

Abolish the Family!

Is the family the heart or part of a heartless world?

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2023

a review of

Abolish the Family! by Sophie Lewis. Verso, 2022

Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care by M.E. O'Brien. Pluto Press, 2023

As we all navigate the perilous shoals of capitalist austerity and precarity, many turn to the family as the last reserve of collectivity, care, and survival. For a lucky few, this is enough, but this notion of the “last reserve” is a deep structural problem that leaves too many people vulnerable to abandonment or abuse.

Two recent books, Sophie Lewis's *Abolish the Family!* (Verso Press, 2022) and Michelle O'Brien's *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care* (Pluto Press, 2023) help us understand how the family has been shaped as both a carrot and a stick, disciplining subjects throughout historical phases of capitalism while making care contingent on conformity and the fear of abandonment.

Not only do these books debunk this narrow notion of love, but they help us understand why utopian alternatives such as the ongoing encampments surrounding the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock and against Cop City in Georgia are more promising harbingers of collectivity and care than the traditional family.

Lewis's “manifesto for care and liberation” foregrounds the fact that family abolition would actually expand rather than shrink the realm of care. She wants us to understand that love and family can be at odds and that the reputedly nurturing family can become a barrier to the support we all crave. The reliance on the family creates the notion that survival is a scarcity, requiring traumatic sacrifice, rather than a limitless resource that should be available to all.

The family can serve as a form of “property love a term Lewis borrows from the Russian revolutionary feminist Alexandra Kollontai, forcing children to conform to its dictates even when the family is dysfunctional, authoritarian, patriarchal, homophobic, or transphobic. Both O'Brien and Lewis build on Kollontai's theories of love under communism while recognizing that she is a problematic figure. O'Brien identifies most closely with “Communization,” an ultra-left tendency that imagines new social relations built in struggle. However, she came to this position through a background in anarchist politics and acknowledges the importance of anarchist theory and struggle as central to her argument.

While we might feel that the family is our only option and that some families, such as POC and queer varieties, can be promising, Lewis is most drawn to POC and queer theorists who argue that even though some individual families might be nurturing, the family in its idealized form is structured by white, settler, heterosexual, patriarchal values and is always a means of forcing people into the enclosure of privatized care. Because of this, she hopes to draw on alternate forms of collectivity modeled by communities of color rather than the rotten foundations of the family, as we imagine building a new world.

in that spirit, Lewis's book embraces a utopian tone, looking to emancipatory visions of alternatives to the family by a range of philosophers and social movements. She sees the forms of decolonial reinvention, mother-

ing outside motherhood, and work refusal developed by these theorists as building to her own identification with trans(sexual) radicalism that she shares with M.E O'Brien.

Though trans movements' hopes for gender and sexual emancipation as well as the everyday politics of protest encampments inspire both writers, they acknowledge that true family abolition is not possible before capitalism is defeated and replaced with a private propertyless society based on mutual aid. In this utopian future, the love that some of us have known in the family would be preserved, but also transformed into something that is unimaginable to those living under the violence and constraints of capitalist sociality.

In *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care*, M.E. O'Brien makes a similar argument but where Lewis has written a brilliant manifesto, O'Brien organizes her book as a more methodical, though still scintillating and passionate, argument. Beginning with the model of women's communities in the Oaxaca commune, O'Brien, like Lewis, immediately offers the protest encampment as a utopian model of family abolition, a place where women worked collectively, publicly, and with shared intimacy, "reproducing the insurrection." Although O'Brien's ultimate goal is the abolition of gender and gendered spheres of labor, she sees the first step in this journey to reinterpret and deprivatize reproductive labor.

O'Brien begins by outlining the problem with the family as it is, using the example of the crises many families experienced during the Covid lockdown to underscore how families are manipulated to fill in the gaps left by cruelly austere policies.

She also examines a truly horrific publicity photograph that depicts Donald and Melania Trump holding a Latinx baby whose parents were killed in a racist mass shooting as a launching point to explore the racist underside of the idealized white family. George Floyd's last, heartrending call for his mother serves as a vision of what she calls a "line of flight" from the family as we know it.

Throughout the book, O'Brien acknowledges that our entire framings for love and care are often formed by notions of the family and, especially in communities of color, these visions have inspired collective rebellion. She sees Floyd's call as a hope for an alternative world where the care we associate with mothering is expanded and lifted from the private sphere and where those who suffer are offered succor instead of punishment.

What if Floyd were surrounded by "salvation, aid and care," rather than punitive violence? Like Lewis, O'Brien emphasizes over and again that by family abolition she imagines a deep expansion of care as it becomes a decommodified resource, free of patriarchal norms, that would allow us to decouple the desire to give and receive love from alienation and coercion.

In part two of the book, O'Brien provides a richly researched history of family abolition, tracing how the concept evolves as the family's utility to racial capitalism historically transforms. She looks at how, from capitalism's inception, workers rebelled against normative family forms, exploring Marx and Engels' critique of the bourgeois nuclear family as well as the attack on kin relationships under slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow-era enforcement of monogamous heteronormative family forms on Black people.

She offers glimpses of transgressive practices, including sex work, gay sex, trans self-presentation, and resistance to racialized family structures. In proletarian communities these practices had the potential of becoming gateways to class struggle. Through exploring decades of social movements, O'Brien shows that a variety of activist-theorists imagined alternatives to the conventional family that can be built on in the present.

In the book's final section, O'Brien dares to dream about alternative possibilities to the family form. Like Lewis, O'Brien has been central in developing a new tradition of trans radicalism, and she emphasizes that this futurity would start with freedom from prescribed gender roles and behavior which is so central to the traditional family.

O'Brien is interested in the potential of protest encampments to help us imagine "the communizing of care" but she goes on to imagine what social changes might be possible were we allowed to develop them during sustained mass uprisings and occupations against capitalism. Although *Family Abolition* does not delve deeply into the gendered relations that have evolved in actually existing protest encampments, elsewhere O'Brien's speculative fiction offers a vision of what those relations could become with social supports.

She imagines this developing during waves of insurrection against capitalist structures. Ongoing rebellion would enable people to collectively deprivatize public space and goods, caring for each other while setting up expansive protest kitchens, medical services, and alternative uses for infrastructure, farms, and factories.

In this transformed landscape, social reproduction would be generalized and transformed, offering care without coercion. For an elaborated narration of this vision, one could read *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052–2072*, a stunningly ambitious speculative utopian novel co-written by O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi.

As both O'Brien and Lewis suggest, family abolition is not aimed at simply destroying the family, but transforming it, preserving the love and care that the family promises, while negating the coercion and scarcity that too often becomes its reality. In a deep engagement with both works the reader will discover that all the best aspects of the family are preserved

in family abolition, while the pressures and prejudices inherent to a system reliant on privatized care are dissipated.

Both of these works ask the questions, if the family is our most precious institution, why can't we prioritize its promise of nurturing and care in every dimension of society? Why does the family have to remain the "heart of a heartless world" when we have the option to transform the world in its entirety into a circulation of "generalized human care and queer love" rather than cold cash and commodities?

Instead of huddling in our fragile, darkened homes, why can't we emerge and bask in the warmth of a sunlit beloved community?

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