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Reviews

Marxisms and Transitions

- Reviews section -

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For a number of reasons I was thrilled when I heard about the impending publication of Transgender Marxism by Pluto Press. [1]

As someone involved in the LGBT+ movement for nigh on 50 years I had increasingly come to realise that too little had been written – at least that I'd been able to find – analysing the oppression of trans people and the relationship between that and women's and/or LGB oppression. Too little even chronicled the reality of trans lives – the impact of the stranglehold of the gender binary on young people for whom it is an instrument of torture, of violence at home and on the streets, and of a very restricted access to the labour market. And that is besides the horrors of needing medical and legal permission to even exist. Equally vital, and equally forgotten, are the communities of solidarity that trans people have built and are building to resist and challenge this oppression.

That feeling of the gaps – the responsibility of all of us who have supposedly written and spoken for LGBT movements without adequately integrating these questions and voices – has become sharper, even more desperate, in the context of increasing attacks on trans people. Including attacks from people who define themselves as feminists. The need to understand these painful fractures was accompanied by a sense that I myself needed to think, listen and explore more about both the theoretical and practical issues around trans liberation.

One place that has been stimulating and rewarding in that regard has been the sexual politics stream at Historical Materialism in London, where in the pre-pandemic days there have been a number of panels led by trans thinkers and writers. I do not quite remember when I first met Jules Gleeson, one of the editors of this volume, and contributors Michelle O'Brien and Rosa Lee, but I know that from the beginning I felt that they individually and collectively (alongside others whose names I have not retained) had insights and were contributing key pieces to the jigsaw I was trying to assemble in my brain.

More recently, deprived like everyone during the pandemic of such live spaces for exchanges, and because of other work I was doing on the topic of trans politics, I sought out writings by these and associated authors.

I found Michelle O'Brien's *Abolish The Family: The Working-Class Family and Gender Liberation in Capitalist Development* particularly powerful. She writes:

In the prostitution and sexual subcultures of the industrializing city, people seized on new forms of gender transgression. A lexicon of cross-dressing emerged, as alongside cis sex workers other new transfeminine gender deviants walked the streets of London, Amsterdam and Paris: Mollies, Mary-Anns, he-she ladies, queens. They sold sex to the bourgeoisie on the streets, ran from police, fought in riots, held regular drag balls, and worked in one of the estimated two thousand brothels specializing in male-assigned sex workers scattered across London.

This set me off on a number of trains of thought – that trans identities emerged at the same time and in similar circumstances to lesbian and gay (and maybe bi) identities, that sex work had been from the beginning one of the few places where many trans people could find some sort of economic survival, that the fact that Black trans women were at the front of the Stonewall riots was not really a surprise. (Much less a myth as I was wrongly told on twitter when I questioned a gay man offensively and inaccurately condemning today's Stonewall for their support for trans

rights! My tweet ended up on the front page of the Daily Fail.) [2]

In her fascinating chapter 'Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom' in *Transgender Marxism*, Michelle talks in detail about the way that the rigid gendering of most work settings severely limits the places accessible to trans people within the labour market.

Trans people usually have a hard time finding work, get treated poorly in most of our jobs, and consequently end up poor. Carolyn, like many trans people, felt a deep and strong commitment to expressing her gender, even in the initial step of growing her hair long. This gendered choice sharply constrained her employability, contributing to a period of habitual drug use and social marginality. Even as she regained stability in her life, Carolyn's employment options were sharply limited... This chapter focuses on the experiences of trans people unable to pass much at all at their jobs, particularly trans women. The experience of being a gender deviant needing work, and how trans people fight for their economic survival, has much to say about gender freedom for all (p48)

The concept of passing Michelle uses here is familiar to lesbians, gay men and bi people – and it's laden with contradictions. Does anyone want to pass in a society where, for many, socialisation around work is a key survival mechanism at lots of different levels? But the more we may become invested in work relationships, the less satisfying it is to feel pressured to try to hide parts of ourselves, and the more terrifying the potential consequences of not doing so, in terms of rejection at best and violence at worst.

There is another link between the trans experience and the LGB one: that the stereotypes of not passing for LGB people are so very often constructed around the binaries of assumed gender presentation. Stereotypes of dungaree wearing lesbians (yes I'm showing my age – but the principle is ageless) or men who are not apparently sporty enough. Indeed, women who may be entirely heterosexual can be policed into gender conformity too, and not only in the workplace; not because their sexuality or gender identity is in itself being challenged or questioned, but because their genderpresentation may well be seen as an affront to the assumption that men are inherently superior. So Michelle's point at the end of the quoted passage, that this reality has much to say about 'gender freedom for all', rings true for me.

This passage also led me to consider another question. Michelle doesn't tell us where Carolyn is in her process of transition, but that expressing her gender was essential to her sense of self, whatever the economic and social consequences. And I can certainly imagine that in a process, on a journey of coming out, this could for some be a relatively early path – and one, like many choices each of us make, that has unforeseen consequences. Michelle later notes that:

the most systematic report on trans Americans available comes from a 2011 survey by the National Center for Transgender Equality, including 6500 respondents... The data on employment was dire: 28% of African-American trans respondents report being unemployed, and 12% of white trans people, compared to 7% of the general population; 15% of all trans respondents were living in extreme poverty, with incomes below \$10,000 a year, four times the rate for the general population... 44% of African-American trans women reported experiences in sex work, and 28% of Latinx trans people. (p.50).

This mapping of trans people's confinement to restricted parts of the labour market and the reasons for it is an

essential part of a materialist understanding of trans oppression – and its relationship with women's and LGB oppression.

On the book as a whole: there were other themes woven between different chapters and contributors that struck me. On the theme of transition, Rosa Lee in 'Judith Butler's Scientific Revolution: Foundations for a Transsexual Marxism' writes:

Often transitions are framed in biological or medical terms – hormone replacement, surgeries, etc. – but at their core transition in this sense refers to a process of remaking the self, of wilful self-transformation. For trans people, transition denotes a set of self-fashioning practices that are crucial to the way that many of us live, practices which occur in our experiences as part of a process (p67)

As an avid reader of Butler over many years, I was drawn to this chapter for its framing, but what I found transcended those expectations. Battling the stereotypes of those who demean and reduce trans lives to a single path controlled by the medical and psychiatric establishment, as well as the law, not to mention the growth of non-binary identities, these are issues I have tried to discuss in writing and in conversation. But what I understood from many of the writers in this compilation, beautifully summed up by Rosa in the quote above, is the active making of self which is transition. I had insufficiently appreciated or emphasised the agency of trans people.

A similar theme is explored by Noah Zazanis in his chapter: 'Social Reproduction and Social Cognition: Theorizing (Trans)Gender Identity Development in Community Context':

By foregrounding conscious acts of reproduction in the formation of trans identities, we can bypass both trans essentialisms and cis feminist social determinisms. We can then move forward towards a historical materialism capable of thoroughly conceptualising trans existence and resistance.

Kate Doyle Griffiths' chapter 'Queer Workerism against Work: Strategising Transgender Labourers, Social Reproduction & Class Formation' builds on some of the themes set out by Michelle and by Rosa. They situate their thinking in a summing up of the present conjuncture which should be familiar to readers of this site; 'it was the best of times, the worst of times'. They describe their task 'to locate trans and queer people in the labour market, and then move through a concerted effort of worker inquiry' (p141) firmly within a framework of looking at social reproduction as key to the map they are drawing. I was interested in the fact that they focus mainly on a broader queer community, firmly within a feminist framework – as well as also realising I had not read Kim Moody's 2018 book *On New Terrain*, on which she also draws, despite enjoying and appreciating much of his earlier work. Griffiths' explains the focus on social reproduction:

The teacher strike wave demonstrates that social reproduction chokepoints are now central to a new wave of struggle; workers who are paid to do the work of the daily remaking of the working-class-in-itself play a central role in expanding and politicising workplace struggles. These moments allow for raising universal class-wide demands, precisely because workers in feminised reproductive sectors like education are in daily contact with the deepening crisis of care that impacts the entire class (p138)

Griffiths is not the only author to situate their work in the context of social reproduction theory – so too does Nat Raha, writing, for example, in ‘A Queer Marxist Transfeminism: Queer and Trans Social Reproduction’:

Marxist theory has so far paid little attention to the material costs in socially reproductive labour that underwrite the inclusion of LGBTQ subjects into the institution of marriage. Or to demands on queer social reproduction intensified by neoliberal capitalism more broadly. Social divestment and austerity measures have become defining features of the daily lives of many LGBTQ people – precarious work (both waged and unwaged), precarious housing, precarious benefits, precarious healthcare, precarious immigration status. This has been especially harsh on those of us who are disabled, migrants, or people of colour (p118)

Again there are familiar themes from other discussions in the LGBT movement, the feminist movement – and almost certainly other social movements – but expressed in an analytical framework likely to be more familiar to people not acquainted with those discourses. These are also themes drawn out particularly by Jules and Elle in the online launch of the book that I had the great pleasure in attending live – but which I am equally delighted to report is still available online.

Inevitably, especially in a book with a medley of different authors, there were parts I found more rewarding than others. I had not read Virginia Guitzel’s biography before reading her chapter on Brazil. I was looking forward to it not only because it was in this book, but because I have a number of strong connections with Brazil and Brazilian politics. I was disappointed both because I felt it added little to my understanding of the brutal reality of trans people’s lives in that country – the place with the consistently highest number of trans murders for many years – and because the denunciations of other political currents other than her own seemed both wooden and uninformative for anyone who does not know the terrain.

I did not relate to JN Hoad’s ‘Encounters in Lancaster’ – I am not sure whether it was form or content that erected those barriers. I liked the collectively written ‘A Dialogue on Deleuze and Gender Difference’ – with its potent railing against liberalism – but it is not useful to quote from, you have to read the whole thing.

I was strongly drawn to Zoe Belinsky’s ‘Transgender and Disabled Bodies: Between Pain and the Imaginary’ because of my own increasing engagement with the politics of disability, but came away somewhat dissatisfied. First there was my uncertainty about the subtitle; does this feed into stereotypes of disabled bodies? Medical pain or the pain of oppression? Still, I could certainly relate to this:

We come to understand that as trans and disabled people our debilitating conditions as proletarians come not from us alone. Instead they arise from the economic structures that constrain us, coerce us, and in many cases kill us.. (p 180)

I was less enamoured – or indeed able to pick my way through – the long explorations of the work of Merleau-Ponty (who I know nothing about and was not inspired to explore) and similarly of Jasbir Puar (who I know a bit and have reservations about). Maybe I was particularly tired when I got to this part, but the texture and content of the writing created barriers I did not find elsewhere in the book.

But in coming towards the end of this assessment, inevitably partial in both senses of that word, there is one other

question that it would be criminal not to draw out. This book is not only a very impressive contribution to Trans politics from a materialist viewpoint, but I would argue to Marxism itself. Some of this is embedded for me in the way so many of the authors I have already pointed out draw on and develop social reproduction theory, which has been an area where new insights and analysis based on a materialist approach have blossomed over recent years.

Some of it is based on the rejection of the emptiness, the vacuity of the images of the few famous and rich trans people seek to deflect us from the harsh material reality of most trans lives. In 'Seizing the Means: Towards a Trans Epistemology' Nathaniel Dickinson writes: 'To be trans is in some ways to struggle at the border between liberal inclusion politics and something more defiant and promising'. (p208)

But even beyond these jewels, there is a richness here I did not foresee, and which in places made me almost cry out in appreciation at their tenderness. There is another skein of rich colour and texture on offer, which incisively undercuts one of the tendencies on the radical left which so depresses and infuriates me in its wooden lack of aspiration. In the introduction, Elle and Jules write:

That capitalism does us harm is to be assumed; what must be explained is how it survives through us. And how, despite this wounding and bitterness required at each turn, it endures over generations. In this way, accounts that attempt to 'dry out' social relations miss the deeper roots of capitalism's continued history. They do not equip us to anticipate capitalism's persistent tendency towards reinvention and revival, and its apparent entrenchment, even long after its supposed 'sell-by-date'. The problem with so-called class-reductionist perspectives is that to reduce to class often enough means a failure to explain how class divisions arise historically, or are sustained (p28)

Indeed, indeed, I shouted to myself. And this gives birth to that disorienting notion that prejudice, let alone acts of violence, are imposed from outside by the boss god on the disempowered workers – who lack agency in relation to any other issues other than those directly to do with ownership and control of the means of production. Kate Doyle Griffiths argues:

A Transgender Marxist lens highlights how reductive engagements with class necessarily mirror and replicate liberal 'identity' politics, instrumentalising class as merely a container or stand-in for other (unmarked) identities: whiteness, heterosexual cisgender masculinity, and nationalism. Here, class is imagined as rooted in demography and identification rather than in the patient, transformative work of building a class-for-itself, through organising in and beyond the workplace (p136)

And more briefly:

We can do better than viewing the working class as always-already radicalised and for-itself, and merely held back or restrained by conservative leadership (p147)

To end at the beginning – from Noah Zazanis in Chapter 1:

In comparison, Marx himself stresses the importance of human agency to alter the conditions of our existence. As he notes in the Eighteenth Brumaire: Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under the circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

This is the Marx that has got me up most mornings for almost five decades – this book makes a powerful contribution to the legacy of a Marx who also argued in Theses on Feuerbach: ‘Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.’

As is evident, I struggle to put this book down – and will certainly bury myself in it more than once – again and again, I expect. Like all familiar friends, each encounter will furnish new insights, and be spun onto new paths of exploration. The chapters I haven’t mentioned, and feel guilty for omitting, all had much to say to me – to make me think, to re-examine assumed truths or peer into previously dusty corners. Next time, comrades.

And I can hardly wait for the opportunity to be back in the same physical space with some of these comrades. To share further conversations that can nourish a sense of solidarity in a world fractured by the violence of poverty and culture wars.

Source: [A*CR.](#)}

PS:

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[1] <https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745341668/transgender-marxism/>

[2] The name of the reactionary paper is actually the Daily Mail, but many on the left use this pun [
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9663325/You-dont-know-BBC-Radio-4-host-Justin-Webb-clash-Pink-News-CEO.html>