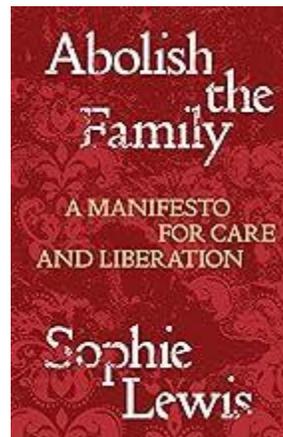


Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation

Sophie Lewis

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That family structure and nature is problematic has been part of arguments about the ordering of society since at least Socrates wrote about it in *The Republic*. He pointed out the unfairness of family arrangements, both between different families but, also, within individual families. Older siblings, plainly, received more attention than younger ones. Perhaps this is a contributory factor to the very diverse range of different arrangements in the animal kingdom. After all, if it is a good thing to have a mother, then surely having several mothers would be better? If being a parent makes a person better, in some way, then biology should not be a barrier to having that experience. These are among the arguments deployed by Sophie Lewis in her polemical *About the Family*, a sequel in some aspects to her earlier *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family* (2019).

From the beginning, there is something of the defensive about the text, as Lewis almost immediately mobilises the arguments that are liable to be used against her. These include the difficulty that most people face in trying to imagine what a society without families would be like – what would replace them? Nothing, is her answer. There just would not be anything. Children would be born and then, presumably, well-intentioned people would come forward to start providing care. This seems to be problematic – I acknowledge her right not to have all the supposed answers (“I am not prepared to hammer out policy interventions in this chapter (48/70)”) since it becomes too convenient to start haggling about these when the arguments behind them have not yet been fully established. Yet something is surely necessary. What we are missing becomes obvious in her treatment of Alexandra Kollontai in her chapter on the historical development of the abolitionist argument. Kollontai, of course, was convincingly able to describe in detail how children would be reared and, indeed, how people would live with each other because, as a Communist, she was able to call on the full means of the state to make things happen (theoretically, at least, since Lenin was not the only one to think that family restructuring could wait until more urgent matters had been settled). Lewis, despite her clear-eyed understanding of the nature and extent of capitalism, is not willing to commit herself to a specific revolutionary movement that has a full manifesto in place. Consequently, there is imprecision in the heart of the book:

“The family is a shield that human beings have taken up, quite rightly, to survive a war. If we cannot countenance ever putting down that shield, perhaps we have forgotten that the war does not have to go on forever (24/75).”

It is certainly true that better lives and a better society are possible but they will not just be given to us, they will need to be fought for and people will need to know what they are fighting and why. However, I am also guilty of blaming the author not for what she has written but what she has not written.

Lewis copes with the various counter-arguments likely to be made against her reasonably well. She then adds a chapter aiming to cover the historical background of the abolitionist proposition, in which we are given Socrates, as noted above, as well as Marx and Engels. However, she also includes the work and thought of Shulamith Firestone, who was new to me and seems to have been a (righteously) challenging figure. Firestone called for the abolition of the labour force, the tyranny of work and the taboo of incest, as well as the diffusion of childbearing throughout society, involving both women and men through the use of ectogenesis (the machine uterus). She then makes the connection with the campaigns for LGBTQ+ equality and freedom, with whom abolition of the family has some common cause. However, the rise of queer campaigning has been accompanied by the rise in identity politics to the detriment of class-based politics and has led to a contemporary focus on queer-oriented family and household structures within society rather than attempt to create a radical rupture with the past.

The book is a short one, although it contains big ideas. Necessarily, therefore, the history chapter is limited in space. It does not venture outside North America and Europe, which is disappointing, especially given recent work that has been done in internationalizing the history of feminism.

The final chapter concerns the nature of ‘abolition’ itself – the meaning might seem clear enough but Lewis reaches back to an etymological source with Hegel’s *Aufhebung*, which she describes as “... the ideas of lifting up, destroying, preserving, and racially transforming, all at once (45/70).” This formulation enables her to complexify somewhat her reasoning and to draw on the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore:

“The abolition of prisons and of the police, rather than constituting a simple deletion of infrastructure, is better understood as a world-building endeavour, a collective act of creativity without end (45/70).”

This is all very well but it is not what people understand by the term and it does not help to persuade people to embrace and demand radical change when meanings become unmoored from their common usage. It undermines the seriousness of the argument.

References

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