

DISMANTLING THE HIDDEN HIERARCHY IN SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS AND GENDER IDENTITIES

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Jackson Bird is a transgender man who makes YouTube videos online discussing various LGBTQIA+ topics, as well as throwing random food into a waffling iron. In his memoir titled *Sorted*, Bird remarked that in college his “gender dysphoria...manifested in a steady contemplation of my sexuality” (Bird, 2020, p. 82). Bird was able to repress his true gender for so long because he often conflicted and confused his gender with his sexuality. This confusion was due in part because heteronormativity has no interest in educating people about identities outside the norm, but also because our systems for labeling sexual orientation and gender identities are inherently confusing. While there are conventional ways I could explain the differences between sexuality and gender as to help distinguish truth from misconception, they tend not to address the system itself. I also do not wish to simply provide a list of definitions for all the sexualities and all the genders to create a “complete” description of both, because such a complete list does not exist. Our sexual orientation and gender identities are not only lacking in their capacity and ability to describe people, but also create expectations and normalities that are used in unjust and oppressive hierarchies. And we can’t meaningfully discuss how Bird repressed his gender due to convoluted identities without first addressing how to free ourselves from those same identities.

We tend to organize around oppressive hierarchies, some of which permeate through all our institutions and have existed for hundreds of years. With regards to sexual orientation and gender, the dominant structure is heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the societal assumption that everyone conforms to heterosexuality and that there is attraction between “opposite” genders and neutrality among the same gender (Hutch 9/23/2021). As such, it includes all the confining expectations of heterosexual relationships like monogamous, long term relationships between cis-men and cis-women. With little flexibility, heteronormativity is a hierarchy that is constructed from the normalities and expectations of heterosexuality and has a very restrictive view of what relationships between people can look like. We can conclude that by embracing relationships outside of the norm, we can begin to deconstruct the hierarchical structure of heteronormativity.

Among the anthology *Queering Anarchism*, Abbey Volcano talks in her essay about how she often felt pressured by friends to be more promiscuous and to not be in exclusive relationships (Volcano 2013, pg. 37). Only because she held a queer identity were these assumptions laid on her. While these expectations were outside the normal, they can be and are just as restrictive as those of heteronor-

mativity. And so, Volcano’s experiences highlight how society applies certain restrictive expectations to everyone according to their sexuality. In order to free ourselves from restrictive views on relationships, we cannot simply embrace relationships outside the norm, we must break down the normalities and expectations that we associate with sexual orientation identities.

I believe dismantling normalities is a necessary action to take in order to prevent any hierarchies from being constructed. In her paper, Volcano also argues that instead of liberating people from the bounds of heteronormativity, we have “create[d] new borders and new limitations around sexuality—we have simply inverted the hierarchy and excluded those deemed “not queer enough””(Volcano 2013, pg. 34). One of the philosophies of anarchism is that in order to bring about equality, we have to dismantle or tear down all ‘unjust’ hierarchies—though some argue all hierarchies are unjust by definition. Through that lens, we can see that inverting a hierarchy by creating new normals will never achieve equality, even though it may make the lives of marginalized people somewhat better. Breaking down normalities associated with all sexual orientation identities is one way to ensure no unjust hierarchies can be constructed. However, inverted hierarchies don’t only occur with sexual orientation. Since heteronormativity insists “on there only being two genders and two sexual orientations” (Hutch 9/23)[a], gender can just as easily be constructed into inverted hierarchies. Therefore, breaking down norms associated with gender identities will aid in deconstruction of the gender hierarchies within heteronormativity.

For example, by dismantling the norms around being transgender—removing the expectations we have of trans people and or what it means to be a good trans person—we will be lifting the restrictive borders on who can hold the trans identity. While a consequence will be the trans identity becoming more broad and less unique as a descriptor, it will also remove its ability to prescribe what someone should be if they choose to take it as an identity. This is in contrast to our modern idea, which suggests that being trans is at the core of whoever holds that identity. The proposal of diluting or removing identity terms is a bit of a frightening concept given how we treat them today, but again taking a page out of Abbey Volcano’s queer anarchist theory, “the ways we fuck, love, and gender ourselves are not inherently revolutionary” (Volcano 2013, p. 35). And if our identities are not at the core of our struggle, then we can continue to fight for equality without them. Thus, if we wish to radically change society to be more equal for all genders and sexualities, we must focus on

dismantling societal norms and not on creating more identities to attach norms to.

We could gain another perspective on the relationship between gender and sexuality by looking through the lens of the patriarchy. Specifically, how “[h]omosexuality is a by-product of a particular way of setting up roles (or approved patterns of behaviors) on the basis of sex” (Radicalesbians, 1970, p. 153[b]). By challenging the approved behaviors set forth by the patriarchy, we can begin to deconstruct homosexuality. And deconstructing homosexuality is in the same vein as deconstructing sexual orientation hierarchies on a whole. As such, we can challenge the hierarchy of heteronormativity by also challenging the patriarchy.

This type of analysis was not present in Jackson Bird’s life when he was trying to figure out who he was. He only had limited knowledge from a high school psychology class, “there were only two sexual orientations: gay and straight. Bisexuals have to choose one” (Bird, 2020, p. 82). While this mindset was a start, it did a very big disservice to him. We say that every person has two separate identities, a sexual orientation and a gender; but something we do not often realize is that almost all of our sexual orientation identities are intrinsically tied to our gender identity. When talking in the dominant culture, one would not need to specify a lesbian woman because that definition of lesbian includes being a woman. From here, we can trace out a lot of confusions between and about sexuality and gender that most people have. As a consequence of this implicit gendering of sexualities, the confusion and uncertainty that arise among individuals who question their gender is only compounded. For example, a cis-man who likes women is straight, while a trans-woman who likes women is a lesbian. With our current system, finding a correct gender identity may necessitate a change in sexual orientation even though no newfound or less-found attraction was discovered.

In middle school, Jackson Bird found himself watching an Oprah special about trans kids and remarked, “that...episode made me feel like my interest in boys disqualified me from being transgender” (Bird, 2020, p. 53). The inadequacy of our system for determining sexuality really shined in this moment for Bird. He was able to convince himself, at least for a while, that who he was attracted to had the ability to determine what his gender was. Even as he later realized that he could like men and be a trans-man, it would necessitate that he be gay, and thus make him “some extra-special kind of freak” (Bird, 2020, p. 53). While Bird is particularly harsh with his wording, I think he highlights the intersection of sexuality and gender hierarchies very well; being a gay cis-man or even a straight trans-man would be seen as more normal than who he was, a gay trans-man. The hierarchy that heteronormativity creates was threatening to place Bird at the bottom—as a gay trans-man—if he continued to have feelings about being a man or came out as such. This threat coerced him into

repressing his gender for the sake of staying on top of the hierarchy as a means of survival. “Threat” is a somewhat nebulous term but here I use it to refer to the discrimination, prejudice, and/or violence from both homophobia and transphobia that Bird would have faced as a result of being placed lower on these hierarchies. Later in the book, Bird remarks, “The big mistake I had made was assuming that there was only one way to be trans” (Bird, 2020, p. 102). Throughout his childhood, Bird had picked up on what expectations and normalities were associated with both straight trans-men and gay cis-men and felt as though, since his experiences didn’t match the norms, then he couldn’t be those things. Therefore, we can remove confusion—and coercion through violence—in people’s lives with regards to their sexual orientation and gender identities by dismantling expectations and normalities that we associate with those identities.

Jackson Bird’s childhood was filled with uncertainty and confusion because of our current system for sorting sexual orientation and gender identities. We must eliminate such uncertainties and remove these confusions by foregoing the normalities and expectations—set in place by the oppressive structure of heteronormativity—that we associate with sexual and gender identities in order to reach a more equitable future. And, if we keep in the back of our minds that dismantling normalities is more important than holding onto identities, then I believe we will reach this future one day.

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