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Reviews

Theorizing trans liberation

- Reviews section -

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And yet, much like the politics of Black liberation, the growth of trans liberation politics has also coincided with a reactionary backlash. This reaction comes from the far right, who seek to gain by ratcheting up a supposed culture war, and from those liberals whose narrow commitment to identify politics rely on rigid, binary definitions of gender. This tension between the Right, sections of the liberal center, and the far left is more than a symbolic struggle meant to maneuver for political advantage. Rather, it is one important site of contestation over the methods by which global capitalism seeks to maintain and extend profit through the categorization of different bodies and the values placed on them.

The current political moment generally moves between outright exclusion and selective accommodation of trans people. State legislatures have passed bills that refuse transgender youth lifesaving access to hormone replacement therapies and puberty blockers, ban trans youth athletes from participation in scholastic sports, and restrict trans people's access to public accommodations (so called "bathroom bills"). However, capitalism has also made room for selective accommodation. Trans bodies are allowed access to public spaces on the condition that they neatly replicate a cisgender binary—a replication that is continually under public scrutiny and one that maintains close relation to employment precarity.

This ideological contest is not without consequence. According to [Human Rights Campaign](#), 2020 was the deadliest year for trans people on record. In the U.S. alone, 44 transgender and gender variant people were killed by "violent fatal acts," and 2021 is on track to supersede that number. What is clear is that continued violence against trans people has been made worse by the Right exploiting our existence as a wedge issue.

It is into this political space that a number of works examining trans oppression have emerged; Transgender Marxism is one such volume. Published by Pluto Press and edited by Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, Transgender Marxism collects an array of voices that theorize and historicize the particularities of trans oppression using a Marxist lens. The collection does not put forward a singular theory nor does it seek to amplify a singular Marxist tradition. Instead, the book offers readers access to a variety of debates that have been taking place in formal and informal trans Marxist intellectual spaces. In their introduction, Gleeson and O'Rourke describe the origins of the project as an "anthology [that] collects theoretical perspectives by transgender writers that [they] had noticed spreading across ephemeral spaces: activist circles, book clubs, and social media, in zines and social media DMs." Though the authors included in the collection vary their approach and points of entry into the discussion of trans liberation, two trends of inquiry emerge throughout the book. The first question asks readers to consider the ways capitalism determines the value of trans bodies and the location of trans bodies in labor. The second question asks readers to extend social reproduction theory to consider the ways trans people make and remake themselves and their communities.

Michelle O'Brien and Kate Doyle Giffiths are two authors whose work explores the (de)valuing and location of trans bodies in the workplace. O'Brien's essay, "Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labor Discipline and Gender Freedom" argues that trans people experience unique exploitation in the workplace, which determines both the form and location of employment. She writes:

Deviant or non-normative gender expressions exclude queer people from work, constrain the industries where we can find work, and make experience at work contentious and dangerous (49).

Theorizing trans liberation

Beginning with 1930s passenger ocean liners (an industry later organized by the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union), O'Brien traces the location of trans or gender nonconforming workers through airlines, retail, sex work, and service work. Her essay links identity-based struggles to workplace struggles and illustrates a keen relationship between the two. O'Brien demonstrates that even in these "queer" work spaces, gender expression remains strictly policed. One example featured in her essay is the unionization campaign among workers at Toys in Babeland—self-described as a "women owned" and "sex positive" sex toy shop. O'Brien chronicles the gender discipline experienced by transgender and gender nonconforming workers at the shop. She cites unsafe working conditions, harassment from customers, and enforcement of rigid dress codes specific to transfeminine employees that led workers at the Babeland and Pleasure Chest toy shops to unionize. O'Brien concludes her essay by arguing that the pronounced gender policing that trans people experience at work makes visible the gender policing experienced by workers broadly.

Like O'Brien, Kate Doyle Griffiths's "Queer Workerism Against Work: Strategizing Transgender Laborers, Social Reproduction & Class Formation" also explores the location of trans bodies in the workforce. They argue that trans workers are overrepresented in the fields of social reproduction (domestic work, health work, sex work, and specifically education and intellectual work)—occupations that are most often undervalued and undercompensated. Work is therefore a site of hyper-exploitation of trans labor:

trans and queer people often risk sustained unemployment, or when we do find work are often restricted to sectors that exploit our specific qualities and skills—those self-same qualities that mark us for stigma in the first place (134).

But Griffiths does not stop there. Acknowledging that the work of labor theorist Kim Moody centers on production (as opposed to reproduction) workers, Griffiths extends Moody's theory of labor choke points to trans (social) reproduction workers. Griffiths asserts that trans workers are uniquely positioned as a vanguard-like entity because of their shared, unique oppression and location within the workforce:

Trans/queer workers have the potential to intensify this connection between workplace organisation, targeted strategy with respect to logistics, and class consciousness. And also between shop floor struggles and social movements—united around class demands (141).

Griffiths argues that trans politics resist identitarianism and class reductionism, and that trans workers find themselves uniquely situated to transcend racial, religious, and ethno-nationalist boundaries.

A second major line of inquiry in Transgender Marxism extends the work social reproduction theorists have done in recent years to explore the unique needs and roles of trans people. Social reproduction theory makes visible the uncompensated and undercompensated labor necessary to reproduce the working class—a task necessary to the maintenance of capitalist profits. In Noah Zazanis' "Social Reproduction and Social Cognition: Theorizing (Trans)gender Identity Development in Community Context," Zazanis examines "the social relations produced and reproduced by trans people ... which allow for transitions to occur and identities to emerge" (33). Drawing on the work of Jules Joanne Gleeson, Zazanis contends that the act of transition requires the social reproduction labor of a community to produce it:

Trans social reproduction occurs and transgender identity formation is facilitated ... [through] instances of informal, unpaid labor for which a Marxist analysis is particularly well-suited (37-38).

Zazanis rejects both trans essentialism (the idea that a person is simply born in the wrong body), and gender socialization theories (the idea that early childhood socialization determines gender). Instead he places social cognition theory in context with social reproduction theory and argues that social influences construct gender throughout the lifetime of an individual. Zazanis emphasizes that this construction of gender is work—specifically social reproduction work—for both cisgender and transgender experiences. He argues that in the same way schooling, religion, and the family work at reproducing cisgender identities, trans people reproduce themselves through relations of social reproduction. Trans people mentor, coach, and provide emotional and physical care for one another in ways that reproduce trans communities. Of course, the shape and context of this trans reproduction is differentiated by race and class, and is also delivered both virtually in the form of online communities as well as in person.

Like Noah Zazanis, Nathaniel Dickson also applies a social reproduction lens to the experience of transitioning. In his essay, “Seizing the Means: Towards a Trans Epistemology,” Dickson explores the work necessary to produce gender as well as the weaponization of the tools required to produce it. Even as trans people seek to subvert gender, they are required to bend the definitions of themselves to the frameworks allowed by capitalism. According to Dickson, trans people are asked to prove their transness to parents, doctors, judges, county clerks, and so forth in order to gain access to the tools of transition:

Because the integrity of gender is vital to maintaining and reproducing the conditions that capitalism requires to operate, any attempt to intervene in the process of producing gender must be articulated in a way that leaves that integrity intact, or else be denied entrance (205).

Dickson also points to the transformational collective efforts of trans people that make gender construction visible through a collective redefining of language, fashion, and the body. Dickson writes, “Trans people are productive in unruly ways; social reproductive labor is spent on teaching ourselves a new gendered relationship with the world.” He concludes his essay by emphasizing the human agency required to reimagine and redefine the self, and argues that this agency remains in conflict with the modes and aims of capitalism.

Perhaps my favorite essay in the collection, Farah Thompson’s “The Bridge Between Gender and Organizing,” provides a narrative companion to much of the more theoretical writing in the book. Her gorgeous and complex narrative places the explored origins of trans oppression within a lived experience. Chronicling her own coming out and transition, Thompson explores the gender policing that occurs in the family and the workplace. She discusses real-life consequences of exploitation of trans bodies, the double-burden of trans social reproductive responsibilities, and she asks hard questions about where the most marginalized section of the trans community—Black trans women—are allowed to create their lives. Thompson writes:

The only way trans women can answer all these pressures is by force, force alongside other marginalized peoples, because force is all we are allowed to be defined by (163).

Taken as a whole, *Transgender Marxism* offers novel insights into the origins of trans oppression and provides glimpses of the emancipatory potential of trans liberation struggles. Nevertheless, a weakness of the collection—through no fault of the authors and editors—is the limited empirical data about trans work and trans lives available. The contributors’ theoretical advances stand in contrast to the very limited quantitative studies at hand, making the decision of former president Donald Trump to exclude trans people from the 2020 census even more

tragically consequential. A final concern the collection raises is about social reproduction theory itself. While trans lives call on us to reimagine how identities are created and sustained, thus requiring a reimagining or extension of what constitutes social reproduction labor, there are limits to the reevaluation of the term. If stretched too far, the concept risks impotence. And yet, how far is too far remains up for debate. Citing J. Cohen Pitt and S. Monk, Nat Raha's "A Queer Marxist Transfeminism: Queer and Trans Social Reproduction" discusses the violent conditions under which queer social reproduction takes place. Raha describes sharing medication, providing care for house members suffering from depression, and fighting off street harassment as "common themes among queer and trans communities and communal housing projects" (98). These acts seem to fall within the scope of labor necessary to reproduce and maintain a queer working class. However, Noah Zazanis stretches the definition of social reproductive labor to include online "passing" guides, YouTube videos and other sites of "direct tuition" and "norm setting" such as Twitter, Discord, and TikTok (41). Certainly, virtual communities serve as a lifeline to many trans individuals—particularly trans youth—but whether the (most often uncompensated) labor necessary to produce content on these virtual platforms constitutes social reproductive labor is unclear.

Despite these shortcomings, the value of Transgender Marxism's robust theoretical contribution to readers' understanding of trans oppression under capitalism is eclipsed only by its usefulness as a tool towards abolishing both. As Gleeson and O'Rourke conclude in the introduction of the volume, "Our end is not just a more rigorous understanding of our social afflictions, but fuel for the abolition of what has long been intolerable" (28).

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