

## Love's Demands

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**I**N *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, Sophie Lewis weaves a compelling, generative, and accessible case for family abolitionism.<sup>1</sup> In under a hundred pages, the four chapters cover vast historical and theoretical ground. They take us from an introduction to family abolitionism and the arguments behind it, to a consideration of some of its history, its most challenging questions and, finally, some reflections on the family-free futures we might work towards.

The persuasiveness of Lewis' work derives in part from its willingness to reinterpret its own genre. *Abolish the Family* is not a typical manifesto. Where we might expect unshakeable convictions and bold predictions, Lewis from the very first page grants an unusual amount of space to fear and (self-)doubt. The book opens by acknowledging family abolitionism's 'explosive emotional freight', the many anxieties the idea elicits, and Lewis even admits how 'scary (psychologically challenging)' she finds it herself.<sup>2</sup> Lewis aims neither to dispel our fears nor to distract us from them, but to convince us, in the face of them, that family abolitionism is a cause worth fighting for. The light Lewis casts is that of a warm torch held by an equally frightened but determined friend offering to accompany us from where we are to where we need to go.

The case Lewis presents for abolitionism rests in part on an analysis of what the family does. The family, Lewis argues, serves as an oppressive capitalist technology that 'incubates chauvinism and competition ... manufactures 'individuals' with a cultural, ethnic, and binary gender identity; a class; and a racial consciousness ... performs free labor for the market ... [and] functions as capitalism's base unit'.<sup>3</sup> The struggle for the abolition of the family thus becomes a fight for our liberation. Lewis is at her most absorbing and witty, however, when she builds her defence of family abolitionism on what the family fails to deliver. Here, she reminds us that the 'guaranteed belonging, trust, recognition, and fulfilment' as well as care that we often associate with the family 'remains a bit of a fiction'.<sup>4</sup> All too regularly, the family turns into a horror story, the most frequent site of rape, murder, blackmail, bullying, verbal

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this commentary was first presented on Monday 10 October 2022 in All Souls College, Oxford at a roundtable on Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (London: Verso, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 10, 8.

and physical abuse. Anyone promising to treat us like family, Lewis provocatively observes, ‘ought to register as a horrible threat’.<sup>5</sup> If we truly love our family members – that is, by Lewis’ definition, ‘struggle for their autonomy as well as for their immersion in care, insofar such abundance is possible in a world choked by capital’ – we will wish more for them than the ‘organized poverty’ of care that is the family system.<sup>6</sup> We will reach instead for different relations and ways of distributing care, ‘for an abundance we have never known and have yet to organize’.<sup>7</sup> The family, Lewis says, ‘is getting in the way of alternatives’.<sup>8</sup>

Lewis’s willingness to entertain critiques and alternative views makes reading *Abolish the Family* feel like an open invitation to join the discussion. In what remains, I would like to offer some reflections in the spirit of such a conversation.

One question I have asked myself is what kind of relationship Lewis sees between the family abolitionist project and the reimagining of our romantic and sexual relationships. In *Abolish the Family*, Lewis’s claim that to love someone truly means to want more care for them than the family can offer is framed in terms of the child-parent relationship. If love implies a wish for care ‘then restricting the number of mothers (of whatever gender) to whom a child has access, on the basis that I am the ‘real’ mother, is not necessarily a love worthy of the name’.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, children who love their mothers would not wish on them the ‘oppressiveness’ and ‘loneliness’ of family-motherhood: ‘when you love someone, it simply makes no sense to endorse a social technology that isolates them, privatises their lifeworld, arbitrarily assigns their dwelling-place, class, and very identity in law, and drastically circumscribes their sphere of intimate, interdependent ties’.<sup>10</sup> That is all very true and, indeed, compelling. But why the focus on the child-parent relationship? Might we not also be drawn to abolish the family because we would like our partners to experience a richer intimate life, the possibilities of freer, more fulfilling amorous relationships than the restrictive form of the family allows? And if loving someone means to wish for them an abundance of care and autonomy, should we not also be unravelling the possessive nets of monogamy?

To think of family abolitionism and ethical non-monogamy as deeply interrelated is nothing new. We might think of Becky Chambers’s *Wayfarers* series (2014-2021) in which the lizard-like Aandrisk follow a communal childrearing scheme where ‘house families’ composed of older Aandrisk, raise the hatchlings of their younger, fertile counterparts. This gives young adult Aandrisk the freedom to travel or study, and to pursue exciting and emotionally meaningful intimate lives with other Aandrisk adults of their own choosing, their ‘feather families.’ The nuclear family is abandoned to make

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 2, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 2-3.

space for greater personal, emotional, romantic, and sexual fulfilment.<sup>11</sup> In Lewis' work, too, family abolitionism and polyamory (or consensual non-monogamy) often appear together. Almost all the figures, cultures, and movements Lewis cites in her potted history of family abolitionism – from 19<sup>th</sup>-century French utopian Charles Fourier through to American indigenous tribes, enslaved and emancipated African Americans, early European socialists, Karl Marx, Soviet revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai, women's liberationist Shulamith Firestone to late 20<sup>th</sup>-century gay liberationists – all advocated for and practiced non-monogamous relationships, as Lewis emphasises. How then are we to understand the relationship between family abolitionism and the reinvention of our intimate relationships? And why not frame the family abolitionist project in part as driven by the search for more satisfying amorous relationships?

The second thread I wish to explore concerns a particular alternative to the family that is not foregrounded by Lewis but that, as a queer historian, I cannot help but examine: community. Having earlier considered a wealth of historical and contemporary traditions of organising social life beyond the nuclear family, Lewis in the final chapter once more asks her readers to explore different ways of standing in relationship to each other. 'It's time to practice being kith<sup>12</sup> or, better, comrades – including toward members of our 'biofam' – building structures of dependency, need and provision with no kinship dimension'.<sup>13</sup> I wonder whether 'community' might feature on this list of alternative structures and relationships.

Two considerations motivate my question. First, community's historical legacy. Community has long been the practical answer some groups, especially LGBT+ people, have given to their own family horror stories. When U.S. homophile activists in 1960s San Francisco first began deploying ideas of community, it was in part because they hoped that community might provide the care they were being denied by their families. Homophile activist Guy Strait understood 'community' as a collective that would 'look after our own,' and urged his fellow activists to launch 'a great program of mutual assistance' that included a blood and clothing bank.<sup>14</sup> Mark Forrester, another homophile activist, envisioned that the first gay community centre founded in 1966 San Francisco would act as a halfway house 'for the so-called 'rejects' of society, the unloved, the unwanted, those who do not seem to fit into society's general idea of a productive citizenship'.<sup>15</sup> Forrester explicitly included young gays who had been disowned by their families. And James 'Robbie' Robinson, a gay bartender who had been abused as a child by his father describes how

<sup>11</sup> Aandrisk society is discussed at greatest length in Becky Chambers, *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), 249-78.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis suggests the Old English 'kith,' 'a form of dynamic relation between beings, a bond similar to 'kin,' but one whose ground is knowledge, practice, and place' as a helpful intermediary and bridge out of the familiar kin into the unfamiliar post-family society. Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> [Guy Strait], 'The Community', *L.C.E. News* 1, No. 25 (17 Sept. 1962).

<sup>15</sup> Mark Forrester, 'A Halfway House,' undated, *Don Lucas Papers*, Box 11, Folder 4, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

discovering the idea of a community meant that ‘We were a ‘family’ and could speak about our needs and demand that they be recognized.’<sup>16</sup> While some of these activists conceived of community rather narrowly as a gay community that only included homosexuals, others imagined community more broadly as a collective that would include and nurture a great variety of different groups.<sup>17</sup> The inventors of ‘gay community’ were themselves following in the footsteps of earlier traditions. Most notably, they were able to draw on ideas circulating in the Civil Rights movement, particularly Martin Luther King’s ideas of ‘beloved community’, as models for reimagining care and interdependence.<sup>18</sup> Feminist thinkers like Chela Sandoval, Judith Butler, and Audre Lorde have likewise all expressed their desire for new, inclusive visions and instantiations of community.<sup>19</sup>

The second reason ‘community’ strikes me as a possible paradigm for post-familial relations and webs of care lies in its continued popularity with grassroots movements. ‘Community’ has found widespread appeal since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Self-styled community groups have sprung up all around the country to provide the solidarity and support neither the state nor the family could reliably provide. In my hometown of Oxford, ‘community’ was most prominently taken up by Oxford Community Action (OCA). OCA is a community-led group composed mostly of multi-ethnic BAME working-class and immigrant activists who provide food, childcare services, and many other services to many different local communities, including some of the most marginalised groups in Oxford. The way many people practice ‘comradeliness’ today, for better or for worse, is not as self-proclaimed communists but as proud ‘community members’.

Let me close with a reflection on the proximity of family abolition. Lewis’ book ends on a pessimistic note, with her belief that she is unlikely to witness the abolition of the family in her lifetime.<sup>20</sup> Across the book, she gives reasons for this conclusion: the failure of varied and powerful movements and activist-thinkers to abolish the family; the absence of family abolitionism in contemporary liberal politics. ‘To attack the family is as unthinkable in liberal-democratic politics as it has ever been’, Lewis laments.<sup>21</sup> And yet, Lewis’s wide-ranging historical survey contains grounds for optimism, too. Family abolition might have failed to achieve widespread uptake, but it is an idea that never

<sup>16</sup> James ‘Robbie’ Robinson, *My Story, One Gay’s Fight: From Hate to Acceptance*, (GLC 197), James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center, San Francisco Public Library, [2017], 75.

<sup>17</sup> Mori Reithmayr, ‘The Invention of Gay Community in San Francisco, 1953-1969,’ [unpublished MS].

<sup>18</sup> On Martin Luther King’s idea of ‘beloved community,’ see for example Michele Moody-Adams, ‘The Path of Conscientious Citizenship,’ in Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (eds), *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 269-89, 270-5.

<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 118-19; Kai Cheng Thom, *I Hope We Choose Love: A Trans Girl’s Notes from the End of the World* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019), 9; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]), 112; Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 69.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 88.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 7.

gone away, despite powerful opposition. Taking seriously Lewis's appeal to think about what our love for one another should entail can amplify this optimism. Our desire to see our loved ones enjoy an abundance of care and freedom can push both self-identified and reluctant family abolitionists to reorient themselves and reach beyond insufficient familial patterns of care. And the 'everyday utopian experiments' such love can inspire 'do generate strands of an altogether different social tissue: microcultures which could be scaled up if the movement for a classless society took seriously the premise that households can be formed freely and run democratically', as Lewis herself emphasises.<sup>22</sup> After putting down *Abolish the Family*, the family's abolition can seem both near and far.

Perhaps, then, those of us convinced of the importance of the cause need to develop a kind of double vision. As Ursula Le Guin, an author Lewis often takes as an interlocutor, once suggested, 'if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers' we are as androgynous as the inhabitants of some of her own fictional worlds. How might we today, in the light of our reality, already be family abolitionists at certain odd times of day here on Earth, whether we realise it or not?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, (New York: Ace Books, 1976), ix.