

Inverting Marxism¹

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This essay will return to the themes introduced in the 2021 collection *Transgender Marxism*². Either one of these words can draw a strong (and divisive reaction). Why bring these two concerns together?

Our collection yoked a focus on a stigmatised minority, and the global majority (those left ‘doubly free’, having been stripped from control over the means of production.) This bracketing clearly caused some consternation among parts of the left. There are those who assert that Marxism’s materialism is counterposed with concern for transgender people, and especially that it militates against prioritisation of identities.

Trans struggles are not alone in facing down this reflex of attempted relegation. As explored by Michael Richmond and Alex Charnley’s newly published *Fractured: Race, Class, Gender and the Hatred of Identity Politics* (2022), an attempt to divorce class politics and liberatory understandings of minorities has become entrenched. By marked contrast, twinning gender deviance and class war is quite intuitive as a set of associations for the global right. From media figure-heads like Tucker Carlson to thriving syncretist political movements in Hungary, Brazil and Britain, contemporary nationalists have proven fully prepared to confront challenges to workplace exploitation and fraying household norms in one moment. In this sense *Transgender Marxism* provided a sort of catch-up to the determined attempts of fascists to smash contemporary threats to both Capital and the private households that churn out its workforces – moves

1 This article was originally presented at the workshop “Confronting the Specters of Marxism. Analysing New Currents in Intersectional, Feminist, Queer, and Transgender Marxism in Times of Multiples Crisis” held on October 13–14, 2022, at the University of Bielefeld. It is being reproduced with the author’s permission and remains unchanged in format and content since its initial presentation.

2 See: Gleeson, Jules Joanne/O’Rourke, Elle (eds.) (2021): *Transgender Marxism*, London: Pluto Press (<https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745341668/transgender-marxism/>).

which leftists have too often been slow, tame and unimaginative in their responses to.

Our approach with the collection was to anthologise a set of commissioned essays from those we'd already seen develop transgender theorising through one historical materialist tradition or another. The result was a collection that drew not only on appeals to political economy but methods from psychoanalysis to phenomenology (transition as experienced) to epistemological explorations. To be schematic, there are three entry points to grasping the struggle *Transgender Marxism* addresses:

- The Workplace
- The Household
- The Clinic

Let's enter the workplace via a June 2022 report from the Washington Post (hardly a radical outlet) titled "A trans 24-year-old finds his voice and ignites a union effort at his Starbucks." (Tan 2022). Reporting based on interviews with one unionising Starbucks worker, Ian Miller, the piece recounts both Miller's transition, and successful unionise in his franchised workplace.

The US chain of the global coffee store chain Starbucks had offered trans employees coverage for healthcare (HRT and surgeries), drawing into their workforce a substantial number of retail worker proletarians otherwise unlikely to have steady access to essential care. Yet as the (inevitable) intensification of exploitation through precarious work contracts came to bite Starbucks' workforces as a whole, this same conditional privileging was swiftly redeployed as more or less explicit leverage by corporate management: resistance to management meant risking *de facto* medical detransition. What had been a worker privilege became (under tension) a tool to attempt disruption of proletarian autonomy.

Reading this reporting for the first time, it was hard not to see the reporting as an inadvertent gloss of the arguments advanced in *Transgender Marxism* (especially the chapters of Michelle O'Brien, and Kade Doyle Griffiths.) Namely that attempting to grasp transition in *opposition to* or *hierarchical prioritisation* against class politics will lead to a weaker understanding of both sexed identifications and class struggles, as they unfold this century. From retail to sex work, specific labouring conditions have drawn in disproportionately trans workforces to conditions both disagreeable to unionisation, and quickly reshaped

by the influx of particularly stigmatised workers predisposed toward militant conclusions.

Yet despite this particular risk, trans (and other LGBT) workers were clearly at the forefront of the Starbucks labour organising, introducing unions to workplaces in a series of breakthroughs reminiscent of the recent drives through Big Tech firms such as Google and Amazon (in that they targeted workplaces clearly built around the presupposition that organised labour politics was not a concern.)

It also demonstrates that inclusion of LGBT matters in frameworks of “Corporate Social Responsibility” has resulted in genuine opportunities for contemporary struggle, however craven and opportunistic these deployments have been. Widespread transphobia had previously ensured a sharper demarcation between so-called “skilled” labourers (especially in tech) and the broader population denied working opportunities through hostility from employers. While much of the “pro-LGBT” glossing of major corporations had gone little deeper than draping their social media accounts with flag avatars for one month a year, cases such as Starbucks shows the prospects (and the limits!) for a more profound transformation of conditions in capitalist exploitation.

In this conditional provision of otherwise unaffordable procedures, Starbucks are exemplary in mobilising the ‘perk’ of relative proletarian privileges, providing healthcare to their workforce with both a lure to attract workers otherwise without assurances that their specific health needs will be met, and a disciplining instrument that through this very extension of transition provisioning tethers each trans worker to their continued employment.

The obvious *failure* of this to stabilise the union free working conditions which prevailed since the company’s foundation should give us hope. For Marxists, this sketch of personal development blossoming to workplace struggle is probably the most comforting, and easily integrated face of *Transgender Marxism*.

Secondly, we start where struggles with transitions are often taken to begin: ***The household***.

To begin by stating the obvious: none of us can avoid implication or involvement when talking of normative upbringings! But more specifically trans experiences are set through and against the private household as a commonplace site for developmental violence and dispossession (or the pointed threat of it). While far from uniform, an overall picture of what it means to be confined in (or to escape) the closet can hardly begin without bringing private households into critical view.

While the division between the ‘properly political’ and private affairs has been problematised by any number of thinkers, work bridging this schism still feels counter-intuitive to many. It has to be said that Marxism as a school of thought has often attracted those who long for a grandiose “modal” overview, to better allow for a remove from the mess and intimacy found in questions around upbringing. From this elevated point of view, whatever aspiration, idiosyncracy or prejudice was baked into us through our household of origin finds some ultimate direction in the pulsations of accumulation, or valorization.

But in recent years Marxist Feminism has generated a substantial body of work which intends to bring labour power’s continuous generation into clearer view, exactly through a collapsing of any loosely imagined partitioned between worker identity, and rearing. Those developing this perspective include Cinzia Arruzza (“Remarks on Gender”, *Viewpoint Magazine* 2014), Holly Lewis (*The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Marxism at the Intersection*, 2016), Tithi Bhattacharya (*Social Reproducing: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* 2017) and Aaron Jaffe (*Social Reproduction and the Socialist Horizon*, 2020).

While Marx uses the word ‘reproduction’ in a very polyvalent way throughout *Capital*, this vein of theory has focused primarily on the way that capitalist workforces are obliged to be *self-constituting*, in order for exploitation to continue. In other words the lengthy and arduous processes that go into ‘showing up ready to work’ before each clock-in, or billable hour.

The challenge posed by these thinkers to existing Marxist social theory is exactly that a rigorous accounting of workforces must extend beyond the workplace (at least as conventionally understood). This theoretical demand was backed by an upsurge of militant struggle which merger worker concerns and struggles typically classed as “women’s liberation”, such as abortion rights and femicide.

While several contributions to *Transgender Marxism* were fully or primarily informed by this Social Reproduction tendency in Marxist Feminism, our editorial work especially was closely informed by the work of Angela Mitropoulos into histories of *oikomia*, or household management. Mitropoulos’ work places into a longer context the incessant references to familial authority which pepper the thinking of right wing demagogues, drawing attention to the same concern in pre-modern thinkers such as Xenophon. Drawing from this schema, we find that private households do not only play a disciplining role for the individual workers reared by them, but continue a legacy of ruling class household management that we might rank alongside “statesmanship”. As well as pro-

viding the continuous churn of fresh workforces required by Capital, private households equally perpetuate a process of normative establishment that long predates modernity. These historic variations in what Arruzza terms ‘patriarchal relations’ (in favour of a conceptually autonomous/systemic Patriarchy).

From this view we can come to see more clearly why the global right have come so intuitively to see trans lives as a threat to “the family”. The cries of Q-Anon conspiracists to “Save the children!” do not appear because they truly consider childhood sacred, but as a rearguard defence of a fraying project instituted by the New Right. In their attempt to delimit acceptable contours of the human these reactionaries are drawing from a deep wellspring: Aristotle classed as monstrous offspring which bore qualitatively little resemblance to their parents.

Finally, we turn to **the clinic** as a site of struggle and the entangled role of clinicians in identity discipline.

But no account of clinical politics today could begin without the campaign of “stochastic terror” which now dominates the United States, with doctors alongside professionals from librarians to teachers who find themselves hounded by loosely organised mobs targeting online distributed targets lists of those deemed too LGBT, and smeared as “groomers”.

Since our book’s publication we’ve witnessed a stark intensification of militant transphobic politics oriented towards clinical care providers. This takes the form both of legislatures attempting to institute “model bills” outlawing healthcare for trans youth, and agitation that takes a more direct approach to menacing queers out of public life, and professionals out of providing us services. In the United States both new media provocateurs with enormous online fanbases, and more conventional media outlets such as Fox News have repeatedly targeted the ire of their movement onto clinics (including children’s hospitals) which offer services to trans patients. Their coverage has reproduced their material with glosses that accuse physicians of “mutilation” and “child abuse”, posting their faces and contact details and urging followers to pursue them. Similarly, groups such as the Proud Boys have stormed libraries hosting drag events.

The purpose of this continuously generated outrage is a strategy of terrorism drawn from the pro-life movement (which various key figures overlap with). Their aim is to steadily reduce provision of trans healthcare across “Red States” through raising the stakes for any professionals considering offering these services, through the same violent means that abortion clinics were shut-

tered years prior to the recent overturning of federal protection of abortion rights (*Roe vs. Wade*) through a Supreme Court reversal.

Meanwhile, liberal defences of these services have usually failed to reckon with the reality that this debate is focused only on the minority of trans children with fully supportive parents. Defences of this kind have typically run that it is the rightful place for parents and professional healthcare providers to decide the best course, disregarding the widespread reality of youth homelessness that remains the reality for such a high proportion of non-conforming youth. Liberalism can offer only a vision of benign drift toward a reformed future.

Having begun with the moves the US right has taken against clinicians, the oppositional tone taken by *Transgender Marxism* towards clinicians may require some explanation. Thankfully, the Marxist tradition is perfectly placed to appreciate disputes among the ruling class, including their most violent and seemingly antithetical appearance.

Recently, it's become unfashionable to juxtapose the influence of Michel Foucault and Karl Marx (especially after the revisionist theoretical and historical work of the late Christopher Chitty). However it must be admitted that those following Foucault's legacy in earnest (or at least as earnestly as his infamous ironising allows...) have made great headway in "deneutralising" clinical practice, and uncovering the pervasive reach of clinical categorisation into unexamined understandings. There's a lot more to be said here about the breakthroughs and limits of critical histories (in short, they've been rich in concrete insights for the inner workings of particular capitalist institutions, while sometimes winnowed in their comparative scope.)

But primarily the work I've encouraged and edited stresses is the often understated *labour* at work on the other side of the clinical relation. A significant number of trans people are immersed in guiding others through clinical contexts, and in places supplanting their typical roles. These informal community workforces operate through methods and venues that are weakly understood by those not directly requiring them, forming a sort of ersatz civil society. From distribution of key knowledge through relevant circles, to clandestine deprofessionalised development of skillsets those formally expected to deliver services can too often not be relied to perform, it's this activity which forms the basis for the 'insurrectionary' moments Foucault's method are minded towards documenting.

While personally I had previously approached this more strictly in terms of "social reproduction", the same concern is approached by thinkers deploy-

ing various vocabularies throughout *Transgender Marxism*. However we refer to them, community labours must be understood to grasp why it is “the transgender question” has come to be posed so frequently today.

The event this essay was prepared for addressed the ‘Spectres of Marx’ haunting the academy. But is the type of social thought under discussion primarily a concern for academics? I’m not convinced.

While there were a handful of university lecturers included in *Transgender Marxism* (two still active by my count), the only tenured professor was Jordy Rosenberg (who provided an afterword.) By and large the insights documented in *Transgender Marxism* are “academic” only insofar as they were developed by those burning out of that context, if indeed they ever had access to such credential-minded institutions at all. So we need to question how far any “return of Marx” to the academy is truly necessary for the further fruitful development of social revolutionary thinking.

I don’t want to provide any oversimplified answer to that question, having posed it. Today’s relations between academic Marxism and thinking focused elsewhere defy easy characterisation, and certainly we should avoid any dichotomising view between “NEET thought” and those with scholarly dayjobs. Especially, I would like to highlight the role played by online fanbases and social media participation in developing the reception of Marxists who have not enjoyed fulsome institutional prominence. Consider for example the recent hubbub around Michael Heinrich and Jairus Banaji, neither of whom can be said to have enjoyed conventional (that is, managerial) success as academics would view it, yet have attracted enthused followings animating topics often taken to be dry and abstruse (Marxology and agrarian labour in pre-industrial political economies).

Beyond this interplay of scholarly publishing and its online enthusiasts, intellectual activity twinning trans and queer critique with Marxist theory is often concentrated in dedicated journals, zines and movement publications. As a case in point, the title of this talk is “Inverting Marxism”, a homage to the intermittent transfeminist materialist journal *Invert*. Named after the sexological category of “inversion” (most famously associated with Havelock Ellis), today usually taken to be an outmoded and effeminacy-centred framework for understanding homo/transsexuality. Chairing their panel at *Historical Materialism* Conference 2019, I was confronted with the realisation that a profound

development of concerns familiar to me that had run parallel to the work I'd fostered more directly. Years later the influence of this current was also apparent in an essay by Sandow Sinai "On Returning Things To Their Proper Places"³, where Naomi Alizah Cohen's reading of Moshe Postone surfaced to address the entrenchment of anti-semitism alongside anti-identitarianism in the contemporary left.

Along with their more gay communism oriented counterparts *Pinko* and *Homintern*, a lively circuit twinning Marxism and sex (or sexuality) seemed to be forming by the later 2010s. Notably though each of these publications proved short lived and prone to hiatus, and have proven rather less durable than dedicated Marxist theory publications outside the academy – such as *Viewpoint Mag*, *Salvage* or *Spectre Journal*. This ephemerality was something we hoped to avoid with our anthologising work, but seems set to return as a cycle of flourishing and dissolution given the unsteady resources available for instantiating communist thought in lasting forums.

So I close by introducing *Invert* to highlight that despite *Transgender Marxism*'s voluminous character (around 300 pages), no single publication could hope to encompass the intellectual activity which currently surrounds questions of transition and class struggle. Beyond the seventeen or so contributors we brought together, theorists such as Treva Ellison, Bini Adamczak, Alex Adamson and Kay Gabriel have provided approaches spanning a wide range of disciplines to address questions which have yet to be settled through revolution. Hopefully following *Transgender Marxism* the auxiliary work of social theorisation can continue apace, with new coalitions and fresh cravings coming messily into view.

³ See: Sinai, Sandow (2022): "On Returning Things to Their Proper Places." In: Hypocrite Reader 99, (<http://hypocritereader.com/99/proper-places>).

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