

Friends against capitalism: Family abolition as a politics of friendship

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Imagining alternatives to capitalism entails drastically rethinking how we live together and care for one another. Capitalism is not only a mode of production, but a particular way of meeting people's needs for food, shelter, and comfort. These needs are currently often satisfied within small social units, symbolically united by marriage, genetics, and inheritance. The nuclear family has been the dominant unit of care in capitalist society. But alongside the family, there are other social forms and ways of looking after one another. People are not only cared for by their family members, but also by friends and acquaintances in their communities and workplaces, as well as waged care workers in the service industry.

Care and sociality outside the family can be articulated as part of a politics that dares to imagine beyond capitalism. In recent years, there have been renewed calls for the abolition of the nuclear family. Queer analyses of capitalism, such as those of Jules Joanne Gleeson and Kate Doyle Griffiths (2015), Sophie Lewis (2019), M.E. O'Brien (2020), and many others, have articulated a politics that seeks to overcome privatised family arrangements as the basis for survival. This also means articulating alternative social forms capable of meeting people's needs. In this essay, I want to highlight how friendship could form a basis for

more collective forms of care, pleasure, and flourishing. Exploring friendship as a form of care could point towards hitherto unexplored potentials, but it could also call attention to the fact that the family, while dominant, is not the only relationship of care that exists in the present. This could help us overcome some of the limitations inherent in the nuclear family form.

The problems of the nuclear family have been widely debated within feminist and queer theory (see for example Barrett and McIntosh 2015, and Cooper 2017). Not only is the family exploitative for those who have been made responsible for caring for others, it is often also dangerous for women, children, queer, and trans people. But leaving the family is not always an easy choice, even when it is harmful and violent. Society is structured around the family in such a way that those who leave – or are excluded – might struggle to access care, emotional support, housing, and money.

Within the spheres of romance and family, emotional intensity is usually related to exclusivity. Feeling becomes a zero-sum game. One can only have one mother, only one true love, only one family. 20th century writings on parenting emphasised the need for a primary caregiver – a mother who was supposed to meet all the needs of her

children (Rose 1990, 182ff). Of course, most people are not exclusively cared for by their mothers. Children are nurtured by day care workers, nannies, grandmothers, fathers, relatives, friends, and neighbours. Yet the idea that mother-child bond is an emotionally unique relationship persists.

This idea is related to the politics of domestic labour, as it emerged under capitalism. As the domestic sphere became increasingly separated from the formal workplace, domestic labour became increasingly privatised and seen as the exclusive responsibility of one person. Mothers have an overarching responsibility for the work of attending to their family members' needs. This involves a lot of work, although white, bourgeois women have been able to outsource some or most of this work to other (usually migrant, working class, black, and brown) women. The family, despite being supported by a myriad of other forms of sociality and work, has retained an almost mythical position as the only right place for love and care. It therefore excludes other forms of sociality and shapes the world in a way that obstructs other ways of caring for oneself and others. The family has a kind of monopoly on the care created by reproductive labour – the work that goes into ensuring people's wellbeing. Cooking, laundry, child care and elder care are supposedly the responsibility of the family, as is the emotional support that people need in order to keep going to work each day.

Family abolition is the movement to overcome the present state of things – overcoming the social dominance of white, bourgeois values that reserve access to care to those who are part of family relationships. Family abolition is inherently queer, in that it seeks to overcome familial sexual regulation. Such regulation aims to produce appropriately heterosexual and cis gendered subjects with the correct desires – not only for heterosex but for the reproduction of the family form and its attendant forms of property. Abolition is a form of immanent resistance, stemming from the very violence and exclusion of the family itself. It is the movement to undo the family by creating a world where the family is no longer necessary as a site of care and resource distribution. This means that family abolitionists are not so much aiming

to take away the care that some people access through their families, but to create more expansive and collective ways of caring for one another. As such, it is the creation of a new world rather than merely the destruction of the current one. It involves the creation of new types of sociality and desire – ones that we cannot yet know.

But there may be some social forms that exist today that we can use in a family abolitionist project. Family abolition could be a politics of friendship.

Our relations with our friends have an ambiguous position in capitalist societies. Friendship, Alan Sears notes, is less explicitly integrated in market relations than for example dating, marriage, and parent-child relationships. Furthermore, friendship emphasises pleasurable interactions in the present – a phenomenon which becomes increasingly impossible as people have less free time as a result of the squeeze between precarious employment and increased levels of domestic labour (2007, 36-37). Time poverty means that we often do not have time for pleasure or the present. We must invest all our time in securing a future for ourselves. As Sears writes, it is the unstructured time of friendship that is the first to go when the demands of paid work and family increase (2007, 36).

There are aspects of friendship that can be used for radical political ends. Friendship can sometimes function as a real alternative to heterosexual romance and family, rather than merely being their supplement. The connection between friendship and the unstructured time of pleasure makes it a form of relationship more amenable to an anti-capitalist politics. Unlike the family, friendship has the potential to be a genuinely expansive form of relationality, which is not marked by the emotional zero-sum game of romance and family but can include a multiplicity of relationships and degrees of intensity. Rather than the work associated with the family, friendship can offer a space and time for play.

That is not to say that friendship as a social form is unproblematic. It is not always a free relationship between equals. Enlightenment ideology idolised friendship as a deliberative social form,

free of economic interest and the right type of relationship for rational discussion. In fact, these relationships were almost exclusively a space for white, bourgeois men to create bonds that shored up their own power and sense of importance. Sometimes these relationships involved a sexual component, but they were hardly a threat to the status quo. Today, friendships between white, heterosexual men can contain some sexual pleasures and still shore up their identity as properly heterogendered subjects. As Jane Ward shows in her book *Not Gay* (2015), in homosocial contexts such as frat parties and the military, homoerotic play is ritualised in a way that serves to reproduce white, male, heterosexual domination. Ward points out that these men can engage in homoerotic activities together while still retaining an 'authentic' heterosexual identity, as these sexualised rituals are understood as a form of male bonding rather than an expression of desire.

Heterosexual women's friendships can also serve to preserve the dominance of heterosexuality, even when they seemingly provide an arena for critiquing heterosexual romance. Tamsin Wilton has argued that these relationships function like battlefield hospitals – providing immediate relief from some of the harm caused by heterosexual relationships but not addressing the causes of that harm itself. Instead, female friendship functions as an essential supplement to heterosexuality. Wilton writes that while heterosexual women tend to complain about men to their friends, and that this can be a source of comfort and solidarity, these conversations also naturalise men's behaviour towards their female partners as 'that's just how men are'. When coming out as lesbian, Wilton found herself excluded from these social bonds, because they are based on complaints about men and heterosexual romance but cannot tolerate lesbianism as a realistic alternative form of life (1992).

Despite these ambiguous rituals, friendship is less overburdened with cultural meaning than family and romance. Although some types of friendship are the site of strict codification and exclusion of those who do not fit, friendship itself can take a multitude of different forms. It

is usually more reciprocal in terms of emotional support than parent-child relationships and heterosexual romance. These more pleasurable and non-hierarchical aspects of friendship can be built upon to create relationships that are less integrated in forms of capitalist reproduction.

In her classic 1991 book *Families We Choose*, Kath Weston argues that for queer people, there have generally been less symbolic differentiation between family bonds, romantic relationships, and friendship. While the absence of institutions and rituals can sometimes make it more difficult to sustain long-term and mutual relationships, this also means that queer relationships are more open and multiple (1991, 113 & 206). This can counteract the idea that we should get all our support from the nuclear family. Instead, multiple forms of relationality open a space for relationships that are more inventive and responsive to the needs of the participants, even as those needs change over time. They are more oriented towards pleasure, safety, and support in the present than an investment in a future which looks remarkably like the past – a future of marriage, children, and home ownership – in other words, a future of capitalist reproduction.

Because of this relative lack of social codification, and because friendship does not fit into neat models for sociality and the private household, it is often either made invisible or stigmatised. While friendship and pleasure are seen as appropriate for teenagers and young adults, there is an expectation that these bonds will be replaced by the more substantial relationships and responsibilities of work and family once we have reached a certain age. There is something slightly sad about no longer being young but still having friends as the most important relationships in your life. Friendships do not matter much in the normative story of a good life – a story based on career progression, romance, marriage, property ownership, and childbirth. Friendships become superfluous in this future-oriented narrative of what a life should look like. Queer people's life stories are harder to fit into this narrative, both because their romantic relationships are often understood as 'just friends' and because

friendships often continue to matter throughout queer lives.

However, queer modes of sociality not the only ones that are stigmatised for their failure to reproduce properly. Racialised forms of kinship, black families in particular, have often been pathologised for their supposed failure to live up to white, bourgeois family norms (Cohen 1997). As Luke de Noronha writes, this has increasingly led to the criminalisation of young black men's friendships in the form of the moral panic around 'gangs'. According to this narrative, it is the failure of the black family to reproduce properly (absent fathers, feckless mothers) that leads young black men to join criminal gangs. But as de Noronha points out, these so-called gangs are often groups of black men who grew up in the same area and have cultivated relationships outside of the family form. These relationships are not always legible to the state or wider white, bourgeois culture, and are therefore not seen as relationships that could offer emotional support and joy. Instead, they are assigned more sinister motivations, which leads to anxieties around 'organised crime' and a desire to surveil and suppress these relationships (2020). Even though these friendships are probably not experienced as political, they are nonetheless politicised as threats to the state and the reproduction of the status quo.

Another form of sociality, related to friendship, explicitly threatens the state. Comradeship is based precisely on opposition to the world as we know it. If the nuclear family is oriented towards a future that looks the same as the past, comrades build pleasurable relationships in the present that are based on a shared desire for a different future. It is a form of relationship that works against the unquestioned and naturalised privatisation of care within the family by creating bonds of solidarity that stretches beyond the private sphere, out towards the world. We can be intimate strangers with comrades in other countries, whom we have never met. Comrades also often become friends in the more traditional sense of the word – people with whom we share the joys and difficulties of our daily lives and build reciprocal bonds of care and

support. And friends can turn into comrades as we become part of political struggles together.

Queer, racialised, and anti-capitalist forms of sociality thus exist outside the nuclear family form. As such, they are often made invisible or stigmatised. We can draw on people's everyday experiences of being supported by their friends as a way to build more expansive networks of care. This would challenge the symbolically and materially privileged status of the family as the social unit that has a seeming monopoly on care under capitalism. By thinking friendship politically, we could also seek to preserve its emotionally expansive and liberatory potential, against tendencies of cliquishness and privatisation. From the figure of the comrade, we learn that even strangers can become part of emotional intimacy – an intimacy that is no longer tied to the zero-sum game of 'true love'.

Analyses of capitalism must be against the family. Being on the left precisely involves a commitment to a world in which people have access to what they need outside of privatised family bonds. Since the purpose of the family is to reserve those resources to the sphere of private family responsibility, the left must be family abolitionist, and being pro-family is inherently reactionary.

If we think of family abolition not only as a negative project, but one aimed at creating other and multiple forms of sociality in order to render the family superfluous, we can begin to see all the little ways we are already reproducing ourselves outside of and against the family form. While the joys we share with our friends might not appear political, they can become part of a political project that centres pleasure and care. These interactions are firmly rooted in the present moment but can also point to a different future and a broader horizon of feeling. Instead of striving for queer inclusion in traditional narratives of familial and romantic love, we can affirm friendship against romance and family. The figures of the friend and the comrade can become fertile ground for political thought, and friendship can provide the emotional support we need in the struggle for a different world. In that way, our political movements can also include more attention to the emotional

aspects of politics, and the joys and sorrows of the present, as well as the long-term aims of political struggle. We can struggle together to reclaim

time from our paid work and family responsibilities and make time for making friends.

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