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Liberating Bodies: Sexualities and Critiques of Capital

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Sexualities under capitalism offer an entry point to the constitution of subjects, communities, and desires of past and future. Emphasis on the political significance of sexuality presents one of the most important feminist contributions to the analysis of global capitalism. The organisation of sexualities hierarchizes labouring bodies according to sexualised, racialized and gendered definitions of legible subjectivities. As such, sexual politics mark the constantly changing field through which binaries of the public and the private, production and reproduction, the deserving and the undeserving, the proper and the dysfunctional, bodily autonomy and its social embeddedness shape the how, when and where of capitalist exploitation and dispossession.

This special issue provides a platform for critical analysis and debates that shed light on the complex and often contradictory ways through which sexualities and capital are related to, shaped by, and constitutive of each other. It aims to provide insight into sexual politics as fundamental technologies of power within capitalism, and how sexual oppression under capitalism foment critiques of domination and communities of resistance. In this introduction, we sketch out

these emerging debates as we contextualise key contemporary discussions concerning the intersection between sexualities and capital across different fields. We insist on the relevance and urgency of these discussions, including topics such as communities and/of resistance as well as one crucial question that this issue's forum discussion tries to address collectively, namely, "why do we put up with it all?"

In the face of overlapping economic, ecological, health and care crises (Fraser 2021; Rao 2021), intensified political tensions and exacerbated socio-economic inequalities that are materialised along deeply gendered, sexualized, racialized and classed lines, we are witnessing an increased interest in thinking through issues pertaining to sexualities, bodies and desires as central to understanding and critiquing contemporary capitalism (Peterson 2016; Smith 2020; Gore 2022). The liberatory approach to the crossings between sexual politics and critiques of capital resounds through much of the emerging literature in Queer and Trans Marxisms and Social Reproduction Theory and critiques of the household (Bhattacharya 2017; Floyd 2009; Lewis 2016; Liu 2020; Raha 2021). The intersection also plays a constitutive role in decolonial

anti-capitalisms, pleasure activism and mutual aid organising (brown 2019; Lugones 2007; Piepzna-Samarisinha 2018; Spade 2020) as well as abolitionist projects ranging from prison abolition to gender abolition and family abolition (Gleeson 2017; O'Brien 2020; Wilson Gilmore 2022). These projects explain how oppressive mechanisms are operationalised through the contradictions of capital and are sustained over time. And they elaborate how people manage to find each other and sustain lived alternatives in spite of these oppressive structures.

The question of sexual and gender minority formation and the problem of the hierarchising and exclusionary dynamics of identity politics are important for discussions of sexualities and critiques of capital. While the relation between the economic and the cultural, and between redistribution and recognition continues to be subjects of debate (see for example Butler 1997; Fraser 1995; Oksala 2017), a growing body of literature maintain that sexualities and sexual politics are both foundational to and shaped by the capitalist mode of production and accumulation (see for example Drucker 2015; Hennessy 2000; Raha and Baars 2021; Valencia 2018), as well as the changing relations of labour and formations of state and nation (see for example Chitty 2020; Guitzel 2021; Liu 2015). This can be observed in the way that the contingent inclusion of particular sexual minority identities in nationalist narratives and imaginaries feeds into the neoliberal logic of "privatization and personal responsibility" (Duggan 2003, 12) on the one hand, and the figure of the exceptional and civilized nation-state on the other hand (Puar 2007, Rao 2020). Through the biopolitical disciplining and regimentation of sexualities, bodies become governable and exploitable. Or, as the necropolitical flipside of the same dynamic, they become marked and discardable as surplus populations.

Discussions of the unfolding contradictions of capital are incomplete without an understanding of the logics and politics of sexual dissidence and gender nonconformity analysed in relation to the household and various normative constructions of the family. In the introduction to their

recently published volume *Transgender Marxism* (2021), editors Jules Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke write that:

"There is no thoroughly anti-capitalist politics that does not include a critique of the household as a social unit of capitalist governance. There is no critique of value that succeeds without becoming queer. Household and mode of production are never segregated: their motion grinds us between workplace and homestead. But if our gender experiences are not outside the grandiose processes of political economy, where are they located within them?" (Gleeson and O'Rourke, 2021, 15)

The household, and relatedly, questions of social support and care labour, are key sites for examining the (missing) link between the organisation and lived realities of sexualities and capitalism. Viewed historically, the meaning and constitution of household and family have changed according to the regime of capitalist accumulation. For example, M.E. O'Brien (2020) charts the transformation of the family in the US context from property owning and inheritance based family during the period of early industrialization, to family as a site of social conservatism of the workers movement in the nineteenth century, and to family as atomised, white and heterosexual institution in the 1960s and 1970s. The different family formations also produce specific modes of exclusion and shape the dynamics of sexual deviancy and sexual rebellion. For example, the property owning family during the early industrialization excluded proletarian and enslaved people. The family formed during the workers movement, although legitimised working-class family life, discriminated sex workers. In the Nordic countries, there have historically been similar patterns of transformation, but specifically anchored to the development of the Nordic welfare state. The changes show the different kinds of stabilisation and destabilisation of various kinds of organising the family, manifesting in different ways the imperatives of heteronormative family formation.

In the present era of neoliberal financialization, the family takes on a new and more diverse form but remains central to the social reproduction of capital. This form can be understood through what Lisa Adkins (2016) calls “asset-based capitalism”, where social/familial relations become objects of financial calculation following the logics of asset ownership and asset inflation. Adkins uses these logics as analytics for understanding the new formations of inequalities and sexual politics that are materialised through neoliberal household practices. Instead of separating production and reproduction, this new family relation “places the ideals of intensive mothering, domesticity, entrepreneurialism and an investor spirit towards work and working on the same continuous plane” (Adkins 2016, 3). Faced with dangers of individualised precarity, the household and the nuclear family unit re-emerges as sources of economic security and sites of welfare. As Melinda Cooper notes, “capital has absorbed the antinormative critique of late Fordist liberation movements while capturing their energies in neoliberal/neoconservative imperative of private family responsibilities.” (2017, 253). Even in the Nordic welfare states, with their supposedly decommodifying policies, the ‘crisis of care’ has become increasingly pronounced (Hansen et al 2021).

If the family has variably constituted the gendered space of reproduction, this has dire consequences for the reproduction of those subjects who will not be sustained by the traditional nuclear family. In light of these difficulties accessing reproductive labour, it seems important to develop an expanded and reformulated social reproduction theory that challenges the heteronormative household. Instead of dissociating sexuality from material concerns, a “queer and trans social reproduction theory” (Raha 2021) allows for the consideration of the life-sustaining work involved in community care and in gender construction *both* as unpaid labour and as a form of resistance (see also Ellison 2017). Drawing on the work of Angela Davis, Jordy Rosenberg calls this a “dialectics of social reproduction” where there is a tension and mutual conditioning between “the ways in which life is both made and makes other life possible,

and the ways in which that life is stalked and subjected to violence” (Rosenberg 2021, 265).

Echoing the above studies, the special issue as a whole aims to underscore the need to account for the shifting and specific dynamics of power differentials in the critique of and political mobilisation against capitalism. The engagement with sexual politics in light of critiques of capital reverberates through fields and themes whose elaboration goes beyond the scope of this introduction. For the reader who is new to this constellation, we suggest you turn the page directly to the forum with M.E. O’Brien, Nat Raha and Grietje Baars as well as the subsequent comments by Jin Haritaworn and Lisa Adkins. We have asked all forum contributors to provide generous references and have compiled these in a rather comprehensive, although always tentative, reading list, which can be found at the end of the forum.

Sexualities and capital have historically often been thought as separate fields of study in the sense that they utilise different sets of methods, empirical material, disciplines and modes of critique. In the Danish context, this has left marks both in academic and activist circles, where a split between the two fields have historically materialised. Such a divide can also be seen in the history of this journal, *Women, Gender & Research*, which importantly considers the topic of sexuality and sexualities as more than a mere sidekick to the gender question of traditional women’s studies, and queer and trans* studies in their intersectional complexities have long had a strong voice in the journal. However, critiques of political economy have appeared sporadically and often through a conceptualisation of the category of woman as predominantly stable, heterosexual and white. The last issue where economic structures of exploitation played a central role for a special issue was, quite tellingly, in 2010 with an issue on “The labour market and the gender pay gap”. Since then, Danish academia has, in what some call ‘the Marxist turn’, seen an increased interest in critiques of capitalism. This is visible not only in conference and special issue appearances in the field of critical theory and Marxist studies but also in a certain mainstreaming of left-wing responses to the

ongoing climate crisis, which emphasise its roots in the extractivist capitalist order.

This imagined foreclosure of a dialogue has often prevented serious constructive engagements across the aisle. In short, the question has too often been *whether* sexual politics is compatible with various anti-capitalist projects and vice versa, and not *how* this is possible. The stakes are now higher than ever, and we cannot afford rhetorical distancing of affinity groups and alienating those whom we should be in solidarity with. This special issue bridges these two critical traditions and casts light on their overlapping struggles and intersecting potentials.

The special issue appears at a time when studies on gender, race and coloniality experience a series of attacks from right wing politicians and public intellectuals. This anti-gender studies agenda is, as many commentators have noted, not unlike the so-called anti-gender movements of France, Hungary, Poland, the UK, and elsewhere. In this context, *Women, Gender & Research* has been mentioned many times as a bulwark for the kind of research that ought to be defunded, and the journal remains under constant threat of a new surge of attacks.

During the spring of 2021, the call for papers for this special issue was cited from the main podium of the Danish parliament as an example of “excessive activism” in Danish gender studies. In this call, we emphasised the importance of activist work for developing various accounts of sexual politics under capitalism. A significant source of inspiration for the work of our contributors is the ongoing dialogue and collaboration with feminist anti-capitalist and anti-racist grassroots movements and activists within and beyond academia. This focus on various strands of activism is not accidental. As feminists and critical theorists, we know that knowledge is never disinterested. Knowledge is always produced within specific political and material contexts. When we invite activist work to inform our academic work it is exactly with this in mind, and it is to work towards academic knowledge production being useful for those most heavily marginalised by and resisting intersecting sexualised and classed repressions.

Overview of the contributions for this special issue

With her article “Colonial Intimacies: Constellations of Property and Kinship in German Colonial (After)Lives”, Hannah Vögele asks how the categories race, gender, and sexuality develop with, through and for proprietary relations. Vögele highlights the relevance of the colonial context for the co-emergence of capitalist property relations and social and intimate relations that are racialized, gendered and sexualised. With a focus on German colonial rule, she analyses property and intimacy from the perspective of colonial interventions in sexuality and family relations. Her article puts forward a powerful argument that solutions for problems such as gendered violence cannot be found within the current liberal proprietary order and its isolated notions of the private family, individualised responsibility, the criminal justice system and bordering practices. These constraints raises, finally, the need for anti- and decolonial feminist critiques.

In her article “Queering the crisis of care: The future of families in the legal recognition of socially reproductive labour”, Miriam Bak-McKenna makes visible the ways in which the division between work and care, as well as between production and reproduction, is reproduced in the heterosexual family model. Using Danish parental leave policies as a case study, McKenna argues that even as non-traditional family forms are becoming recognized, the sole focus on gender in this case recreates and reinforces the heteronormative family as the ideal.

David Reznik’s article “Queering comradeship: Anti-capitalist relations in *We Are Who We Are*” engages with Jodi Dean’s conceptualization of comradeship to explore the queer connections and anti-capitalist relations in *We Are Who We Are*, a 2020 television series by Luca Guadagnino. Reznik sets his close reading and discussion of the radical relationality between the show’s protagonists against the material background in which the show unfolds, that is an American military base in Italy. Highlighting the intersections of capitalist political economy, imperialism, and

gender/sexuality, he insists on the possibilities of queer comradeship to inspire revolutionary change and promote the everyday subversion of global war capital.

In the forum, M.E. O'Brien, Nat Raha and Grietje Baars, approach the main question of the special issue - how to understand the complex and often contradictory ways through which sexualities and capital are related to, shaped by, and constitutive of each other - through various perspectives. These perspectives include the relationship between social reproduction and queer and trans subjectivities, the changing configuration of capitalism and its implication for queer and trans Marxist practices, and global corporate capitalism. The forum is moderated by Liu Xin and Mathias Klitgård. In their respective texts, Jin Haritaworn and Lisa Adkins make commentaries that link to but are not discussed in the forum. Haritaworn's text puts emphasis on the queer of color framework for examining the changing modalities of exclusion of racial capitalism. Adkins' essay underscores the necessity of grappling with the specific logic and operation of the asset economy for understanding the shifting configurations and governance of sexuality.

In Jules Gleeson's essay, we are introduced to two different accounts of the concept of 'fetish' and its analytics in the work of Freud and Marx, respectively. Gleeson argues that we have inherited as common sense a Freudian framework where fetish is a pathology that demonstrates a queer quirk in the development of a healthy (cis-heterosexual) sexuality. Such an understanding of the fetish, as it becomes evident in Freud's writings, participates in racist fantasies of the uncivilised and immature colonial Other. Instead, Gleeson demonstrates how the fetish-character of the commodity that we find in Marx's mature writings works as a satirical comment on these western bourgeois constructions that allows us to grasp the socio-objective allure of the commodity. This non-psychological account of the fetish instead points to two necessary sides of the commodity as the object of desire: the sensuous and the supra-sensuous. Gleeson closes with a reading of the piss fetish documentary *Piss Off* (2019) and

shows how these two accounts make for two different understandings of the fetish in question.

In her essay "Abortion is legal!", Nuria Giniger analyses the historical and ideological base that led to the National Senate in Argentina legalising abortion on 30 December 2020. The essay has two objectives. On the one hand, Giniger offers a genealogical account of women's struggles in Argentina and, on the other, she reflects on different liberal elements of the campaign and how it proves limited for the wider struggle for social and gendered emancipation. Through her historical analysis of the Argentine feminist movement(s), Giniger argues that while the individual right to abortion is essential as defiant of state and church, a socialist pro-abortion politics has historically underscored the importance of also including a broader critique of the institution of the nuclear family and the church and has offered substantial support for women's labour rights.

Tom Ward's essay "The politics of queer precarity: Queer resistance to rentier-capitalism" focuses on the possibilities of counterhegemonic organizing against the housing crisis and how it has come to structure queer life. As a queer tenant union organizer, Ward shares his experiences with political organizing against the housing crisis in Ireland and Britain, in a housing system that gentrifies and privatises urban space and forces queer people into hostile and unstable housing. Through a discussion of the consequences of rentier capitalism for the restructuring of aspects of queer life, Ward shows how new forms of queer resistance can emerge to develop emancipatory horizons.

Alva Gotby, in her essay, focuses on the politics of friendship and the importance of communities and networks of support for meeting people's needs at the face of intersecting systems of oppression. Drawing on queer Marxist approaches to family abolition, Gotby suggests that friendships could offer an alternative to the structural violence of the nuclear family as valorised through the dominant social logics of white, bourgeois gender categories. For Gotby, abolishing the family doesn't mean further individualisation but could invoke friendship structures that are already in place and

which are already essential to so many social organisations of care today. In a call to nurture those different forms of sociality based on friendship, we can start to create caring relations that render the traditional family form superfluous.

In “Rethinking feminism: From critique of capital to decolonial analysis”, Signe Arnfred takes the reader with her on an autobiographical review essay of feminist thinking and writing through many decades of academic and political engagement. Focusing on how to conceptualize gender and how to think feminist struggle in anti-capitalist ways, that is combining feminist and anti-capitalist struggle, Arnfred brings together jigsaw puzzle pieces that show the interconnections, linkages but also tensions between these different discussions. She highlights the crucial contributions of feminists like Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí and unfolds Maria Lugones’ argument about the coloniality of gender. Arnfred’s intimate

and inspiring essay showcases the strength of feminist decolonial anti-capitalist thinking from 1970s Marxist-feminist organizing in Denmark to contemporary struggles as in the 2019 *Feminism for the 99% Manifesto*.

Matthew Cull reviews Christopher Chitty’s posthumously published book *Sexual Hegemony* (2020). In this highly favorable review, Cull highlights Chitty’s work as ‘queer realist’, i.e. interpreting hegemonic sexual formations not as free-floating regulative ideals but rather as a formation that under particular historical socio-economic conditions gives class-political advantages to its practitioners. Chitty, in Cull’s review, is therefore interested in moral and pathological accounts of male same-sex practices only insofar as they become instrumentalised for statecraft and the reproduction of class relations. Herein lies important insights for queer history, political theory and beyond.

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