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ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

- 121** Кристиан Клессе. Понятия любви в полиамории: составляющие дискурса о множественных любовных отношениях. *Резюме*
- 26** Наталья Савельева. «Входя в лифт своего дома, я уже чувствую себя на работе». Границы между работой и не-работой в сетевом маркетинге
- 48** Анна Желнина. «Здесь как музей»: торговый центр как общественное пространство

ОБЗОР

- 70** Сергей Соколовский. В ЦЕЙТНОТЕ: заметки о состоянии российской антропологии

РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Дискуссия о книге Марины Могильнер «Homo Imperii: История физической антропологии в России»

- 90** I. Марина Могильнер. Homo imperii. История физической антропологии в России. М.: НЛО, 2008. *Александр Эткинд*
- 94** II. Response to Alexander Etkind's review of Marina Mogilner's "Homo imperii: Istoriia fizicheskoi antropologii v Rossii". *Vera Tolz*
- 97** III. Реплика по поводу дискуссии о книге Марины Могильнер «Homo imperii: История физической антропологии в России». *Константин Иванов*
- 100** Marion Fourcade. Economists and Societies: Discipline and Profession in the United States, Britain, and France, 1890s to 1990s. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. *Олеся Курчик*
- 104** Serguei Alex. Oushakine. The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. *Elisabeth Anstett*
- 107** Roger Griffin, Werner Loh, and Andreas Umland, eds. Fascism Past and Present, West and East: An International Debate on Concepts and Cases in the Comparative Study of the Extreme Right. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2006. *Антон Шеховцов*
- 111** Екатерина Деминцева. Быть арабом во Франции. М.: НЛО, 2008. *Елена Филиппова*
- 114** Белорусский формат: невидимая реальность / Отв. ред. А.Р.Усманова. Вильнюс: ЕГУ, 2008. *Анна Савченко*
- 117** Анна Сидорова. Коммуникативные стратегии и культурные практики в поле литературы. Барнаул: Изд-во АЛТГУ, 2009. *Александра Яцык*

145 АННОТАЦИИ

150 Информация для авторов и рецензентов

160 Авторы

ARTICLES

- 4** Christian Klesse. Notions of Love in Polyamory—Elements in a Discourse on Multiple Loving
- 128** Natalya Savelyeva. 'When I Enter the Elevator of My House, I Already Feel Like I am at Work': Borders between Work and Not-Work in Network Marketing. *Summary*
- 132** Anna Zhelnina. 'It's Like a Museum Here': The Shopping Mall as Public Space. *Summary*

REVIEW ESSAY

- 137** Sergey Sokolovskiy. In a Zeitnot: Notes on the State of Russian Anthropology. *Summary*

BOOK REVIEWS

Discussion of Marina Mogilner's "Homo Imperii: Istoriia fizicheskoi antropologii v Rossii."

148 ABSTRACTS

157 Guidelines for authors and reviewers

162 Authors

NOTIONS OF LOVE IN POLYAMORY—ELEMENTS IN A DISCOURSE ON MULTIPLE LOVING

Christian Klesse

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I would like to thank the participants of the seminar series of the Research Network on Love (Manchester Metropolitan University and University of Manchester, UK, January 29, 2008) and the participants of the International GEXcel Conference of Workshops "Love in Our Time—A Question for Feminism" (in particular the ones who participated in the sessions on the sub-theme "Gendered Interests in Sexual Love, Care Practices and Erotic Agency" (Örebro University, Sweden, December 2-4, 2010))for valuable feedback on my presentations on this subject. I am particularly grateful to Chiara Addis, Adriana García Andrade and Anna Temkina for their encouragement. I would further like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their very insightful commentary and Mischa Gabowisch of the editorial board of Laboratorium for his extremely friendly and flexible style of cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

Polyamory circumscribes a relationship philosophy or an approach to intimacy and sexuality that is based on the belief that it is worthwhile and valid to have more than one loving or erotic relationship. The term combines word elements derived from the Greek (poly) and Latin (amory) languages and thus literally translates as "many loves". The concept has circulated for several decades in social networks which are interested in developing alternatives to monogamous couple and family relationships (Anapol 2010; Lano and Parry 1995a; Munson and Stelboum 1999a; Klesse 2006). Polyamory endorses an ethical approach, according to which all participants in a relationship are aware of the (potentially) non-monogamous character of their mutual bond(s). In this regard, polyamory aims to challenge the common "double standard" at the heart of what Pepper Mint (2004) calls the monogamy/cheating system: the dominant cultural arrangement, according to which people are expected to identify with the value of exclusivity, even if affairs are so common that they can be considered to be an institutionalised part of the intimate and sexual landscape (cf. Druckerman 2007).

It is primarily due to the emphasis on honesty and consensus that polyamory is frequently referred to as a “responsible practice of non-monogamy” (Anapol 1997; Lano and Parry 1995b; Klesse 2006). Most publications suggest that polyamory promotes a distinctive set of values. As a consensual approach to non-monogamy, polyamory promotes an ethics based on honesty, respectful negotiation and decision making, integrity, reciprocity and equality (Anapol 2010:65–86; Barker and Langdridge 2011). In previous publications, I have described polyamory as one particular discourse on non-monogamy (Klesse 2006; 2007a). Its most distinctive characteristic is its up-front endorsement of love. The conflation of polyamory with a practice of love is a salient feature of most publications on polyamory. For example, Lano and Parry translate the term as “more loves than one”. They propagate polyamory as “a generic term intended to cover all forms of responsible non-monogamy”, because it “helps to emphasise that there is more than just sex at the issue in non-monogamy” (all quotes, Lano and Parry 1995b:v).

Despite the centrality of love in the interpretation of polyamory, there are few analytical accounts of what kind of love is advocated in polyamory.¹ In this article, I will explore polyamory as a “discourse on love”, rather than as a “discourse on non-monogamy”.² This will enable me to compare the notion of love advanced in the discussion of polyamory with other conceptualisations of love, namely romantic love. Positing polyamory as a specific discourse on love denaturalises love by framing it as a socially constructed set of emotions, with particular histories and specific, culturally bounded archives (cf. Ahmed 2004; Moon 2008; Jackson 2010). At the same time, I am aware that any attempt to define “poly love” is inherently problematic. The whole debate about polyamory has been driven by a concern with the creation of a less prescriptive emotional and sexual culture. A commitment to diversity is a salient feature of the polyamory debates (Schroedter and Vetter 2010). I therefore consider my analysis as an attempt at approximation. I will limit myself to discerning salient “elements” within a non-cohesive discourse on love.³

The archive for my discourse-analytical study consists of the following sources. Firstly, I will draw upon a critical reading of the major popular publications on polyamory (primarily) in the English language. As I have argued elsewhere, the major bulk of published literature on polyamory falls into the genre of popular advice literature (Klesse 2007d). Most of this work has been written by authors who are themselves quite close to, if not even active members of, polyamory communities. Some of these texts could be placed on the borderline between advice and activist

¹ Schroedter and Vetter’s book (2010) is a rare exception. They present an impressive historical genealogy of polyamory as a love style. However, they fall short of providing a detailed analysis of the specific features of contemporary poly love.

² The definition of polyamory as simply a particular approach to non-monogamy is also not able to incorporate perspectives which consider *intentional* monogamy (Anapol 1997; 2010) or asexuality (Scherrer 2010) as valid choices *within* polyamory.

³ My approach has been inspired by Roland Barthes’ (1978) subtle analysis in “Lovers’ Discourse: Fragments”. For Barthes, the discourse of love cannot be systematised. Zygmunt Bauman (2003), too, presents a largely non-systematic analysis with multiple entry points.

literature. For example, *The Ethical Slut* by Easton and Liszt (1997) is frequently referred as the “Bible of Polyamory” (Klesse 2007a). Because of the popularity of many of these publications among polyamory practitioners, I think it is possible to analyse them next to more explicitly “activist” texts or personal experience stories (e.g. some contributions to Lano and Parry 1995a) as parts of a multi-faceted discourse on polyamory.⁴ In the case of polyamory literature, the boundaries between genres are frequently blurred. For example, some of the early publications on polyamory in more explicitly academic outlets, too, contain a significant number of “activist” or experience-based writings (cf. Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004d). More thorough sociological research and theory has only started to appear over the last few years, again, with many authors having personally close links with polyamory communities (cf. Klesse 2007d; Barker and Langdrige 2011). While I treat the first set of publications (i.e. polyamory guide books and manifestos, FAQ texts, personal experience narratives, etc.) primarily as sources within my heterogeneous archive for the study of the discourse on polyamory, I draw upon recent research publications (in addition to social, cultural and critical theories) primarily as guidance and inspiration for my sociological *contextualisation* of polyamory. I will also utilise interview data collected as part of my 1997-2003 research into gay male and bisexual consensual non-monogamous relationships in the UK (Klesse 2007a). This study was designed around a combination of qualitative methods, namely interviews, focus groups, documentary research, participant-observation and discourse analysis. I conducted forty-four interviews with people with experiences in non-monogamous relationships. Most of my interview partners resided in the south-east of England, primarily in London. Smaller numbers lived in (or around) Manchester, Leeds, Nottingham, Glasgow and Edinburgh. One half of the research participants identified as gay male or strongly related to gay male cultural contexts. The other half consisted of bi-identified men and women (in roughly equal numbers) or people who strongly related to bisexual cultural contexts. Both parts of the sample contained cis-gendered people⁵ (the majority) and transgendered people (few). Most of the bi-identified research participants positively referred to polyamory. Many considered themselves to be part of both the bisexual and polyamorous communities. Although they articulated their views from a particular (bi poly) perspective, they usually reflected extensively on the wider debates on polyamory. In these personal interview narratives, they reflect upon their own decisions, choices, relationship trajectories and life experiences. Referring to polyamory, they cite, alternate or negotiate elements of wider discourses on polyamory they are familiar with. In my view, these personal narratives are part of both the construction and reproduction of a discourse on poly love (cf. Howarth 2000; Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000).

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the discursive specifics of psychological advice literature on non-monogamy and polyamory see Klesse 2007c; Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse 2006; see also Pallotta-Chiarolli 2004; Noël 2006; Petrella 2007. For a methodological discussion of heterogeneity as a feature of archives, see Halberstam (1998).

⁵ The term cis-gendered relates to people who neither contest, nor wish to alter the sex which was ascribed to them at birth.

My discussion falls into the following parts. First I will provide a brief sociological contextualisation of the phenomenon of polyamory. I will then discuss salient features of the discourse on poly love by drawing on examples from both the literature and my own research. In the last part of the paper, I will locate polyamory in the larger context of the history of love and emotions.

POLYAMORY—IDENTITIES, COMMUNITIES AND PRACTICES

The concept of polyamory was developed in debates around alternative approaches to relationships. According to Anapol, the word was coined by Morning Glory and Oberon Zell, the founders of the neo-pagan Church of All Worlds to create an alternative to the term “responsible non-monogamy” in 1990 (1997:5; 2010:1).⁶ The term initially spread in a primarily spiritualistic counter-cultural milieu in the United States (cf. Anapol 2010; Aviram 2010; Kaldera 2005; Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004c). Some researchers suggest that this history continues to shape the cultural and political orientation of many polyamory communities today (Aviram 2010).

Polyamory has been an attractive concept for many people outside of neo-pagan communities, because it envisions alternatives to couple-based monogamy. The critique of monogamy was a hot topic in many progressive movements since the 1960s, including socialist, anarchist, feminist, lesbian, gay male, bisexual, transgender, BDSM and queer forms of activism (Adam 2010; Easton and Liszt 1997; Barker and Ritchie 2007; Jackson and Scott 2004; Pieper and Bauer 2005; Schroedter and Vetter 2010, Anapol 2010; Heckert 2010b; Bauer 2010). The debate on polyamory had some resonance in all these movement contexts. My interview partner Pal, for example, who has committed himself to an overtly non-religious, queer-inspired, bi- and kink-assertive sex-radical political agenda, explained his preference for the term polyamory with the fact that, in contradistinction to the term non-monogamy, polyamory is not based on negation.

Pal: Breaking it down into being multiple loves, rather than using “non-monogamous”, which worked negatively, what you are not, rather what you are. It’s not a word about what you are; [...] it’s more a sort of non-label.

Today the discourse on polyamory maps a broad and diversified cultural terrain. Polyamory has an appeal to people who are close to lesbian, gay male, bisexual, queer, transgender, queer-feminist, BDSM, anarchist or other progressive tendencies within the “new left”, as well as ecological and spiritual, religious or new age movements (based in, for example, neo-Tantrism, neo-paganism, Wiccan religions, Christianity or western adaptations of Hinduism or Buddhism).

⁶ There are also claims which suggest that variants of the term have been around throughout the 1960s. Alan (2007), who discusses competing claims on the origin of the term, suggests that this claim is based on a mix-up of the terms “polyamory” and “polyfidelity”. The latter is said to have a much longer history. Alan’s 2007 text confirms the thesis that the word “polyamorous” first appeared in print in Oberon Zell’s article “A Bouquet of Lovers” in spring 1990. See also The Ravenhearts (n.d) for a version of this historical narrative. However, subsequent research by Alan (2010) brought up evidence for earlier circulations of the term, ranging back to 1953.

In the USA, there are expansive polyamorous communities in most major cities (Anapol 2010). Jessica Bennett (2009) suggests in an article in *Newsweek* that there are now more than half a million openly polyamorous families in the United States. Aviram (2010:87) stresses the high degree of cultural and political organisation among polyamorous people in the San Francisco Bay Area. This infrastructure includes activist organisations, regular workshops and conferences, publications and social gatherings (cf. Mint 2009). Loraine Hutchins (1996) talks of the existence of poly movement in the USA as early as 1996. So far there is not a lot of detailed research on polyamorous communities available.

Elisabeth Sheff (2005:8; 2006:624), who conducted a seven-year-long ethnographic research project within a west-coast US poly community, characterises mainstream poly communities in the region as follows: Members are overwhelmingly white, college educated, claim a middle- or upper-middle class status, have professional jobs (often in computers or counseling/therapy). Most of her respondents were in their mid-thirties to late fifties. Pepper Mint (2009) claims that there are few regular participants in San Francisco (i.e., in their teens, twenties or early thirties). Other research, however, represents a wider age range. Wosick-Correa's (2010) 343 poly-identified research participants fell in the age range from 18 to 67, with 76% being aged between 18 and 45. Survey data collected on USA polyamory communities affirms the educated nature and advanced class-position and ethnically/racially exclusive nature of polyamory communities (Weber 2002, Wosick-Correa 2010), an image which is reproduced in most publications on polyamory (cf. Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse 2006; Noël 2006).

While polyamory communities have blossomed for decades in the USA (cf. Munson and Stelbourn 1999a; Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004c), polyamory is still quite unknown in Europe.⁷ The social organisation of polyamorous communities is not very advanced in most European countries. Referring to the state of poly culture and politics in Germany, Schroedter and Vetter (2010) prefer to talk of a subculture, rather than a social movement. The poly community has no political voice, they argue, and becomes only visible once journalists undertake the effort to go out and search for it (2010:142 and 159). Yet there are social groups in larger cities (Von Gantenbrink 2011). The situation in the UK is similar.

Pal, who put a significant amount of time into activism around polyamory when I interviewed him in 1999 and 2000, questioned whether it would even make sense to talk of a UK polyamorous community. Yet the existence of a community would be the pre-condition for a social movement.

Pal: The people, who are doing it, just don't know other people that are. [...] Generally there's a fairly visible gay community, lots of places, so you can find it,

⁷ When I started my own research into gay male and bisexual non-monogamies in 1997, I had not known about the existence of the term "polyamory". Although I had been in non-monogamous relationships with partners of different genders for most of my adult life in Germany and the UK, I only encountered the concept when I did more systematic research into non-monogamy. Cath, one of the research participants in my study, suggested that there are many more people "out there" whom she would consider to be polyamorous, but who do not have access to this term.

if you looked. And there isn't that for poly at all. [...] It's not even [worthwhile] doing a thing, even [...] starting having a sort of activism without a sort of community. [laughing] I don't think you have a community, if no one knows each other.

Things have progressed significantly in the last few years. There are social poly groups in at least three UK cities (London, Manchester and Cambridge). Poly-interested people are connected via various networking sites, e-mail lists and newsgroups (Bi.Org 2010). The moderator of several UK-based poly web groups suggested in 2007 that at least 1000 people were part of this on-line community. In the year 2006, the first UK Poly Day was organised in London and attracted more than 200 people (Gill 2007). Poly Day has now established itself as a regular occasion for the UK poly community to come together. The annual UK Bisexual Conventions (BiCons) stage workshops and debates on polyamory as a regular feature. Poly-identified bisexuals use these events to have meetings specifically for the bi poly community (Klesse 2007a). It is not surprising that polyamory meetings take place at bisexual conventions and gatherings. Marianne suggests that the UK polyamory community overlaps strongly with other communities.

Marianne: In the UK there's a strong overlap with the S/M community and the bisexual community. If you're into S/M and you're bisexual and you're poly, you're likely to just keep bumping into the same people at all the events. I don't know why. I think [...] it's partly because it's quite a small community and it's mainly on-line people. [...] I mean there are also a lot of pagans, a lot of [...] people, who like Science Fiction. [...] It's quite funny. There's like a set of criteria almost. Are you into S/M? Are you bisexual? Are you into Science Fiction? Are you a Pagan? And the amount of people, who fit in all of those, is quite surprising.

According to Marianne, the UK polyamory is located at the conjuncture of diverse subcultures, including bisexual and S/M scenes, neo-pagans and the science fiction fan community.⁸ Other research participants had been part of the commune movement (Rubin 2001).⁹ The common references to neo-paganism, bisexuality, science fiction

⁸ It is important to note that, of course, not all polyamorous people are bisexual. Some US-based research mentions the prevalence of homophobia and biphobia in particular among straight-identified male polyamory practitioners (Sheff 2006). In general, polyamory appeals to people of various sexual identities, including heterosexuals, bisexuals, lesbians and (according to anecdotal evidence) a rather small number gay men. Research indicates that non-monogamous relationships are very common among gay men. However, there are rather few direct references to polyamory as a concept or identity in gay male culture (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 1996; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001; Adam 2010; Klesse 2007a). Some authors see a particularly strong affinity between bisexuality and polyamory (cf. Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004c, 2009). Bi-identified people make up a significant portion of polyamorous activist networks and communities in some countries, such as, for example, in the UK and the USA (Klesse 2007a; Mint 2004). Without question, polyamory creates a space for expressing desire for people of different genders or irrespective of gender, i.e. kinds of desire which are often labelled "bisexual". This may be one of the reasons why many bi-identified people are drawn to polyamory.

⁹ The confluence of various marginalised and counter-cultural identities in Marianne's ac-

fan culture, and geek culture in descriptions of the poly community by my UK respondents resonate with US accounts (Anapol 2010; Aviram 2010; Weber 2002; Wosick-Correa 2010). In both countries, poly cultures are furthermore predominantly white and middle class (Sheff 2006; Noël 2006; Wosick-Correa 2010). Yet there seem also to be differences: Some analysis suggests that poly advocates in Europe often take a more politicised stance, whereas the spiritualistic currents are more strongly developed in the USA (Anapol 2010; Bernhard 2009).

As an umbrella term, polyamory encompasses a whole range of relationship practices. Open relationships, open marriages, intimate networks, group marriages, triads and quads are the descriptive terms for polyamorous relationship arrangements offered by a range of authors (Munson and Stelboun 1999b; Labriola 1999; Anapol 2010). Yet these labels do not exhaust the full range of polyamorous possibilities. Moreover, for many polyamory does not manifest itself in a particular relationship form, but consists in a dedication to a set of values and the cultivation of a particular inner approach to intimacy (Anapol 1997; 2010).¹⁰ Only the emphasis that it is more than just sex which grounds a polyamorous relationship is common to all descriptions of polyamory. At times, this “more than sex” is captured in references to intimacy. Taormino (2008:71) claims that polyamorous relationships are born out of the desire for “maintaining multiple *significant, intimate* relationships simultaneously”. Mostly, however, the “more than sex” is given the name of love: “Polyamory means ‘loving more than one.’ This love may be sexual, emotional, spiritual, or any combination thereof, according to the desires and agreements of the individuals involved” (alt. polyamory 1997). In the following, I will explore in closer detail what kinds of love are evoked and celebrated in polyamory.

ELEMENTS OF A DISCOURSE ON POLY LOVE

Although polyamory cannot be adequately theorised as a singular or closed discourse, it is possible to discern salient themes across the entirety of the terrain of its discursive enunciation. These themes or elements, as I call them, are part of a wider repertoire of fragmented tropes on the issue of poly love. They do not form a

count is striking. There are various explanations between the cross-over between consensual non-monogamy and other identities. Barker and Langdridge (2011:761) talk of a recent proliferation of research into such cross-overs, for example between polyamory and bisexuality, transgender, asexuality and BDSM (cf. Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004c; 2009; Bauer 2010; Richards 2010; Scherrer 2010). I do not have space to theorise these links in detail here. However, it is worthwhile to consider two major general explanations which have been offered for this situation. One rests on the assumption that people who have brought up the imagination and energy to defy, for example, heteronormativity, find it easier to question compulsory monogamy. Another explanation highlights shared cultural values between communities, for example the stress on communication and negotiation in both polyamory and BDSM (cf. Bauer 2010).

¹⁰ Reciprocity is certainly central to this set of values. Depending on the relationship context, this reciprocity may be enacted in different forms and according to different degrees of intensity between the different people who are part of a particular polyamorous constellation. Scales of reciprocity may range from abstract acknowledgment, to mutually shared recognition or mutually shared bonds of trust, commitment, friendship, love, intimacy or sex.