

decorticatedturnip.tumblr.com

Becoming-Openly:Relationship Anarchy and Immunitas

18-23 minutes

So, because my radical aloneness post was received so warmly, I figured I'd post the paper that I reference in that post for anyone who wants to read it. It is much more academic, far longer, and the arguments are significantly more fleshed out. Anyway, here it is...

In the final pages of Immunitas, Roberto Esposito articulates an example of positive immunity - a case of the mother and her fetus, which "contrary to the metaphor of a fight to the death, what takes place in the mother's womb is a fight 'to life' - proving that difference and conflict are not necessarily destructive" (2013, p. 171). Esposito highlights the "furious battle" between mother and child as the moment that "... the entire immune paradigm wraps itself until reaching the point where it becomes indistinguishable from its opposite "community" (2013, p. 171). Sketching a line of flight out of the modern immuno-obsessive genealogy that is charted throughout the trilogy of Communitas, Immunitas, and Bios - Esposito attempts to show that life can proliferate and thrive in direct contact with a feral outside - that instead of negating that which negates life through pro-active acts of immunization, the tension that arises through encountering an opposing force can be,

“...like a tug of war, the equilibrium of the whole is determined not by subtraction, but by the sum of the forces that oppose each other” (2013, p. 171).

After a brief, and no doubt incomplete tracing of Esposito’s work on *communitas* and *immunitas*, I will attempt to define, situate, and then interpret “rule relationships” in all (or at least most) of their forms as versions of negating the negation, or said another way, examples of the modern immuno-paradigm that begins with Hobbes. From there, I will engage with the highly underexplored idea of “relationship anarchy.” It is my hope that relationship anarchy may provide an affirmation of negation, or allow us to become-openly with one another.

COMMUNITAS/IMMUNITAS

Immunitas only makes sense against the meaning landscape provided by *Communitas*. Both terms share the root of *munus*, meaning: gift, office, or obligation. Those who are immune are exempt from gift-giving, office-holding, or duty, they are those that are “...safe from obligations or dangers that concern everyone else” (Esposito, 2006, p. 50) - in fact, the common begins where the proper ends, and this is where the meaning of *immunitas* comes to the fore - she who is immune is exempted, safeguarded, or protected from that which flows freely - or the *munus*. It is from this etymological jumping off point that Esposito begins his razor sharp analysis of the modern immuno-paradigm that ferociously attempts to protect life from that which can negate it by erecting borders that separate out the proper from the improper outside that constantly threatens it. “What remains constant is the place where the threat is located, always on the border between the inside and the outside, between the self and the other, the individual and the common”

(Esposito, 2013, p. 3). Within the modern paradigm, chief importance is given to protecting from contagion, "...as the risk of the common becomes increasingly extensive, the response of the immune defense becomes increasingly intensive" (Esposito, 2013, p. 5).

RULE RELATIONSHIPS

I will use the term "rule relationships" to characterize all relationships that operate on and maintain rule sets - these include: monogamy, non-monogamy, polyamory, polygamy, swinging, polyfidelity, open marriages, and cuckoldry. In one way or another, all of these relationships work by creating rules related to the outside, or the appropriate conduct to be expected while engaging with those that are on the outside of the relationship, exclusion by inclusion. With this blanket term, I am attempting to find something that covers even those ways of relating that are considered open - it will be part of my project to show that, perhaps, these relationships aren't as open as they seem. While monogamy is the relationship style that would be associated most readily with "rule relationships" - my argument is that the others listed act on the same basic premise. For example, in polyamorous relationships, it's not infrequent that hierarchies are set up to the effect of, "You can sleep with (X) person, but only if I know, and only if you promise me that I'll still be your primary partner." or "You're allowed to be intimate with other people, but I don't want to find out - don't tell me when you are." As Mae Bee has expressed in A Green Anarchist Project of Freedom and Love, "...we do not need to make rules about things we do not fear." And this point intersects with the Hobbesian contract Esposito has so thoroughly articulated.

While talking about Hobbes in the first chapter of *Communitas*,

Esposito says, "...to escape an initial and indeterminate fear, men accept an amount of fear and indeed institute a second and certain fear with a covenant" (2010, p. 24). And he goes on, "The state's task is not to eliminate fear, but to render it certain" (2010, p. 25). Can we easily swap out the word "state" in the above quote and substitute "rule relationship"? In rule relationships, scared of the circulating munus, in attempt to become absolved from the frightening outside, we pro-actively set up structures of relating to those who are not a part of the relationship proper, however that comes to be defined - whether it is three people who live together and sleep with one another freely but don't allow each other to sleep with anyone outside of the nucleic three - or, the swingers who say - "You can have sex with another person, but I've got to be there having sex with their spouse, in the same room, at the same time." These "rule relationships" set up private worlds within the stochastic outside that is perceived and understood as overwhelmingly threatening in its generality - compared to this generality, "...immunity is a condition of particularity, whether it refers to an individual or collective, it is always "proper" in the specific sense of "belonging-to someone" and therefore "uncommon" or "non-communal" (Esposito, 2013, p. 6).

It is my suggestion that this creates a very difficult problem to escape. By "belonging-to someone" through the enactment of contract or the construction of rules in regards to the improper outside, how are these rules to be enforced? Do we, by creating "rule relationships" attempt to possess the ones we care for? Do we close off and negate away the multitude of possibilities for augmenting relationships, in whatever shape and form they would take, from both ourselves and the ones we love? When the one you love encounters someone who excites them, enraptures them,

overjoys and deliciously mystifies them - they aren't allowed to experiment and be-with this other person because of a previous contract they made beforehand that legislated out the possibility. In a certain sense, the one who one loves becomes the wall, the border, the protective device that stands in the way of enlarging experiences. Because you "belong-to someone" you aren't able to communicate and commune with others. The very "rules" that were made to protect the circulating munus, in turn, close off your outsides. As "the risk of the common becomes increasingly extensive, the immune defense becomes increasingly intensive" and this is what can happen, of course. In an attempt to rid the threat of the common, hyper-vigilant monitoring for insidious invaders becomes the predominant modality. Unable to, or unwilling to let the relationship be altered in unforeseen directions, the immune response reaches fever-pitch, the body must eradicate that which threatens it to restore it to the properties initially agreed upon. "Who are you texting?", "Do you like him?", "I saw on your Facebook page that they wrote on your wall - what's that all about?", and a whole host of other, much less humorous examples become activated as possibilities, as well. Instead of changing to accommodate the outside, the walls get reinforced. Instead of being ecstatic that the one you love has found another to love, to commune-with, to open up worlds of possibilities with, we enforce our right to possession and become that which stands in the way. Instead of being hospitable to the common, we reject the outlandish and draw our property lines even darker. Instead of seeing the other as a chance to change the selfhood of our relationship, the immuno-response is enacted in an attempt to recover the origin, the pure space that the rules are meant to protect. The thought of another at your lover's body incites unfathomable amounts of

jealousy, of course, because that person is yours, their body is yours to enjoy, your property - not for everyone and apparently not for the person you love, either. In fits of anger, jealousy, and threat, the coercive core of “rule relationships” gains full force - you’re not allowed to explore, you’re not allowed to wander, you’re not allowed to feel in ways that I don’t agree to. As is often the case, these intense propositions and ultimatums lead to the end of the relationship. If another can have you, if you can return to the common, then I don’t want you. To follow this to its logical conclusion, once again quoting Esposito in regards to Hobbes, “...only by disassociating themselves from any relation can individuals avoid lethal contact” (2010, p. 27). In an attempt to render permanent the fleeting, ungraspable joy of *communitas* or being-with another by reifying it into contract, or the “myth of community” - the erotic escapes. In the place of overwhelming communicative beauty, the necrotic enforcement of the contract has taken center stage. That which can negate must be negated, but unfortunately the relationship gets negated as well, or at the very least it takes on the diminished tenor of survival instead of thrival.

RELATIONSHIP ANARCHY

There is a paucity of writing that deals with relationship anarchy, both in positive construction or negatively in destructive form. The term was coined by Andie Nordgren and her “Short Instructional Manifesto for Relationship Anarchy” was posted to her blog on July 6th, 2012. Since then, there have been very few engagements with the concept; two Swedish Bachelors theses, a discussion at a workshop, and a presentation in 2013.

In my interpretation, the concept of relationship anarchy is based on a few different points. As Andie Nordgren has said, relationship

anarchy opens onto and “builds for the lovely unexpected” (Nordgren). In conjunction with this openness to change, relationship anarchy also sets in its sights the idea that we should rank our relationships, as seen in a lot of polyamorous situations where one partner is the primary partner and all other relationships become a less-than. It is with this double move that relationship anarchy deconstructs both rule relationships of the poly genealogy and those of the monogamous type. Relationship anarchy attempts to value each relationship as a unique unfolding, with its own particularities. In this sense, relationship anarchy tries, as best as possible, to reduce the hierarchical ordering that accommodates entering into “intimate relationships.” (which in common parlance gets interpreted as having sex in one way or another). On the contrary, relationship anarchy attempts to view all relationships on a continuum of intimacy that varies from person to person, that can be expressed however is seen fit by those participating. One day, you may want to kiss someone, hold their hand, make dinner with them, and pick sunflowers in their company - the next day you may want to ride bikes, share secrets, and have sex with them - and relationship anarchy tries to give space for this emergent ethics, one that takes stock of how things are going in the moment. How would this relationship be characterized within a rule relationship? Girlfriend, boyfriend, friend with benefits, best friend, acquaintance, cheating, seeing people or experimenting? In this regard, relationship anarchy doesn’t really care to name what’s going on, it sees its unfolding as just that, an unfolding to be enjoyed, and if you’re involved with anyone else at the time (face it, we’re all involved in all sorts of relationships at the same time...) you tell them because you want to, not because you have to, and hopefully they’ll be open to hearing about it and will revel in your joy. To be

able to be happy that a person you love has experienced something profoundly meaningful is the task at hand, and one that, I can say from experience, is shockingly bewildering in a positive sense. Instead of feeling like one can't be available to ideas, experiences, and another's singularity because of "rules and shoulds", relationship anarchy attempts to "...organize based on a wish to meet and explore each other" (Nordgren). It is within this opening that I attempt to place the idea of affirmative immunity articulated by Esposito.

As Esposito expounds throughout his trilogy, we are constitutionally vulnerable - to ignore this brute fact is to believe that one either comes from a pure origin that needs to be protected, or that with the right amount of vigor and stamina, with borders built and life safeguarded on the inside, our property can be protected from decay - "...there is no such thing as an apparatus or device that can ever, even potentially grant us some form of immortality" and not only that, but he says, "...even more, the simple presumption of an eventuality of this sort only brings us back brusquely to the reality of our insuperable condition" (Esposito, 2013, p. 159). With this said, Esposito isn't saying that we should just roll over and die - what he's offering is a more dynamic conception of life - one that thrives by engaging with the unknown, one that welcomes and acknowledges that, although things come together, and that those things may seem safe and sound for a period of time, eventually they must learn how to move and shake, they must learn how to assume novel forms, and in a lot of cases just die because they can't go on any longer. In short, we stand on the edge of the unknown together and consent to uncertainty, because to act as though the unexpected won't happen is to deny that things rot. It is to deny that things decompose and deteriorate, and it is to hold

onto and possibly strangle in the meantime that which you love, and to shun the precious moment that you have for the pro-active management of that which might come. Instead of attempting to be unwavering amidst the flux and potentially slipping into the catastrophic autoimmunity that can accompany frenzied wall guarding, the alternative being offered is that by standing side-by-side, scared but poised to do all we can together to welcome change, willing to expropriate the identity of the relationship, to let it become contaminated by and infected with improPERTIES, and ultimately reconstituting the terms of our relationships if needed - that this is how we can try our hardest to become affirmatively immune. Not by negating the negation to keep ourselves the same and the others out, as evidenced in Hobbes and throughout the entire modern tradition, but instead by practicing and screwing up a whole bunch. Instead of clinging to an unrealizable purity and longing to stand in an absolute position, you get all mucked up and resolute. Instead of folding over on the properties of the relationship, you expose the relationship "...to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject" (Esposito, 2010, p. 7). To be quite clear here: opening up relationships to the munus that can disintegrate it is in no way a method of guaranteeing success. In fact, the idea that success in some perfect sense as attainable is wilfully relinquished, joyously abandoned.

CONCLUSION

"Didn't they do that in the 70's? How did that turn out?", "Sounds nice, I guess, but it'll never work.", "How are you going to deal with jealousy?", "It's impossible, evolutionarily speaking, you know..."

These are some of the responses I get when I explain "relationship

anarchy” or “non-monogamy” - which I had identified with in the past. Whenever I hear these responses, it feels like everyone has got it all figured out, that we know how we want to relate to one another intimately, it’s just a matter of figuring out how to do it the correct way - we got the idea, we need the correct technique. This, very obviously, scares me.

My task in presenting this paper isn’t to tell you how to be with the ones you love, at all - it’s more so an attempt to open up a dialogue on monogamy and rule relationships more broadly, an unabashedly critical one at that. I feel like we all do all sorts of beautiful, expansive, and deadly important work that has to do with how we relate to one another - but for whatever reason, in my experience, when it comes to critiquing the couple bond, that’s where the reflexive thinking ends.

You might get up every morning, and when you see the one you love you may ask yourself “do I want to be with this person today” and you may feel comfortable answering “no” and telling them that. You may, very honestly examine your rules, what you’re called to do, and see if you want to keep doing it - you may even be welcome to the one you love doing the same, and be willing to accept it when and if they say that they’re done. But, maybe consider a different scenario - and even if feel like your relationship is malleable, adaptable, and relatively open, I think this gets to the crux of what I’m trying to get at: the one you love has fallen for someone else, too - wants to explore with them, see how it feels to be with them, but still, very much so, wants to love and share a life with you. They say, “I’ve met someone else, but I still love you too, I hope we can make it work out.” What would you say? How would you act? How would you feel? While it’s not easy to do, having

someone leave you is conceivable, the same goes with leaving yourself. The challenge is, of course, to let the one you love be loved by another, be touched by another, and have a life that's intimate that doesn't necessarily include you primarily. Can you do that? If you can't, why not? I would suggest that this is worth taking a moment to wonder about.

What does it feel like to lie down with someone who has been with someone else? The closest we may be able to get to this experience is being cheated on. Have you ever been cheated on and then welcomed back the one who cheated on you?

Qualitatively, their body changes. How does their body present itself to you, and how do you feel about it? Does it feel tarnished and desecrated? Does it feel like there are secrets written all over it that you can no longer decipher? Can you allow them to hold those secrets, respect that alterity, and love them anyway?

As Bataille says, "...we're crushed by twin pincers of nothingness. By not communicating, we're annihilated into the emptiness of an isolated life. By communicating we likewise risk being destroyed." We will all be destroyed. The ethical question is, of course, how should we get on with the process of becoming destroyed?