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Unchallenged Myth: *Abolish the Family* and Structure

There are aspects of society we are taught not to question: government, education, capitalism. These are portrayed as immutable truths that, if presented with a gap in their logical system, are dependent on sidestepping them, referring to the aforementioned immutability, and relying on the status quo to keep their position as societal structures. Sophie Lewis's most recent case for phasing out the nuclear family structure, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care*, demonstrates how the family is another one of these seemingly universal concepts. The unacknowledged reality of the family is historically one a tool of control rather than freedom, and Lewis seeks to redefine love in the context of social care rather than nuclear dependence. She argues that the truest act of affection is to allow someone to step outside of the family structure if they need it, rather than trap them in a situation for the sake of blood relation. Some families may benefit from the traditional structure—those with the resources to provide all that they need within the house *and* get along well emotionally—but, like capitalism itself, only because there are others who are suffering within the system. While not a utopian exercise, family abolition is a form of compassion, based on de-engineering harmful state systems.

Lewis makes the important choice to center Black scholars in the initial chapters. Liberalism is fraught with, “ecstatic queer-utopian theorization,” or the tendency to wash a particular group of people of any individual flaws to present the group in a better light (Lewis 26). The downside of this movement is not uplifting marginalized people, which is a noble pursuit, but the tendency it has to remove context and nuance. Horstense Spillers, in response to the 1965 “Negro family” Moynihan report, said that the goal of Black feminism should be to move away from the “grammar” of the white, American family, and seek to form new kin bonds that are specific to the Black experience (Lewis 25). Tiffany Lethabo King's 2018 argument, which Lewis expands on, follows Spillers's line of thinking, with her saying that mere redefinition of the family would result in the core of the idea— “kinship-as-property-relation”— reappearing in future endeavors (26). Consequently, this is the root of the abolition argument: that the root of the family is corrupt, so all derivatives that use it as a starting point will be corrupted. Lewis points out that family abolition, while not inherently an anti-colonial exercise, has the potential to reject even the most fundamental aspects of white cultural assimilation.

At the background of this discussion hangs the reason why people are hesitant of family abolition in first place. At first glance, the admitted intrusion into the family structure mimics the modern American social worker as both disrupter of non-white families and enforcer of European social norms. The American South, chief engineer of some of humanity's worst behavior, played a key part in the sense of “family propriety” Americans now experience. White slavers employed not only physical control over enslaved victims, but sexual control as well. Victims were often subject to sexual assault, rape, and pregnancies by plantation owners, resulting in a “concubinage” of women that were forced to carry their rapist's children and bring them into the slavery system (38). That inherently hypocritical reality—decrying the evils of a race so inept they must be enslaved, while committing atrocities oneself—is still present today in conservative America. Every year, numerous scandals involving conservative politicians, community leaders, and

religious figures take a tour around mass media, sparking liberal outrage and bemusement at the accused's hypocrisy (Weissman). How can one preach family values then turn around and cheat on that family? Easily: because this is the norm. That pure, Christian nation, beacon of the "values of frugality, hard work, and lifelong, monogamous, biologically fruitful marriage, oriented toward heritable property accumulation, as master pioneers of the New World," which conservatives opine for has never existed (Lewis 38). Even if they achieved an ethnostate utopia consisting of Christian nuclear families, it would still be rife with adultery, drugs, and other such vices those on the political right deride.

Additionally, Native Americans were subject to multiple kinds of violent imposition on the basis of expanding the family, beginning with the inclusion of "traditional" marriage in policy to consolidate power in the hands of men and dissolve the more gender-neutral forms of power present in tribes. This was followed with the abduction of children into residential schools to acclimate them to a European family structure (Lewis 36). While it is not strictly necessary to explicitly state the vast negative impact the genocidal settlers had on Native American culture and society, it is worth noting how purposeful and effective they were. It then follows that non-white families are inherently more suspicious of interventions into the nuclear family, a well-deserved skepticism from years of being targeted by a government who states they are only taking action for the child's benefit. Child social workers are an arm of this government that tend to cause as much harm as they do good, when they separate children from parents for reasons that are less than valid and choose not to remove children simply because the parents are well trained in how to throw them off the scent of abuse. The goal of family abolition is partly to remove this pressure by making it less necessary for the state to intervene in a child's care, because the child will hopefully have many more adults (and more accountability) to oversee how they are treated.

Family abolition is highly relevant to queer people. Gay and trans people are more likely to want to leave the nuclear family if their relatives are blatantly homophobic, but are also prone to being ejected from their households. People who have been removed from a nuclear family by way of disowning over "lifestyle choices" are marked by their removal. They are more dependent on public services, which are continuously targeted for starvation by conservative legislators, who see their lack of immediate familial support as a weakness to be exploited. When Lewis says the family is meant to, "replace welfare and to guarantee debtors," she is speaking to the idea that families should be welfare units of their own, self-sufficient aside from spending money at free-market institutions (12). As such, queer people have a history of establishing non-nuclear support systems. We previously read about Sylvia Rivera and her STAR House, which was a refuge for previously unhoused queer kids, and Rivera herself stated to a room of young gay men that, "you are all my children" (Gan 299). Similarly, Lewis recounts: "at the National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference of 1979—where Audre Lorde gave the keynote speech—a caucus of lesbians agreed on the statement: 'All children of lesbians are ours'" (54). It is uplifting for the idea of family abolition that large subsections of the population have been practicing non-nuclear social groups based on mutual identification for many years, even if the concept waned in prominence for the community in the wake of AIDS (55).

If those who are forced out of family spaces then seek to create extended support structures, then it could be argued that the family is then a tool of shrinking support structures. As mentioned above, the connection between a nuclear family and capitalism is apparent. One grows up in a house that must make purchases for its household alone, as opposed to a group of related or non-related people who pool their resources, and we are expected to recreate that structure in our adult lives. The monogamous couple is mentioned several times, mostly being derided by Charles Fourier, as a method of emotional consolidation. Rather than seeing our lives in the context of a large, diverse social circle and support structure, love is centered around those you will one day procreate with and the results of that procreation. This results in “a process of enclosure in which all kinds of families unintentionally participate” (Lewis 29). An isolated nuclear family, emotionally or physically, restricts the household members from forming bonds outside their immediate kin.

Additionally, when children and their care is centered within the nuclear structure, it inherently holds up the patriarchal ideal of women being responsible for the domestic needs of the house, into which she becomes enclosed. Alexandra Kollontai’s universal childcare bid was a counter to the problem not just of women’s emancipation from the home, but the children’s liberation movement that would later find home with queer activism (43). While not entirely synonymous with Lewis’s care-based argument, Kollontai still put forth the belief that children should be taken care of by the community, and not merely the two biological parents. Children are not just the next generation of a specific set of people, but of society, and should be society’s responsibility. Kollontai’s goal was to create a new working class of women, but she did not disconnect mothers from child rearing. Rather, they would be free to work and mother as they chose, rather than being obligated to the latter.

To end, I’ll put forth Lewis’s explanation of Marx’s statements on family abolition: “He isn’t saying that the family is natural (and natural = bad), nor is he saying that there’s nothing natural about the family (and unnatural = bad). Rather, he’s saying that there’s nothing immutably *natural or unnatural* about us” (42). Here we find another rebuttal to the conservative myth. In the school of evolution, it is understood that humans are the most “intelligent” (in terms of sheer social scale and global reach) of the primates, but we are still primates. We are highly vocal and social, and enjoy forming in-groups that we live and travel with. However, we are also several thousand years into the development of modern human society, which is markedly different from how our early ancestors, barely distinct from other great apes, lived. People have developed a complex social structure and concepts that have their own legitimate, if still constructed, history. Colonialism is not the immutable nature of the world, but it is the historical nature of *our* world. We are animals that require society, leisure, and productivity, but have had those needs misrepresented by a capitalist ruling class that assure us that humanity will indeed crumble into dust if the working order is disrupted—and because we have only lived in our own reality and not that of the prehistoric human, we accept this narrative. To move beyond it means that we have to deconstruct our assumptions about human nature, distinguish what is objective reality as opposed to lived reality, and decide which aspects of each we want to bring into the future.

Works Cited

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