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ARTICLE

Paths to a world without families: reasons, means, and ends in family abolitionism

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Abstract

The present article is a sympathetic critique of the most prominent contemporary articulations of family abolitionism. It examines whether queer communist family abolitionism is successful in linking an account of reasons for abolition, with an account of the means of abolition, and finally with an account of the ends of abolition in the form of speculation on a possible world without families. Recent work by M.E. O'Brien has developed these connections in ways that have never been done so thoroughly before; but the rejection of states as an institutional form of political power leaves it unclear what forms of equality we could expect in such a world, and why coercive power would be unnecessary there. Family abolition is a utopian political agenda; but that utopianism needs to be constrained by a realist concern with issues of power, resources, and human capacities. This will require confronting trade-offs and imperfections within possible worlds without families. The recognition that there are many paths to a world without families, and many possible such worlds, is the first step towards aligning reasons, means, and ends and confronting the social and political trade-offs that this entails.

Keywords Family abolition · States · Utopianism · Realism

In 1936, reflecting on almost 20 years of Bolshevik rule in Russia, Leon Trotsky wrote 'It proved impossible to take the old family by storm…You cannot "abolish" the family; you have to replace it' (Trotsky, 1970, p. 74).[1] But with what?

[1] The 1918 code on Marriage, The Family, and Guardianship had 'established civil marriage, simplified divorce, and abolished the concept of illegitimate children in the name of the liberation of women and the dissolution of bourgeois family life' (Kaminsky, 2011, p. 65). By 1926, unable to continue running the system of children's homes, the state closed them down, and now began to encourage adoption. 'The family', writes Wendy Goldman, 'was resurrected as a solution to *besprizornost'* [homeless children] because it was the one institution that could feed, clothe, and socialize a child at almost no cost to the state' (Goldman, 1993, p. 100).

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Contemporary communist family abolitionists have given a range of answers to this question, from 'nothing' (Lewis, 2022, pp. 84, 88)[2], to the revolutionary creche (Griffith & Gleeson, 2015), to the 'commune to come' (O'Brien, 2023, pp. 219–233). They have also tried to avoid that opposition between abolition and replacement, and to frame family abolition as a positive project of world-building, with appeals to the concept of *Aufhebung* (which connotes 'preservation', 'replacement' and 'supersession') that Marx and Engels used when discussing the abolition of the family in the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 2012, p. 88; Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 13; Lewis, 2022, p. 80; O'Brien, 2023, pp. 56–57).

Over 20 years ago, Ruth Levitas diagnosed the condition of late-modern utopian thought as one in which the *content* of utopian visions had been largely replaced by an emphasis on the *process* of utopian praxis (Levitas, 2000), meaning that the function of utopian thought had retreated from prescription and experimentation to critique. But in contemporary family abolitionism, these alternatives now appear as the two horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, family abolitionists have focussed on the sites of current resistance to the nuclear family (including urban encampments and protest-kitchens), but at the cost of becoming almost completely indeterminate in the content of their utopian vision of the future (Lewis, 2022, pp. 77–79; O'Brien, 2023, pp. 203–218). On the other hand, family abolitionists have occasionally taken the risk of sketching out a picture (if not quite a full blueprint) of a future world without families, but at the cost appearing detached from real social conditions, and exposing the cracks and problems that the blueprint reveals (O'Brien, 2023, p. 187; Griffiths & Gleeson, 2015).[3]

In this article, I ask which horn of this dilemma contemporary family abolition should choose. My conclusion is that 'blueprint utopianism' can respond to a number of problems that an indeterminate and process-oriented utopianism cannot, and that family abolitionists only open up for productive dialogical engagement when they take the risk of imagining the future.

We can frame the choice between the horns of this dilemma as a choice of which kinds of *realist* concerns should act as constraints on radical political theorising. On the one hand, many contemporary 'realists' in political philosophy claim that we should abandon 'political moralism' and ideal models of society, learning instead from the 'prefigurative structures' and 'provisional autonomous zones' established by real social actors today and in the past (Rossi, 2019, pp. 648–649; Aytac & Rossi, 2022; Westphal, 2023). This is based on a sense of 'realism' grounded in ideology critique, whereby the abstract arguments and values of political theorising are framed as part of the *problem* of social injustice, not part of the *solution* to it. On the other hand, 'realism' in political theory has traditionally, with Thomas Hobbes (1991 [1651]) as the central point of reference, implied a concern for the institutional organisation of *power, resources, trade-offs*, and *human capacities* for cooperation and conflict.

[2] Here, Lewis follows Barrett and McIntosh (2015 [1982], p. 158).

[3] On these different varieties of utopian thought more broadly, see Ingram (2017, p. xix); Cooke (2004), Levitas (2000, p. 25).

I will argue that contemporary work on family abolition is at its best where it chooses the path of speculating on detailed accounts of the institutional arrangements of a world without families, precisely because it can then address realist concerns about power, resources, trade-offs, and human capacities. In doing so, family abolitionism moves decisively beyond abstract formulations relying on dialectical logic (the promise of *Aufhebung*) or the embrace of the unknown ('nothing') of the future. The contrast between M.E. O'Brien's *Family Abolition* (2023) and Sophie Lewis' *Abolish the Family* (2022) illustrates this difference.[4]While Lewis' vision of a post-familial future is suggestive but ultimately obscure, O'Brien's speculative blueprint utopianism tests the family abolitionist imagination in a world of stateless communes, where relationships of care are formed voluntarily and relations of economic dependence have no basis in the nuclear family. O'Brien has argued for the value of this speculative utopianism in general terms (O'Brien, 2023, p. 189), while also being clear-sighted about the colonialist underpinnings of nineteenth-century utopian projects inspired by arch-utopians such as Charles Fourier (O'Brien, 2023, p. 188). The present article goes further in defending the importance of speculative utopianism for family abolition and in showing the shortcomings of the alternative.

In what follows I distinguish the *reasons* for family abolition (family abolition as critique), from the *means* of family abolition (family abolition in practice), and from the *ends* of family abolition (family abolitionism as world-building). Once we make these distinctions, we are in a much better position to engage critically and constructively with contemporary arguments for family abolitionism by looking at the issues that arise in connection with each of these aspects of the abolitionist project.

First, by focussing on the *reasons* for family abolition, we can ask whether the reasons commonly given in fact support the case for family abolition. The important point to notice here will be that we cannot answer this question unless we consider the *connections* between reasons, means, and ends in the family abolitionist project. If the *ends* of family abolition remain indeterminate, so too do the *reasons* that are commonly given for abolishing the family. That is to say: we don't know whether the reasons given when critiquing the family should motivate family *abolition*, unless we know (or can at least begin to judge) that the proposed alternative (the concrete end) is any *better*.

Second, by focussing on questions about the means of abolition, we can raise issues of *power* and *subjectivity*, both in the creation of a world without families, and in that world itself. *How* exactly would families be abolished? And what forms of power would be used in the maintenance of social order in the future world without families? Contemporary family abolitionists have been extremely critical of state power (O'Brien, 2023, p. 191; cf. Gleeson, 2020). For example, O'Brien's 'commune to come' imagines a world without the coercive power of states, but at the cost of very strong assumptions about how humans living in this world would manage resources and conflict in a peaceful and non-coercive way. This question about power is integrally connected to the questions about what the people living in this world without families would be like: what would they want? How would

[4] O'Brien regards her book at complementary to Lewis' (O'Brien, 2023, p. 262), but is clear that her approach differs because of its efforts to imagine the revolutionary future (O'Brien, 2023, p. 187).

they cooperate? How would they sanction one another? Several scholars of utopia have thought of utopian works as contributing to the 'education of desire' (Abensour, 2017; Levitas, 1990, 2000; Thompson, 1976) that can change us as human subjects. Family abolitionists have also hoped that this is possible (Lewis, 2022, p. 87; Weeks, 2021, p. 17). But unless tempered by a realist concern for power and the control of resources, this elasticity of utopian subjects becomes absurd: it should be the institutional arrangements proposed that might solve our social problems, not the idealised accounts of the human beings who dwell in that world. This requires tempering the utopian imagination without collapsing into the scepticism or indeed conservatism that is often associated with realism (Cross, 2022; Favara, 2022; Raekstad, 2016).

Thirdly, turning to the *ends* of family abolition, we need to ask *which* world without families we should want (if any). There is not *one* possible world without families; there are *many* possible worlds without families. Therefore, family abolitionism needs to provide enough detail to any proposed world without families that *this* world may be compared with others. For example, Plato's *Republic* offered a dystopian, authoritarian vision of a world without families that has almost nothing to do with the queer anti-state communism shared by the most recent wave of family abolitionists.[5] There is no such thing as choosing family abolition *as such*, and therefore, utopian critics of the family today must give us at least some idea of the contours of one specific world without families that we might hope for. One thing that this would allow us to do is to evaluate the *trade-offs* that would be required in creating such a world. While a speculative utopian account can choose to remain silent on what has been *lost* from that imagined world, it can also choose to be explicit about those losses, and to try to justify them against the gains that we imagine having been won. Radical utopian speculation does not have to be about a *perfect* world. While the unknown utopia of a 'glorious and abundant nothing' (Lewis, 2022, p. 88) can afford to be perfect by being perfectly empty, sketches of institutional design such as we find in O'Brien's 'commune to come' rightly show their imperfections, if not always clearly announcing the trade-offs that they entail.

Working through these aspects of family abolitionism (reasons, means, and ends) and the problems related to these (indeterminacy of reasons, power and subjectivity, and choosing between worlds), the present article is a sympathetic critique and assessment of the most prominent contemporary articulations of family abolitionism. It contrasts sharply with the wholesale rejections of family abolition that characterise many responses to the recent wave of work on this topic; such responses either try to discredit the proposal as a strategic mistake for left wing class mobilisation (DeBoer, 2021), or simply reject family abolition as sinister or indeed just utter nonsense (Majumdar, 2020; for a summary of such responses, see Lewis, 2023). These criticisms are depressingly misplaced. The family abolitionist reimagining of our basic social relationships is a form of fundamental social and political theorising that challenges the very units—individuals, families, and states—that we so often take for granted in normative political theory. To challenge recent utopian work on

[5] Strangely, Lewis (2022, p. 36) suggests that Socrates sought to abolish the family because it was 'unfair'. This view is unsustainable, given the class-structure of Plato's (Socrates') imagined city-state.

family abolition with questions about the relationships amongst reasons, means, and ends, and to ask difficult questions about how it can balance utopianism with realism, is not, I hope, to misunderstand its genre or undervalue its contributions. The aim is to show that family abolitionist political theory faces choices, and that those choices matter for the coherence and appeal of the family abolitionist agenda.

Family abolition in the socialist tradition

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels proposed the abolition of the family, arguing that while family relationships were already destroyed for the proletariat, the bourgeois family deserved the same fate (Marx & Engels, 2012, pp. 88–89; Weikart, 1994). This is the most famous call to abolish the family, and it is directed at the (hypocritical) sexual morality and material privileges of bourgeois family life, but the bourgeois family had already been under attack by socialists for several decades. Robert Owen (1771–1858), Charles Fourier (1772–1837), and their socialist followers, criticised the system of 'single-family arrangements',[6] and imagined communities in which the sexual division of labour, women's social standing, and sexual relationships themselves, would be transformed. As Fourier saw it, human beings needed liberation from the deadening structures of 'the isolated household and permanent marriage' (Fourier', 1996, p. 111).

But the 'bourgeois family' did not remain the only target of family abolition in the socialist tradition. O'Brien (2023, p. 10) has helpfully periodised family abolitionist thought and activism into four phases. The first is an early phase (1830s–1880s) focussing on the bourgeois family. The second phase (1890s–1950s) targeted the 'respectable' working class family as a 'white, male breadwinner family form' that kept women's reproductive labour unpaid and unsocialised (see, for example, Kollontai, 1971). The third phase (1960s and 1970s), led by radical and Black feminism, and queer theorising and activism, also attacked this patriarchal, racialised, and heteronormative ideal model of family values and economic organisation (Firestone, 1971; Lindsey, 1970; Dalla Costa & James, 1973; Weeks, 2011, 2021). The fourth phase of abolitionism (later 1970s–present) addressed a family form in which the real possibility of a single-earner breadwinner model of the family had disappeared for most in capitalist democracies, but where families had maintained the private household as an economic model, and maintained many aspects of a heterosexual and racialised family norms (for important, although not all abolitionist, work on the family in this period, see Spillers, 1987; Zinn, 1990; Cooper, 2017; Care Collective, 2020). Thus, Lewis' (2022) and O'Brien's (2023) recent work on queer communism has developed out of a well-established socialist tradition of family abolitionism, but a complex one. Not only have abolitionist views of the family changed over time, but contemporary family abolitionism is influenced by queer political theory and history, Black and anti-colonial political theory, and transhumanist ontology, all of which offer different ways to diagnose the problems of the family.

[6] The term is Robert Owen's, quoted in Barbara Taylor (1983, p. 39).

What this brief intellectual history illustrates is that part of what makes the task of imagining a world without families so difficult is that the family is a moving target of political critique to begin with, and so the reasons for proposing its abolition, and the effects of that abolition are hard to pin down. Not only do family forms change over time and vary across cultures, but even critiquing the family in one society at one point in time opens up a whole box of questions about exactly what we are talking about. For example, should the family be defined as the private unit of care and social reproduction (Weeks, 2021; O'Brien, 2023, p. 21), or quite differently as the conduit of social identity and resources across generations (Engels, 2021)? Should the family be defined with reference to 'nature', for example as a unit of biological reproduction, or with reference to 'culture', for example as the unit of household consumption (Laslett, 1972)? The social practices that constitute family life in its various forms are shaped by different kinds of social power (for example, patriarchal power and state power) and they function at several scales and temporalities, from daily household social reproduction to intergenerational transfers of resources that may be global in reach. The many faces of the family provide family abolitionism with a broad target, but also a complex one. The present critical assessment of family abolition does not choose between different conceptualisations of 'the family', by beginning with a definitions of 'family', because part of its task is exactly to show the diversity of things that family abolitionists have criticised and hoped for.

Reasons: family abolition as critique

To begin with, the different faces of the family present us with various *reasons* to abolish the family, which need to be distinguished from one another.

First, families are places of an extraordinary amount of *violence*. The statistics about violence within families are often shockingly at odds with not only rose-tinted stories about families as places of care and refuge, but with individual experiences of relatively safe family life that we might be tempted to mistakenly generalise (UNICEF, 2017; Lewis, 2019, 116).[7]

Second, families are an integral part of *the heteronormative social order*. Feminists have long argued that the family is the site of the reproduction of asymmetrical gender relationships, and conservative heteronormative models of family life have been extensively mobilised in public policy in ways that have had a particularly damaging impact on the lives of the LGTBQ folk (Cooper, 2017), where those models are used to regulate welfare rights, tax duties, inheritance, and more.

Third, the family unjustly reproduces *social and economic inequality* in society (Calder, 2016). This has worried liberal egalitarian political philosophers (Brighouse & Swift, 2014; Gheaus, 2018; Rawls, 1999a, 1999b) and it has worried social

[7] UNICEF's (2017) summary of familial violence worldwide gives us some of those statistics: 'Three quarters of children aged 2–4 worldwide—close to 300 million—are regularly subjected to violent discipline (physical punishment and/or psychological aggression) by their parents or other caregivers at home, and around 6 in 10 (250 million) are subjected to physical punishment. Many children are also indirectly affected by violence in the home: Worldwide, 1 in 4 children (176 million) under the age of 5 live with a mother who has been a recent victim of intimate partner violence'.

scientists (Hills et al., 2013; Piketty, 2014), but it is primarily Marxist and post-Marxist theorists who have been willing to propose family abolition.

Fourth, the family is an institution through which *state power* is exerted. That state power has been regulatory, discriminatory, homophobic, racist, colonialist, and patriarchal.[8] Kay Lindsey's, 1970 essay 'The Black Woman as Woman' captured with incredible precision and succinctness why the call to abolish the family made sense from a Black feminist perspective: the family as an institution is based on the extension of male power over women and children; states as political systems are the extension of this male power through war and other violence; and racist states are the extension of white male power through the control of the family as an institution (Lindsey, 1970, pp. 104–105; for more recent Black feminist critique of the family see King, 2018).

Fifth, the family is part of the machinery of *capitalist exploitation and oppression*. Early twentieth-century communists like Rosa Luxemburg, V.I. Lenin, Alexandra Kollontai, and Leon Trotsky, all recognised that the emancipation of women from the unpaid, inefficient, and isolated labour of the household was a crucial part of any fundamental economic and social revolution. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist socialism and anarchism developed this theme in much more detail (Dalla Costa & James, 1973; Federici, 2012), sparking the 'domestic labour debate' within socialist political economy (see Bubeck, 1995; Weeks, 2011) and the 'dual systems' debate in feminism more broadly (for a good summary see Arruzza, 2014). For those who sought to tie social and economic issues into a single revolutionary project, it made sense to regard bourgeois state familialism as integrally connected to bourgeois state capitalism. The compelling idea here is that through the family, capital can command more labour than it pays: relying on the unpaid labour of carers and domestic workers to ensure the social reproduction necessary to keep capitalism going.

Pieced together, these reasons seem to make a damning case against the family.

But as important as they are, that conclusion should not be reached too quickly. Each of them is indeterminate as a reason to abolish the family until the case can be made that the alternatives to the family would be better. Would the alternatives really avoid repeating the problems of the family: as a vehicle for state policy, as a mechanism for social reproduction, as a conduit for the transmission of inequality, as a site of violence, as a bastion of heteronormativity? This is much more difficult to answer with any certainty than it is to accept the truth of the various critiques listed above.

To begin with statistics about violence: the fact that so much of the violence in the world happens within families does not tell us whether that violence would be eliminated or just relocated in a world without families. If children were raised in a revolutionary creche (Griffiths & Gleeson, 2015), or adults lived in voluntary associations making up non-familial households (Firestone, 1971), would that violence

[8] The Moynihan report, 'The Negro Family: The Case for National Action', is famous for making that racism explicit in US politics (Moynihan, 1965). These policies have been met with resistance from such movements as Wages against Housework and the National Welfare Rights Organization that sought to challenge that racialised power channelled through the family as a social institution (Lewis, 2022, pp. 66–71).

go away? Perhaps, but just as the statistics look bad for the family, they also look pretty bad for the other kinds of care institutions that we actually have today. Take for example, the care and living arrangements of the elderly, which have become highly institutionalised in many societies and which represent one of the ways in which care work has been partially taken outside of family structures in the last several decades. Globally, the chances of physical abuse for elderly people are currently five times higher in institutional settings compared to rates amongst the population as a whole; the chances of psychological abuse are three times higher (WHO, 2022). In some ways, statistics from care institutions are not a very good indicator of what care would be like in a world without families: after all, a post-familial communist world without states or markets would not have private or state-run care institutions at all, so why should we care about statistics generated by these today? We should care, nonetheless, because what we learn here is that the case for family abolition relies not only on seeing what really goes on in families (lots of violence) but also a claim about how a world without families would be better. In short, the statistics about either families or care homes are simply not enough on their own; we need to supplement them with further claims about the *ends* of abolition before those statistics give us *reasons* for family abolition.

The same kind of indeterminacy is a problem when gauging the persuasiveness of the other reasons too, which I can only touch upon briefly here. Would a world without families be a world without heteronormativity? Or would it just be a world in which gender was (to an even greater extent than today) learned and enforced in *public* social institutions like kindergartens, schools, religious institutions, workplaces, and so on? Similarly, would dismantling the family household as the core unit of social reproduction and unpaid labour create a world of socialised childcare and cooperative domestic labour? Or would it just create new markets, new contractual relations and new chances for capitalist exploitation? If it is unjust that today some children are born into well-functioning and well-resourced families while others aren't, then it would also be unjust in tomorrow's post-familial world if some children were born into well-functioning and well-resourced alternatives to the family (e.g. 'orphanages', 'creches', 'households', etc.), while others weren't (Gheaus, 2018). There is nothing *automatically* egalitarian about a post-familial world. Similarly, there is nothing inevitable about overcoming racism by overcoming the racist uses of the *family* in colonial conquest, control, policing and policy (on welfare, housing, childcare, medical care, and so on); whether a world without families is a racist world or not depends on many other dimensions of that imaged world (for discussions and counters to the claim that the family sometimes operates as a bulwark against racist abuse and violence, see Carby, 1982; O'Brien, 2023, p. 5; Lewis, 2022, pp. 31–32; Weeks, 2021, pp. 3–5).

To be clear, what I have been trying to show is not that family abolitionism is based on bad reasons, or that the critical analyses of the problems of the family sketched above are flawed in some way. They are, I think, very powerful indeed. The claim here is that however good those critical analyses are, the reasons that they generate for *family abolition* are only forceful if the counter-factual world that they push us towards is a *better world*. In some ways, the queer communism of contemporary abolitionists provides answers here: we are not just comparing the present

situation with any other possible social arrangements, but with a communist world of care and cooperation. It is the possibility of *this* world—a specific vision of a world without families—that makes those reasons persuasive. But if it is this alternative that makes the reasons for family abolition persuasive, then we would expect that this alternative has some fairly clear contours. As we will see, the speculative 'metaphysical moment' of O'Brien's family abolitionism, in which she sketches out what a world without families might be like, allows us to develop the necessary connections between reasons, means, and ends because the proposed alternative social practices and institutions that replace the family either address, or fail to address, the reasons given for family abolition. But as we will also see, that specific world appears to successfully address some of those reasons, but not others.

Means: family abolition in practice

In *Abolish the Family*, Lewis writes 'It is time to grasp the nettle, then, and consider what abolition means in practice' (Lewis, 2022, p. 79). That nettle is never grasped by Lewis,[9] but O'Brien has developed an extensive account not only of the possible role of a progressive state in weakening the family, but of the limitations of this kind of statist reform and the need for alternative revolutionary strategies (2023, pp. 170–180).

Other voices on the radical reorganisation of care beyond the nuclear family, such as The Care Collective (2020, pp. 60–70), give significant space to the idea that states can have a role in organisation the resources and practices of caring in a future society, and O'Brien also acknowledges the real ways in which progressive state policies can weaken the legal and economic bases of the nuclear family, and lessen the damaging effects that can follow from these especially for 'queer and trans youth, women in abusive relationships, and disabled and elder proletarians' (O'Brien, 2023, p. 173). But she ultimately argues for a form of family abolition that 'refuses the consolidation of authority into the hands of even a benevolent state' (O'Brien, 2023, p. 191; cf. Gleeson, 2020). The work- and state-centric vision of family abolition offered by revolutionaries like Alexandra Kollontai,[10] and Bolshevik legal reforms in revolutionary and post-revolutionary USSR,[11] give a glimpse of what the statist weakening of the legal and economic bases of family life can look like.

[9] Instead there follows a discussion of the term *Aufhebung* as developed in Hegel's idealism and subsequently used in Marxist socialism (Lewis, 2022, pp. 80). O'Brien also seems to regard *Aufhebung* as a concept that holds important keys to the meaning of family abolition today (O'Brien, 2023, pp. 56–57). Rejecting the magic of *Aufhebung,* and focussing instead on concrete examples of possible worlds without families, is one of the aims of the present argument.

[10] For O'Brien's view on Kollontai see (2023, p. 125): 'Kollontai's vision replaced the family with the factory as the social unity [*sic*] of reproduction, replacing patriarchy with the new tyranny of work and state'. The contrast with Lewis' positive view of Kollontai (Lewis, 2022, pp. 49–54) reflects the much greater attention to the means and ends of abolition in O'Brien's work.

[11] On family abolitionist influences in the reform of Soviet law, see Goldman (1993, p. 57).

Against this, the revolutionary impulse of family abolitionism today is to look for the means of family abolition in the world-building power of cooperative social networks that can build social spaces beyond the state bureaucrat's gaze: 'liberated zones', such as protest-kitchens, that begin the work of cooperation and care beyond the nuclear family (O'Brien, 2023, pp.203–218). This focus on local organisation and provisioning under revolutionary conditions is the most characteristic feature of O'Brien's account of family abolitionist practice, and makes clear that the project of family abolition must be pursued within the broader framework of massive social and political transformation (O'Brien, 2023, p. 54).

However, behind this contrast between statist and grass roots family abolition are questions about what 'abolition' really means in terms of the uses of power and coercion. This has not so far been addressed in the current wave of family abolitionist works. We need to recognise that family abolition can be either creative or destructive, and either hard or soft. These alternatives can be usefully framed as questions. Does the proposal for family abolition include a demand for *the widening* of individual choice about kinship, care, the division of labour, and so on (and so is creative), or a demand for the *restriction* of those choices (and so is destructive)? And does the proposal for family abolition require *new applications of power and coercion* (and so is hard) or only *social mobilisation through cooperation and solidarity* (and so is soft)?

The 'friendly face' of abolition is obviously creative and soft, in the sense that the means of abolition involve developing alternative networks and practices for provisioning and care outside the family. The 'unfriendly face' of family abolition would be the use of coercive power to disrupt familial forms of social practice and organisation. Contemporary queer communist family abolition focuses, for obvious reasons, on the first. But these two faces of abolition are more closely connected than is admitted by contemporary abolitionists. In current societies, states use their coercive power to enforce a regime of political economy, and by and large that regime reinforces the heteronormative family as the fundamental unit of social life (Cooper, 2017). But how would alternative networks and collectives that create new circuits of economic resources and new practices of care outside of the state-family nexus enforce and protect the regime that they establish? In short, where is *power* in a world without families?

It is easy to dodge this question by treating coercive power as synonymous with state and patriarchal power, and then pursuing an anti-statist agenda. O'Brien (2023, p. 192) understands states as 'an institution that rules over social life yet is separated from the direct relationships between people'. 'In a stateless society, communist society', she goes on, 'this administration would be taken by popular mass organs enlisting the majority of the population, a part of the fabric of day-to-day life…' (O'Brien, 2023, p. 192). But this solution to the problem of coercive power is too vague to be convincing. In its current forms, queer communist family abolitionism has relied too heavily on the normative dichotomy between a coercive state and family (representing *power*) and a cooperative community and commune (representing *care*). That has made it easier to distance contemporary family abolitionism from the horrors and tragedies of totalitarian state socialism in the twentieth century. But systems of provisioning and care can only be maintained in two ways: either by a

new regime of power-relations that protects them against disruption, or by a radical change in human society that makes coercive power unnecessary. The latter is the massive counter-factual assumption that anti-state communist visions rests on.

As an answer to this problem, various family abolitionists have noted that the subjects who would live in a world without families would not quite be like us (Weeks, 2021, p. 17; Lewis, 2022, p. 87). As Firestone argued (1971, pp. 62–69), the psychological structures shaping our desires and habits (she calls these 'power psychology') would be vastly transformed in a world without families. But when engaging with family abolitionist utopianism in political thinking and debate, how much leeway should we give to assumptions about how human beings might be transformed in worlds without families? Must utopia answer our social problems with new *practices and institutions* or with a new vision of what we might *be as subjects* living in this world?

There is no reason that these aspects of utopian thought have to be mutually exclusive: sometimes imagining transformed *subjects* is integral to imagining transformed *practices and institutions*. But the balance between these aspects of a utopian vision matters a great deal. If we make our account of utopian subjects too ideal, then we are playing the game of solving human problems by theoretical fiat. A utopia of saints (who never disagree) or angels (who live on love and air, not material resources) is not a useful tool for political thought or practice. Without any realist constraints on how we imagine the subjects of utopia creative institutional design would become unnecessary because all social problems would be solved by the unlimited goodness, ingenuity, and spontaneity of individual utopian subjects. The problem of how to organise *power* in utopia evaporates.

Ends: family abolition as world-building

Once stated, the basic point about the ends of family abolition is obvious: there is not one possible world without families, but many. The queer communist world without families that is the goal of contemporary authors on family abolitionism has very little to do with the authoritarian *polis* imagined in Plato's *Republic* where private property is abolished for the guardian class, along with the families that could hold it, in order to ensure that loyalties to the state are not compromised by self-interest (Plato, 2000, 464c; Okin, 1989, p. 351).[12] It also has little to do with John Rawls' consideration of family abolition, which was tentatively raised and quickly retreated from in *A Theory of Justice* (1999a, p. 448), and has been sketched out by his interpreters as a world of permanent state-run boarding schools (Gheaus, 2018, p. 291) or well-run orphanages (Munoz-Dardé, 1999, p. 39). Shulamith Firestone (an important source for contemporary abolitionism, unlike Plato or Rawls)

[12] For the fascistic elements of Socrates proposals, see Plato (2000), 459e–460 and 458d–e: on the control of sexual relationships; 457d: on the elimination of children's attachments to specific carers; on treating one another as kin during warfare and earning the right, through bravery on the battlefield, to kiss anyone in the city; 460c: on the eugenic selection of 'good' children and their special rearing, and the eradication of weak children.

imagined non-familial households as being formed on a voluntary contractual basis with an in-built time-limit to allow for easy dissolution and reconfiguration (1971, pp. 261–262), all within the geographical boundaries of something like a small town or 'campus' (p. 265). While there is perhaps good reason to think that Plato's just city is meant as a warning, and not a blueprint (Strauss, 1964, p. 138); that Rawls' question was rhetorical challenge, not a utopian hope; and that Firestone's contractual households are a striking suggestion, but potentially a contractarian dystopia; these examples are nonetheless reminders that all abolitionist roads do not lead to the same place. To paraphrase Trotsky's point cited earlier: the negative mode of 'abolitionist' critique cannot do the job of 'replacing' the family.

Contemporary abolitionists repeatedly point to the real experiences of alternative networks of care and provisioning that people build in moments of political protest, resistance, and survival. But while these practices are quite obviously important in their local context, and have the potential to educate and change the people who are involved with them, to rely on them as prefigurative models of a world without families is to fall into the kind of 'folk politics' that has been accurately diagnosed as a trap of a leftist politics in recent years (Srnicek & Williams, 2016, pp. 9–13). Localised sites of political protest, defined by their stances of resistance to the world around them, cannot be models for the forms of economy, politics and—not least—desire that would characterise an entire world without families. While Lewis' work falls squarely within this celebration of 'folk politics' (see, for example, Lewis, 2022, pp. 77–79), O'Brien is careful to push beyond it to a wider account of social transformation (2023, pp. 203–218) and to give a glimpse of one possible world without families.

For this reason, it is important to think about the differences between the abstract ends pursued by family abolition and the concrete ends, sketched out as institutional designs and practices. While the abstract aims of family abolition may be expressed in values such as equality, freedom, peace, creativity and beauty, the more concrete institutional aims have been developed, for example, in accounts of the care arrangements of the communist creche (Griffiths & Gleeson, 2015), the political economy of the post-revolutionary commune (O'Brien, 2023), or the reorganisation of private and public space to match the reorganised living arrangements in a world without families (see for example Hayden, 1976; Taylor, 1983). It is only when we try to move from the abstract ends of family abolition to proposals for concrete institutional arrangements that we begin to see worlds without families emerge from the mists of social critique, and begin to diverge from one another. We can also begin to see how reasons, means, and ends either align or fail to align in each.

For example, if we recognise that equality is important for family abolition at an abstract level, then as we move towards an account of a world without families, we have to begin to ask what equality looks like in that specific world—a world, for example, of self-governing communes. If we have abandoned the state as a means of abolition, then we already know that law and coercive state redistribution will not be the mechanisms by which this equality is achieved, and we therefore need a different account of how equality will be achieved and what it will look like there.

One of the reasons that it is so important to do this is that *scale* really matters when thinking about the social arrangements of a better world. In contemporary

societies we have grown used to social organisation at particular scales defined to a great extent by the family household at a micro scale and the state at a macro scale. One of the promises of utopian critics of the family is that the new world will take shape at the meso-scale of communities: expanding care and sexual pleasure beyond the limits of the nuclear family, and shrinking social decision-making down to some form of direct democracy. 'Single families with separate interests', as Robert Owen wrote, must be eliminated in order that 'communities…with one interest…arranged as one family' might flourish (Robert Owen, quoted in Taylor, 1983, p. 48).[13] And for utopians like Fourier, spatial planning, design, and—not least—attention to scale were all essential to this project. Towns and villages were, he claimed, currently organised for 'families having no societary relations' and overcoming this was, in part, a design problem (Fourier, 1972, p. 240).

Let us look briefly, then, at one contemporary sketch of a world without families that gives concrete practical shape to the abstract ideals that communist family abolitionists support. Inspired by Fourier's erotic communal utopianism,[14] O'Brien's vison of post-family communes imagines collectives of a few hundred people living together on a geographical scale equivalent to a few city blocks of housing and infrastructure. Such communes would include both private living space with public communal space, and would even allow for the formation of 'family-like arrangements' where members of the commune wanted this (O'Brien, 2023, p. 232). The key difference with current forms of family life would be that the economic basis of the private family household would be abolished along with the abolition of private property, so that resources would not be controlled by families but by the collective. This would detach relationships of care and support from the economic channels of the nuclear heteronormative family, allowing new and complex networks of care and support to develop without claims to private property and proprietary kinship relations to disrupt that process (O'Brien, 2023, p. 230). Direct democratic governance would replace the decision-making structures of authoritarian states and representational democracies (O'Brien, 2023, p. 225). Members of the commune who have caused harm would be handled through processes of transformative and restorative justice (O'Brien, 2023, p. 223).

While this account of the commune to come is certainly utopian, it is not naïve. O'Brien herself points out the problems that those living in a post-familial world of communes would have to face: creating the conditions of widespread equality and

[13] Owen expressed the inward-looking logic of the nuclear family quite savagely: 'The children within these dens of selfishness and hypocrisy are taught to consider their own individual family their own world, and that it is the duty and interest of all within this little orb to do whatever they can to promote the advantages of all the legitimate members of it'. Robert Owen, quoted in Taylor (1983), p. 39.

[14] Although the fact that Fourier's *phalanxes* were not egalitarian and that capital, talent, and labour would all be rewarded there in not discussed by either Lewis or O'Brien. See Fourier (1972, p. 249). For O'Brien's interpretation, see (O'Brien, 2023, pp. 226–229). On Owenite and Fouriest experiments in collective living in the nineteenth century see: Taylor (1983) and Hayden (1976).

handling social harm without the coercive apparatus of the state.[15] She explicitly refers to the violence, sexual harm, and social exclusion that have been a feature of actual protest camps and communes, and is well aware that these problems do not vanish her imagined communist world without families.

This recognition of imperfection in the midst of utopia is perceptive and productive. But we could also go further in drawing out how the concrete arrangements of a utopian vision address some of the reasons for family abolition, while leaving others undeveloped. In particular, it is unclear that the stateless world without families addresses the problem of creating equality on a wide scale beyond the bounds of the imagined commune. The redistributive apparatus of the state is one answer to the problem of how to create a form of economic, social, and political equality within this world (as O'Brien recognises, 2023, p. 226); national and global markets (especially for labour) give a plausible institutional framework for the mobility of persons and things. But rejecting *both* leaves this stateless world without families heavily dependent on a hopeful account of human beings' capacities to cooperate and distribute resources, without the biases of family, commune, or nation. As O'Brien notes, we would 'require new and currently unknown practices to mitigate against potential inequality in consumption between communes, and to assure basic material well-being for all' (O'Brien, 2023, p. 226). This returns us to the problem discussed in the last section concerning subjectivity: does it make sense to leave these 'currently unknown practices' to the creative powers of future human beings unlike ourselves in many ways? Rather than relying on these creative powers to solve these problems, family abolitionists could and should frame these problems as the result of trade-offs that are worth making. The *loss* of the forms of equality that the architects of progressive welfare states have aspired to may simply be *worth it*—or it may not be.

Utopian visions of a world without families do not have to be perfect in order to be inspiring and instructive. The point should not be to suggest that a world without families solves *all* of our social problems, or even that a world without families could address *all* of the reasons that we began with that were supposed to motivate family abolition. The only case that utopian family abolitionists need to establish is that a world without families would *be better* than the familial state capitalism that we live with today. In this mode, family abolitionists don't need to show that the revolutionary creche, or the contractual household, or the commune to come, could achieve perfect equality, or free us entirely from the suffering that a heteronormative social order produces, or leave children entirely free from the arbitrary or unjust power of adults. Family abolition only needs to show us that the trade-off against our current dominant institutions and practices is worth it (and perhaps also that a *reformed* family is undesirable or impossible). But family abolitionists can only show this when they are willing to choose one horn of the utopian dilemma, and to

[15] As she notes, 'Among the many unresolved questions in imagining communism is preventing stratification between commune…What practices could assure the universality of each according to their need, without the impersonal domination of a state removed from, and governing over, the social body?' (O'Brien, 2023, p. 225).

affirm a picture of a world without families. Only within such a picture can we begin to measure the benefits of this world against what it has lost.

Conclusion: Utopia and the demands of realism

Marx and Engels were critical of utopian pictures of better societies. When they turn to the family abolition of the 'utopian socialists' (Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, and Henri Saint Simon), they regard those authors' models of transformed family relationships as 'valuable material for the enlightenment of the working class', but ultimately utopian in the bad sense of being disconnected from real class struggle (Marx & Engels, 2012, pp. 99–101). This attack on utopianism, first by Marx and Engels in the nineteenth century and then by post-war liberals (like Karl Popper), republicans (like Hannah Arendt) and anti-communists (like Friedrich Hayek), left the idea of 'blueprint' utopianism discredited (Ingram, 2017, pp. xiii–xviii; see also Leopold, 2016, and Olin Wright, 2010, pp. 89–109). In its place, those who wished to salvage the importance of utopian thought had to avoid the 'bad utopianism' that produced detailed images of a good society, and so avoid a form of utopianism that lacked a connection with social reality and ignored the contingent and unpredictable nature of social transformation (Cooke, 2004). Given this intellectual history, and the more general hostility towards 'utopian' thought in the Marxian socialist tradition (Leopold, 2016), it is unsurprising that communist family abolitionists have often focussed on describing real experiences of care and connection outside of the family that have emerged in moments of social protest such as camps and protest-kitchens (O'Brien, 2023, pp. 203–218; Lewis, 2022, pp. 77–78).

But that attempt to avoid a utopian 'metaphysical moment'—where we create an 'ethical object', an 'image', or a 'pictorial' representation of the good society—is a mistake (Cooke, 2004, p. 419). As I have tried to show above, it is only speculative institutional detail that allows political *problems* to emerge from the utopian experiment, and political problems are the engine of political dialogue and development. In short, we need more, not less, description of worlds without families, if we are going to engage with family abolition as a radical transformative project.

That description is important, not least because it allows us to engage with 'realist' questions about power, resources, cooperation, and conflict. The relation between utopianism and realism, of course, is an old problem, and it has been discussed by leading figures in current debates over family abolition (Weeks, 2011, p. 174–225; Weeks, 2021). My claim here is not that some sense of 'realism' should hold us back from utopian speculation, but rather the opposite: that there are some kinds of realist concern that can *only* be addressed in the most speculative and detailed forms of utopianism.[16] Utopian family abolitionism should develop its 'metaphysical moment' precisely because it should take seriously its obligations to say something about power and resources in a world without families. The more it relies on

[16] Cf. Rawls on realistic utopianism: 'I begin and end with the idea of a realistic utopia. Political Philosophy is realistically utopian when it extends what are ordinarily thought of as the limits of practical political possibility' (Rawls, 1999b, p. 6).

an account of transformed human subjects who can cooperate and care without conflict, the less it has to say about power—and the worse off it is for this neglect. It is one of the most interesting aspects of family abolition, that it forces us to rethink how power would and should operate if our most familiar institutional forms of power relationships were dismantled. Without the twin pillars of familial power and state power, how would disagreement be resolved and resources produced and distributed? What forms of physical and social mobility would individuals have in a world without state borders, but equally without welfare states? There is a form of family abolitionist utopianism that refuses to ask these questions, because it refuses to speculate on any specific world without families. But there is an alternative that is both utopian and realist in the alternative senses that I have proposed in this paper: a blueprint utopianism that tries to answer realist questions about power, resources, and conflict. O'Brien's work takes us further in this direction than has been achieved before, but reaches its limit in problems of distribution and equality at scale.

The recognition that there are many paths to a world without families, and many possible such worlds, is the first step towards engaging with family abolition as something more than mere provocation. Following Trotsky's warning, we should insist that abolishing the family is not the same as replacing it, and that hopes for a dialectical *Aufhebung* of the family do not remove the need to speculate on what a world without families would be like. Family abolition should embrace its 'metaphysical moment' in blueprint utopianism and should use realist problems about power, resources, trade-offs, and the limits of human capacity to sharpen its claims. Imagining a world without families as a 'glorious and abundant nothing' (Lewis, 2022, p. 88) is a way of refusing political dialogue. It should be rejected.

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