

Polyamory Is Gay Marriage for Straight People

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20–25 minutes

Excerpt: The problem with relationships is not that individuals engage in them in particular ways, but that systems compel individuals to relate to each other in particular ways.

This essay has been reprinted in both the New Yorker and The Atlantic, under pseudonyms.

Like red roses on Valentine's Day, polyamory is everywhere these days. Sure, it's been around in some form or the other—recall, if you will or can, that profoundly boring book *The Ethical Slut*, a rulebook of sorts for those interested in what is often termed "ethical, consensual non-monogamy." But before the P-word, there was the S-word, as in swinging, as in the Swinging Seventies with keys and fishbowls and much suburban humping. At some points, here and there, "open" marriages and relationships flourished (and still do, as does swinging). There have been and are, doubtless, several other forms of non-monogamous romantic relationships and there will be something else on the horizon next year, perhaps something that integrates the natural world—perhaps falling in love with nature will take on a literal turn ("that dandelion had the sweetest stem of them all").

But until then, we've got polyamory now and it's all the rage. A recent piece in Quartz declares that "[Polyamorous sex is the most quietly revolutionary political weapon in the United States.](#)"

Well, then, and oh, my. Surely, we might wonder, the swelling opposition to inequality, the spread of teachers' strikes for better and fair pay, the movement for prison abolition, a growing demand that

abortions ought to be free and legal and with no questions asked—surely, at least some of that ought to count as “revolutionary”? Or is the problem that these movements are not quiet enough? Why does anything to do with sex have to be quiet anyway? And why, at this particular moment in time, is polyamory on the upswing, no pun intended?

Dig around for a history of polyamory, and things get a little shady: polyamory is currently wrapped up in a discourse about class mobility even more than race (many complain about its overwhelming whiteness). Establishing it as something germane to the upper classes relies on denuding it of its less glitzy, less tony origins. The Quartz article begins by locating the heart of polyamory in a particular locale: “To find polyamorists today, head to Brooklyn.” And not just any part of Brooklyn, but “in areas of the borough dominated by corporate-sponsored graffiti and homogenous warehouses-turned-craft-cocktail-bars, the practice of dating multiple lovers has developed into a social scene.” The article gushes that polyamorists “are shifting fundamental structures of society simply by relating to each other differently.” How does this happen? It expands: “multiple people living together in a polyamorous relationship can choose to work part time and still have the resources to live comfortably. If you’re okay with multiple roommates, even the most expensive neighborhoods become far more affordable.”

These words reveal everything about how fundamentally flawed is the idea that polyamory is revolutionary: the article muddles causes and effects. Living with multiple people in an area where a one-bedroom can cost upwards of \$3000 isn’t subverting capitalism (a claim made in the title of the piece, by several pro-polyamory people, and throughout the article): it can simply be a form of desperation. The passage naturalises the idea that so much of a vibrant city is effectively inaccessible to most people. This is like telling homeless people where to find shelter on the coldest nights but doing nothing about the conditions of capitalism that create homelessness in the first place. Certainly, polyamorists are not responsible for ending capitalism, but then perhaps so many of its defenders ought to stop pretending that its conditions somehow do take on that onerous task

(“most quietly revolutionary political weapon” is hard to live up to).

Which brings us to the question of class. If you ask and root around and look outside the Brooklynite world emphasised in the Quartz article, you find that versions of it have existed in less visibly upwardly mobile communities, including those involved with Renaissance fairs. Ren Fairs are widely mocked as gatherings for people who like to dress up (in fact, some of the work builds community and skills in ways that aren’t always discussed in depth by outsiders), and they’re not considered as hip as, say, the entrepreneurs and real estate agents lauded in Quartz. One of these, a real-estate broker Leon Feingold who “helped to establish a sex-positive, three-story, 15-bedroom apartment building in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, believes polyamory reflects high intelligence” (the whiff of essentialism flirting with eugenics appears to have escaped the writer). Feingold is described as “an exceptionally tall, friendly polyamorist, eager to talk about his high IQ and his sexual philosophies.” Feingold is also the owner of a three-story building. Tall, intelligent, presumably well-off, and philosophical — quick, several people, grab him before he’s taken by several other people!

Polyamory has become popular in recent years because it has been urbanised and dissociated from its origins in less sexy worlds like that of Ren Fairs, and been reinvented as something engaged in by people of great intelligence and social cachet, mostly residing in expensive neighbourhoods in Brooklyn and Seattle. Swinging, a long while ago, when the suburbs were new and shiny, was once the hippest thing to do, arriving at a time when the very idea of sex as a deeply private and often shameful activity was radically revised to include multiple partners outside marital bonds—though it could be argued that the fundamental basis of swinging, something specifically engaged in by married people, was an affirmation, not an erasure of the sanctity of marriage. In much the same way, as much as polyamorists huff and puff about how radical they are, there’s not much they do that challenges the state’s determination of what kinds of arrangements count as legal or not. You can live polyamorously in a three-story building filled to the brim with polyamorists, but [nothing about your cohabitation scenario or the varied amounts and](#)

kinds of fucking you engage in or the building you live in is challenging the idea that it's okay for some neighbourhoods to be more expensive than others (note that I haven't even touched the idea that some of you clearly think you're literally better than others).

Which brings us to gay marriage. In her memoir of polyamory, *Many Love: A Memoir of Polyamory and Finding Love(s)*, Sophie Lucido Johnson refers to the sex columnist and gay marriage activist Dan Savage as a "deity," constantly deferring to him as an expert on polyamory. Johnson's uncritical appraisal of Savage is typical of a particularly clueless set of people, white and mostly straight, who assume that the fact that Savage is (to his credit) one of those responsible for making it okay for straight people to even think about, say, fisting automatically means that his politics on everything else are radical and groundbreaking ([we have argued elsewhere that fucking in itself is not a politically radical act](#)—and it does not need to be). But Dan Savage has persistently been a troubling figure especially with regard to gay marriage. When Prop 8 passed in California in 2008, [Savage immediately set about blaming African Americans](#)—all of 7 percent of the entire state—and their supposed homophobia for its passage. In the years since then, he has consistently argued for gay marriage, and his position as the guy who talks publicly about previously taboo sexual topics has cemented his reputation as some kind of radical, and it has served to give the cause of gay marriage the gloss of alterity.

But gay marriage has always been a conservative cause not, as too many insist, because it's assimilationist but because it is part of a larger system that has systematically justified the cutting of benefits like health care, forcing individuals to rely on marriage to gain such basic rights. At the heart of the gay marriage fight, gays and lesbians argued that marriage rights were necessary in order that their spouses could get health insurance. This was a departure from LGBTQ activism up until a point in the 1990s, when the larger community, still deeply affected by the AIDS crisis, marched for universal healthcare as a basic right, not for marriage.

Gay marriage only became an issue when it was decided that AIDS was no longer a crisis for gay, white and well-off men who could

access new regimes of pharmaceutical care that made AIDS manageable (across the world, it remains a crisis for millions and people of colour even in the US remain vulnerable to unequal amounts of funding and care). The 1990s saw the rise of a wealthy class of gay men and women and the rise of the gay nonprofit world, and [they determined the new gay causes, which included marriage.](#)

[Gay marriage](#) has directly served to destroy the creation of options for people to literally survive outside of marriage. As soon as it became legal, corporations and even state employers set about cutting off health benefits to the civil unioned or unmarried partners of both straight and gay employees, forcing people to marry if they wanted to keep healthcare for both people in a relationship. The logic was simple: since you can now marry, you must. [Marry or die.](#)

Straight people are still slow to understand the long-lasting costs of gay marriage, and they are quick to worship gay men like Savage because, Really, they think, Look how cool he is! He has no limits when it comes to talking about sex stuff and he's so gay! Savage is also publicly polyamorous with his husband Terry, with whom he has an adopted child, all of which ratchets up the hipness factor.

Polyamory is not tied to Dan Savage alone, but it is in many ways the gay marriage of the time, for straight people. Today, left with a vacuum of causes that are cute and sexy and also look very hip and radical, polyamory fills the void left by gay marriage. It is effectively gay marriage for straight people in that it has a similar gloss of alterity (conservatives hate it, so it must be cool, is often the logic with the broadly construed left).

But, you might wonder: what about LGBTQ people and polyamory? After all, haven't queers always been engaged in various forms of polyamory?

Well, yes, but as with everything else queer, dear straight people, you took what we had and turned it into something both more complicated and simplistic. We gave you our free and open ways of public sex in the 1970s, and you took that into your houses, installed that vile shag carpeting, brought in far too much incense and oils, and turned it all into some sad attempt at "hedonism." Everything we

did with sex, you turned into something much less interesting and much more commercialised.

There's nothing inherently radical about queer and public forms of sex, but they're often rooted in the survival of a world and a people, and sex becomes a way to not only fuck but to come together and fuck (or not, or just to watch) in spaces that also protect and shield us from the outside world.

In the years since gay marriage became a fact (and begins its slow creep around the world), the mainstream gay community has expanded in influence, and it has become the face of a deeply conservative movement that wants to marry, fight in imperialist wars (or at least send the poorest of its lot into said wars), and place more people in prison, even as the rest of the world is becoming rightly more dubious of all these as "causes." But there's also a strong, vibrant queer world that's also an anti-capitalist and anti-prison world, a trans world, a genderqueer world, a fuck-all-categories world of people who don't even bother identifying on the straight-queer continuum and who are constantly repurposing living and loving and sexual practices to their own ends, to see what fits (sometimes [literally](#)) and dispose of what doesn't.

And even if some or many of them identify as polyamorous, "polyamory" isn't really what's driving this brave new world. Polyamory isn't liberatory at all, but the opposite.

Which brings us back to Sophie Lucido Johnson and *Many Love*.

There's much to like in the memoir—for instance, it considers the topic of friendship, as Johnson describes how she grew up thinking that only her romantic partners mattered, at the cost of undercutting deep ties to female and male friends. There's also a thought-provoking chapter on jealousy, something that anyone engaged in multiple relationships of any sort continues to run into: how do we maintain a willingness to be with different people in different ways, including sexual ones, and not constantly fall into pits of despair induced by jealousy? (Short answer: You forge on by constantly keeping in mind that you will fall, and you keep in communication with everyone involved).

But, ultimately, as many words as Johnson spends on the virtues of polyamory, they're undercut by her moralistic presentation of it as something that makes polyamorists better than others and by a revelation that sceptics like me have long had about polyamory: that it ultimately serves to shore up a hierarchy of relationships. In Johnson's case, marriage is placed firmly at the top.

At the very start, Johnson bemoans the fact that she constantly runs into people "who think that polyamory is about having sex with whomever you want, whenever you want, without a whole lot of emotional consideration." Later on, writing briefly about "hook-up" culture among teens, she states that the term "annoys me because it seems to imply a lack of emotional intimacy." But what of those who don't want "emotional intimacy" in every or even in any sexual encounter? What of those who relish "having sex with whomever you want, whenever you want, without a whole lot of emotional consideration"? In her moralising—there is no other word for it—Johnson, like many other polyamorists who are always going on on about how much more connected they are to their sexual partners, wants to separate herself from the sluts who fuck for no reason other than pure physical pleasure.

For some of us sex is a romp at the beach, not a long-drawn-out day at the spa. For some of us, whether or not we are emotionally connected to sexual partners is contingent on time and place and any number of factors. We might decide, for instance, that a certain kind of moustache warrants no more than a quick fuck in the gender-neutral bathroom on the third floor of that department store, but a particularly dashing jacket, neither too vintage-y nor too obsequious to fashion, deserves at least a coffee date. The libido wants what it wants, and sometimes the heart merely follows helplessly after.

Johnson's not very subtle finger-wagging points to the larger problem with polyamorists: that underneath all the talk (so, so much talk, that we sometimes feel we must enter any poly relationship prepared to sign off on end-of-life directives), there's not much more than a prim sense of "We're just better than all of you."

It's not just slutty types who might be puzzled by such snooty moralising. Polyamory rests on the idea that it is somehow just so

much more interesting than any other kind of relationship. Or, as Leon Feingold, he of the high intelligence, puts it in that Quartz piece, that it's illogical to not be polyamorous.

This is where polyamory as a discourse and as a lifestyle fails and falls under its own pretentiousness: the problem with relationships is not that individuals engage in them in particular ways, but that systems compel individuals to relate to each other in particular ways. The problem with marriage, [about which I and many others have written about for years](#), is not that people marry for any reason (call it love, call it healthcare, call it citizenship) but that people are given no option but to embark upon fundamentally unequal relationships—unless they wilfully and intentionally set about creating conditions that don't impose inequalities and abuse upon each other. In that sense, two people in a long-term marriage or any relationship are not inherently less radical than a poly bunch of people—the general cluelessness about power on the part of the latter makes them inherently less radical, more obsessed with the form of relationships than with seeing the systems they are embedded in.

Not unsurprisingly, Johnson's book ends on paranoia about her relationship with her primary partner (we have left untouched for now polyamorists' bizarre obsession with levels of intimacy and with separating people into hierarchies): she keeps worrying that he will leave her for another. Finally, he proposes to her. After a number of chapters where she has waxed on about multiple loves, the book implodes spectacularly: "We wanted to get married because we were committed to each other for life." But what, a surprised reader might query, about committing to all the friendships for life? And why does polyamory only work in this longitudinal way? How, we ask with one eyebrow arching, does a woman who spends so much time dismantling conventional notions of ownership and jealousy end up a seething, insecure creature who seems to have practically compelled a man to propose to her just to allay her fears?

It's not really worth pursuing answers to these rhetorical questions, because the answers are already apparent. Johnson wants to have her wedding cake and eat it too: she wants the sexy gloss of poly while retaining the trappings of a conventional marriage, the sort

that she otherwise derides as not interesting as her own because, well, she's poly.

Johnson and other polyamorists often use a phrase like "Ethical, consensual, non-monogamy." But: there is this thing we call love and which could, if we are brave enough to let it, course unbounded, like crashing waves, over so many relationships in our lives, heedlessly ignoring definitions of proper and improper (Never fall in love with a friend! You can never be friends with a former lover! Loving someone outside your marriage is "emotional infidelity"!)

But the opposite of an "ethical" relationship is not an unethical one: it might simply be one we haven't learnt to discern or clearly define.

Being committed to an "ethical" approach doesn't mean you won't fuck up in a relationship, any kind of relationship, and it doesn't say a damn thing about how "ethical" you really are.

Polyamory doesn't offer much more than a set of mind-numbing directives (the rules, the rules, have we mentioned the rules?), increasingly disseminated by people for whom it appears to have become yet another fashionable accessory, like the latest kitchen gadget. Carefully pruned of its funkier origins in less hip and more non-urban environs, polyamory is fast becoming the way of life for a certain set, a combination of hipster-millennial-wealthy-people, and do we really want our sex lives determined by the same people who gave us [mason jar salads](#)? In the end, that particular culinary item may just be the perfect metaphor for polyamory: it looks very pretty, but it is ridiculously unwieldy (try making your way on public transportation with everything else and a couple of heavy, packed glass bottles), and much too fussy to consume once at your destination (if you forget your bowl, you're screwed).

If you're interested in multiple relationships, there are ways of having them without subjecting yourself to polyamory (my own advice to people: just go fuck other people if you're so inclined). At one point, Johnson notes with wonder that her mother, in 1963, was in fact engaging in a kind of polyamory when she engaged in multiple relationships with men that spanned levels of intimacy. As she puts it, her mother "fell in love fearlessly." It's unfortunate that Johnson takes nothing away from her mother's experiences.

Because, in the end, that is the best we can hope to do (alongside the random and emotionally unconnected encounters to which we have a right, no matter what polyamorists tell us): to first redefine falling in love as something we do with friends and lovers alike and any combinations thereof, and then to fall in love fearlessly, with friends, lovers, people we meet, and any combination thereof, at any time.

Many thanks to Liz Baudler for the point about Ren Fairs, and the encouraging photos of Trouble the Cat.

See also:

[Jason Momoa, Aquaman, and the Art of Queer Friendship](#)

[Friendship in the Time of Love](#)

[Your Sex Is Not Radical](#)

[Against Equality archives.](#)

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