

Book Review:

***Queering Anarchism: Addressing
and Undressing Power and Desire***

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Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire
C. B. Daring, J. Rogue, Deric Shannon, and Abbey Volcano,
eds.
Oakland CA: AK Press, 2012

In *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*, a diverse group of authors explore the connections between anarchism and queer radicalism. While anarchism can refer to a broad spectrum of anti-statist political theories and movements, *Queering Anarchism* primarily represents collectivist and communist forms of anarchism. In her introduction to the book, Martha Ackelsberg describes these traditions as valuing “freedom *and* equality, individuality *and* community, and ... freedom as a *social product*, rather than as a value/goal that is necessarily in tension with community.” But this synthesis of individualism and community is not exclusive to anarcho-communist and social anarchist thought. Left-wing market anarchists such as Roderick Long, Charles W. Johnson, Sheldon Richman, Anna Morgenstern, Gary Chartier, and Kevin Carson seek to bridge these gaps regularly. Even outside of anarchist discourse, political economist Elinor Ostrom has challenged the false dichotomy between markets and states, exploring the wide range of bottom-up forms of community. These approaches are not engaged within the book, although that is not a particularly glaring flaw given the richness of the social anarchist tradition. The term “queer” is just as contested as anarchism, and the volume grapples with a wider range of definitions of queerness. The term has a long history as a slur directed at members of the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Queer) community. It has since been reclaimed, in part as an identity label that is more fluid and open than specific labels such as gay or bisexual. It has also been reclaimed as a term related to subversion, challenging of dominant norms, and the academic discipline of queer theory, which challenges reified and rigid categories of gender, sexuality, and social

normativity. *Queering Anarchism* is an exciting, accessible, and diverse exploration of the connections between queerness and social anarchism.

Queering Anarchism is part of a long history of queer and anarchist solidarity, and the book offers some fascinating exposition on this history. For example, Jerimarie Liesegang's "Tyranny of the State and Trans Liberation" offers an insightful history of the movement for sexual liberation, dividing it into four "waves." The first wave of the movement consists of anarchist sex radicals who wrote and lectured on same-sex love. Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Benjamin Tucker, Leonard Abbott, and John William Lloyd are significant figures in this period. By analyzing the history of the movement, Liesegang explores the ongoing tension between reformist LGBTQ movements that seek inclusion within hierarchical institutions and anti-authoritarian queer and trans radicals who seek to dismantle oppressive institutions.

Many essays in the anthology present a powerful critique of the state, particularly state-sanctioned marriage and the prison industrial complex. In "Gay Marriage and Queer Love," Ryan Conrad offers an excellent anarchist critique of the gay marriage movement. Conrad draws on Emma Goldman and Voltairine de Cleyre's critiques of marriage as a patriarchal and state-sanctioned institution, and he also explores how a single-minded focus on marriage has prioritized those who are relatively privileged within the LGBTQ community, ignoring the impacts of poverty and state violence on queer and trans people. Perhaps my favorite essay in the book is Jason Lydon's "Tearing Down the Walls: Queerness, Anarchism, and the Prison Industrial Complex." Lydon is a founding member of Black and Pink, a prison abolitionist group that builds solidarity with queer and trans prisoners. Building upon his experience at Black and Pink, Lydon offers a detailed analysis of the prison industrial complex and practical strategies for the prison abolitionist movement. Lydon's essay exemplifies anarchist scholarship that artfully blends theory and praxis, offering a powerful exposé on state violence and concrete suggestions for social change.

Another intriguing essay discussing anarchist praxis is Benjamin Shepard's "Harm Reduction as Pleasure Activism." Shepard discusses how harm reduction, both in relation to safe sex and to drug use, challenges conservative ideologies that stigmatize pleasure. He also explores how harm reduction is a form of direct action, in which individuals and communities act in defiance of social and legal prohibitions in order to make prohibited actions safer. Some harm reduction projects have been integrated into state apparatuses through grants and other governmental initiatives, but harm reduction began and has been advanced through voluntary associations acting in defiance of the law. In this sense, it is a radical prefigurative politics that directly solves social and health problems by routing around the state and "building the new world in the shell of the old," to use an old slogan of the

Industrial Workers of the World.

Many authors in the collection extend their analysis of power to the interpersonal realm and explore identity and intimate relationships as sites of resistance to power. This means mounting powerful critiques of heteronormative culture, compulsory monogamy, and institutionalized cissexism. However, it also means exploring how queer and anarchist communities can reinforce oppression, whether by inverting conventional hierarchies or by creating our own forms of machismo. One essay, “Police at the Borders” by Abbey Volcano, critiques the reified borders between identities and how queer communities can pressure their members in ways that would be recognized as coercive if implemented by dominant groups. For example, Volcano points out that in many queer communities queerness has been conflated with non-monogamy, with polyamorous heterosexuals challenging the legitimacy of the queer identities of queer people in monogamous relationships. By exploring how power is reproduced in interpersonal relationships, both in the name of upholding dominant culture and challenging it, the anthology offers many important additions to anarchist theory.

The collection is admirably intersectional, and engages with oppression related to race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and political power. “Queer-Crippling Anarchism: Intersections and Reflections on Anarchism, Queerness, and Dis-ability” offers particularly intriguing intersectional analysis. The authors discuss how disability studies can also be understood as “normalcy studies.” They also explore how queerness and disability have been defined in relation to each other. “Compulsory heterosexuality only operates as it does because of presumed able-bodiedness of its subjects, and vice versa,” they explain. Queerness has historically been defined as a disability, and disabled individuals are generally perceived as asexual rather than heterosexual. Disability has been largely ignored by anarchist theorists, and this essay offers a compelling anarchist approach to disability studies, which is a welcome contribution. Another essay offers a revolutionary intersectional feminist critique of *Sex and the City*, pointing out how the show conflates women’s liberation with the success of wealthy white women. Diana C.S. Becerra argues that instead of embracing this liberal feminism, we ought to advance a revolutionary feminist praxis that challenges power and state violence and advances liberation for queer women, women of color, and working class women.

Perhaps the least compelling aspect of the book is the approach contributors take towards political economy. Sometimes this appears in short remarks that betray dubious premises. For example, Jerimarie Liesegang refers to “the predominant gay liberation movement” advanced through non-profits and liberal political organizations as “a hierarchical, identity-based, single issue, gender conforming, free market, and state/electoral based movement.”

Most of that description rings true to me, but “free market” sticks out. It is true that the mainstream gay rights movement uses reformist electoral strategies to seek inclusion within our society’s prevailing hierarchical systems of power. But the prevailing system of power in our society is not characterized by a “free market.” The state taxes, subsidizes, and regulates relentlessly, radically distorting markets in the process. Subsidies tend to flow towards politically connected concentrated interest groups, which then have more incentives to engage in rent seeking than to satisfy consumers on the market. Regulations often serve not to restrain predation by corporate capitalists, but instead to raise costs for their competitors, thus protecting them from the competition that would discipline them within a free market. Hierarchical power in our society, including the power of corporate capitalists, is secured not through a “free market” but through state granted privilege. Mainstream gay rights organizations rarely challenge these privileges. If any LGBTQ organizations can be described as advancing a free market economic agenda, it is the radical queers in organizations such as ACT UP, who challenge protectionist patent privileges that restrict competition and raise the prices of AIDS medication. The radical queer and trans liberation movements that Liesegang rightly praises are in many ways pushing for more free market policies than the “predominant gay liberation movement” Liesegang rightly criticizes.

Where political economy is explicitly engaged in *Queering Anarchism*, authors tend to rely solely on Marxist theory. In “Radical Queers and Class Struggle: A Match to Be Made,” Gayge Operaista applies a standard Marxist class analysis and argues that radical queers ought to integrate our struggles for liberation within class struggle that seeks to overthrow the bourgeoisie. One particularly glaring flaw with the essay is the repeated contrast of Marxist class theory with “liberal” and “sociological” class analysis. Sociologists generally consider Marx one of the founders of their discipline, so the insinuation that sociologists ignore Marxist insights regarding class seems dubious.

Marxists define class in relation to property rights over the means of production. By defining employers and workers as inherently antagonistic to each other, this ignores the possibility of mutually beneficial exchanges between workers and employers and obscures the complementary relationship between labor and capital as factors of production. My rejection of Marxist class theory does not mean that I reject class theory as such. Marx’s class analysis largely derived from classical liberal theories of class, which focused on exploitation as enacted through legal privileges. Rather than denying the harmony of interests that occurs when individuals freely exchange with one another, classical liberal class theory emphasizes the exploitation that occurs when privileged classes use the political means to coercively extract resources from others. The literature within public choice

theory, which applies conventional economic analysis to politics, offers extensive analysis of the rent seeking and monopoly privileges that concentrated interest groups secure through the state. New institutional economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson make a distinction between “inclusive” and “extractive” institutions that can also be helpful for analyzing how ruling classes extract wealth from the masses.

Regardless of its flaws, *Queering Anarchism* is an illuminating, exciting, and engaging book. The book includes diverse styles of writing, ranging from academic analysis to personal narrative to even one chapter presented in the form of a comic. While queer theory is often characterized by impenetrable academic prose, this book is eminently accessible and readable. *Queering Anarchism* offers radical analysis of contemporary social problems and compelling strategies for social change. Anyone interested in LGBTQ rights, queer theory, anarchism, feminism, or social change would benefit enormously from reading this book.

