

The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Marxism at the Intersection

Holly Lewis, London: Zed Books 2016

Reviewed by Roz Ward

The election of Donald Trump to the White House in the USA has re-ignited debates about the relationship between class and identity in Western politics. A public polarisation around particular ‘culture wars’ has targeted queer and transgender people internationally (Kováts, 2017). As a result, there has been a radicalisation within the conservative right of politics (Nicholas and Agius, 2017). For example the boldness of President Trump in expelling transgender people from the US army (Phillip, 2017) and the compulsory promotion of heteronormative family values under the Presidency of Bolsonaro in Brazil (Phillips, 2018). In this challenging context, Holly Lewis proposes a theoretical response to the question of how to fight for economic justice *and* against gender or sexuality-based oppression.

Lewis certainly has an ambitious aim, to support a new generation of queer and trans Marxists in a quest to engage Marxist theory in a contemporary dialogue with Feminism and Queer Theory. Within this dialogue, Lewis is clear that Marxism offers a “fundamental insight” which is “that capitalism operates through the expropriation of surplus value from labour” (pp.89). The book goes on to argue that “the centrality of class is tactical, not moral” (pp.275). This points to the potential that the working class has to shut down production and therefore provide a material challenge to the exploitative economic relationships that are central to capitalism. The working class – in all their diversity – are not deemed to be morally more progressive but are the only people who hold a collective and strategic power.

Historically, many scholars and activists have attempted to understand and explain the ways in which economic exploitation and class divisions are connected or intersect with women’s and queer oppression. Indeed, it has been one of the key challenges for both Marxists and Feminists since the 1970s (Vogel, 1987, Gimenez, 2005, Sayers et al., 1987). In *The Politics of Everybody*, Lewis proposes a new approach to thinking about queer and trans oppression from an economic perspective; *queer Marxism*. Where Lewis argues that classical Marxism “failed to keep up with much of the argument” around queer and trans politics, this book races to make up that ground.

The book is structured in four parts that aim to examine contemporary queer and trans politics with a materialist lens. For Lewis, a Marxist ‘politics of everybody’ is not about erasing individual identities, but attempting to reveal key social relationships that underpin capitalism. In attempting to engage with readers from

different theoretical backgrounds who may be unfamiliar with Marxism, the book begins with a lengthy section outlining what Lewis describes as the “terms of the debate”. This includes a useful introduction to the economics of capitalism as well as an argument that philosophical and theoretical debates are best understood in their material context with a whirlwind tour of some of the major shifts that have led to Queer Theory. The second section endeavors to challenge some of the caricatures of Marxism through historic examples and set the scene for the subsequent case for *queer Marxism*. In the Conclusions section, Lewis calls on readers to ‘take sides’ with an inclusive internationalism that recognises the urgency of creating a shared future free from oppression and exploitation.

In many ways, Lewis’s work fits within the developing field of Social Reproduction Theory that finds its origins in the 1970s debates on how to account for women’s domestic labour within a Marxist analysis of capitalism. The major contours of these debates can be found in Lise Vogel’s 1983 book *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory* that was re-published in 2013 (Vogel, 2013). Vogel sets out to challenge the idea that two theories are needed for the separate systems of patriarchy and capitalism, a position known as ‘dual-systems theory’. However, despite wanting to defend Marxism, Vogel also argues that there was “in-disputable failure [on the part] of Marx and Engels to develop adequate tools and a comprehensive theory on women” (1987). While Lewis is also offering a defence of Marxism, she similarly concedes that there are gaps in the work of Marx and Engels around how to explain sexual oppression and a “blind spot” in relation to the reproduction of the working class (pp. 144).

Tithi Bhattacharya’s edited collection of essays *Social Reproduction Theory* (2017), like *The Politics of Everybody*, aims to fill this perceived gap in how to understand the role of generational reproductive labour in sustaining and maintaining exploitation and capital accumulation. Bhattacharya argues that the “fundamental insight of SRT is, simply put, that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole” and that it “seeks to make visible labor and work that are analytically hidden by classical economists and politically denied by policy makers” (Bhattacharya, 2018). *The Politics of Everybody* operates within this SRT framework to draw out further connections between these forms of reproductive human labour and queer oppression.

Lewis relies heavily on the work of Vogel in particular throughout the book, arguing that understanding the relations of production rather than property relations is key to being able to fit women’s oppression into a Marxist understanding of capitalist economics. The basic premise is that capitalism needs a supply of labor power that is most commonly provided through “generational replacement” (pp.151) - workers having children who become workers – rather than immigrant labor or bringing non-working adults back into the workforce (e.g. former full time parents, prison labor, or unemployed homeless). The primary role of women as caregivers for children and in performing the domestic labor necessary to sustain workers other than themselves is therefore crucial to maintaining the relations of production.

While families are the fundamental unit for generational replacement, Lewis gives examples of other forms of labor production that do not require family units. These include labor camps and prison labor which are always segregated by sex.

When workers in these camps leave or die they are replaced by other prisoners or laborers. Lewis argues that as a result of these alternative methods of replacing workers, “queer subcultural practices are simply not inherently anti-capitalist” and that “the truth is that capitalist expansion can do quite well without the family”. While these examples of labor reproduction outside the family are useful, the question of where the alternative replacement workers come from is not addressed. Presumably the next intake of prisoners or workers in a labor camp were mostly born and raised within privatised family structures?

Within these feminist debates about the centrality of the family, Lewis correctly identifies a failure to account for racial divisions in society. Drawing on the work of Angela Davis, Lewis argues that due to the conditions of slave labour in the US in particular, a different history of gender relations can be found in Black communities. The subsequent ‘undoing’ of the gender of Black women under slavery was not progressive, it meant that they were treated and worked as hard as men (pp.157). Racist gendered stereotypes in relation to Black men and Black women continue to serve to promote social violence and assist the refusal to accept the fact that Black lives matter. The relationship of Black women to reproductive rights also has a different history with brutal sterilizations performed on hundreds of thousands of Black women across the US in the mid-twentieth century (pp.160).

It is when Lewis moves on to provide a critique of patriarchy, identity politics, intersectionality and queer theory that the strongest elements of the book emerge. In these sections there is a refreshing directness to the style of writing that leaves no doubt about the point being made. The critique of a politics of queer ‘lifestyle’ comes under a particularly direct attack;

It is romantic to think that you can change the world through diverse sexuality, creative self-expression, and communal bonding. But you can’t...

Thus, those who are gender non-conforming are not necessarily poor; those who are gay and lesbian are not necessarily middle class. Opposing normativity is a politically empty gesture. Queer culture is not anti-capitalist. And neither is queering culture (pp. 275–6).

When queer subculture is raised to the level of political principle, it becomes an elitism that ultimately can be inhabited only by those financially independent enough to break their ties with the working classes and by those who do not have to worry about racist, anti-immigrant violence (pp.164–5)

The critique of identity politics is equally incisive. Lewis situates the rise of a ‘vector system’ of oppressions that have no clear origin but might sometimes ‘intersect’ in low levels of class struggle, the degeneration of Marxist influence in the academy, and the position of middle class thinkers. This section demonstrates a useful materialist approach to understanding theoretical or academic ‘turns’. Expanding on the work of Barbara Fields (Fields, 1990, Fields and Fields, 2014), Lewis goes on to use the example of race to illustrate the weaknesses of a politics of identity. Lewis (and Fields) argue that race is best understood as an ideological product of racism not an innate sense of white superiority that can be thought of ahistorically. In a similar way, ideas about gender and supposedly ‘biological’ sex categories can be understood, as Judith Butler does, as a product of repeated actions based in social relations that become normalised (p.199).

These explanations for race and gender are then compared with the way in which class is perceived as a category of oppression. The idea, or more accurately the ideology, that people can move between classes or that they occupy a position in the working class due to individual failure provides a level of suspicion not present in other categories of identity. Without an economic framework, class discrimination becomes *classism* which can only really be addressed by correcting people's wrong ideas. This is presented as a further failure of identity politics.

Turning to the queer part of *queer Marxism*, Lewis situates the emergence of the first gay liberation movement alongside a broader emancipatory project associated with a whole series of class and identity-based struggles that culminated in the high point of May 1968. These movements retreated through the 1970s and were further limited and fractured with the AIDs crisis in the 1980s. Lewis argues that the politics of Queer Nationalism could only develop in a climate where Marxism was thoroughly rejected. The establishment of 'safe spaces' created new barriers between queer and straight people where queer was promoted above other differences in political activity. Lewis is correct to identify the weaknesses in some of the subsequent work that claimed to provide a Marxist critique of Queer Theory (Morton, 1996, Kirsch, 2013, Penney, 2013). Lewis argues that these often highly polemical works fall into the trap of ascribing too much weight to the idea that theory drives activism and often end up becoming an argument for a new identity in the form of 'anti-identity'.

Moving on to explore Lisa Duggan's popular notion of 'homonormativity' (Duggan, 2002), and the equally influential idea of 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2017), Lewis accepts the premise that the demand for equal marriage fits into a "legacy of imperialism" (p. 225) while conceding that the decision of same sex couples to marry or not to marry should not be understood as a political act. Lewis points out that a rejection of normativity does not imply a rejection of capitalism or neoliberalism or the participation in anything other than individual acts. Lewis also observes that these 'non-normative' subcultures often replace one set of 'norms' with another (pp. 229).

The final section of the book deals with the question 'what should queer politics demand today?' The limitations of the contemporary queer left in the US are a good starting point. The lack of an economic understanding of class and class struggle, and the idea that families perform the same conservatising function for working class and ruling class people are highlighted by Lewis as major hurdles to progress (pp.234). With low levels of class struggle, queers have become susceptible to "wishful thinking" and a "hope that queer sexuality itself could be a material force capable of challenging capitalism" (pp. 236).

It is Lewis's final conclusion, that "queer Marxism is only necessary insofar as Marxism does not automatically include trans, gender non-conforming, and sexually diverse people into its analysis of social relations" (pp.281) that is most troubling for those of us who work with both Marxism and sexuality. Lewis accepts Vogel (1987) and Brown's (2013) critiques of Engels *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) including the idea that Engels did not pay enough attention to the psychological and ideological components of male supremacy in working class families. But for many Marxists the idea that Engels did not cover all aspect of women's or queer liberation may be missing the point. An assessment of Marx and Engels in their historical context shows how it may be naïve to think that they would

address 'queer' identity. In that case, the usefulness of Marxism may not be about particular content, but more about the nature of the dialectical project of a Marxism that is constantly in motion (Wolf, 2009).

Although Lewis offers some explanation of dialectics, the book does not engage with how a Marxist dialectical method is key defence against reductionism. Understanding that the totality of society is constantly dynamic and made up of many contradictory parts that react and interact with each other and the whole and cannot be simply reduced to single aspects is important in being able to investigate which parts may be more important or even fundamental. Objective and subjective realities, economics, culture, institutions, laws and human actions all make up parts of this totality. Sexuality and gender identity are subject to these same dynamics that a Marxist method can contribute to illuminating.

The ambiguity that Lewis has about the nature of what she describes as "(arguably) non-capitalist societies such as Cuba, the Soviet Union, and China" (pp. 152) may provide a clue about the type of socialist tradition that shapes the politics of this book. This is also reflected in arguments about women's progress in the Chinese revolution of 1925–27 and left nationalist movements in Latin America (pp. 168) as well as her description of the collapse of the Soviet Union as "communism crumbling beneath the weight of its errors" (pp. 175). Unlike the revolutionary traditions that describe the Soviet Union and China as examples of 'State Capitalism' (Cliff, 1974, Resnick and Wolff, 1993), Lewis is equivocal about whether or not these places are capitalist or communist. This lack of clarity could be an indication of a particular perspective on the kind of socialist future Lewis envisages, although this is not specifically addressed in the book.

When Lewis argues that class "is primary—not in the sense of more important, but in the sense of being the limit, the foundation, the point where profit is extracted and the point where it can be challenged. The centrality of class is tactical, not moral" (pp. 274–5) there is a danger of the argument collapsing back into economic determinism that puts economic questions before questions of identity. Without making the connections between struggles or acts of resistance around identity and class struggle, the argument misses a step of *how class power is mobilised*. It is certainly a challenging environment for Marxist scholars working across a period of historically low levels of class struggle but this should encourage us to work even harder to convince those who subscribe to oppositional theoretical frameworks that Marxism is not a 19th century relic. Allowing space for a more thorough engagement with the core texts of Marxism, rather than selective dismissals of Marx and Engels, would potentially support this project (Allman, 2010).

In conclusion, Lewis puts forward "Ten axioms towards a queer Marxist future" centred on a commitment to solidarity that "implies antagonism" and the "taking of sides" (pp. 259). Many of these are useful counterweights to prevailing ideas about stultified approaches to Marxism. A politics of everybody, Lewis argues, is not about unity for the moral sake of it but about understanding the totality of the world as a way of understanding how to change it. Despite some weaknesses, in the current political climate, Lewis's argument that "women's sexual liberation is tied to class struggle" (pp. 182) and that queer liberation is not possible without the dismantling of capitalist economic relations is an important intervention.

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