyamory, but admitted that in practice he tends to be monogamous: “I wish I was polyamorous. I wish I could psychologically cope with polyamory [*laughs*] but, um, I probably couldn’t, so instead I’m a very reluctant monogamist.” The anarchist understanding of queer identity and the anarchist understanding of polyamory are similar, in that both are not so much about material actions as about ethical orientations and the importance of symbolically representing those orientations. In this, they are similar to other aspects of anarchist lifestyle which depend heavily on discourse to construct them as radical political interventions. There is an important analytical distinction to be made between the material and symbolic consequences of personal sexual practice. Within the norms of a culture or subculture, some practices are valued for what they *represent*, whereas others are valued as material goods in themselves. This distinction is relevant to consider when assessing the strategic suitability of a given tactic in a particular situation. Where representation is of political significance, questions of visibility, audience, and discursive framing are crucial to assessments of a practice’s strategic utility.

Subcultural norms of sexuality

I will consider the broader political implications of these sexual practices as they travel beyond the anarchist subcultural milieu, but for now I want to hold my analysis for a moment at the subcultural level, to consider the effects of normative lifestyle discourses on individuals *within* anarchist subcultures. One interviewee, Emily, listed sexual practices among the things anarchists used to pass judgment on each other (though she did say that sexual practices were less of a factor than consumption habits and aesthetic tastes). By articulating authentic anarchist identity with non-hegemonic sexualities, the subcultural discourses of sexuality circulated by anarchists work to discipline self-identified anarchists into adopting particular practices as a means of demonstrating the authenticity of their commitment to anarchist politics. One effect of this construction of authentic anarchist identity is

the experience of internal dissonance and unease when felt personal desires conflict with subcultural norms. For example, Joel observed that individuals who attempted to practice polyamory were ashamed when they found themselves experiencing feelings of possessiveness or jealousy, as if these emotional reactions jeopardized their identities as “good” anarchists. The CrimethInc. essay on non-monogamous relationships also posits that, “it’s probably just as common for lovers in a non-monogamous relationship to feel insecure about their longing for monogamy, or at least some of the reassurances it professes to offer, as it is for them to feel ashamed of their desires for others” (CrimethInc. 2005a: 398). Orlando said that he had seen his friends get “stressed out” about their own desires, putting pressure on themselves to be in open relationships, even though they did not personally find the arrangement pleasurable. Leo made a similar observation, that people (himself included) feel pressure to practice polyamory because it is seen as ideologically preferable to monogamy:

Ideologically, I thought it was fine, but I was really trying to force the ideology on my reality Some people want to be polyamorous but they just can’t cope with it, like [on] their own psychological level. But you can tell they suffer at it and they’re making everybody else suffer, and . . . like, some people don’t want it, but yet they’re taking that position.

Anarchist scenes evidently have the potential to reproduce the dominant culture’s “lack of a concept of benign sexual variation,” in Rubin’s terminology (1984: 282), only in the opposite direction to mainstream society. Among some anarchists, straight identity and monogamy are positioned as morally inferior to queerness and polyamory.

This “hierarchical valuation” of sexualities—to borrow another phrase from Rubin (1984: 279)—is used as a mechanism of discipline within anarchist communities. At times, the disciplinary effects of subcultural norms may reproduce patterns of domination for which anarchist sexuality was supposed to be a remedy. For example, some women feel quite strongly that the anarchist emphasis on polyamory ends up reproducing sexual domination and exploitation of women within the anarchist scene. In an essay titled “Polyamory on the Left: Liberatory or Predatory?” one anarchist woman expresses her belief that “having multiple partners at any given time is not liberating for women,” that “being open to the fuck, as all polyamorous women are supposed to be, is *men’s* definition of liberated female sexuality” (Kreutzer 2004, emphasis mine). In Kimberley Kreutzer’s view, the normalization of polyamory does not reflect the sexual desires of most anarchist women, but is rather a means of rendering them “sexual chattel to be passed back and forth between brothers in arms.” One interviewee, Melissa, seemed to share this view, when she argued to me that polyamory

has nothing to do with feminist politics, that it is merely a justification that anarchist guys use to get away with cheating on their partners.

In an anarchist's ideal, anarchic world, perhaps individuals would have the wherewithal and autonomy to refrain from sexual arrangements they don't find personally pleasurable or liberating. Yet, in our present context, subcultural norms can be powerful sources of discipline, particularly when questions of political authenticity and commitment are at stake. Kreutzer argues, for instance, that women who do not prefer to be in polyamorous relationships are disciplined into submission by the equation of authentic anarchist identity with polyamorous sexuality. That is, Kreutzer and other women suggest that if a woman expresses a personal desire not to be polyamorous, she is perceived as unserious in her commitment to anarchist politics. The disciplinary power of authenticity comes into stark focus when women actively refuse polyamory: "When we decide we aren't polyamorous, given the male defined terms and standards, we are called 'old-fashioned' a term that by leftist standards is degrading and humiliating" (Kreutzer 2004). In order to avoid such marginalization, women may adopt polyamory even though they do not personally desire it: "Because of the views towards non-polyamorous relationships I have seen many unwilling women sleep with other men in order to prove that they are not 'old-fashioned,' but that they are in fact new, 'liberated' women" (Ibid.). In the eyes of those who see polyamory as an expression of male privilege, using the practice of polyamory as a gauge of anarchist authenticity risks disproportionately marginalizing women within activist communities, or even disciplining their sexual behavior in ways that seem to mirror traditional patterns of gendered domination.¹⁰

Even if we set aside the issue of whether subcultural norms have the effect of replicating mainstream hierarchies, the fact that they instantiate any kind of hierarchy is unsettling for many anarchists. From a practical perspective, the institution of any kind of moral hierarchy around sexual practices can spawn drama that may prove detrimental to a unified atmosphere within the movement. The CrimethInc. essay on non-monogamous relationships points out a tendency for some polyamorists to be "insistent or even confrontational" about the correctness of polyamory as a political practice, yet it asserts the importance of not "making others feel they must live up to some standard around you" (CrimethInc. 2005a: 399). The essay also asserts that, "It is important that we avoid developing a competitive culture of non-monogamy, in which people must feel shame for wanting anything 'bourgeois' or 'traditional'" (CrimethInc. 2005a: 398). The solution for these writers is to do away with normative standards altogether: "*Everything*, every desire and need, has to be respected, or else this is no revolution after all, just the establishing of a different norm" (CrimethInc. 2005a: 398). But clearly, not "*every* desire and need" ought to be respected—what of the patriarchally perpetuated desire by some men to assert sexual dominance over women?

Where people are drawing on hegemonic histories of oppression in their own personal behavior, shouldn't they be held responsible for doing so, when they might do otherwise?

A puristic anti-normativity position risks reproducing the liberal model of free choice that treats individual acts as pure expressions of personal agency, even though systemic power relations are always at work in structuring those acts. To invoke this discourse is both to dismiss the real obstacles that work against the adoption of oppositional identifications and practices and to excuse people when their choices happen to replicate traditional oppressive relationships. The likely effect of a movement purporting to reject norms altogether is the invisible conservation of dominant norms from within and beyond that movement.¹¹ Philosophically, it might make sense to oppose the way that norms, both mainstream and subcultural, constrain personal autonomy. Yet, unless anarchism is to stand for a kind of moral relativism, standards of ethical authenticity, and the dynamics of disciplinarity they generate, *are* politically defensible for anarchists in the interest of social transformation.

Consent-seeking

To illustrate this point, I want to look at another sexual practice that is strongly associated with contemporary anarchism—that of consent-seeking. One CrimethInc. article asserts that “the first and most important matter in bed (or the stairwell of the parking deck, or wherever you are) is the question of consent” (CrimethInc. 2005a: 474). Just as anarchist organizations are often actively structured to facilitate decision making by consensus, the seeking of consent is advocated as a prerequisite for sexual activity between individuals. A document disseminated by organizers of the 2009 G20 protests in Pittsburgh in advance of the summit provides one example of anarchists’ attempts to define sexual consensuality:

Consent is actively and voluntarily expressed agreement The following do not qualify as consent: silence, passivity, and coerced acquiescence. Body movements, non-verbal responses such as moans, or the appearance of physical arousal do not, necessarily, constitute consent. Further, if someone is intoxicated, they may not be in a position to give you consent. Consent is required each and every time there is sexual activity, regardless of the parties’ relationship, prior sexual history, or current activity.¹²

Discussions of consensuality and its importance to anarchists can be found in many other places as well. The Slingshot Collective is a publishing entity that puts out a popular radical-themed calendar/organizer each year. Several of its annual editions have included an article entitled “Will You Go Down

on Me?,” which extols the virtues of open communication between sexual partners as a means to non-coercive sexual exploration. The guidelines for the 2009 Bash Back! Convergence included points on “practicing active consent,” such as, “Always ask for explicit verbal consent before engaging or touching someone” (BAMF! Productionz 2009). At the 2008 BASTARD (Berkeley Anarchist Students of Theory and Research & Development) Conference, I attended a panel discussion on the links between anarchism and BDSM,¹³ in which all of the presenters cited the central role of consensuality for both traditions.

The ethical basis for this position within anarchist philosophy is that consent-seeking is understood as a way to consciously counteract the dynamics of domination and hierarchy that may manifest themselves in personal interactions. An anonymous contributor to the magazine *Rolling Thunder* puts it this way: “Non-hierarchical, consensual relationships are the substance of anarchy, and we need to prioritize seeking and promoting consent in all our interactions” (CrimethInc. 2005b: 41). The distributors of the “Sexual Consent Guidelines” document quoted above similarly argued that “Doing personal work to consistently seek consent and respect the times when it is not given helps to combat rape culture, and informed consent, sexual and otherwise, is necessary in the building of strong, healthy anti-authoritarian communities.” As the distribution of this document attests, there has been a marked effort to make anarchist convergences into spaces where people feel safe from sexual assault at the hands of comrades.

The method of “calling people out” is commonly used to address instances of sexual assault or harassment when they happen within the movement.¹⁴ Sometimes, the term is phrased as “calling someone out on their shit,” meaning the person has a consistent issue of ethical failure that they are perceived as needing to work through in order to have integrity as an anarchist. The purpose of calling someone out on their shit is ostensibly to motivate them to alter their behavior so that it is more aligned with ethical standards. It may also be to communicate to others in the scene that this individual’s anarchist credentials are not to be trusted. For example, in light of the fact that some anarchist men may use the discourse of polyamory to justify dishonesty and infidelity to their female partners, Joel informed me that “guys who are players under the auspices of anarchism are called out really quickly.” Those who egregiously violate anarchist ethical standards, for instance by perpetrating sexual assault on a comrade, may even be banned from participation in organizations and events, effectively stripping them of their social identities as members of the anarchist movement.

The issue of consensuality can shed light on the productivity of disciplinarity around ethical commitments within anarchist subcultures, given its near-universal status as an absolute ethical good. Even staunch sex radicals insist that “the absence of coercion” ought to be a universal criterion for judging the moral acceptability of sexual practices (Rubin 1984). Consensuality makes

an interesting case for exploring an anarchist critique of normativity, since it's hard to imagine how the universalization of consent-seeking could play into an oppressive power dynamic that anarchists might ethically oppose (this could be a failure of imagination on my part, though). A "hierarchical valuation of sexualities"—in Rubin's terms (1984)—that values consent-seeking above coercion would be just what anarchists would desire, though the use of the word hierarchical might make them squeamish. This squeamishness might be alleviated by recognizing that there is an analytical difference between the practice of consent-seeking on the one hand, and the practices of polyamory or queer self-identification on the other.

To seek consent is to materially enact a social relationship in which the individual recognizes another as horizontally positioned in relation to oneself and treats the other accordingly. The act carries ethical value in itself. By contrast, to identify oneself or one's relationship as queer or polyamorous is not to *enact* a particular power arrangement. For one thing, these identities don't necessarily correspond to a given material reality, and even if they did, there is nothing intrinsically immoral (within the values system of most anarchists) about an individual's tendency to have sex with a particular gender of person versus another, or with one person versus many people. Thus, as a political practice, identification as queer or polyamorous is an *expression* or *representation* of dissent against a macrosocial system of power in which some types of subjects are able to dominate others by virtue of their subject positions. To have erotic desires that are heterosexual or monogamous is not an ethical lapse in itself. Within an anarchist ethical framework, it may be consistent to try to discipline subjects into practices of consent-seeking, and inconsistent to try to discipline subjects into practices of self-identification, which are not in and of themselves oppressive or liberating. Yet, in spite of this, my research shows that, among anarchists, identifying in such a way as to potentially *imply* one's support for the hegemony of heterosexuality and monogamy can be seen as politically unpalatable. Recall Tina's claim that I quoted above: "I don't like to identify as straight. I find it oppressive." So there must be something at stake beyond the material enactment of power relations – why does Tina feel uncomfortable merely identifying with a hegemonic sexual category, regardless of whether or not she actually wields illegitimate power over others in her own life?

Identification as contestation

I want to further clarify here what is at stake for individuals who "don't like to identify as straight" or as monogamous. Many anarchist activists position their very self-identification as a site of contestation against hegemonic (or "straight") constructions of sexuality. For anarchists, like many other sex radicals, to adopt the label of queer is not to foreclose heterosexual

activities, but rather to symbolically disavow the social coercion involved in enforcing what Adrienne Rich (1980) calls “compulsory heterosexuality.” Coming out as queer is not, in these cases, an act of exposing one’s “true” or “inner” identity. Rather it’s “a voluntaristic and reflexive act” which is “accessible to anyone who possesse[s] the right political convictions” (Stein 1997: 48). What is at issue here is less an objection to heterosexual desire and more an objection to heteronormativity, or the idea that sex between so-called opposite sex partners is normal, natural, and correct (Berlant and Warner 1998: 548). Ideally, as Annette Schlichter explains, “the object of the critique is neither heterosexual desire nor the subject desiring another gender but the *sociocultural system*, which inscribes a heterosexual identity as a hegemonic position” (Schlichter 2004: 546, emphasis mine). Similarly, the anarchist critique of monogamy is usually, in theory, a critique of *compulsory* monogamy, rather than a critique of any particular couple’s actual habit of sexual exclusivity.

There are multiple scales of operation here: whereas normativity is intrinsically macrosocial, personal behaviors are intrinsically microsocial. There is a distinction to be made between the “cultural system that produces and regulates sexual identities” and the individual subjects who end up taking on identities within that system (Schlichter 2004: 546). Yet, proponents of a kind of micropolitical sexual resistance often fail to make this distinction; on one side, straight subjects are held accountable for the perpetuation of an oppressive cultural system (which they cannot, as individuals, reasonably be held responsible for); on the other side, queer subjects are attributed the capacity to resist or subvert an entire system by their performance of a non-hegemonic identity position. While there is convincing theoretical and empirical support for the ways that macrosocial phenomena like norms have microlevel effects through their work on individual subjects (as elaborated in the work of Foucault, for example), the opposite operation is less well supported. In other words, while norms have identifiable effects on individual bodies, individual bodies are less clearly shown to be able to make a material impact on social norms.

Despite this lacuna of evidence, somewhat grandiose claims for the assumed effects of individual actions on the social order are often made by proponents of queer identity and practice. For example, a leaflet circulated by self-identified queers at New York City’s gay pride march in 1990 proclaimed, “Every time we fuck, we win” (Anonymous Queers 1999: 589).¹⁵ It’s true that by engaging in queer sex, individuals succeed in doing something that bigots don’t want them to do. But does the act of queer sex undermine the power of those who would prohibit it? If anything, it exposes the bigots’ already existing lack of power to completely control queer sexuality. It is unclear how precisely the exposure contributes to the project of winning *more* power for queers in society. Diana Fuss (1989: 101) is worth quoting at length on this point:

While I do believe that living as a gay or lesbian person in a post-industrial heterosexist society has certain political effects (whether I wish my sexuality to be so politically invested or not), I also believe that simply *being* gay or lesbian is not sufficient to constitute political activism. A severe reduction of the political to the personal leads to a telescoping of goals, a limiting of revolutionary activity to the project of self-discovery and personal transformation. 'The personal is political' re-privatizes social experience, to the degree that one can be engaged in political praxis without ever leaving the confines of the bedroom. Sexual desire itself becomes invested with macropolitical significance. The personal, I am arguing, is *not* political, in any literal or equivalent fashion.

Following Fuss, it's arguable that personal acts may have political significance, in the sense that they carry political meaning, but that doesn't necessarily ensure their efficacy in radically subverting *systems* of domination. There is no necessary relationship between gestures that are imagined to *represent* a desire for subversion (e.g. calling oneself queer), and *actual* subversion of a network of power (e.g. overturning heteronormativity).¹⁶

We can see the parallels here between sexual practices and other lifestyle practices discussed in earlier chapters. All, as the acts of individuals, perhaps undertaken in private, are limited in the impact they can possibly make on the norms of mainstream society. Furthermore, many of the privileges of normative sexual identity are discursive and unquantifiable, such as pervasive cultural validation and familial acceptance of one's romantic partners. Thus, these privileges cannot simply be renounced on an individual basis, discarded along with the hetero identity label. To be fair, anarcho-queers do tend to renounce many elements of the "network of norms" that comprise the "complex field" of operations that upholds heterosexuality as a privileged social position (Jakobsen 1998), state-recognized marriage being a major example. But even here, we have to be critical about the idea that an individual's personal rejection of marriage matters for the dismantling of heteronormative hegemony. As Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman (1993: 219–20) point out:

Butler's metropolitan polymorphous solution to the politics of spectacle recognizes local, urban, consumer-oriented spaces as crucial sites of political transformation; but her imagined 'gender performances' never link the politics of repeated contact between individual and visible bodies to collective forms of political affect or agency.

In order to see an individual act of "trouble-making" as something other than a trivial gesture, we have to return to the idea of performance as a theatrical act. Within the logic of performance, there is an actor *and* an audience, and that which is performed attains its social force through its effect on

that audience. Within this logic, resistant sexuality must in some way be a public performance (even if the public in question is very small); individual transgressions do not, in themselves, subvert relations of oppression. (This is why closeted queerness does not even have the potential to generate social change, no matter how much it is experienced as rebellious by the individual queer subject. To again invoke the typology of effects I presented in Chapter 2, there may be personal outcomes to private queerness, but not activist ones). I would argue that anarchist scenes, as subcultural spaces in which activism and socializing are inseparable, do provide a sort of sphere of publicity in which alternative sexualities may be performed for others. Furthermore, subcultures in which particular performances are contextualized within a discourse of politicized sexuality just might offer the kind of link between individual performances and collective affect and agency that Berlant and Freeman call for. Resistant sexual practices are positioned by anarchists, not as random choices, but as recognizable expressions of anarchist politics. As certain practices are consistently valued and promoted within anarchist scenes and discourses, they take on a collective character.

Take the way that sexuality is performed within the anarchist community in Washington, DC, for example. According to interviewees such as Joel and Gabby (and several others who had lived there), both polyamory and queer identification were part of normal sexuality for DC anarchists. Such normalization had come about as the groundbreaking performances of certain visible individuals were taken up by others within the scene. Joel observed, "What happened is that, cuz, it enters the sexual vocabulary of people I think, it enters the sexual vocabulary through someone else, like someone has the idea, 'oh we could have open relationships, let's think about this.'" Joel went on to talk about one well-known and well-liked couple in the DC anarchist community who had an open relationship, which he felt paved the way for others to try out the practice. As he put it, "A lot of people fell into that, 'if they can do it maybe we can do it.'" As more people "fall into" the practice of polyamory, it becomes all the more visible and even commonplace within the social spaces of the scene.

Anarchists in DC tend to live together in communal housing arrangements, and their group houses become gathering places for members of the local anarchist community (as well as visiting travelers). People thus have opportunities to witness others' lifestyle practices that might otherwise remain sequestered in private domestic spaces. Even the most intimate expressions of sexuality are on display for others to observe and emulate—everyone can see (and hear) how many and what kinds of people someone is bringing home on a regular basis, and who disappears with whom into whose bedroom. In the context of the dominant culture where sexuality—especially alternative, resistant forms of sexuality—is often encouraged to remain hidden, semi-public alternative spaces create the feeling that it is perfectly acceptable—even normal—to be openly queer, polyamorous, etc.

In this kind of community setting, the promise offered by one CrimethInc. essay, “Look around and you’ll see that there *are* alternatives . . . to the traditional ways of making love and being sexual that mainstream culture offers us,” actually rings true (CrimethInc. 2000: 203). Once non-hegemonic sexuality becomes a subcultural norm, the performances have transcended individual bodies, though of course they may remain marginal in relation to the larger social order.

Certain practices are normalized more so in some settings than in others. Polyamory, for example, was matter-of-factly accepted as a normal relationship structure by interviewees from Washington, DC. Interviewees from other places demonstrated an *awareness* of polyamory as a typical anarchist lifestyle practice, but were less likely to have practiced it themselves; for them it was not so important as a marker of their anarchist identity. Gabby had spent several years in the anarchist scene in DC, but at the time of our interview she was living in Los Angeles, where she had grown up. She explained that in DC, polyamory is “the main relationship type that everybody’s in” and the refusal of monogamy is taken for granted, whereas in Los Angeles, Gabby felt that she was more likely to be met with opposition if she proposed having an open relationship with a potential partner. Gabby speculated that one reason for this was the stronger tendency toward what she called “machoness” among men in the LA anarchist scene. This difference between the two subcultural environments points to one of the important factors in the capacity for performative resistance to be effective: a resistant performance must resonate (at least somewhat) with existing discursive, cultural, and personal values, or it will not even make sense as “a good thing to do” (to invoke Joel’s understanding of polyamory quoted above). It also highlights that while sexuality, like other lifestyle practices, may be an individual practice, it is not a solitary one—it relies on the understanding and cooperation of others. A collective commitment to oppositional expressions of sexuality is thus crucial for sustaining even individual practices of resistance.

Miles’ experience with his partner is testament to this. Miles was initially optimistic about his ability to have a marriage that preserved the radical, non-heteronormative nature of his relationship with his partner. In an email exchange with me, he described his disappointment at finding this optimism to be unfounded:

When I got married I was relatively young, and even though I ‘never believed’ in marriage, I thought it was such a trivial thing that I could participate in the institution without it having any effect on me or our relationship. I have learned the power of these structures in how they shape your world and how others deal with you (and you with them), and don’t like it. This so-called intimate relationship has become an interest of others (and, of course, the state). I guess I used to think that you could

turn these things against themselves from the inside and it didn't make any difference if you had the right attitude. I don't believe that now So the 'marriage experiment' is a failure, from my point of view, but now, as I contemplate what it would mean to move to another stage, I realize how caught up I am in the state (I have to ask permission from others to change my relationship), as well as the inertia of not only our relationship, but the 'tradition' of marriage and all the cultural baggage that brings.

Miles did express to me that he does not really feel himself to be a part of an active anarchist community. It is tempting to speculate that if he and his wife had, in fact, been surrounded by others who reimagined intimate relationships in the same way Miles would like to (had they lived in collective houses in DC for example), they would have been able to sustain a more "radical" partnership, even as a married couple. But as it was, merely understanding that there are other anarchists out there who share his attitudes toward marriage was clearly not enough to protect Miles and his wife from the material effects imposed on them by the institution itself and the "cultural baggage" that goes along with it.

In addition to cultural pressures, the structural incentives to monogamy and marriage thrown up by the state and the capitalist economy are significant enough that they may outweigh even strong desires to resist such practices in one's own life. Even assuming one has the support of an alternative subculture, the pressure exerted by dominant ideologies and structures still works against the adoption of resistant lifestyles. Heteronormativity is deeply entrenched in mainstream culture, and particularly for those individuals who do not experience a felt, erotic desire for non-heterosexual sex, there may seem to be little material incentive for renouncing the privilege of heterosexual identity, though they may see the symbolic political value of doing so. Take as an illustration the exchange I had with Miranda about her and her husband's practice of monogamy:

LPS: Are you guys monogamous? Do you believe in monogamy?

Miranda: Do I believe in it or are we?

LPS: Either, both.

Miranda: Um, I don't believe in it, but yes we are [*laughs*].

LPS: Does he [your husband] believe in it, is that why you are?

Miranda: I don't think so yeah, theoretically we're anarchists who don't believe in monogamy, but practically we're married because he has health insurance on his job.

The fact that Miranda insists on a distinction between whether she "believes in" monogamy and whether she "is" monogamous, as well as the reason she gave for being married (health benefits), epitomizes the disconnect between

political ideals and what may be practically feasible for individuals to do in their personal lives. Contestatory identification with polyamory may not make sense as a tactic of resistance when basic, immediate concerns like health care are involved. In situations such as these, personal motivations may trump ethical, activist, and other considerations.

Both Miles and Miranda's experiences illustrate the point that radical, systemic change may be a prerequisite to individuals' even having the capacity to choose alternative lifestyles. Heterosexism, statism, capitalism, exploitative sexual power dynamics, etc., do not go away for anarchists simply because they try not to engage with them in their own personal practices. However, the production of a strong subculture in which individuals share commitments to avoid pernicious forms of sexuality can certainly foster different and more appealing experiences of sexuality for those individuals than can be found in mainstream culture. As alternatives become normalized in anarchist communities, new kinds of desires, relationships, and even selves are produced.

A diversity of sexual tactics?

Resistant sexual practices are not solely undertaken for the direct personal benefit of the practitioners. Like other politicized lifestyle practices, polyamory and queer self-identification are also often imagined to have activist effects. What then might be the broader social ramifications of these individual or even collective subcultural performances of resistance in the form of queer, polyamorous identity? By assuming an identification that positions them as non-straight and non-monogamous—by disidentifying with normative sexuality—these individuals are enacting resistance to the process of normalization or “distribution around a statistically imagined norm” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 557). Statistically imagined norms are often used in normative projects—that is, the supposed fact of something's occurring most often in a society is advanced as justification for that thing's dominance and privilege over other things (Jakobsen 1998: 518). By proliferating instances that deviate from the norm, disidentifiers might imagine that they can effect a statistical shift such that the norm moves to the left of where it once was. The logic is, the fewer people who publicly identify as straight, the less “normal” straightness will be, and ultimately, the less normative power the ideology of straightness will have.¹⁷

The displacement of non-conformity away from actual, physical sexual activity and onto symbolic representations of sexuality (i.e. identity labels) rather ingeniously sidesteps debates about whether sexual desire is biological or cultural, rational or instinctual, agentic or determined, politically innocent or politically valent. Within the anarchist discourse of queer identification, at issue is not what kind of people one has sex with, but

rather whether, by specifying that information through one's identification, one participates in a system that awards or withdraws social power based on this information. While people can perhaps not be held ethically accountable for what they desire (if we assume that desires are somehow below the level of consciousness, that they are "governed by some internal necessity" [Fuss 1989: 2]), people can, it would seem, be held accountable for whether they discursively position their desires as aligned with a privileged sexual subjectivity.

Yet, whether or not an individual can be held ethically accountable for their public identity is perhaps beside the point. The mere presence of queer people does not qualitatively subvert the dominance of heteronormativity, though it may offer an alternative that quantitatively chips away at the numerical dominance of straightness by attracting away adherents. Furthermore, as I discussed in the previous two chapters, simply exposing people to alternatives will not be enough to attract them to a non-dominant position. Some ideological realignment must take place for formerly privileged practices to be displaced by more liberated forms of sexuality. Such realignment depends, at least in part, on the circulation of rhetorically effective arguments in defense of these more liberated forms. This circulation may be a realistic proposition within the anarchist subcultural milieu, given the subculture's discursive infrastructure; ideas are rather easily spread to very receptive audiences via electronic and print media as well as conferences and other physical meetings. Yet, beyond the limits of the subculture (i.e. in the realm of broad social transformation), resistant sexuality befalls the same trouble as all other forms of lifestyle politics. It is simply invisible or, more to the point, illegible as a political intervention. In fact, individual transgressions may serve to restabilize the very normalcy of the norms they transgress, if they are read as mere whims or worse, as pathological deviance.

What is needed is a discursive context in which alternatives can be made to resonate with other values. This may have been partially achieved within anarchist subcultures, in which anarchist political philosophy has been aligned with queer sexuality, in ways described above. But can broader social transformation really be generated by anarchists' personal practices of sexual resistance? While it seems clear that individual practices of sexuality can contribute to the subversion of mainstream norms *within* the subcultural spaces of anarchist movements, it is less clear that these acts have an impact on anyone not already operating within the anarchist political framework. For those who are heavily invested in heterosexuality, monogamy, and marriage, the knowledge that there are people out there who are not so invested will do little to unsettle their own personal investments. For people who don't share the ideological commitments upon which anarchist practices of sexuality are based, these practices may well lack appeal, and, in fact, may just as easily disgust and alienate as attract and inspire.

This is one reason why some anarchists feel it is strategically ill-advised to be too insistent on non-conformist performances of sexuality, just as some feel that it may be detrimental to dress in distinctive styles. Melissa, for example, voiced frustration with anarchists being insensitive to the fact that working-class communities of color may not be comfortable with the forms of sexuality practiced by anarchists (whom she seemed to position as not claiming membership in those communities—that is she seemed to be referring only to white, middle-class anarchists). She thought that openly embracing queerness and polyamory had foreclosed potential relationships of solidarity and had posed an unnecessary obstacle to collaboration between anarchists and non-anarchists in urban St Louis, where she had been an activist. Melissa's perception of the dynamics in St Louis may indeed be accurate. However, it seems problematic to assume that inner-city people of color are predisposed to be alienated by oppositional sexual practices. Indeed, although I cannot make statistical generalizations from my small interview pool, I observed no obvious correlation between interviewees' sexual practices and their class statuses or racial identities. That is, interviewees who identified as middle class and/or white did not strike me as any more or less likely to practice or support polyamory and queer self-identification than other interviewees. Of course, the one thing all my interviewees had in common, across their various class and racial identities, was their identification with anarchism. So, setting aside Melissa's potentially problematic assumptions about class and race determining attitudes about sexuality, she is onto an important point, which is that people who are not operating with a baseline openness to non-dominant sexualities may be best communicated with in other ways than embodied performances of sexual resistance.

In line with this, many interviewees mentioned the importance of "meeting people where they're at," meaning they saw the value of accepting and working with people who do not (yet) share their goals, values, identities, and lifestyles. The willingness to meet people where they're at is, at times, a strategic effort to forge alliances in recognition of the cultural differences that may account for differing attitudes toward sexuality. For example, Mark reflected that he often encounters homophobia among the working-class laborers he tries to do organizing work with. For him, this highlighted the importance of cultivating strong personal relationships based on points of political solidarity, so that he could feel comfortable challenging comments and attitudes he finds offensive. For Mark, it was important not to alienate people he is trying to do political work with, but it was also important to him that he not "let shit fly" when he felt it was inappropriate.

It's worth noting that it may have only been possible for Mark to keep this kind of attitude because of his own identity and position of privilege with respect to hegemonic sexuality—had he identified as queer, and visibly presented himself as such, he may have found it much more difficult even to establish productive personal relationships in the face of vocal homophobia.

Mark was able to make a strategic choice about how he communicated about his anti-hierarchical politics, based on his own subject position and relationship to the people he was talking to. It may not be a choice that is available to all other anarchists, nor a viable tactic for promoting anti-hierarchical values in all situations, but it has its utility in this particular context. Given my above argument that whether Mark *personally identifies* as queer or not is not directly material to the project of subverting the *social privileging* of straightness, I think anarchists can find value in the way he exploits his position of privilege in order to facilitate dialogue with people who would likely be unreceptive to queer political performances. Importantly, tactics like Mark's can coexist with embodied performances by those anarchists for whom queerness and polyamory are internally felt *needs* and not solely *representations* of political dissent.

A catchphrase among anarchist organizers of large-scale protests is "diversity of tactics." When anarchist organizers use this phrase, they are stating that they recognize the legitimacy of a range of modes of resistance, from whimsical theatrics to combative confrontation with police to violent destruction of property. Each bloc involved in the protest is accorded the autonomy to freely decide which tactics it will employ. This decision can take into account the social positionality—membership in various, intersecting social categories with each posing their own constraints and possibilities—of the protesters. For example, there are often individuals who identify as "unarrestable" due to factors like not possessing the requisite documentation for their presence in the United States or having to support young children. Unarrestables may thus try to refrain from tactics that involve illegal activities. Tactical decisions can also be tailored to the desired outcome of the action. In any specific instance, protesters may consider whether their aim is to win public support for a cause, to forge unity among themselves, or to have an immediate material effect on an unjust situation, each of which is a valid reason for action but each of which might call for a different tactical approach.

The case of anarchist sexuality shows that the diversity of tactics principle can be productively applied to lifestyle politics as well. What this principle requires, in any case, is a fundamental commitment to reflexive critique. That is, activists must be constantly vigilant about considering the ramifications—both intended and unintended, both direct and indirect—of any given instance of a practice. For example, if one is considering one's own practice of polyamory, one has to ask whether it satisfies one's personal desires and needs, whether it loosens the grip of capitalism and patriarchy on one's own personal experience, whether it communicates an indictment of capitalism and patriarchy to others, whether it effectively demonstrates to others that polyamory is a viable alternative to monogamy, and so on. And one has to ask these questions in any given situation, with the understanding that the answers will change depending on who is involved, where they are, and who is watching.

This kind of commitment to contextual reflexivity requires that specific tactics not be fetishized for themselves. A given tactic may not work for some people, in some places, at some times. Boundaries of authenticity thus cannot be drawn based purely on the adoption of a tactic. Moral righteousness cannot be claimed on the basis of a lifestyle choice, since that choice may only be politically efficacious in certain contexts. Lifestyle politics makes most sense when its practices are approached as provisional and subjected to situational critique (in a way that mirrors the ironization of anarchist identity described in Chapter 4). Situational critique provides an alternative to purism, which is a trap that frustrates many activists and in some cases even drives individuals away from activist movement cultures. The minute problematization and discipline engendered by movement cultures can be taxing and ultimately exhaust the reserves of commitment that individuals have toward the movement. Purism goes hand in hand with the aestheticization of politics in that it refers to the judgment and policing of individual habits to the extent that they fail to line up with subcultural norms about what is acceptable anarchist practice and what is not. These judgments are supposedly based in the substantive ideological differences that motivate subcultural deviations from dominant ways of life. But because everyone can be called out at some point for not living up to anarchist principles—to live in contemporary society is to be complicit with capitalism and other forms of exploitation—the search for purity is a trap in which everyone is doomed to fail. In the most generous reading, purism comes from an ethical place—it is supposed to point out where people are not being consistent with their values and hopefully to bring them in line. But besides playing into a dynamic of normativity that would seem to be at odds with anarchist philosophy, purism may have a paradoxical effect of driving people away from activist movements rather than actually spurring them to bring their behavior in line with anarchist ideals.

Ethical critique that attends to the specific conditions of any given situation—including the structural constraints experienced by the individuals involved—offers a way to retain accountability without devolving into puristic moralism. It makes more sense for lifestyle practices to be assessed on the basis of their practicability and observable effects in particular contexts, rather than activists making a wholesale embrace or rejection of a given lifestyle or lifestyle practice.