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# Transversing Sexualities and Critiques of Capital

Participants: M.E. O'Brien, Nat Raha, Grietje Baars,  
Liu Xin and Mathias Klitgård

*M.E. O'Brien, PhD, LMSW, City University of New York*

*Nat Raha, PhD, poet and activist-scholar based in Edinburgh*

*Grietje Baars, Reader in Law and Social Change, The City Law School, City University of London*

*Liu Xin, Senior Lecturer, Centre for Gender Studies, Karlstad University*

*Mathias Klitgård, PhD Fellow, Centre for Gender Studies, University of Stavanger*

This forum has come about through a series of conversations and discussions over a period of time in 2021-2022. Our ambition was to bring together scholars from different disciplines and perspectives, hoping for mutual curiosity and dialogue. We invited the participants to the forum to consider the following question:

*"How can we understand the complex and often contradictory ways through which sexualities and capital are related to, shaped by, and constitutive of each other?"*

Due to restrictions and exigencies of the corona situation together with time zone obstacles, the conversation had different modes. The first part of the forum consisted of an online video-recorded conversation between M.E. O'Brien, Nat Raha and Grietje Baars. The conversation was moderated by Liu Xin and Mathias Klitgård. Laura Horn provided editorial support. Jin Haritaworn and Lisa Adkins then kindly sent their contributions to this conversation in writing. What you will read in the following is hence a conversation across three continents, which mixes synchronous and asynchronous elements, and which aims to show the strengths but also divergences and open questions in these different engagements.

## Video-recorded conversation, 29 June 2021

**O'Brien:** I'm focusing on theories that explain the transformation of patterns of sexuality in society according to the long arc of capitalist development and capitalist transformation of society. Broadly, I would identify two distinct theoretical projects, both Marxist, that have located sexuality as changing under conditions of capitalist development. And strangely these two projects have very few overlaps.

First, there's a great deal of excellent material often under the term queer Marxism, or gay Marxism. These are theories of sexuality and capitalism that try to understand how capitalism's new relationships to the commodity form, the production and objectification of the self, new modalities of social life and, broadly, proletarianization and urbanisation produce the conditions for consolidated, reified and coherent claims to sexual minority identity. Scholars have explained the specific emergence of gay identity in the twentieth century. They've tried to explain concerns about sexuality in the Victorian era, by considering the ways in which capitalism transforms the social, psychic and material conditions for life, for both proletarian and bourgeois subjects (see for example Chitty 2020; Floyd 2009; D'Emilio 1983, 1998; Drucker 2015; Foucault 1978; Heaney 2017; and Valocchi 1999).

Second, sexuality has been considered as part of the research into the family and its role in the social reproduction of capitalist society. Historically, the best example of this would be Engels. Currently, we point to social reproduction theory. In the Seventies, we had the housework debates and Marxist-Feminist theoretical debates broadly. These are grappling with how capitalist transformation broke up the peasant family, constituted the conditions for the new bourgeois nuclear family, then expanded access to that family. You could look at mainstream theories of fertility decline in the twentieth century. There's all sorts of excellent work that tries to think about the family and the history of capitalism. So for some this is the

family as a privatized mode of social reproduction: the unwaged raising of the children, care for the elderly, children who will later constitute society's workforce. But others have considered the family as a site of ideological reproduction. They described the production of particular kinds of gendered and sexualised subjects (see for example Bhattacharya 2018; Chicago Women's Liberation Union 1972; Davis 1981; Dalla Costa 1972; Delpy 1980; Endnotes 2013; Engels 1884; Firestone 1970; Hartmann 1979; James 1975; Jones 1949; Kollontai 1977[1920]; Jaffe 2020; Vogel 1983; Zetkin 1920[1996]).

We need more research that effectively incorporates and bridges these two theories. The family, on one hand, and sexual deviancy, sexual minority identities, sexual rebellion, on the other, are necessary counterparts to each other in the history of capitalist society. The heterosexual family has always been a counterpart to sexual deviancy since the rise of capitalist proletarianization. It is in the dynamic tension between these two processes that we can understand the particular sexual logics of capitalism, as they have evolved over time. I think there is often a missing piece in queer Marxism in thinking effectively about the family. And a missing piece in social reproduction theory of really thinking about the dynamics of proletarian sexual rebellion and sexual deviancy.

In my own research, as one example of this, I've grappled with this link through the question of family abolition. In each era of proletarian rebellion, over the last two centuries, revolutionaries have challenged and attacked the family as a way of evoking and pursuing ideas of gender and sexual freedom. But interestingly, what they meant by the family has transformed repeatedly as the role of the family has changed in capitalist reproduction. And as the meanings of the family have changed the roles of sexual deviancy, the dynamics of sexual rebellion have also transformed.

So what they meant, what they imagined, by the critical demands to abolish the family, or challenge the family, continued to transform as the role of the family in capitalist society changed. In one era, as we see in Marx and Engels, the family specifically refers to the bourgeois, property owning,

inheritance based family. Family abolition meant destroying bourgeois society. Meanwhile, the conditions of early industrialization were undermining the ability of proletarian people to form any sort of stable families. In the Americas, we see the conditions of slavery similarly attacking the kinship relations between enslaved people (see for example Davis 1972; Hartman 1997; and Spillers 1987).

Later in the nineteenth century, we see the rise of a workers movement that is able to win material gains to enable an expansion of the single wage-earner household to a broader section of the working class in the United States, in England and in Germany. The family becomes the primary site of this social conservatism of the workers movement that distinguishes legitimate working people from the rabble, the lumpenproletariat, the criminal element and sexual deviancy of sex workers. Where previously many working class women would move in and out of sex work prior to marriage, this turn towards respectability separates sex workers from legitimated working-class women. This corresponds to a distinction between the queer proletarians and legitimate, working-class family life. The legitimacy gained through this family form aided in pursuing franchise, in asserting that the worker's movement could legitimately rule society. Some socialists used the turn towards normative family forms as an argument to elites that the representatives of the working class should be welcomed into legislatures. Others used to assert the viability of a workers' state, and future revolutionary society.

Later, through the twentieth century a growing number of white women entered the workforce. Women of color already worked in large numbers throughout the United States. In the 1960s, there is a rebellion against a particular vision of the family: the family as a form of social atomisation, alienation, and social isolation. These struggles of the 1960s and 1970s targeted the houselife. Black women challenged white family norms through the national welfare rights movement. Black feminist organising, challenging the family as a heterosexual, white normative institution (Beal 1976; King 2018; Sherwin 2019; Spillers 1987; The Combahee River Collective 1977). Throughout all these

periods, the horizon of sexual freedom is constituted by the proletarian struggle up against the family. What they mean by family is shaped by class struggle, capitalist development and racialized inequalities.

We need to grasp the dynamic and particular contradictions of the role of the family in our current era. What is the family today? We've seen such a fragmentation of the single wage earner family. We've seen the massive expansion of commodity products available to people that enable a form of market-based household reproduction. A household now can get by on fast food take out, drop-off laundry services, delivered groceries, childcare care centers, senior citizen residences, and many other commercial services not long ago restricted to the home.

But we've also seen a reinscription and intensification of the family as welfare services and social support services are stripped away. The labor of reproduction has become more atomized and privatized inside of family structures. We've also seen an expansion and intensification of the family as an ideological rubric for the right in really fighting against sexual and gender freedom and the centrality of the family for various kinds of ethno-nationalisms and fascisms around the world. All of these dynamics have transformed the role of families, chosen kinship, obligatory kinship, couple forms, all the many forms that the family takes. To understand the dynamics of sexual and gender rebellions in our current moment, what that means for people materially in their lives, we have to situate this in trying to make sense of the dynamics of the family in the current era.

**Raha:** I would like to outline the theoretical strands of my work, which I think speak to the need that M.E. O'Brien just addressed, to bridge the discussion about queer Marxism that considers how capitalism has produced the conditions for coherent minoritisation in terms of gay and queer sexual identities, and the discussion about the relationship between social reproduction and queer-ness. My doctoral thesis, completed in 2018-19, was primarily trying to bring together strands of queer theory, how they had addressed Marxism,

and how Marxism has been picked up within queer theory. Initially, queer Marxism responded to queer theory's turn away from materialism in the 1990s. The work of Kevin Floyd (2009) and in particular Rosemary Hennessy (2000) was really important to my thinking, for my understanding of racial and gendered divisions of labor under capitalism, and the devaluation of certain kinds of bodies and identities, lives and people. In her last two books (2000; 2013), Hennessy talks about the interphase between the cultural and the economic and how that coheres into the division of labor in the workforce. I was interested in how the dynamics of the neoliberal cultural assimilation of queer life was playing out, how it was transforming material grounds and how that was creating cultural transformations within LGBT culture. I was also interested in how Marx could be returned to in a way that could retool queer Marxist theory to reground it in a critique of political economy.

I was thinking about the dialectic between the qualitative and the quantitative that manifests in the famous example in the first chapter of *Capital* volume 1: how 20 yards of linen equals one coat leading to the theory of commodity fetishism. Capitalism invents new forms of abstraction that absorb queer life, absorb queer bodies in certain ways, whilst also spitting us, our bodies and lives out at the same time. Use value is transformed in terms of the kind of objects that capital gets behind and wants to produce in service of profit. I was thinking about the quantities and objective forms of how LGBTQ cultural life is playing out in the pride month – rainbow flags on everything, gay ATMs, LGBT sandwiches etc.

I was also interested in thinking through a queer historical materialist methodology – looking at scenes and examples of history, either political or rooted in labor organising, or in political resistances that represent the gendered and racialised division of labor, to examine how forms of queer life have emerged. For example, Allan Bérubé's (1991) work on queer work and labor, especially the historical accounts of men working on cruise ships in the 1930s on the West coast of the United States, raises important questions concerning what creates social reproduction and what trans

social reproduction entails and looks like. Why have those histories been marginalised within the canon of Marxist feminism, particularly in the 1980s onwards, and even being marginalised now in the revival of social reproduction theory? I am interested in a trans archive history of people thinking directly about queer forms of housework, or lesbian forms of housework in terms of *Wages Due Lesbians* (1991). I'm also thinking about more popular ideas of trans and queer liberation and activity that have enabled our lives, that are rooted in the politics of liberation that comes from the gay liberation movement, as tools by black and brown and third world liberation movements in the 1970's. In a recent essay (Raha 2021), I focus on the devaluation of queer and trans lives within in the racial and gender division of labor, and within institutions such as the family, as well as how these forms of devaluation compound the possibility of our lives and what forms of life we need to create for each other. This comes back to some of what M.E. O'Brien was talking about regarding the inaccessibility of single-family units and how those forms of survival become really impossible through the arbitrary distribution of wealth, which links to issues of property ownership and gentrification.

I am also a poet so I am really interested in the question of affect; thinking about how the material can really smash the possibilities of life and thinking about the forms of life that we can create in resistance. That was one of the central points that I was trying to bring together under this banner of what queer Marxism could actually be, especially if we are approaching it from a Marxist-feminist and transfeminist standpoint. And I should say that I am really interested in these questions as experiential, lived, embodied questions. The social demarcations of identity and subjectivity are less interesting for me. Capitalism is ultimately interested in undercutting the ground on which we might even build identity. It definitely comes back to embodied forms of life and what emerges from that.

**Baars:** My work is on the material and ideological structures of capitalism that produce the

particular hyper-exploitative, racialised, gendered and disabling reality that we live in today. The two main questions throughout my work are very simple: Firstly: "Why do we put up with it all?" And the second one is, as of course you might guess: "What is to be done?" I'm a legal scholar and my recent book is on the relation between law and capitalism in the global economy, using the legal form of the corporation and how it sits within (or without) international law as a case study to illustrate this relationship (Baars 2019). I use Marxist theory of law, specifically Pashukanis' commodity form theory of law (Pashukanis 1978; Miéville 2006; Knox 2012), and historical materialist method, to see where law, law as we know it, where the universalised legal system we know today comes from and where the corporation, and the corporate legal form, corporate legal subjectivity come from and what function they both have in structuring the global economy – global corporate capitalism.

The corporate legal form has been capitalism's main motor from the very beginning. This is my starting point, that the corporate *legal* form is the main vehicle through which capitalist accumulation occurs, capitalism operates, imperialism manifests. In the transition to capitalism, the Dutch and British East India Companies (then novel legal-organisational forms) and several dozens other such companies, violently exported and imposed global corporate capitalism *and capitalist law* around the world. I call this law's capitalising mission, a notion that's recently been further elaborated upon by Tzouvala (2020). The exploitative nature of capitalist relations of production finds its nadir in the corporation, on the one hand through the wage relation and on the other the peculiar legal characteristics of the corporate form. These include the unique legal personality (subjectivity) of the company itself, separate from and shielding its directors (and also, shielding the company's assets from the directors), the limited liability of shareholder-owners and the directors' legal obligation to operate the company so as to to maximise shareholder return as its primary objective. These key characteristics are now part of company law around the world, giving companies worldwide a common basic structure and purpose. The

clever thing is that *through law* corporate capitalism manages to conceal, normalise, even legitimise its exploitative characteristics. Partly this is because we tend to ascribe to law a neutral, regulatory function at least, but more commonly we equate law with order, rule of law, and 'justice' as positive values. It is also because in 'liberal democracy' we conceive of ourselves as citizens, legal subjects within a system of relations governed by law. If we look at law materially however we can observe its part in shaping (changing!) social relations so as to create 'market society'. The capitalist firm emerged in the transition to capitalism when what Weber called 'calculable law' (Weber 1982) enabled *literal* accountability of risk within the now *legalised* relations between members running what once was a family engaged in domestic production. This is also the moment ME describes above, where the bourgeois family is created with its particular heteronormative roles/subjectivities. While manufacturing is moved out of the home, and novel financial schemes are invented to 'crowdfund' global treasure hunts (Petram 2014), the corporate legal form enables capitalists to quantify and minimise (externalise) risk exposure while maximising surplus value extraction. Risk of course is viewed by the corporation as purely financial, but we should understand it as the *financialised* relation between the corporation as a subject/entity in itself and the rest of the world. Risk includes debtor default but also 'market risk', the risk of an 'exploratory' or colonial trading mission returning empty-handed, a ship carrying enslaved captives sinking (or being sunk – such risk can be lucrative (Balai 2013) workers and captives falling ill, dying or revolting, extraction polluting or depleting ecology, and what insurers now call 'political risk' (war/conflict). In other words, the corporation is constructed as a profit maximising, risk externalising machine: a structure of irresponsibility (Glasbeek 2010) and an amoral calculator (Neocleous 2003). The corporation limits the liability of those who pocket the profits, the shareholders, but externalises as much as possible the cost of harm associated with surplus value extraction to broader society and the environment. The corporation is imperialist by nature: it is driven by its mandate to

forever scour the world hungry for more resources and new markets. At the time of the Berlin Conference, what I call the 'corporate scramble for Africa' two thirds of the globe was colonised and ruled by companies – and it is interesting – if we think of the span and reach of today's mega-multinationals – to imagine how that picture might look today (see e.g. Manahan and Kumar 2022).

The main theme I started with in the book is this idea of corporate complicity in conflict and the various human rights and international humanitarian law violations that appear there: a big theme in the early 2000s when the International Criminal Court was just starting its work. There was and still is a loud and widespread call for companies to be held to account in international law, but also a clear failure of that actually happening. Why do we continue to call for this accountability, and why is it not working? My conclusion is that it is precisely because of laws' relationship to capital that law cannot categorically be successfully employed to prevent, or remedy, the many negative effects of corporate capitalism around the world. Capitalism produces those effects and it is law that makes that possible, and profitable (Baars 2016).

What does that have to do with gender and sexuality? On the one hand, corporate capitalism determines the often dire material circumstances of queer and trans people and particularly of racialised queer and trans people. On the other hand, as we know for example from the work of M.E. O'Brien (2020) and others such as Chris Chitty (2020) and of course Hortense Spillers (e.g. 1987), the material and ideological structures of corporate capitalism also produce those relations, values, and categories of identity that we understand to exist today and according to which resources are distributed. And yet, law is often considered as one of the main vehicles for emancipation; the notion of the rule of law is one factor in why we put up with it all. My work seeks to shatter this illusion. I argue that law and capitalist legal systems are part of the structure of capitalism that is rotten at its core and inherently destructive of freedom, community, ecology. The law and the legal form enable (even force) modes of relating that hyper-exploit especially black and brown working class, queer

and trans bodies. I show that queer and trans liberation is by necessity anti-capitalist, and to use a currently very hot term, abolitionist (e.g. Wilson Gilmore (2006), Purnell (2021), Olufemi (2020), Lewis (2019), and also Baars (2019)). Abolitionist of the police, prisons, the state, capitalism, and all that comes with it – including the heteropatriarchal concept of the family, and binary gender – and of course corporations – and indeed law.

But let's pause here for a moment and not get ahead of ourselves just yet. As Dean Spade suggests (2011), in today's 'in-capitalism' life, law is essential, and asserting one's rights and claiming one's legal space in it are crucial for many for our survival on an everyday level. We do need law for – as the Black Panthers put it – "Survival pending revolution" (see e.g. Narayan 2020). There are limited possibilities for non-reformist and disruptive litigation and there will always be a need for movement lawyering (e.g. arrestee support) (e.g. Cerić 2020, Brabazon 2022). However, beyond that, capitalist law cannot bring us liberation and it's that revolution that we need to set in motion.

The explicit connection between the violence enacted on queer and trans bodies and lived experience within capitalism we can see vividly described and analysed in the exciting flourish of new queer and trans marxist work at the moment. *Transgender Marxism* for instance is a really exciting collection of essays collected by Jules Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke (2021). The urgency of, and desire of/for our liberation is palpable in those essays. In tandem with this work we also see a new turn to the archive in search of tools for today and beyond, this includes M.E. O'Brien's work, C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017) and Chris Chitty's posthumously published *Sexual Hegemony* (2020) – which could be read alongside Silvia Federici's *Caliban and The Witch* (2004). These important works investigate the creation of racialised, gendered and sexualised subject categories within (and for) capitalism, with a view to their undoing. A massive gap in academic scholarship still is how such understandings, behaviours or subjects were and are created or imposed and understood historically and presently elsewhere in the world

– outside of Europe and the Americas. What we do have is a growing collection of critical, decolonial scholarship that examines law's constitutive role in racial capitalism: colonialism and the trade in enslaved people upon which our present system of international trade, finance and global governance is built (Anghie 2007, Mutua 1995, Gathii 1999, Bishara 2017, Mawani 2018, Bhandar 2018, Park 2019, Yahaya 2020).

Altogether these works build a picture of the legally *racialised, gendered, sexualised*, corporate capitalism that produces the long-term crises we are in today.

So where are we going and what is to be done?

A really fantastic array of poetic works including Marquis Bey's *Black Trans Feminism* (2022), Lola Olufemi's *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (2022), Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Change Everything* (2022), help us imagine what the world beyond the current horizon might look like and realise that this world is actually within our reach. ME's and Abdelhadi's science fiction novel *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune* (2022) will be an exciting addition to this.

Moreover, out in the streets there is an upsurge of queer and trans people organising within broader anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggles – queers at the helm of Black Lives Matter, Trans people leading Black Trans Lives Matter marches in various countries, Queers for a Free Palestine at the New York pride march, Arab Queers for Gaza at London demos. For some time now, queer and trans people have been at the forefront of political mobilizing, the type of activism aimed at transforming economic relations, workplace organising, the 'great resignation' and degrowth/alternatives (see e.g. M.E's broader work). For most the connection of our struggles is obvious (Raha and Baars 2020), for others, the readings cited here will help them on their way. In sum, good queer and trans scholarship is anti-capitalist. And all good anti-capitalist work, in the academy and on the street, is necessarily queer, trans and anti-racist.

**Liu:** I am interested in the relation between bodies, affects, materialities and abstraction that Nat Raha mentioned. For example, Nat, you made the observation that the claim that the figure of the human in Marx as a social relation is already queered, for it is 'an effect of emancipated and intimate desire and connectedness in the world' which universalises and abstracts the queer Marxist abject figures in removing the embodied labors and lives. From a slightly different perspective, Jin Haritaworn also cautions against the ways in which queer- and trans organising have become institutionalised and therefore risk losing their radical transformative potentials. M.E. O'Brien also observes the 'structural dependency, that is distinguished from direct capture and control, expressed in the ways in which the funding coming from certain privileged white gay men influenced a social movement. Could you elaborate on what you see as good strategies, or different methodological approaches, that could be used to resist this displacing, dispossessing and abstracting tendencies in both theorising and in organising.

**O'Brien:** I was interested in a comment Nat made a moment ago, that you are more interested in trying to think about affects and material embodiment than identities, in part because capitalism undermines our abilities to produce identities. One of the things that Marxism contributes to queer theory, and trans studies, is recognising that abstraction is a material process. Abstraction is a production of capitalist society. Capitalism as a mode of production is historically relatively unique in producing concrete abstractions that rule over social life. While various concepts, obviously, are integral to feudalism and other class societies, they operate through a system of belief, such as people believing in the legitimacy of the king or the church.

In capitalism the rule of value as a system of abstraction does not depend on belief. It is materially substantiated through the force of the market and market dependency. And that is a phenomenon that various Marxists, particularly in this value form theory school, have spent a lot of time talking about. Queer Marxism, I think, has done a pretty

good job in thinking about the implications of that for queer theory. Kevin Floyd (2009) will probably be the best and a really rich example of it. A lot of gay Marxism, queer Marxism, like John d'Emilio (1983, 1998) and Peter Drucker (2015), treat the sort of emergence of sexual minority identities as a historical product of the dynamics of capitalism.

There are significant implications of that for how we think about what it means to organise and struggle. We are trying to make sense of the dynamic of abstraction through this production of identity categories and its ramifications for the people who are organising. But there is another subtle thread there: how the reproduction of abstraction is a generalised phenomena of capitalist society. The move to refuse to fully embrace identity, in favor of bodies or subjects of struggle or material realities of reproduction, is really interesting given the decades of engagement with identity in queer theory. It is compelling to sidestep identity as a sole form of struggle, even as it comes up over and over again despite our attempts at eluding it.

**Baars:** I think it is also interesting how we are enticed into making identity, the self, the center of our life, to strive for authentic self-actualisation above all else. I have an article in which I talk about the constitution of the legal subject – specifically about the role of law in constructing, defining, and limiting the legal subject as the gendered legal subject and also by consequence delineating the nature and shape of our bodies, lives, the family and ultimately society (Baars 2019). Research has shown that in the UK the current impossibility for trans men to be legally recognized as the father of the child they give birth to stops many trans men from having children. You might say this is the objective of the legal rule in the first place: it delineates permitted lives, relationships and experiences. It shapes society in a certain way, and determines the immediate objectives of our struggle.

This reminds me of *Cruel Optimism* by Lauren Berlant (2011), who sadly passed yesterday. She said, 'a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing'. In the book she so crushingly yet

generatively explored how we are made to want what isn't good for us, what is not liberating for us, how we are made to want the next best option to freedom.

This connects with what we have seen in the last five years or so in the UK (and much longer in north America), namely, that the discomfort with the gender binary has been channelled into the desire for legal recognition – non-binary legal recognition – that's now a campaign that has led to court cases that have so far not been successful (e.g. *R (Christie Elan-Cane) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2021]). Legal recognition might aid our survival (for instance through availability to non-binary people of medical transition through the National Health Service, which currently is patchy at best). And yet, do we really want to be 'recognised' by the system that so exploits us? Marx (1844) discussed a similar conflict in *On the Jewish Question*, where he argued that legal emancipation was not the same as human emancipation. By human emancipation, he meant, emancipation not within but *from* the system, from the state, law and capitalism. Human emancipation is revolution, and real human flourishing.

At the same time as non-binary legal recognition is sought through the courts and through Parliament, we are disrupting and destroying the binary as a political act with our bodies rather than as identities, in everyday gender (or no-gender!) performance and in living and in creating life and community outside the cis-heteronormative binary. When we seek to destroy or disrupt at least a key structuring logic of the system, the system will seek to ensure it is captured or channelled into something very narrow that actually is not what we want. It will seek to assimilate us into a legal system, which is the thing that is holding us down – not the only thing of course – but as part of global corporate capitalism it is holding us captive as it were. Our fight for liberation and against (or beyond) co-optation is, as Angela Davis said, a constant struggle (Davis 2015).

**Raha:** For me it always comes back to this dialectic between the qualitative and the quantitative in terms of this question of what strategies are useful

and helpful both in terms of theoretical and practical approaches. It is really interesting to compare these approaches in light of certain reformist modes of law, specifically in trans rights organising in the UK context but not alone, as Grietje has just described. They become the means to try and leverage some type of social change which feeds into the reproduction of trans normativity. I am interested in approaching histories as examples of means to organise. Whilst identity might be a means to organise something around, quite often it is practices and material conditions, such as S&M sexual practices or being queer and homeless youth, that drive the desire to organise or produce some sort of social change or subcultural space. I think we need to create spaces of liberation even without, well not without, but before capitalism has been abolished maybe. Because you still need to be able to dream, you still need culture to make the worlds we want to exist in.

We cannot escape the overarching expansion of capital as a mode of abstraction. Capital is always going to try and expand. Even in its mode of contraction and crisis, it is still going to try and find new ways, new markets. It is going to build its new markets where it can. I think since the 1990's there has been LGBTQ cultural politics that capitalism is interested in and wants to draw into its aura and its glow.

There are modes of abstraction which our bodies and our lives, the things we do with our lives and our bodies, and the things that we need and the resources that we need to survive get found within and sucked into. Social assimilation is part of that process. The site of resistance is always some form of embodied life or some form of relation and material relation. This embodied form becomes abstracted or is existing within some form of abstraction that is unlivable, impossible, difficult, oppressive, repressive or alienating. The site of resistance is always concrete and material. That is what for me queer Marxism helps us think through. That does not necessarily give us an answer but it does give us a theoretical framework for understanding what is happening. Historical materialism allows for the rewriting and reinterpretation of history, in which we might find some

inspiration for practices in cultural politics, organised workers resistance, in ways that collectivise the domestic or turn social reproduction of labor towards the care and support of our own bodies rather than the reproduction of our labor power for capital's sake.

**Baars:** Building on what Nat said, it is interesting to see how queer and trans people are already creating new and different worlds in so many ways as a means of survival. Instead of the traditional family, we have queer families. Instead of perhaps traditional ways of living, we have collective ways of surviving – by necessity. Having to engage in creative types of “world making” also forces us to think more practically and also to dream more, envision more. To reach beyond the present conditions to what is possible and realisable. In that sense it is also a very hopeful practice.

**Liu:** I am thinking of a sentence you wrote, Grietje: ‘Proposing a radically new approach requires going to the root of the problem’ (2019, 10). It seems to me that much of what we have been discussing today concerns the question of the root of the problem. I think this is made very explicit in Grietje's work on corporate capitalism, in Lisa's work on the asset economy and the logic of assets, as well as Jin Haritaworn's critique of the figure of (hu)Man. I don't mean to suggest a ‘simple cut’ between the human and the post-human – as Spivak would say the human is not something we can simply abandon but must be continuously negotiated with (see for example Spivak 2009). I would like to steer the conversation towards questions of decoloniality and anti-eurocentric epistemologies, that challenge the logic of whiteness as property. In so far as the logic of property structures corporate capitalism, and the asset economy as well as issues such as sexual contract, the family unit and kinship, how might the rethinking of the figure of (hu)Man and the logic of property afford new insights into the question of sexuality and capital?

**Raha:** I mostly approach these questions through a queer of colour critique. There is critique of both property and the concept of the human as part of

the production of racial capitalism. The critique of racial capitalism ties into some of the anti-colonial/decolonial responses to the anthropocene. I am thinking of for example Françoise Vergès' (2017) and Kathrin Yusoff's (2018) work on the issue of racial capitalocene. Afropessimism has also produced important critiques of the processes of dehumanisation and objectification that have taken place through slavery.

To answer your question, I suggest thinking through forms of commoning, commons and communising as forms of abolition. I do not want to say communisation but I am thinking of commune, as in the Paris 1871 Commune. How do we practice the abolition of property, the abolition of legal relations or the abolition of the state, the abolition of capitalism, in a way that might begin to operate reparatively? That is, operate in reparation towards the historical violences that have been enacted on black and indigenous people in particular and people of color more broadly, as well as the ecological harm that has been enacted into the planet. I think the concept of racial capitalocene might allow for an analysis of these interrelated dynamics.

In terms of sexuality, whilst I do not want to return to ancient forms of sexuality, I think it is about how forms of sexuality that exist now, that have existed, influence or inform the kinds of dreaming and world-making and world transformation that we need, and need to see. I think that is where theory is not so helpful, although I do think theory can also do certain kinds of imaginative work. In the past 24 hours after Lauren Berlant's passing, people are saying: 'Berlant's work is so important for me to believe life is possible, believe some kind of theory is possible'. So maybe there is something in theory that can help us do that. Imaginative work of the imaginary that comes with the commons. Kristin Ross' work on the commune is really important for my thinking of this, about how we continue to practice commoning, how we dream of practices like that, how we maybe enact them (Ross 1988).

**O'Brien:** The human and its relationship to property can refer to multiple registers. In this discussion

we are moving rapidly back and forward between different levels of abstraction, different modalities of discourse, different ways of thinking about these terms.

I find it helpful, occasionally, to go back to Marx. In his critique of Proudhon, Marx is quite clear that it is a mistake to locate private property as the locus of the problems of capitalist society. Private property is the *product* of the alienated labor and the social relations of capitalist labor. This can refer to the exploitation of labor and the extraction of surplus value, but also the dispossession of people and the production of surplus populations. Private property is the product of these material dynamics of massive, racial, global violence of colonialism, of capitalist domination that is then reproduced continuously both in the labor relation and in the exclusion from the wage form.

This gets into some of our discussion of legal categories. These categories are the *product* of material dynamics that are immensely violent. There is a lot of excellent critique about the human as this European subject, a product of the Enlightenment and Colonialism. Then there is also a major debate on the role of the human as a category in Marxist thinking.

When I read Marx, I understand the human is something that we have yet to discover. The human is something that we see hints of in the course of rebellion and struggle. We see hints of it in people's work to try to survive in this nightmare world that we have created. The human is a utopic possibility of transformation and struggle. This is evident in reading Marx' early work in *The German Ideology* and *Theses on Feuerbach*. The human is not a category through which information is sorted and parsed, in the way that it is often understood in the Enlightenment tradition. The human is a site of potential transformation, a horizon of freedom. I think that this element of Marx in relation to the human is really worth reclaiming and reconnecting to.

What it means to be human is something that we have yet to create fully; the place of that creation is precisely the commune. It is the overcoming of class society, the overcoming of class domination and class relationships, the structure

of racial violence, of the state and the family, that undergirds and reinforces the capitalist relation. The human is something, if it is to mean anything, which will emerge in the course of that overcoming.

**Baars:** In this sense the human is a relation, and I would add a relation not just between human animals but also between people and animals, a relation to ourselves, our surroundings, other creatures and matter in our ecosystem. This is also the human I was talking about above in the context of 'human emancipation'. This notion of 'human' is very different from the Enlightenment human of 'human rights', the individual of neoliberalism, and the identity bearer of 'identity politics'. Perhaps it would be easier, less confusing indeed if we talked about the common, the commune and communism, precisely because this human does not exist in isolation, on its own.

What human emancipation and communism are going to look like is definitely a favourite topic of mine and my queer family at dinner conversations. We cannot have a very detailed and concrete picture of this as of yet, although it is fun to dream about and it is definitely a vision that keeps us out on the street, that motivates us to keep struggling. On the notion of private property and how that is then a product of, or rather a factor in, the development of racial capitalism, K-Sue Park has done amazing work on that in law (e.g. Park 2019).

**Raha:** The human is created as a legal status and the human is always this enlightenment category, it is always a racialised and ableist enlightenment category. The human has been responsible for the extraction and the theft of the whole planet and the lives and life on it. It is put to serve the accumulation and reproduction of capital. I was beaming when I heard O'Brien talk about that the human yet to be discovered. That point in early Marxist thought is really what began my relationship with Marxism to begin with.

**Klitgård:** I want to move to this last part of our talk by reflecting on the queer worlds you talked about, Nat, concretely and particularly living out family

and gender abolition. These worlds appear in the creation of our communities and become the basis for thinking a world beyond capitalism. I was inspired by Grietje's story about the Camilles<sup>1</sup> and how they in adopting the same name gathered under a queer umbrella that allowed them the safety of anonymity at the same time as the strength of collective action. Their queerness is what gathers them and from which political involvement on a variety of issues can evolve.

I am interested in what a critical examination of contemporary capitalism can tell us about the role of the queer politics, of the queer subject and of queer critique in capitalism in today's society. Where do we find these today? Where do we go from here?

**O'Brien:** In closing, I want to focus on the understanding of capital and sexuality through the commitment to imagining a horizon of overcoming class society, of communism. Notions of sexual and gay liberation have fallen out of favour in recent decades and much of queer theory emerges in response to, or in critique, of certain kinds of utopic ideas around futurity. I would situate this turn against futurity as a result of an unravelling of the particular logic of the worker's movement as a coherent glue of global proletarian struggle. This unravelling since the 1970's has left many different movements adrift, struggling to imagine the link between the present and the revolutionary future.

Recent years, however, have seen a return to talking about utopia, to thinking about the overcoming of class society. We've seen new thinking about what a profoundly different world could look like, emerging out of the contradictions of current struggle. This is most starkly evident in recent years in the Black Lives Matter uprising, and the uprising against police brutality. Here abolition has gained traction as a way of thinking about the overcoming of police and prisons, and the destruction of the racial state as an organising principle of capitalist society. It is these current dynamics of struggle that are enabling us to return to thinking about the revolutionary horizon as a relationship between our current modes of struggle and the

future—to fighting for some futures above others. There are glimmers of such utopian thinking in the midst of mass rebellions, in the numerous attempts, which are inevitably failures, to prefigure some alternative modality of collective life and care and love for each other in the midst of capitalist society. We find this different sense of the utopian horizon in queer erotics, queer relationships and queer movements.

This utopian impulse can be a way of reopening the question of the communist horizon, to identify how the current dynamics of struggle suggest lines of flight towards the overcoming of class society. Family abolition, work abolition, prison abolition, police abolition—these are all different political and conceptual modes of trying to again think about revolution, about the meaning and content of communism.

In other words, we need science fiction, to be imagining revolution. Current rebellions are creating modes of being able to think in speculative terms. Science fiction is a register through which current struggles are reintroducing questions of communism. Investigations in sexuality and capital have a particularly intimate and necessary relationship to this speculative turn in thinking about the future and thinking about the horizon of what is possible. The best current examples of this are activists talking about what a world without prisons and without prisons could actually like.

**Baars:** I get a lot of hope and excitement and energy and inspiration from the current organising that I see around me and that I'm involved in. I'm involved for instance in the London social centres network and in running a radical social centre called The Common House. We had a meeting on the weekend where we started working on building a broadly carried transformative justice practice. These discussions and practices have been growing massively in the last years exactly as, and because, the abolitionist movement is really taking hold. What I see in the social centres network is not a specifically queer/trans project, rather it is a collection of projects that are all 'queer and trans' in that they're not about gender or sexuality but foreshadow a world where queer

and trans are no longer needed as terms to assert our existence, perspectives or needs. These are the kinds of projects where everyone, in that sense, is queer and trans whatever their gender or sexuality or lack thereof. That is the amazing thing about it. In London we have for instance now a new queer and trans POC squat which will be starting a social centre as well. And we have the House of Shango, the black liberation squat in Loughborough Junction, that is directly building on the shoulders of the giants like Olive Morris, the black queer squatters of the 1970s who had a whole street of squatted social centers in Brixton. Those things give a lot of hope, inspiration and energy.

**Raha:** Grietje, why do you think the social centers and movements are so heavily organised by queer and trans people? Does this have to do with the material conditions?

**Baars:** Oh yes! For instance, if you think about Palestine organising in the UK or in the US, in New York for instance. It is mostly queer people – Black Lives Matter being initially queer led, the Stonewall riot being led by Black trans women, and The Combahee River Collective (1977) which was a group of Black lesbians, and the movements that you (Nat) wrote about in your thesis as well, such as the STAR – and indeed those that you, we are involved in and lead. Those on the margins of the system are rendered invisible or ineligible, materially hyper-exploited (and I know I am on the privileged side of the scale, being a white European academic). As queer and trans people we are the ones fighting and struggling and leading also because by necessity we are already living our lives differently and that enables us to understand the world differently and understand that different lives are possible. Because we have to. Because we are forced every day to have a different kind of life than, say, the cis-het mainstream.

One thing to watch out for though is to view social change as a move from a certain specific 'here' to a new and better 'there' in the future. Looking at change this way risks mimicking settler

colonial practices, erasing what exists, declaring 'terra nullius', the future as our 'blank space utopian frontier' where we build our own vision from scratch. E. Ornelas, Scott Branson and Kai Rajala in a recent podcast discussed precisely this connection between queer utopian visioning and the settler colonial project<sup>2</sup>. Such visioning forgets that everywhere in all places around the world people are already doing, making, acting, relating, worlding otherwise – or elsewise – a word I heard S.A. Smythe use recently (Smythe 2021). Some of those practices and ways of relating have survived the European white supremacist corporate capitalist imperialist onslaught and some had to be generated anew as acts of resistance and survival, in the cracks of the everyday present or the present every day. The point is to center, celebrate and build up, nurture and grow those practices. That's not to say there won't have to be some 'creative destruction' and, of course, abolition along the way.

I wanted to end with a quote from Alyosxa Tudor from a recent article (2021: 251). Alyosxa uses the term "transing" on the final page of their article that really well encapsulates what I've been trying to say about queer and trans liberation in this conversation today. It also echoes what earlier authors have said about 'queering'. "'Transing" is going beyond a category. Deconstructing a category can do the work of creating solidarity while challenging borders and boundaries with respect to the nation and migration. Moreover, trans-gender calls for trans-nation—for fiercely antinationalist, anticolonial politics and knowledge productions." I

would add to that, of course, anti-capitalist politics and knowledge production.

**Raha:** I can really relate to that, thinking about the queer and trans folks who are going to still continue to be institutionally marginalised. The material conditions may continue to be against us. The heteronormativity, homonormativity and transnormativity of capitalism promise uplift that in practice never happens, because the class structure of society remains the same. We need to continue reproducing life outside of institutions and create an alternative to live in. The role of theory – how it might service the social movements against capitalism and forms of oppression that we live in and are trying to resist – will always remain part of the conversation we've been having today. For example, it seems that trans studies is really playing catchup on the ways in which we have been living and doing and organising in and around for decades. It could be said, in an albeit rather simplified way, that this has partly to do with trans studies' complex relationship to academic institutionalisation and the knowledge production practices that they support. Theory does have a role that it can play towards some of the emancipatory visions that M.E. O'Brien has described, that I think is really eloquent and beautiful. All the theorists I work with are often people who are also involved in creating art in some form. It is really great to see queer Marxists and trans Marxists thoughts coming together in the way that they have in the recent months and years, to service the communities that we need and that exist for us today.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Raha and Baars (2020), Baars cites an queer activist interviewee who introduced themselves as 'Camille' – which is a code name all activists in the group CLAQ use when talking to the media. Who the original Camille is or if there even is or was such a person remains a source of fond speculation.
- <sup>2</sup> In 2021, the UNC Queer Studies Conference called "No Blank Slates: A Discussion of Utopia, Queer Identity, and Settler Colonialism" featured occasional Final Straw host, Scott Bransen alongside E. Ornelas and Kai Rajala. This audio first aired on QueerCorps, on CKUT radio in Montreal. Accessible through <https://www.sjbranson.com/thefinalstrawradio> or <https://archive.org/details/palestine-and-challenging-settler-colonial-imaginaries>.

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