Contradiction and Making the World Anew

Kushti Westwood
Hertford College, Oxford

'The left is trying to take grandma away, now, and confiscate the kids, and this is supposed to be progressive? What the fuck?'[1] Sophie Lewis is tongue-in-cheek when engaging with critics of her proposal to abolish the family. But Lewis is clear that she is not chiding us for the love of our family, if we are lucky enough to have that. The proposal to abolish the family itself presents a very real existential challenge to us and to our economic and social systems at large. Lewis's attack is not on our need for love or care. In fact, the book should be read as advancing a case for *more* love and *more* care. She asks us to see differently the problems of the family, its institutions, history, and how we care for each other. Lewis proposes that we instead consider the following questions: what would it mean to not need the family? Could we not imagine something *better* than the family for how we organise care?

To answer these questions, Lewis thinks we must first ask about the conditions that made the nuclear family possible. In prioritising this question, she harks back to a long and sometimes ignored feminist tradition that looks to denaturalise the family and its institutions. It is a tradition that points out that many of the standard characteristics of the Western family – mum, dad, 2.5 children, a dog, and a white picket fence – are neither necessary nor inevitable. Lewis prompts us to consider the role that patriarchy, whiteness, empire, and other systems of domination have in creating and shaping this reality, our reality.

At the centre of this analysis is a story about how the family privatises care. Drawing on Kathi Weeks, Lewis argues that all families participate in this process of enclosure.[2] Locked away in our households, the work that reproduces the workforce, and cares for children, the sick, and the elderly is done mostly by women working for free, perhaps out of a sense of obligation or duty, or by domestic workers on desperately low pay. Lewis proposes that this is an environment in which love cannot flourish, not really. Many critics of family abolition often stumble at this first hurdle, responding 'But, I love

[1] 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).
[2] Kathi Weeks, 'Abolition of the Family: The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal', *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 3 (2023 [online first 2021]), 433–53.

my kids!' It's not that Lewis doesn't think that you love them, or that you only visit grandma out of obligation. However, Lewis repeatedly emphasises that we should all be so lucky to feel such love. She reminds readers that the family is not always the safe haven that some assume. At the heart of Lewis' point is that during this process of enclosure, where our care work is shut away from the world and routinely undervalued and under-supported, this does not lay the ground for happiness to flourish. As Silvia Federici said of this situation, 'They said it is love, we say it is unwaged work'.[3]

Before I read Lewis' book, I was certainly critical of the family and its functions. I don't think, however, that I would have counted myself as a family abolitionist. It is rare to find a book that prompts the kinds of personal and in-depth discussions about family, love, and care as this one does. The success of *Abolish the Family* lies partly in its patience. It takes seriously a range of critical or hesitant responses to what Kathi Weeks has called feminism's 'most infamous proposal': the complete abolition of the family.[4] That is, the complete dismantling of the family as a particular sociological and economic unit – though "Abolish the family!" is certainly a catchier slogan. Surely, the sympathetic critic might say, it is not that we need to abolish the family, we need to *reform* its institutions. Should the aim not be to expand the definition, and so the boundaries, of the family, such that it might include queer families or other non-traditional family forms? Such a reader might be willing to advocate for the abolition of the nuclear, patriarchal family; but why should we target marginalised families, which might themselves be sites of resistance to the dominant nuclear paradigm?

Lewis is adept at handling these critiques as she takes readers through them step by step. Lewis notes how it is simultaneously possible to love one's Black family, even to see it as a site of safety in a world of white supremacy, and to understand that the family itself emerged because of the forms of violence involved in empire, colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. This love might lead some to want to resist the family or it might mean we cling to it. For Lewis, 'reforming' or 'abolishing' the family isn't some sort of semantic disagreement. It is especially difficult terrain to discuss marginalised family forms, who often practice the kinds of kinship we might want more of. Lewis dwells on what we might salvage from these family forms, considering what other ways of organising kinship could emerge from them. Rather than electing to say that we need an *expanded* family form and specifying that we should abolish white, cisheterosexual, patriarchal families, Lewis clarifies what she takes abolition to mean in this context. When she calls for the abolition of all families, Lewis is calling for an end to the privatisation of care as its most fundamental feature. Though marginalised family forms may contain seeds of potential for Lewis to organise kinship in ways that are better than the family, she warns against forgetting to turn a

[3] Silvia Federici, 'Wages Against Housework', in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 15.
[4] Weeks, 'Abolition of the Family'.

critical lens to even marginalised family forms. What becomes clear is that, yes, Lewis does mean *abolition* of the family, all families.

If you read Lewi's book and you're sold on the idea of abolishing the family, then the question quickly becomes: 'How?' Abolishing the family and the necessary revolution it entails (or perhaps presupposes) is not an event anyone will be hosting next Tuesday. The answer is more complicated, and it cuts to the heart of what 'abolition' really means. For Lewis, as for other family abolitionists, to speak of abolition is not merely to call for an absence. Lewis is clear that the project is one of world-building, of institution building, which requires continuous and collective acts of creativity. Positioning the book as "critically utopian", she pushes us to reimagine social reproduction, and its organisation, from its very foundations. The family, she argues, is really what is utopian here, meant in the pejorative sense of that word. For many of us, the family can seldom live up to the myth surrounding it, and it leaves us wanting. Lewis could easily talk about the shocking domestic violence statistics and the violence that surrounds the family as an institution, which she gestures towards at points. However, even absent this, Lewis recognises that the family is often a site of discomfort and begrudging obligation. As she remarks, it is uncomfortable and often met with anger to suggest that we all deserve better than what we got growing up.

That you love your family members and yet you would also happily see the institution wither away might seem contradictory. But why are we so often allergic to seeming contradiction? Can the analysis of contradiction, as Marx showed, not be revelatory? Throughout the book, Lewis insists that the willingness to dwell in contradiction is a necessary condition for much abolitionist thought.

In their 2022 book, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners and Beth Richie introduce this as 'both/and' thinking, rather than binary 'either/or' thinking.[5] This is to say that abolition often requires that we do multiple things at once. It is a framework that does not shy away from contradictions. As the authors argue, rather than a limitation, these contradictions themselves might be a spark for change and generate necessary sites of analysis.[6] How, for example, does the movement for family abolition speak to other abolitionist movements like prison abolition or those who hold post-work ambitions? Are there tensions between these visions of abolition, or are they movements with the same ends in mind?

Lewis writes that the family is a shield that many, particularly the most marginalised, took up to survive a war. She invites us to consider that the war does not have to go on forever. In putting down the shield, the steps to ending that war require us to do things that might be in tension. In the final chapter, Lewis indicates that for us this means reducing harms in the moment, such as through fighting forced family separations at the border or offering solidarity to a queer kid in that same family should she need it. But these actions are not our horizon.

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[5] Angela Y. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2022), 3.
[6] Davis et al, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, 3-6.

The vision Lewis presents of abolishing the family is one that is far off. As she ends the book, she remarks that it's a future that we might not yet be able to desire fully. If the task for feminism is, as Amia Srinivasan puts it in *The Right to Sex* (2021), that we transform the world beyond recognition, this complete and utter transformation might yet seem like something we are not able to fully grasp.[7] It is nonetheless important to see that there is a kernel of this future to be found in our present. These kernels may be taken from art and architecture, poetry, protest camps, marginalised family forms or other 'experiments in imagining otherwise'.[8] Scraps of inspiration for how to build something *better* are to be found in the here and now.

How might we bridge this gap between the near and the far-off? In reflecting on this tension, I was reminded of a quote from *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* expressing the difficult task we have in remaking the world anew:

> The productive tension of holding onto a radical, real and deep vision while engaging in the messy daily practice *is* the feminist praxis: the work of everyday people to try, to build, to make. And this requires collectivity. Always.[9]

When I first read the ending of Lewis' book, I was struck with a sense of melancholy. Perhaps it is true we cannot yet fully know what it means to desire a world without the family, where we can be together as people and we end the separation of peoples. It even feels uncomfortable to recognise the radical hope that Lewis expresses in her vision of a 'glorious and abundant nothing' that may come after the family. For many of us invested in projects of abolition, including the abolition of the family or prisons, we likely won't see or reap the benefits of our collective struggle in our lifetimes. Despite this, our work remains to do what we can to build something better for a future that will not be ours to inhabit but that we have to hope for and to do our best to imagine.

[7] Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), xi.
[8] Lola Olufemi, *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (Maidstone: Hajar Press, 2021).
[9] Davis et al, *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, 16.