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Marriage: An Invasive Political Regime



An objection to all weddings

Written June 2019



Will
you...

- promise to overlook all the shitty things I do?
- enable me to access more undeserved power than I already have?
- perpetuate misogynistic gender roles with me?

As an advocate for individual autonomy and nonmonogamy, I am against the institution of marriage. Many women are outspoken about keeping the state from managing their bodies when it comes to abortion, but it's rare for women to raise any issue with state management of their relationships through marriage. People have difficulty recognizing the latter as a problem, because of liberal choice rhetoric. They claim that as long as they have the choice not to get married, that marriage doesn't need to be examined, let alone abolished. I believe that that's an overly simplistic view that ignores the costs and effects of marriage as an institution by only seeing it as a personal choice.

Marriage is not just an individual choice. In fact, it violates the principle of individual consent. A person may consent to get married in the first place, but once they are married, they cannot just change their mind, revoke their consent, and have the marriage end when they are no longer willing to be married. They have to get permission from the state to legally get a divorce. It is not based on the will of the participants alone, and they do not get to set all of the terms of their divorce, just like they didn't get to set the legal terms of their marriage.

If we don't have the individual freedom to say "no," then our "yes" is not meaningful. Consent must always be revocable. People often stay married for

years after they no longer want to be married, because of the stress and costs of divorce (financial, social, emotional). Marriage ceases to be consensual once the contract has been entered, even though agreeing to the vows creates the expectation that couples will want to stay in the contract until they die. The existence of a state relationship contract like this enacts several harms on society and individuals.

Marriage is an invasive political regime that is meant to regulate sexuality, male-female social relations, household structure, property ownership, child ownership, access to healthcare, access to citizenship, and how people prioritize their non-contractual relationships. One harmful function of marriage is the creation of a hierarchy of relationships, in which long-term sexual contracts are given privileged legal and social status over those that do not fit that criteria. If you don't think that this hierarchy is inherent to marriage, consider how compulsory it is to congratulate couples on getting engaged and to celebrate marriage as an accomplishment.

People are already free to celebrate loving someone else in whatever way they would like, so why would people get

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married if not to gain legal entitlements to their spouse and to signify their superior status in their spouse's life?

This hierarchy weakens individual autonomy, friendships, community bonds, and political solidarity. Traditional marriage propaganda disseminates the idea that marriage is a union between two people — a couple unit — who will meet most of each other's emotional, sexual, and material needs. The couple unit is most often ostensibly

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• **Marriage is an invasive** •
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• **sexuality, male-female** •
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• **household structure,** •
• **property ownership,** •
• **child ownership, access** •
• **to healthcare, access to** •
• **citizenship, and how** •
• **people prioritize their** •
• **non-contractual** •
• **relationships.** •
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monogamous (perceived sexual exclusivity); or, at least, the partnership is primary and considered one of the most important bonds in the couple's life. Platonic love and bonds outside of blood relatives are often subordinated to the needs and expectations of the spouse and the rules of the monogamous contract.

Promoting marriage as a relationship goal that is superior to all others often leads to neglecting one's own needs that a spouse cannot or will not

meet; neglecting other meaningful relationships; a sense of entitlement to a spouse's emotional, sexual, or physical labor; social conflict caused by jealousy, infidelity, and the expectation that others will police the marriage contract; and sometimes violence when relationship rules aren't followed.

I've personally experienced how harmful this hierarchy can be to friendships. When a former friend of mine told her husband that I was a sex worker, he instructed her to barre me from their home and demanded that she cease spending time with me. He also expressed concern that she and I were sexually interested in each other, because she was non-monogamous prior to getting married (and because we were, indeed, attracted to one other). Clearly, he felt entitled to have these demands met, based on his status as her husband, and she felt obliged to follow them.

Even though my friend was pro-sex work, she subordinated her own values and our friendship to her husband's rules. She informed me that she would no longer be "able to" see me in person, because she had to put her marriage first. Her

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• **"Each relationship is** •
• **independent, and a** •
• **relationship between** •
• **autonomous** •
• **individuals."** —The •
• Short Instructional •
• Manifesto for •
• Relationship Anarchy •
• (Nordgren, 2006) •
.....

articulation of her “inability” to continue to see me indicated just how much marriage had eroded her autonomy. She no longer saw this as a choice in which she had agency, but an imperative that we should all recognize, understand, and excuse. I was hurt by her withdrawal of emotional and political support. However, I recovered from the loss quickly, because I had already become part of a robust and supportive non-monogamous community. She, on the other hand, only became more socially isolated and less of an individual through her role as a wife.

Another example of how marriage harms our other relationships was described to me by a client who hired me as an escort. He was going through a divorce and said that because he had been so focused on prioritizing his relationship with his wife, he didn’t have any friends once the marriage ended. His social life while married revolved around other married people, and they spent time together in couple units. Now that his status had changed from married to single, he couldn’t fit into that social structure and suffered from isolation and loneliness.

Instead of living as autonomous individuals and members of communities in which we can share material resources, emotional care, sex, and political support, marriage (as well as the relationship escalator that leads to marriage)

divides people into couples and nuclear families. Men and women are funneled into participating in this custom when other choices are framed as socially undesirable and there's a dearth of modelling and legitimizing of alternatives (i.e. cohousing, care collectives, 'singledom' as a life choice, etc.). In this societal structure, it is normalized to share resources and privileges almost exclusively with family members who are related either by blood or law, and this norm is institutionally enforced.

**“Breaking the
nuclear family...
releases energy”**

—RAD 2019
unconference
participant

For instance, a person who has health insurance through their job cannot add a few friends to their plan in order to help support the people who they care about. They are, however, allowed to add their children and one person with whom they have a sexual commitment that has been state licensed via marriage. Policies like that make marriage more appealing to people who otherwise might not have access to healthcare, which adds a transactional element to the relationship.

It's common for marriage to function as an economic contract between two people who are trading financial resources in exchange for domestic, emotional, or sexual resources. Many

wives are totally financially supported by their husbands, with the expectation that they will be sexually available only to their husband and become child-bearers. This kind of relationship is akin to sex work, although it's not stigmatized like prostitution. Within this system, the wife's role is considered more virtuous than that of the "whore" who does short term sexual labor for several men and remains free from the long-term contractual expectations of wedlock. The wife has signed a contract to trade only with one man and is often expected to produce his genetic offspring, which takes her off of the market and seemingly secures the husband's paternal ownership over any children.

When it comes down to it, neither the wife nor the sex worker is superior in her approach to relating sexually with men. Both are situations in which sex and intimacy are treated as commodities and traded for other resources in private transactions. But, the state and our respective cultures have divided

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• **"The intimate is a**
• **worthwhile domain in**
• **which to struggle**
• **against hierarchy and**
• **domination."**

• —RAD 2019
• unconference
• participant
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women within a false sexual hierarchy by upholding marriage as the supreme relationship, and shaming

and criminalizing prostitutes. What makes the prostitute so undesirable and dangerous is her lack of commitment to or dependence upon one client, which gives her mobility. If she gets pregnant, there may not be any assurance of paternity, and thus no patrilineal rights or responsibilities over the child. She may even request public government assistance for childcare expenses, instead of relying solely on privatized wealth from a husband.

Conservatives would prefer that women take the latter approach. Another past client of mine is an example of this conservative perspective. I went on a couple of dates with him, during which he told me that he didn't believe that women should have to work and that he would fully financially support his future wife. Later, we got to talking about welfare programs. He claimed that there should be strict work requirements for people to receive government assistance. My counter-argument was that it may be beneficial to society for single mothers and fathers to be able to stay home and focus on taking care of their children as their full-time job. I thought that when it came to mothers that we would at least share some common ground on the issue of *women* and work.

However, he claimed that the problem is that women make unwise mating choices, such as having sex with men who they aren't already married to and who may not have an incentive to

stay with them. According to him: *women should depend on individual men*, with whom they have a sexual relationship, for economic support, rather than depend on government or community resources. In the traditionalist agenda, everything depends upon the man and woman as private resources. This is damaging for men who are expected to increase their value as they age by working and accumulating wealth, and for women who are expected to add value to a man's life with her fertility. The institution of marriage has historically been the program through which those values are securely exchanged.

But, that security is slowly being threatened. Because the sexual market has become deregulated over time, especially after the invention of birth control and the free love movement in the 60s, more people are having more sex outside of marriage. This has led to a traditionalist backlash against sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, and abortion. Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychology professor and public speaker, has even called for an increase in culturally enforced

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• **Sex is a political venue** •
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• **“desire permeates the** •
• **so-called ‘public’** •
• **terrain”** —Against the •
• Couple-Form (LIES •
• Journal, 2012) •
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monogamy, because the social status of sex has changed from a means of exclusive pro-creation to a pleasure-centered free for all.

This shift has divorced female sexuality from its traditional role as sacrificial and subverted it for the selfish interests of individual people, which leads to an inequality of sexual distribution. Based on unregulated desire, some men and women have sexual access to lots of people, while others do not have access at all. There are factions of society who think that this is unfair to undesirable men and that it makes women into morally degraded “sluts.” However, this outcome is not unjust or immoral. Inequality of outcome is a consequence of freedom, as well as degeneracy, both of which I embrace as someone with a libertarian approach to sex and relationships.

If we really believe in the sexual freedom of men and women, we should not support or engage in the marriage contract, which is a form of enforced monogamy that already exists to regulate the sexual marketplace. To engage in the marriage

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• **If we believe love should be freely given from** •
• **desire than we cannot respect the culture of** •
• **love-as-commodity-lover-as-possession.** •

• —A Green Anarchist Project on Freedom and •
• Love (Mae Bee, 2004) •
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contract is to reinforce a hierarchy of relationships and female sexuality, even if you personally disagree with those harms and consciously structure your marriage to try and avoid them. To become a married person of any sex/gender is to



uphold the idea that your relationship contract is superior to other relationships, because that is the function of marriage regardless of the intent behind your choice.

With that said, I'm aware that marriage is perceived as a necessity for some people, in the case of healthcare or citizenship. And indeed, the systems that we live within, participate in, and reify may make this a material reality. There are many coercive factors influencing people to engage in marriage, many of which are intentional methods of controlling people (especially women) that I've outlined herein.

I am also aware of how coercive religion can be, and that some people get married just to have honest, shame-free access to intimacy and sex with someone who they love. These reasons do not erase the harms of marriage, and I grieve the sacrifices that married people have made. The married couple are two of the people who are directly experiencing those harms. In the essay "Marriage is Made in Hell," Laura Kipnis

writes that “a 1999 Rutgers University study reported that a mere 38 percent of Americans who are married describe themselves as actually happy in that state.”

According to Kipnis, the misery that comes with marriage results from mate behavior modification and the policing of monogamy, while promoting the mantra that “Good marriages take work.” Kipnis raises the question, “When exactly did the rhetoric of the factory become the default language of coupledness?” She claims that marriage is a mode of mass social control disguised and romanticized as the respectable meeting of emotional needs. She describes it as “a social institution devoted to maximizing submission and minimizing freedom, habituating a populace to endless compliance with an infinite number of petty rules and interdictions, in exchange for love and companionship.”

Kipnis asks us to “consider, for instance, the endless regulations and interdictions that provide the texture of domestic coupledness. Is there any area of married life that is not crisscrossed by rules and strictures about

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• **“coercive** •
• **relationships are** •
• **NOT respectful, for** •
• **they are denial not** •
• **only of desire but of** •
• **growth”** —A Green •
• Anarchist Project on •
• Freedom and Love •
• (Mae Bee, 2004) •
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everything from how you load the dishwasher, to what you can say at dinner parties, to what you do on your day off..." Finally, she claims "that the conditions of marital stasis are remarkably convergent with those of a cowed workforce and a docile electorate." Just like with our jobs and our politicians, many times we willingly submit to conditions that undermine our autonomy, because we don't see any other way of living and feel powerless to change it. More than anything, I would like to inspire people to resist that compulsory submission, which is why I was motivated to write this essay. I also plan to engage in public acts of anti-marriage protest.

I recognize that this essay and my direct actions will hit a particularly sensitive nerve for same-sex married couples and LGBT rights activists. I don't reserve my criticisms or protests only for heterosexual unions, just because LGBT people have fought so hard for equal marriage. Equal participation in oppressive hierarchical systems is not my priority, so I am still against marriage now that it is inclusive of same-sex couples.

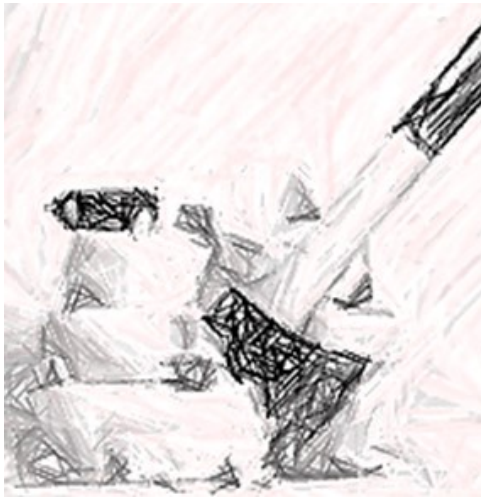
The fact that two people of the same sex can partake in that system is not a victory for queer people. It is a sign of liberal submission to state surveillance and management of our relationships. It has nothing to do with queer power, but rather with making our relationships more palatable within

mainstream notions of what they should look like. Marriage was and still is a way of managing heterosexuality. Queer people are now simply acting within that template, which leaves us little room to creatively and radically destroy the foundations of heteronormativity.

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• **“Homonormativity and** •
• **gay assimilation have** •
• **fashioned queer** •
• **relationships in the** •
• **shape of straight** •
• **coupledom.”** •
• —Queers Read This •
• (ACT UP, June 1990) •
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No matter how queer, feminist, or egalitarian you believe that you are, and no matter how sexually “open” your partnership is (i.e. swingers or polyamorous married couples), you reinforce anti-queer, misogynist, state-enforced hierarchical relating when you get married. So, I ask that those of you who are engaged or married consider the politics of your choices and understand the regime that you have been supporting. Your choice has consequences for the entire society and hurts a lot of people. I know that many of my own friends and acquaintances will find this essay offensive and take it personally. If you are one of those people, you *should* take this as a personal criticism of your actions. Attacking the oppressive politics of marriage requires my disavowal of your personal engagement with them, because the political *is* personal.

Friends, this is a courteous warning. Do not invite me to your engagement parties, bridal showers, or weddings. If you do, you can expect a protest. I may plan a sex worker and queer power rally around your venue, yell “promises are lies” when you are saying your vows, or organize a mock funeral to mourn the death of autonomy and community. When the officiant asks if anyone objects to your marriage, you can count on me saying “YES!” and telling everyone exactly why.



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: telling everyone exactly why. :
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Source: Against Equality (postcard prints, 2012)

The background of the entire image is a close-up, high-contrast photograph of flames. The fire is bright yellow and orange, with dark, swirling patterns of smoke and ash visible within the fire itself. The flames are rising from the bottom, creating a sense of upward movement and intensity.

For more:

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