



KINDERKOMMUNISMUS



**A Feminist Analysis of the 21st-Century Family
and a Communist Proposal for its Abolition**

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Introduction

After riots broke out in Baltimore following death of Freddie Grey at the hands of local police, GOP congressman Bill Flores of Texas argued that riots were the result of the “breakdown of the family” including the “legalization of gay marriage.” This followed a longstanding conservative tendency to explain social, political, and cultural conflict (in this case, attributing anger about longstanding patterns of racist police abuse) by blaming it on changes in the family. This suggests a relationship between global economic depression, increasing social conflict and tension, and structural changes to the family as an institution. Liberal politicians and activists, meanwhile, fixate on fair and equal representation in increasingly unequal categories, making marriage equality (for gay and lesbian couples) the main example of the success of a progressive agenda. However, beyond discrete reforms such as marriage expansion, limited defense of formal abortion rights, and LGBT equality and “hate crime” legislation, liberals offer nothing. Although it is true that in certain cases, liberal reforms have introduced substantive alterations to familial norms (e.g., easier access to divorce, especially reducing the bureaucratic substantiation of patriarchal conventions), even the best liberal efforts have done predictably little to undo the family’s core role in organizing social reproduction.

For conservatives, the social institution of “the family” is being destroyed, thus requiring an appeal to revanchist bureaucratic privileges to secure its dominance. For liberals, changes to the family represent a progressive revision of the family, adjusted to be a pluralistic, supportive site for the production of individuals. In the liberal vision of the family, questions of (economic) coercion are set aside: it assumes that parents (and in reality, this usually means women) will meet the bulk of the social reproductive burden for their children, which allows for more permissive attitudes about what kind of couples can legally secure a marriage contract.

While conservatives and liberals alike have been able to provide a clear picture of the place the family should have within contemporary capitalism, the Left has largely abandoned questions of the family altogether. The project of replacing the family unit, in addition to remaining unrealized, seems never to have been attempted or even really imagined. In this article we will attempt to escape these ideological confines, by analyzing the family’s role in capitalism and proposing an alternative for a revolutionary context.

Historically, Marxists and other revolutionaries have instead recognized the centrality of the family to the reproduction of the capitalist social order and its role as a site of

oppression within it. *The Communist Manifesto* calls for the abolition of the family, to be replaced by “social” education:

Abolition [*Aufhebung*] of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists. On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution. The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital. Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead guilty.

In contrast, contemporary leftists have few positive efforts at actively replacing the family, and the Left’s alternatives to it proved to be largely piecemeal. Efforts by counter-cultural groups to replace the family unit with social communes were short lived and have been more or less abandoned for decades. Recent efforts continue to be small-scale, piecemeal, and largely centered around the most unstable sections of global leftism, such as squatting subcultures. Worse still, even theoretical speculation on the family seems to have hit “too close to home” for leftist thinkers. It seems no more possible today to replace the family than it did forty years ago due to pervasive personal reliance on the family, both as a source of economic resources and as a naturalized center of collective social existence. Tacitly, at least, leftist organisations today have accepted families as a feature of contemporary capitalist society, which they will do nothing to end.^[1]

This remains apparent in all the muddled discussions of the concept of “social reproduction” which has too often come to mean anything which takes place under capitalism outside the “point of production,” thereby giving insufficient attention to the varied forms that social reproduction takes under capitalism. Today, austerity measures and “neoliberal” ideology increasingly “focus on the family” as the primary site of social reproduction as opposed to welfare state institutions and *ad hoc* collectivities that once might have vied for the position.

Yet Marxists have done little to theorize the family beyond discussing its ideological roles and its place as a site of (limited) collective reproduction of individuals as workers. We argue that the family is central not only to the maintenance of capitalism in terms of providing a space “outside” the budget crises of states and the externalities of profit on which to unload the human needs of (individual) workers, but that it is central to the resilience of capitalism under conditions of crisis and depression, precisely because it is both structurally and ideologically flexible, all the while appealing both to a sense of “tradition” for conservatives, “progress” for liberals, and “social solidarity” for what remains of the left. Indeed it is these features which make it ideal as the perpetual site of pitched battle between conservatives and liberals who share the agenda of “strengthening” the family while supporting capital’s assault on wages and streamlining reproductive functions of the capitalist state.

The Family as a Site of Conflict and a Source of Capital's Resilience

Changes in the Family

Appreciating the current state of the family requires an understanding of the New Right as driving at once towards a retrenchment of the heterosexual family and purification of local economies through marketization. The New Right's attachment to the family was not simply a negative drive against social progress: the destruction of the welfare state necessarily re-centered the heterosexual family in social relations. The New Right's claims regarding its "pro-family" stance, against vaguely defined attacks from subversives were antiquated from the outset and have grown only more so. While the defining feature of the family under capitalism is its flexibility, the New Right's treatment of it has been an ideological recuperation of an inter-generational institution which would have proven a material imperative regardless.

Increasingly in the face of global austerity, the family is ideologically and structurally emphasized to such an extent that it is posed as natural and timeless while simultaneously capable of accommodating and facilitating changes in the labor market. This extension of familial hegemony was partly the result of a positive political project to destroy and "streamline" state reproductive services, and in part the negative consequence of the failure of all communal efforts to create inter-generational replacements for conventional family-centered communities. Ultimately both losses are driven by the scarcity of full time, secure work, and increases in worker mobility.

The result is families which are more like those that existed in the early days of capitalist industrialism or which have continuously existed outside of the "first world" in greater numbers during the period in which the family wage pertained for many workers in metropolitan countries. Women have entered the workplace in greater numbers and are "heads" of households more often; maintenance of nuclear families depend on two incomes, a situation which more and more is difficult to consistently arrange. As a result, "social reproduction" at the level of direct care for dependents (children, the elderly, the ill and the disabled) requires the employment of waged help or dependence on the unwaged labor of relatives, often members of an extended family. In both the US and the UK, community-based care for the mentally ill, posited as a reform of dangerous and cruel institutional care, has resulted in large numbers of families burdened by the care of severely ill or disabled relatives. As mental health and holistic institutions have been stripped to minimal form, dysfunction has become a commonplace as these vestigial institutions interact with families. Those rejected by their families, or otherwise left without one, have faced homelessness and destitution and are left without access to treatment, housing, or other support. In many cases, poor mental health provisions have resulted in the exact inversion of traditional family ideals: with appropriate care givers in short supply, children and adolescents have been left to oversee the subsistence of parents facing chronic illness, severe mental health conditions, and addiction.^[2]

This return to a reliance on extended families is necessitated particularly by patterns of labor migration and capital mobility and facilitated through advances in communication technology. Families can sustain themselves across physical distances with increasing ease, from workers dispatching remittances from their low-wage labor to relatives abroad, to bourgeois families funding their children's international studies in the hope of advancing their relative prospects within the ruling class. The success of any one individual has increasingly come to rest on the support offered to them by familial relations, and in that fashion the reproduction of class has become naturalized. Conventions such as deposits on rented accommodation, ever-increasing college tuition costs, financial backing during periods spent in professional training or looking for work, or performing unpaid internships, all ensure that wealthier families will prove able to secure better conditions for their members. The family here operates as a naturalised source for affective labor, with the state serving only as an inadequate and last-resort provider.

Recent work, such as that of Thomas Piketty, has identified the extent to which families have proven able to sustain wealth across generations. It has been suggested that this strengthens the case for the redistribution of wealth. However, this analysis also points toward the role the family unit plays in sustaining social order across time. The resilience of the family poses problems for any type of redistributive program. Politics is shaped by impulses to preserve wealth within the family, and these pressures should be understood inter-generationally. That is to say, not many will accept their children losing social advantages which they possess. The absence of alternative institutions of obligation ensures that this is felt as a binding burden: beyond the family, there are merely individuals.

Entrenchment of the Family Across the World

Nowhere in the world do family relations seem to be dissolving under the pressures of market relations. Contrary to Marx and Engels' early predictions, capitalism has not, on its own, ended or even damaged the family as a central social form, even among the working class.

South Africa has long been seen as an "exceptional" case in the historical development of family and gender relations under capitalism. In *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, Lise Vogel uses South Africa to explain a conception of Social Reproduction which extends beyond the nuclear family:

[these] are not ... the only places where workers renew themselves on a daily basis. For example, many workers in South Africa live in barracks near their work, and are permitted to visit their families in outlying areas once a year. Furthermore, children do not necessarily constitute a family's only contribution to the replenishment of society's labor power. Other family members may at times enter the workforce, at harvest, for instance, or during economic crises. Finally, families are not the only source of such

replenishment; other possibilities ... include migration and enslavement of foreign populations. These observations demonstrate that the identification of the family as the sole site of maintenance of labor power overstates its role at the level of immediate production.[3]

While Vogel's citation of these systems of social reproduction is welcome, this account overlooks the degree to which the "alternatives" she describes are in fact forms of family organization. Instead of seeing South Africa as exceptional, it's more helpful to see it as a case of capitalism deploying the family as a main method of conserving wealth inequality as well as accommodating new labor market realities. In contemporary South Africa, migrant labor remains an important aspect of economic and social life, yet with the end of 'gender apartheid' there the laborer migrating is increasingly likely to be a woman. Politicians from Jacob Zuma to his opponents such as Julius Malema of the socialist Economic Freedom Fighters party rhetorically emphasize the importance of fathers and patriarchy. In the context of austerity, tensions between "tradition" and the increasing reality of relative gender equality obscure the degree to which the family is strengthened by and strengthens the economic inequality. Class division has not only remained but increased since the days of apartheid.

Whatever the short term outcome of South Africa's contemporary political volatility, the geographically dispersed but economically integrated structure of the family seems likely to carry through from colonial and apartheid days to contemporary democracy as an important institution of capital accumulation. The brutal response by the South African state to the wildcat strikes of the Marikana miners (who were demanding wage increases necessary for the survival of families in the Eastern Cape) which left 34 dead at the hands of police serves to highlight the contradictions which are repeated worldwide, between levels "two" and "three" of social reproduction under capitalism. Individual families and the working class as a whole are increasingly challenged in reproducing themselves, while profit imperatives drive wages down by any means necessary.

Even comparatively secure states that were previously engaged in radical interventions into family relations haven't pushed such efforts into an attempt to achieve their supposed ends. In the largest post-socialist "capitalist technocracy,"^[4] China, the Communist Party is currently relaxing one of the largest interventions into family life in history, the One Child Policy. With the economic-environmental aim of this policy achieved, and in the face of increasing labor unrest, state speeches have come to focus on the need for women to fulfill 'traditional' roles (housewifery). Nascent attempts by Chinese women to participate in the feminist resurgence taking place elsewhere in the world have been suppressed by the state, despite their careful rhetorical concessions towards the existing political order. Feminist activists attempting to hold the state to its own formally established standards were arrested on March 8th of this year (International Women's Day).^[5] Even campaigns with politically moderate aims to get China to implement its own formal policies against sexism are, as such, *de facto* unacceptable to the state. The fledgling personality cult surrounding Chinese premier Xi

Jinping, referred to as Big Uncle Xi, has promoted a song indicative of this policy shift. Referring to his relationship to former diva Peng Liyuan, who abandoned her previously lifestyle for a more austere fashion and charity work, “Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama,” features the line “Men should learn from Xi and women should learn from Peng.” While the Chinese state’s one child policy required efforts which seemed radical from the perspective of any liberal (especially systematic state coercion towards abortion for parents who putatively had second children), it would seem that this campaign was ultimately one of sustaining the family unit as an on-going feature of Chinese society.

Even in one of the world’s most apparently unstable polities, the Islamic State, the family remains undisturbed. Notes from the IS’s internal intelligence indicated that a series of marriage alliances between the group’s members and local dignitaries were used to consolidate IS control over swathes of Syria. This strategy gave an advantage to the Islamic State over both democratic Syrian actors and rival Islamist groups. While the Islamic State is often touted as either uniquely adept at using unique 21st-century social media technology, or as proponents of a regressive, even purportedly “medieval” political theology, they in fact secured their territorial dominance with a much older convention than either the internet or Islam. Exploitation of family ties remains a viable tactic for groups hoping to take advantage of the breakdown of 20th-century national settlements.

The Victory of the New Right, and Gay Assimilation

The New Right’s efforts to retrench the heterosexual family as the sole viable source of social existence coincided with the apogee of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the West. Communities that had previously been among the most likely to resist such a broad revanchist familial project found themselves occupied with political efforts agitating for their own survival. The epidemic tested the limits of gay communities and relationships. For its part, the New Right’s role was primarily passive (internment of the HIV-positive, as seen in Cuba, remained a far-right fantasy). This dynamic of inaction left activists obliged to frame their politics as an increasingly desperate petition of the state and other powerful institutions. Implicit in the example made of gay men was an acceleration of the logic of the family: in many cases abandoned by their biological families, a large amount of the basic care work fell to others in LGBT communities. Especially notable was the contribution of lesbians, who performed much of the social reproductive support needed by gay, bi and trans AIDS patients and who, in a lesser-known development, also contributed to the development of “safer sex” practices that have since been fully incorporated by states and NGOs.

Following this cataclysm, the broader radical potential of gay liberation was significantly muted. Increasingly, the focus of gay liberation shifted to ensuring full claims to civic participation for gay couples and on achieving the same comparative advantages afforded to heterosexual state-recognized couples within bureaucratic systems. While

probably overstated, this account by Bryan Lowry gives some indication of how much damage the HIV/AIDS crisis did to gay politics:

When AIDS ravaged gay men in the 1980s and early '90s, it necessarily ravaged gay culture. For one thing, it immediately rendered the more frivolous-seeming gay practices like camp secondary to basic survival. But more important, it disrupted the process of gay cultural transmission that had gone on since the turn of the century. Within a few years, much of the cohort of gay men who would have taught gayness to the next generation—or at the very least shared the contours of the debate—were dead...after much of the “bravest and most unconventional” gay “standard-bearer” class was lost, “what replaced them were the dull normals,” more conservative, integrationist, often previously closeted types who proceeded to use their “superior wealth and executive skills” to take over gay politics and branding.

An outsider of this new mildness towards existing power regimes has been the UK's Stonewall, who praised the 2010-2015 ruling coalition in a statement saying it was looking forward to collaborating with the new Conservative minority government. This assessment clearly prioritized the treatment of gay couples (who are now allowed to marry) over the government's repeated deportation of LGBT asylum seekers, including returning them to states where homosexual sex acts are punishable by death or where LGBT people face particularly intense violence and risk arrest and imprisonment.^[6]

Queer Rejectionism

Queer is not merely another identity that can be tacked onto a list of neat social categories, nor the quantitative sum of our identities. Rather, it is the qualitative position of opposition to presentations of stability—an identity that problematizes the manageable limits of identity. Queer is a territory of tension, defined against the dominant narrative of white-hetero-monogamous patriarchy, but also by an affinity with all who are marginalized, otherized, and oppressed.

The Mary Nardini Gang, *Toward the Queerest Insurrection*

As “gay” politics increasingly came to exclusively signal assimilation and conservatism, a minority tendency within LGBT politics began to engage in a number of consciousness-raising exercises intended to agitate (rhetorically) against the hegemony of familial ideology. Queer rejectionism is the result of the liberal accommodation of the gay movement as a response to changes in the family and the elimination of state social reproductive supports. In some cases centered around local groups or short-lived campaigns, such as Bash Back (in the US) or Queers Against the Cuts (in the UK), this development is better seen as a response to the increasingly non-contentious politics of official LGBT NGOs. For the most part, rejectionist orientations have been cultivated in the loosest possible structures: through informal networks of social media discourse, agitating through memes, ephemeral ‘zines (today often distributed primarily as PDFs),

and in-crowd humor. Treating such a variegated mesh of performative extremity is a task which is impossible to perform comprehensively, but this shadow of conventional LGBT politics is prominent for our purposes. Given the dedication of liberals (including LGBT NGOs) to the *inclusion* of sexual minorities in the family, queer rejectionism is the sole source of political criticism of the family as such in the contemporary Anglophone landscape.

A constant in the arguments of queer rejectionists are what could be termed “historiographical appeals of contention.” Such appeals have been directed especially at the disregard shown for trans women. For example, the aforementioned UK group Stonewall had until quite recently explicitly placed transgender issues beyond its remit. References to the original event of the Stonewall riots (which queer rejectionists usually describe as “led by trans women”), is counterposed with slogans such as “Stonewall was a Riot, Pride is a Protest.” More nuanced analysis identifies the accommodation of “respectability politics” with earlier masculinist agendas, promoted by groups such as the Mattachine Society. This characteristic appeal to history contrasts the originating form of gay politics to indict the tepidity of contemporary LGBT NGOs. A queer rejectionist critique of groups such as the Human Rights Campaign and Stonewall shows these groups’ agendas to be severely deficient and represents no kind of connection to an earlier gay politics. Whereas previously marriage was condemned by gay radicals, now LGBT NGO politics focuses around the *incorporation* of gay lives into civic space, signified most obviously by the state’s formal acknowledgement of gay relationships.

This historical perspective demonstrates the insipid state of contemporary, subsumed, LGBT activism; but queer rejectionism has been less successful in pursuing an *active* formulation of anti-familial politics, and it often ignores the degree to which these divisions have in fact characterized gay/queer politics since the 19th century.^[7]

Positively, this tendency has advanced slogans proposing queers as an anti-social subject. Affirmative support for imperatives such as “fuck the gender binary” and “smash heteropatriarchy” has been rather vague, with proposals that queer activists replace the mundane by subsisting through “self-care.” These efforts misidentify the family as a matter of cultural convention or as in the instrumental grip of a particular socio-political project. In this account, the “assimilation” advanced by liberal LGBT NGOs is a political failing in a moral sense: an abdication of responsibilities to less fortunate gender subjects, a betrayal of historical destiny, and a concession to heteronormative hegemonies. However, this partial account misses the family’s current function as an *economic* unit. Irrespective of the consciousness participants in family relations may have, families continue to exist through necessity. In this context, a civil rights auxiliary to familial formation will become a prominent matter. Whatever shame may be appropriate for the liberals of the HRC and Stonewall, it is clear that that the success of this NGO-based, family-focused gay politics is due not merely to bad intentions but to material circumstance.

In some cases, members of this anti-assimilative tendency have usefully demonstrated that the family as such is the source of suffering for “sexual and gender minorities.”^[8] Radical lawyer and trans activist Dean Spade has emphasized that the worst suffering experienced within LGBT communities is among underage youths left homeless through rejection by their families—in other words, those abandoned by their families at an age when they remain primarily socially and developmentally reliant on the family unit. Drawing from experience with the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (which he founded in 2002 to provide free legal assistance to transgender and gender variant individuals), Spade underscores the fact that those who experience the most intense suffering are those who are least often centered by mainstream LGBT NGO politics: black trans women, who face the highest rates of homelessness as well as unique difficulties accessing gender appropriate homeless shelters, rape crisis centers, and other basic facilities.^[9] This suffering shows little indication of abating, and indeed under the conditions of austerity seems likely to worsen. Politics of pluralism and “tolerance” may drive down the ambient levels of homo/transphobia, and perhaps shame parents into performing duties they would be otherwise unwilling to. But for as long as the familial unit remains central to both the economic and social relations of the existing orders, it will find (objective) political defenders who reject all but the most predictable permutations of it.

Queer groups such as political poets Dark Matter (Alok Maid-Venon and Bala Subrahmanian) have also stressed the deracializing drive of contemporary LGBT politics, and the limits of politics of normalcy in societies featuring foundational systemic racism.

While mainstream LGBT activism has certainly failed to sustain any challenge to the dominance of family relations, it’s unclear if efforts by queer rejectionists either have or ever will. Participation in familial relations does not occur because of a moral failing on the part of queers (or heterosexuals, for that matter). Rather, it is a reflection of the demands placed upon all those obliged to commodify their labor. Rhetorical efforts (including descriptive academic analysis) without institutional substantiation will do nothing to displace the family as the primary provider of inter-generational social reproduction. The family exists because so many are left without the choice not to participate, regardless of how they might feel about this concession.

At its best, the tendency offers a description of the family as the source of delimitation of human experience but fails to offer any concrete political means for its dissolution. In many cases, the critique remains an entirely “in house” project, directed from radical queers towards mainstream LGBT individuals or organizations. It is altogether unclear what even a full-throated revival of queer radical politics might actively achieve towards ending the family. We are inclined to adapt Bordiga’s comment on anti-fascism being the worst by-product of fascism: the failings of liberal LGBT politics has resulted in a mesh of queer activists who simply define their stances through rejection of it. Rejectionism allows the opponents of LGBT politics as a celebration of and participation in bourgeois life to lay claim to the mantle of queer history. But this project is ultimately reactive. Particular efforts to cover the support work left undone by an increasingly

liberal LGBT movement may be successful, but these projects show no sign of achieving a broader impact. Queer rejectionism has not made any concerted effort to imagine what such a systemic shift might look like. Rejectionist accounts of revolutionary change present either the vaguest vision of “queer insurrection” against social norms, or in fact present no vision at all (focusing instead on the politics of “survival”). While our rejectionist comrades have made a decisive case for rejecting liberal-subsumed LGBT NGOs, they do not make any advancement toward the family’s end. Their politics is one of celebrating tension, not collapsing the material foundations of straight identities. Their nostalgic-historiographical poetics have failed to provide an emancipatory path that will destroy the heterosexualizing coercion of the family. They have failed even to speculate clearly as to what such a path might look like.

Without any positive establishment of alternative social institutions to the family, queer counter-culturalism merely offers a voice of discontent with existing conditions and not a means of their conscious destruction. However begrudging their political convictions might make them, participation is inevitable, and rhetorical opposition will never see substantiation into a materially transformative politics.

If queer rejectionism is to be taken as an ascetic exercise in honing political intuitions, of training political actors to side with the dispossessed and reflexively reject subsumptive bargains offered by the heterosexual order, it has value as far as such a self-directed project serves us. But more than this is required. For queers to advance their fortunes, they must actively drive the ascent towards communism.

Return to Communism

The return to communist analysis of the family has two central components: first, to attend to what role extant families or alternatives to it can play in the development of a revolutionary working class consciousness, and second, to imagine what could replace the family after capitalism.

The Family in Social Reproduction

In order to trace the possibility of abolishing the family, we first must define what the family is, and what it does. In ideal form it consists of a physical household and a nuclear family, but increasingly large numbers exist as multi-generational households, female-headed households, and financial units extended across long distances (a result of global patterns of migrant labor and displacement). For our purposes, a family is a social, legal, and financial unit represented as relatives expected to (if not necessarily) follow biological lines of descent. This clearly takes many forms.

The family is a vertical institution linking three distinct scales of social reproduction in capitalism. First, families serve as the primary generative institution of social individuals

and of individual workers. Second, families (along with workplaces), operate as sites of collective labor through which the working class is objectively constituted (we shall return later to the roles families do and might play in the development of a subjectively constituted working class). Third, families link the working class to the state, and serve a vital function in subordinating the working class to capital's profit imperative. They serve as a means of coercion of individual workers, and against workers as a whole. The costs of reproduction can be externalized from the profit relation to families, both directly in the worker-employer relationship and through the remnants of state social services.

Since the project of communism is to collapse these three levels of social reproduction into a single organically constituted sphere, the communist perspective attends to the ways in which the extant family not only links the three spheres of social reproduction but simultaneously holds them at a remove from one another. Any proposal to abolish the family must first attend to theorizing the role of the family and social reproduction in revolutionary politics as well as to develop caring institutions which might supplant the capitalist family.

Once we have established that the family is the institution that links these three distinct aspects or scales of social reproduction it should become clear that the place of the family in developing working class revolutionary consciousness is complex, if not contradictory. As previously noted, the family is simultaneously the only "lived" experience of collectivity many people seemingly have outside of market relations; at the same time, it is in the most devastating instances often a site of gender-based abuse. Even in the "best" families, free of abuse, the family is the institution tasked with producing individuals, including our gendered, racially/ethnically marked identities. Several ethnographers of gender and of work have noted that these divisions serve to prepare us for the division and abuses of the workplace or our exclusion from it.^[10] If gender in its current form is primarily a system for organizing regulatory violence, the family is the most significant institution through which that violence is expressed.^[11]

To consider the role of the family in the potential production of a revolutionary consciousness we must think through the apparent contradiction between the first and second aspects of the family's role in social reproduction mentioned above: between the production of capitalist individuals and the organic constitution of the working class. Put another way, it is the family as a site of the collective work of social reproduction, along with the classic model in which the collective project of production of commodities defines the working class, that constitutes the working class "in-itself" as an objectively existing feature of capitalist society. It is also the family as an ideological construct and site of identity production which constrains class consciousness both by justifying ruthless market participation as an individual (supporting one's family) and by preparing individuals to accede to the demands of capital and the state, sometimes long before being faced with them.^[12] On the one hand, it is in and through families that workers with different experiences of the labor market (precarious and non-precarious, employed and unemployed) share not only the subjective realities of that experience, but often the concrete material burdens of them as well; on the other hand, the

immediate demands of family and social reproduction can be (but are not always) an inhibiting factor weighing against both broader identification and radical action.

Given these conflicts, it is necessary to think through how families produce a common experience of “precarity” across the working class and across relative degrees of job security. Most often this sense of precarity is conservatizing, at other times—as in the South African wildcat strikes inspired by Marikana—explosive. In other iterations, it is a mix: for example, the Occupy movements and other “movements of squares.” We argue there is something to be hoped for in noticing that it is the consciousness of the precarious worker, with responsibilities for social reproduction in her family that is generalized, and argue that revolutionary politics and action must attend to this fact. First, by the obvious and oft-mentioned fact that “workers”—even masculine, well-paid and securely-employed ones—should not be considered either outside this general consciousness, nor pandered to as though they are outside of it. Further, the attention to social reproduction has produced activist calls for “strikes” against social reproduction, echoing radical slogans of earlier eras. Instead, we argue that that the collectivization, even if only temporarily, of the basic work of social reproduction beyond nuclear families and extended family networks during protests, strikes, riots, and moments of crisis (e.g., hurricanes Sandy and Katrina) can make a contribution toward the development of a revolutionary class consciousness, and draws on the long history of working class struggle defined by these practices.^[13]

Moments of intense organizing and conflict have historically provided space for and required militants to take on roles contrary to the normal constraints of gender and family roles and to push against the reinscription of these roles into worker and revolutionary organizations. These activities and other everyday efforts to practice gender egalitarianism or “self-organize” among oppressed gendered and sexualities are not enough to end gender oppression constantly reinforced by the family and the labor market, but they might lay the basis, both politically and organizationally, for imagining and enacting alternatives given the opportunity. Rather than reframing these practices, as has often happened, as a new kind family or a “beloved community” we argue for increased attention to the ways they contradict and counteract the usual logic of family life.

The second task, imagining what might replace the family, is more speculative and difficult. What is a “social education?” In what way might reproduction and social reproduction be organized en route to a future society? Marxists and other feminists have raised this question, both in the past and increasingly today.^[14] At the heart of the debates between proponents of “dual” and “triple systems theories,” indifferent capitalism, and a “unitary theory”^[15] is the question of whether ending the economic imperatives that enforce family life (under communism) would, in fact, abolish the family and/or the function of its constitutive parts: gender, marriage, and compulsory heterosexuality. Certainly, eliminating economic coercion in family life would have dramatic effects on individual choices, but saying that says little to nothing about what ending economic coercion in family life would actually entail.

The Anti-Dyadic Crèche

If the family is taken to be a loose, flexible, yet socially binding institution, any historical progression towards its overcoming will require a supplanting revolutionary institution. A purely negative effort to destroy the family would simply result in starving infants. As communists, we accept (but do not embrace) the material role that the family unit has come to play. We freely acknowledge that advances against and beyond it occur in its shadow.

We will outline these efforts here in ideal form, before a brief (and necessarily insufficient) logistical comment.

A Counter-Familial Institution: The Ideal Form

While the family serves to naturalize, obscure, and particularize, a counter-familial institution would be historicizing, educational, and universal. While the family demands the continual rearticulation of dyadic gender relations, a communist center of social reproduction would be gender liberatory, both for those currently raised as girls-to-women, and all others who currently suffer through oppressive sex role regulatory ideals. It would be deliberately destructive of delimitation of human experience into currently prevailing distinctions. It would be active, unabashedly anti-dyadic, and overpowering. It would be unifying, pedagogic, nurturing, pastoral, insistent, all-encompassing, authoritative, revolutionary.

We would suggest a more formally (and as such, reliably) established system for overseeing the inter-generational reproduction. We will call this counter-familial institution a *crèche*. Various aspects of this crèche will be simple expansions of existing, or clearly historically precedented, structures. The defining qualities of this supplanting institution will be first, its creation within the context of previous educational institutions undergoing their (long overdue) abolition, and second, its foundation in an explicit view towards the destruction of the family, and all its attendant ideological forms (manhood, motherhood, and the gender dyad.) While such an ambition may strike the contemporary leftist, impoverished in prescriptive approaches to ending gender as currently constituted, as harshly utopian, the initial stage of this would be a quite straightforward path toward universalism.

At its simplest, this crèche would immediately provide those who have children access to labor covering the social reproductive requirements of their infant. This service would at no point cease. Crèche facilities would be based primarily at appropriate metropolitan centers (with appropriate rural centers also established at whatever scales suit regional needs). They would be large and deliberately oriented towards the dissolution of existing social distinctions. These crèches would be merged with existing state schooling systems (wherever these exist, with further establishment required where they do not). The consolidation of all universities (which would lose their current function of

bourgeois enculturation) into this crèche would allow for a unified structure for both education and upbringing which would extend across the first two decades of every person's life between neonate and adulthood.

The universalization of access to nutritional needs and pediatric support would do much to counteract the wildly varying healthcare prospects of those to be raised in the revolutionary society. Vaccinations to eradicate diseases from HPV to measles would be delivered as standard. Healthcare provisions would include offering any given child control over the on-set of puberty. This measure would be especially helpful for those currently treated for "Gender Identity Disorder" for their difficulties developing themselves as cis-gendered capitalist subjects. (In this context, transgendered children would come to no longer be considered disordered at all). This would also be one aspect of a generally introduced provision of fertility control (also including access to contraceptive measures and abortions, for anyone old enough to have need of them.) Reproductive labour would no longer be assumed as a burden for all women.

The equalizing potential of nutritional provision alone can be grasped in this writer's anecdote about his time at a Scottish public school:

No pupil I can think of left my school fat. Sometimes, a tubby, or even an obese child would step from their parents' car into the front quad at the age of thirteen. But by the time they left, they would be a sleek, muscular young adult...it was only when I arrived at university that I realised I am not short. At five foot ten, at school, I was small. I remember the specific, baffling moment that I was standing in a crowd of my fellow university freshers and saw, for the first time, that my peers didn't tower over me.[16]

As communists we are committed to extending the privileges currently used to establish elite solidarity to advance the prospects of all. The nutritional and health needs of children being met would ensure a "minimum basic level" for children, destroying previously entrenched class differentiation.

Educational approaches would also benefit society, greatly expanding the quality of life. "Core requirements" for any system (medical, engineering, research) would be provided in such a fashion that a surplus of skilled labour would exist, rather than the current system of limited numbers (with highly leveragable labor) being trained as a demographically slender elite. In this way the system would end the current system of "professionals" *tout court*, through dramatically expanding the number of trained potential workers in currently elite-associated activities. This increased pool of technically skilled labour would reduce pressures on any particular bearer of this theoretical knowledge to immediately participate as a practitioner. This pedagogic aspect of the institution would be only one role, but it would serve to disrupt the current scarcity of skilled logistical labor across successive generations. Finally, we would expect to see a collapse of the distinction between later stages education and research, given the latter's current formal confinement into a system structurally intended to establish differentiation within a capitalist economy.

Unmooring Biological Reproduction from Social Reproduction

The effect on differentiation for successive generations would be twinned with its undoing of distinction between parent and non-parent: biological child-bearing would come to be seen as a burden “standing alone,” existing as a contribution to society in its own right. It would not necessarily come with the responsibility of overseeing a child’s upbringing (for at least a decade and a half), and in this way the core foundation of “motherhood” would be undone. Social and biological reproduction would be distinct obligations, and those who bear children biologically might waive responsibility for social reproduction without either the formal-logistical difficulties or the subjective shaming attendant to giving over a child the current, structurally defective, foster care system. “Motherhood” would become a materially unmoored ideology, rather than the binding ransoming of fortunes for subsequent generations that it functions as today.

Meanwhile, the crèche would not ignore the developmental needs of children to have close relationships with a small number of care providers across the course of their young lives.^[17] This role within the crèche would be reserved for those who are educated in child development, committed to the aims of the institution, and able to demonstrate caregiving skills.^[18] In this way, the crèche would combat the grim weight of gendered expectation, insecurity, and historical ignorance through providing unifying exposure (through direct and historical means) to the full bounty of hitherto existing gendered experience. This would eventually become an anti-cultural process, characterized by a refusal to engage in regulatory placement within the increasingly outmoded lines of differentiation.

Where the family reduces social ties to individual connections, narrows cultural exposure, and limits social contact along homosocial lines, communist education would unambiguously seek to develop the individual against history (rather than a circumscribed nationalist or communalist ideological assembly, intended to induce an ontologically differentiated subjecthood). Having been confronted with the scope of human variations (both through peer group, and pedagogy) during their education, developing workers would be better prepared to set their own terms of affinity, and preferred terms of reference.

We can offer no informed speculation as to whether the crèche would “end gender,” as various radical and materialist feminists aim to. It’s unclear whether gender would continue to exist, and we declare ourselves agnostic on this vexed issue, while suggesting that whatever form it might continue in would be most likely difficult to recognise. Irrespective of this categorical-analytical issue, ending the existing system of child rearing would alleviate much of the current suffering experienced by sexual/gender minorities and women. Unpredictable permutations of gendered experience would arise from experimentation no longer operating against the grain of societal expectations, and economic necessity. Without the dyadic pressures currently reproduced both actively and structurally through families and schooling systems, many fewer lives would be lost to suicide, neglect, and murder.

Logistics, Resistance and Implementation

In many cases, those who personally bear children might reject the option to make use of the crèche. Doubtless, many parents would continue to desire personal contact and individual enculturation, and this aspect of social upbringing would not be done away with forcefully. The project of this provision would be primarily positive: whereas currently labour is tacitly demanded of all those who bear children, our communist institution for upbringing would replace at once the brutality of the family and the foster home (not to mention the streets, which too often serve as the center of enculturation for so many children in the 21st century). The transformations that what is currently termed “motherhood” would undergo in conditions in which *de facto* obligation to oversee upbringing is normatively-enforced are difficult to foresee. But the abolition of material obligation implicit in the vast majority of pregnancies today is a minimal material requirement for any movement toward overcoming existing obligations instilled by womanhood as a sex role.

We unflinchingly accept the prospect of our ideal institution becoming, across the short term, one of the least popular to have ever existed. Reaction against it will likely range from non-involvement becoming a competitive class marker for elite, revanchist parents (who perhaps may even establish clandestine schooling networks), to willful subversion and outright sabotage. Further resistance could be expected on the part of children, who leftists have often underestimated as agents of reaction, racism, sexism, and class reinscription.^[19]

We also acknowledge the likelihood of widespread abuse among the workers tasked with sustaining this system. This could be best combated through a continual process of self-investigation, perhaps with a specific body specifically tasked with an internal investigative remit. We expect that this could provide a substantial improvement on high proportions of incest in existing families in every society (which currently affects somewhere between twenty-five and thirty-three percent of children) in addition to the abuse rife in the foster home and juvenile prison systems which currently provide care for children and youths. Today, children experience rape and sexual abuse from uncles, sports coaches, care workers, counsellors, and others in whose custody they are placed. This is an unavoidable and invariant feature of any society’s enculturation of children, and we consider the prospect of systematic and institutional processes of investigation to have much potential in mitigating and reducing this form of everyday, devastating criminality.

Overcoming these unavoidable imperfections of implementation, abuses of power, and active disruption on the part of reactionaries will be a process which is difficult to outline in specifics. The institution’s eventual success would come through collectivizing the everyday. Once established as the uncontentious bedrock of developing post-proletarian unconsciousness, this socialist establishment would advance communist relations by leaving biological reproduction unmoored from an attendant nexus of *obligation*, and in the process leaving familial ties and manhood firstly redundant, and

later inconceivable. This will not be a straightforward process. The ingenuity of communists will be tested, and undoubtedly, support for the overall project of overturning capitalist relations will be contested.

Conclusion

Our proposal for an anti-dyadic crèche presupposes a communist revolution sufficiently advanced to found such an institution. Only this context could mobilize and direct the required resources in the centralizing, sustained fashion required for a material unmooring of familial (and especially maternal) obligation. In this sense, this text serves as a revolutionary-speculative proposal: our end is not to provide a blueprint for future communists, but to deepen materialist analysis of the relationships between the family, gender, and the reproduction of capitalism. We intend this proposal as a positive contribution to the current revival of revolutionary approaches to questions of gender and social reproduction. We write to define the pre-requisite form required by any kind of communist drive to succeed in abolishing the current *de facto* coercion into family relations and the lasting effects of material differentiation within society. Put simply: capitalism cannot survive without the family; revolutionary communism cannot survive with it.

Appendix

The Revolutionary Crèche: A Guide for the Perplexed

1. The crèche abolishes the elite. *Before children can learn, train to labor, or think, they must eat. The crèche will nourish and drive up the bare minimum a growing body expects from its upbringing. As we approach communism, none will go hungry again.*
2. The crèche forges an “elite.” *The literate are advantaged over the illiterate, the full-bellied over the hungry, those who grow up hearing myths and fables over those raised without them. The crèche will abolish conditions of deprivation. It will provide conditions which will allow those raised through it to pity the alienation and lack of past generations.*
3. The crèche destroys coercion. *At present, parents raise children in the face of incessant fear and anxiety. Their every act is mediated through an awareness of society’s judgement. The crèche would provide for the many who in truth want none of this, who want a rest, who have broken down.*
4. The crèche is coercive. *There is no such thing as a libertarian upbringing. At present, children are taught to feel desperation and to accommodate themselves to capitalism by parents and other care workers living under capitalist conditions. The crèche would be a communist institution, driving children instead to forge themselves into the face of a new society.*
5. The crèche pursues its own obsolescence. *By undermining the foundations of gendered oppression and dyadic relations, the crèche pursues a resolution of the need for an anti-dyadic institution. Political in its original necessity, it will become a matter of routine following the capitalist family’s dissolution, as well as the ascension of society and culture beyond the systematic coercion of children and youths into dyadic sex roles.*
6. The crèche is indispensable part of communist revolution, and indispensable for communist society. *Just as patriarchies grew and supplanted more variegated and egalitarian societies through the rise of agriculture, the end of gender oppression will become possible only with destruction of capitalist economic relations. Expecting the advance to a communist society to occur without the targeted destruction of the family is equally impossible. The aspect of formally-guaranteed care provided to all children is the material underpinning of any potential gender liberation.*

Footnotes

[1] It is unclear that this unwillingness on the left to attempt to replace the family is undesirable. Across the past several years, leftist organizations have been exposed as entirely incapable of overcoming patriarchal dynamics even within themselves, with a range of rape, abuse, and subsequent cover-up scandals emerging from various Marxist sects, as well as from anarchist affinity groups and other movement spaces (including the short-lived Occupy encampments of 2011). Further, as “restorative justice” emerges as an increasingly popular mode for managing internal dynamics of gender-based violence, its inherent flaws make it convenient for left-wing organizations and social scenes to paper-over violence.

[2] A 2010 survey found there were 700,000 children in this position in the UK alone: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/nov/16/children-carers-survey>

[3] Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket, 1983), 141

[4] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2012/08/china-in-revolt/>

[5] See the following articles: <http://chuangcn.org/2015/03/gender-war-social-stability-in-xis-china-interview-with-a-friend-of-the-womens-day-five-1st-half/>

<http://chuangcn.org/2015/03/gender-war-social-stability-in-xis-china-interview-with-a-friend-of-the-womens-day-five-2nd-half/>

<http://www.npr.org/2015/03/19/394099704/detained-feminists-highlight-chinas-crackdown-on-dissent>

<http://chuangcn.org/2015/03/gala/>

[6] See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/02/24/here-are-the-10-countries-where-homosexuality-may-be-punished-by-death/>

[7] <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/26/berlin-story>

[8] Butler draws this term from Gayle Rubin here: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/articles/gender-is-extramoral/>

[9] *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law*, (2011) <http://genderlawjustice.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Normal-Life-Administrative-Violence-Critical-Trans-Politics-and-the-Limits-of-the-Law.pdf>

[10] See Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labor* and Phillipe Bourgois’ *In Search of Respect*, among others

[11] We intend to develop this argument further in future work as an engagement with contemporary Marxist/materialist feminist debates.

[12] One thinks here of the “#worldsbestmom, ‘a mother who became a meme and source of debate between liberals and conservatives when she was videotaped beating her son for participating in protests against the killing of Freddy Grey. Racist conservatives celebrated her actions as simply reflecting their “values” that black people protesting racism should be met with violence and appreciation of authoritarian violent family structures. Liberals on the other hand apologized that her actions were aimed at “protecting” her child from the more-likely-to-be fatal and inevitable violence of police, that the assault was an argument, made with her fists, that racist state violence cannot be confronted, only accommodated.

[13] See <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/79-may-day-precarity-affective-labor-and-the-general-strike>

[14] See <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/05/04/gender-and-capitalism-debating-cinzia-arruzzas-remarks-on-gender/>. Additionally Endnotes in their recent piece “The Logic of Gender,” concludes with a closely related question: “A last thought, to conclude: if it happens to be true that the present moment allows us to see both our class-belonging and our gender-belonging as external constraints, this cannot be purely accidental. Or can it? This question is critical for an understanding of the struggle which leads to the abolition of gender, that is, to the reproduction by non-gendered individuals of a life in which all separate spheres of activity have been abolished.” See <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender>.

[15] <https://viewpointmag.com/2014/09/02/remarks-on-gender/>

[16] See <http://brightgreenscotland.org/index.php/2013/06/my-public-school-days-the-building-of-upper-class-solidarity/>

[17] See <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2014/02/20/280237833/orphans-lonely-beginnings-reveal-how-parents-shape-a-childs-brain>

[18] Before embarking on even imagining such a project, many readers will immediately mention the (counter) example of “Romanian orphanages,” infamous for being a case of institutionalized neglect of the worst kind, systematically producing children facing “attachment disorders” and which were implicated in a tragic epidemic of pediatric HIV/AIDS. This excerpt from a National Public Radio story on these orphanages encapsulates the way this crime has come to dominate any discussion of alternative social reproduction outside the family: “More than a decade of research on children raised in institutions shows that ‘neglect is awful for the brain,’ says Charles Nelson, a professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and Boston Children’s Hospital. Without someone who is a reliable source of attention, affection, and stimulation, he says, ‘the wiring of the brain goes awry.’ The result can be long-term mental and

emotional problems.” In the context of most discussion of this tragic scenario fails to recognize that these orphanages were extreme even in the context of Eastern Bloc countries. Furthermore, they were the product of misogynist, natalist policies under the Ceausescu regime. This system was one part of a particular nationalist attempt to develop “socialism in one country.” The anti-dyadic crèche will not institutionalize neglect; on the contrary it will aim to make the best known child rearing practices available to all, including research on the importance of focused affection and attention.

[19] See

http://www.faculty.umb.edu/lawrence_blum/publications/reviews/feagin_first_r.pdf

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