

Family Abolition

“M. E. O’Brien tells us exactly how the family has delivered human survival throughout modern history even as it has served the needs of capital accumulation, cis-hetero-patriarchy, and the colonial state. Here is an accessibly written distillation of two centuries worth of reproductive class struggle; a revived vision of revolutionary ‘beloved community’ for an age of climate catastrophe and permanent pandemics. Spread this book around, and start communizing care!”

—Sophie Lewis, author of *Abolish the Family*

“M. E. O’Brien has gifted us a stunningly urgent and timely book that not only sustains our ‘freedom dreaming,’ but also our concrete efforts at enacting a world where the concept and mechanism of family does not have to be complicated by coercion, domination, and the privatization that creates untenable labor conditions. Through an exhilaratingly accessible narrative, O’Brien moves effortlessly between history, current sociopolitical specificities, and future possibilities to show that communized care is not a far-off fantasy, but rather, a vibrant necessity for current day life-making.”

—Lara Sheehi, Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology,
George Washington University

“A bracing account of the crisis of the family and an important history of struggles to transcend it. O’Brien is a sensitive and astute guide to the material realities and the impossible ideal of the family—that site of dependency and love, intimacy and violence, coercion and care. This is an essential guide to the critique of the family form and a radical vision of care beyond it.”

—Katrina Forrester, Associate Professor of Social Sciences,
Harvard University

“An important work of queer theory which examines family abolition from a generative—not punitive—mindset, asking how can we create a future where we all receive the essential care that is currently doled out only to some of us by the crapshoot lottery of birth?”

—Hugh Ryan, author of *When Brooklyn Was Queer*

“Bringing impressive erudition to a vast subject, O’Brien takes a debate to new frontiers, illuminating how a family in perpetual crisis fuels racism and violence. From Oaxaca to Minneapolis, *Family Abolition* shows ‘insurgent reproduction’ preparing a world of ‘red love.’”

—Peter Drucker, author of *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anticapitalism*

“Incisively traces the warps and strictures of our embattled history and culture, unleashing a searing yet hopeful paean towards a different set of possibilities. A precious book for anyone trying to understand our current crises and how to transform ourselves and our communities towards justice and wholeness for all.”

—hannah baer, author of *trans girl suicide museum*

“Compact but expansive, *Family Abolition* is an incisive work of history, theory, and imagination. O’Brien locates family abolition as an insurgent tradition deep within revolutionary movements around the world. It is an inspired call to action and a call to community: Come, let us abolish the family—together.”

—Dan Berger, author of *Stayed on Freedom: The Long History of Black Power Through One Family’s Journey*

“An immensely useful book that will help us not just understand the violence of gender and family relations, but also take action to establish new methods of caring for one another and building survivable social relations ... A tool for transformation, skillfully drawing on insurgent histories and contemporary struggles to increase our capacity to build new ways of being together.”

—Dean Spade, author of *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*

“A vision for the future that draws on insights from both the history of the workers’ and Black liberation movements, and contemporary struggles worldwide. Both meticulous in its historical account of insurrectionary moments (that unsettled our assumptions about how to care for one another). And daring in providing a strategy for replacing private households with ‘beloved community’, founded around Red Love. Highly recommended to anyone committed to both care and revolt, or bored of household chores.”

—Jules Gleeson, writer, comedian, historian,
co-editor of *Transgender Marxism*

Family Abolition

Capitalism and the Communizing of Care

M. E. O'Brien

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Introduction

The Oaxaca Commune

In June 2006 three thousand police officers attacked a teachers' protest in the Mexican city of Oaxaca. The teachers had been on strike for a month, occupying the central square of the city. The police and teachers battled for hours over the course of the day, leading to over a hundred hospitalizations. In the aftermath of the confrontation, hundreds of social movement organizations gathered to form the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO), an organization that became the central coordinating body of hundreds of protests and occupations over the coming seven months. In August, insurgent women seized control of multiple radio stations, going on to use them as communication hubs for the movement. At the end of one radio broadcast of an occupied station, the newscaster concluded, "Transmitting from the Oaxaca Commune." Insurgents took up the name, referencing the Paris Commune of 1871.¹

The militants of the Oaxaca Commune erected hundreds of barricades throughout the city. They used the barricades to defend their neighborhoods against nightly attacks by police and paramilitaries. Many workers were on strike, living full time at the barricades. Many not on strike spent their nights on the barricades after their day's work was done. Insurgents communicated with each other from one barricade to the next using radio and began to identify themselves by the name of their barricade.

These barricades became sites of what I call *insurgent social reproduction*, the transformation of the daily tasks of household labor into means of sustaining militant protest. Barucha Peller writes, "The barricades were places where the people of Oaxaca slept, cooked and shared food, had sex, shared news, and came together at the end of the day."² Women on the barricades redistributed seized goods, conducted educational workshops,

gathered supplies, socialized together, and shared life. Peller goes on, “People belonged to the Commune simply because they took part in this reproduction of daily life—from cooking at the barricades, carrying coffee to the barricades from homes or businesses, carrying news between barricades, to making molotovs at barricades, stacking rocks or simply sharing stories.”³

The women of the Oaxaca Commune were engaged in a moment of *family abolition*. They were rebelling simultaneously against both abusive husbands and racist, anti-indigenous, and anti-worker state forces. They were challenging the social role to which they were relegated as women, as wives, as mothers, upending norms of gender and sexuality. Their collective labor made the rebellion possible. Rather than the atomized isolation of private households, during the rebellion people lived collectively on the barricades. What had been women’s work in the home became the daily practice of reproducing the insurrection. Through the barricades, the women of the Oaxaca Commune created a new, collective life that overcame the divisions between private and public. They were refusing the private household as a link in the circuits of racial capitalism.

For these women, rejection of the family was not a move toward isolation or abandoning of caretaking relationships. They brought their children with them to the barricades. They were not simply rejecting maternal caretaking but radically transforming it. They were expanding the care labor of their private homes into a mass insurrectionary movement for the transformation of society as a whole. In creating the collective life of the barricades, they were constituting a new basis for shared social reproduction and shared intimacy. They were transforming the isolation of domestic life into a means of communal, revolutionary survival.

The daily life of the barricades and the city’s other occupations became a site of escalating gendered struggle. Many husbands, frustrated their wives at the barricades were no longer serving them in their home, forced their wives to abandon the occupation. A participant recounts:

There were comrades who complained that since August 1, my woman doesn’t serve me. There were many women who

suffered domestic violence for being at the occupations and marches, sometimes their husbands even attempted to divorce or separate. The husbands didn't take well to the idea of women abandoning the housework to participate politically. They didn't help in the sense of doing the housework, such as taking care of kids or washing clothes, so that the women could continue being at the station.⁴

This reassertion of the family as a system of private, male-dominated households contributed to the defeat of the Oaxaca Commune. The women could not act as both frontline militants and obedient wives. The family was a tool of counterinsurgency.

The women of the Oaxaca Commune rebelled against a system of private households, male-dominated kinship arrangements, and a gendered division of labor. All these are dimensions of the family form that characterize most people's lives under racial capitalism. Families typically exist as private households in segmented isolation from each other, divided by architecture, resources, public policy, and custom. Each family works separately, helping to reproduce capitalist society from one generation to the next. Families raise children and offer them their first socialization in heteronormative gender norms and labor market discipline. Through maintaining a stable family, individuals gain legitimacy, social acceptance, and respectability. People's kinship arrangements and households are judged by the extent to which they manage to obtain an ideal of the family rooted in a long history of white supremacy and capitalism.

Through the Oaxaca Commune, women sought to overcome the family form; their efforts in turn made the scale of the mobilization possible. Many popular rebellions share this quality. When large numbers of working-class people move into open rebellion, the boundaries of the family begin to break down. The private household gives way to the collective life of shared, insurgent social reproduction. Those subjugated within the private family seize the opportunities of new ways of living and loving together. Rather than rigid gender roles, people may begin to care for each other as comrades. Replacing private family kitchens or takeout from local restaurants, people may gather around protest kitchens, canteens, and group meals. Care for children, the injured, and others unable

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to work becomes a shared concern of collective projects of survival. Family abolition is a horizon of human freedom, one briefly visible on the barricades of the Oaxaca Commune.

FAMILY AS LIMIT

The family is a limit to human emancipation. The family's horrors are vast, its abuses widespread, its logic coercive. The family is a joy for some, a necessity for most, and a nightmare for too many. Behind its closed doors, the household is a gamble. Children born into abusive households have no recourse from harmful parents. Those trapped in abusive couple relationships may see their means of escape gradually cut off by manipulative and controlling partners. Those working-class adults who wish to be a part of a child's life are forced into degrees of economic precarity to keep their children fed and cared for, trapping parents further within awful jobs. The family policing system targets poor, Black, Indigenous, and migrant families with new forms of state violence in the name of protecting children, leaving the violence of the white, propertied family form untouched.

The family is also a limit to our imagination. Many of us grow up in private households and struggle to envision anything else. We can barely conceive of real alternatives to the family. Shared households are often a necessary survival strategy for proletarians, yet most working-class families come under frequent pressure from changing labor market conditions, state policies, or state violence. These pressures make it hard to form and hold together families, but even harder to maintain chosen, nonnormative living arrangements. Many imagine and pursue a household that is entirely chosen and a radical alternative to the normative family, but attempts at holding such arrangements together often fall apart over decades of the stresses of trying to find and maintain work, to pay rent, to deal with medical emergencies, or to face aging. Others flee shared households altogether, often to find isolation and loneliness. Beyond some variation on the private household, what could possibly provide the care that we all so desperately need?

The family is also a limit for many mass social movements and revolutionary struggles. Social revolutions that left untouched the

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tyranny of the home prevented a deeper social and cultural change that could extend into everyone's lives. So long as the private household is maintained, no revolutionary process can overcome class society. Many reform protest movements run into major internal crisis when they are forced to grapple with conflicts and contradictions often relegated to the family. Countless organizations and parties have been destroyed because they were unable to adequately address sexual assault, intimate partner violence, the unequal gendered division of labor, or the demands of child-rearing. The family is a limit, and the real movement for collective liberation must abolish it.

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Family abolition is a fraught phrase. Right-wing critics accuse proponents of family abolition of trying to destroy gender, market relations, and civilization. Progressive opponents of the idea suggest it is an ultra-left fantasy likely to alienate people, foreclosing the mass constituency necessary for social democratic demands. Some astute skeptics of family abolition point to how Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) rely on family relations to survive the racist onslaught of the state. Many imagine that family abolition calls for the acceleration of the current neoliberal social forces that make having children or finding a stable home challenging for so many people.

These critiques of family abolition reflect deep anxieties. Many people rely on their family when they are at their most vulnerable—as newborns and children, while sick or disabled, while aging and approaching death. For those lucky enough to have loving family members, such support can be a source of great solace. Even those with unsupportive families of origin may keep them close throughout their lives. Those who raise us have a profound impact on our emotional, physical, and social development. Parenting, in turn, can be an extraordinary space of self-growth and experience of long-term care for another person. Unlike most relationships in a capitalist society, families can offer what feels to be an unconditional and unwavering form of love, at least sometimes.

It is through the language of family that people often articulate their yearnings for care, for affection, for the long-term interweaving of our lives. For those with cruel or harmful families, the idea of doing it better, of forming healing chosen family can be profoundly compelling. Family abolition provokes in listeners' fears of being abandoned, of being without support, of being left alone to face the violent power of the state or the cruelty of work. These are nearly universal fears in an era of neoliberal dismantling of social welfare supports, increasing atomization of capitalist society, racist state violence, and generalized instability. Many imagine family abolition as the Left robbing them of their only means of solace and survival. In their imagination, to abolish the family is to make the world unlivable.

Human life depends on care. We are all inescapably interdependent. In our society, many important forms of care are often concentrated in families. Everyone needs material supports. For some, these are found through a family's access to jobs or property, safe housing, financial support during difficult times, healthy food, mobility, or quality healthcare. But the basis of a rich human life also includes the emotional, interpersonal, and physical support families provide. These are all basic human needs, and the family is where we are most likely to have found them. To those who fear family abolition, abolishing the family sounds as if it involves eliminating access to care; however, the opposite is true.

Family abolition is a commitment to making the care necessary for human flourishing freely available throughout society. Rather than relying solely on one's immediate personal relationships, access to care could be built into the social fabric of our collective lives. Family abolition is the vision that the basis of thriving should not depend on who your parents happen to be, who you love, or who you choose to live with. Family abolition is a horizon of sexual and gender freedom beyond the bigotry imposed by those on whom we depend. Family abolition is the expansion of care as a universal, unconditional social good. Family abolition is not just the positive assertion of care but also a refusal of the harmful relationships of domination that the family form enables. Family abolition is a belief that no child should be trapped by cruel parents; no woman should be afraid of poverty or isolation in leaving her violent

husband; no aging, disabled, or sick person should be afraid of having to depend on an indifferent and uncaring family member. Family abolition is the recognition that no human being should ever own or entirely dominate another person, even children. No individual should have the means to coerce intimacy or labor from another, as current property relations enable. Family abolition is the destruction of private households as systems of accumulating power and property at the cost of others' well-being.

As well as overcoming the private household, family abolition is also the radical overturning in how society values particular family forms at the expense of others. A long history of white supremacy, heteronormativity, and capitalist property relations have enshrined a particular narrow vision of the family as the basis of an orderly society. Certain family norms are upheld in law, enforced through state violence, and defended in popular culture. Family abolition is a call for embracing the many forms of care and love through which people can form rich and fulfilling lives. It is for the destruction and overcoming of an ideal that treats some family structures as normal while devaluing or destroying other care relations.

As a meditation on family abolition, this book sets out to offer three linked arguments. First, it details a diagnosis of the ongoing crisis of the family today. Part I of this book engages multiple dimensions of family to understand this crisis, focusing on the family as private household and as a site of violence. Families as private households are embedded in the broader circuits of property, labor markets, and the state. All these link together to reproduce capitalist society as a whole. The family simultaneously is a site of multiple forms of violence. Through the racist, heterosexual normative ideals of family, institutions of racial capitalism assault chosen care relations. In trying to function within racial capitalism, families are pushed to embody a normative ideal set out in public policy and the cultural imagination. Yet this ideal is impossible without the stabilizing foundations of property, whiteness, and empire. Shrouded in privacy and bound by relationships of dependency, families readily enable violence and abuse.

Second, this book is a history of family forms in capitalist society and the changing visions of its overcoming. Part II offers a history of the family and anti-family struggle embedded in the dynamics

of capitalist development. Over the last two hundred years, revolutionaries have repeatedly come up against the family form and imagined something more. Family abolition has taken on many meanings in each era of mass struggle: the destruction of bourgeois society and private property, the rebellion against white supremacy, the collectivization of household chores and cooking, the rejection of suburban isolation. All these meanings will be explored throughout this book, along with the particular conditions in capitalist society that gave them each substance.

Third, this book concludes with a specific speculative vision for what family abolition could become in our future. Family abolition entails imagining how a revolutionary transformation of society may enable new ways of approaching things we ask of our families today: raising children, forming intimate relationships, cooking and eating, managing disability and illness, and aging and death. This may be accomplished in many ways. In Part III I offer an imagining of the commune as a social form that arises during the escalation of mass insurgency against capitalism and the state. Like the women of the Oaxaca Commune, making daily life communal can be a strategy of insurrection and survival, a means of abolishing the family.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Part I lays out the core concepts of the book through examining the crisis of the family in the present. Chapter 1 uses the context of the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns to explore a primary meaning of family as used throughout this text: the family as private household. Private households are embedded in the circuits of the reproduction of capitalist society. However, they are not sufficient on their own to complete the basic tasks of raising children, caring for the elderly, or making it from one day of work to the next. I offer the threefold schema of the family, the market, and the state as the three main means of survival under capitalism, a framework I later use to identify the changing place of the family in capitalist society.

Chapter 2 considers a photograph in the aftermath of racial terror to explore the family as a racial, normative, and social ideal. This chapter considers two dimensions of the family as a source

of violence: the external violence inflicted by the family policing system and racial capitalism, and the internal violence enabled by the family's particular combination of coercion and care. This internal violence is a mechanism in socializing gender roles, imposing heterosexual norms, and maintaining male domination.

Chapter 3 turns to another positive meaning of family: the plea for love, for help, and for salvation. Taking as my point of departure George Floyd's call for his deceased mother, I introduce the movement to go beyond the family as the fulfillment of this plea. In the struggle for human freedom, movements periodically point the way to the possibility of moving beyond the family, into less coercive means of interpersonal care. This chapter also grapples with the tensions between abolition as destruction and abolition as transformation, and is written in dialogue with the multiple revolutionary political traditions that raise the call of abolition.

Part II outlines a history of family abolition, one that follows the changing role of the family in racial capitalism. The nuclear family is a recent historical phenomenon, essentially unique to the capitalist era. Its dominant forms and how accessible it has been have changed over the last two centuries. Chapters 4–9 delve into the past, examining the changing meanings of family abolition over the course of capitalist development, explained through the changing role of the working-class family. In each phase, proletarian struggle against the family was the horizon of gender and sexual freedom. Yet the particular meanings and form of this struggle changed over time, as the place of the family in capitalist development changed. Table 1 (overleaf) provides an outline of these historical chapters.

I begin my account of past struggles against the family in chapter 4, with the family politics of capitalist industrialization in Europe, following the arguments of Marx and Engels. Capitalism destroyed the peasant family, pulling new proletarians into the factories of the Great Towns. There, low wages, overcrowding, and factory labor prevented proletarians from forming stable family structures. Marx and Engels direct their family-abolitionist politics, therefore, against the nuclear family form of the capitalist class. Family abolition is a component of the destruction of the institutions foundational to capitalist society, including bourgeois society, private property, and the state.

Table 1

	1830s–1880s	1890s–1950s	1960s–Early 1970s	1970s–Present
Dominant family form	Bourgeois, white, property-owning family	Respectable working-class, white, male-breadwinner family form, made possible by workers' movement	Respectable working-class, white, male-breadwinner family form, made possible by workers' movement	Diversification of family, but persistence of private household
Transforming working-class families	Capitalist assault on peasant and working-class kin relations; crisis of working-class reproduction	War mobilization of World War I and World War II	Growth of office employment opportunities for women	Working-class male-breadwinner family form impossible
Family racial politics	Natal alienation in plantation slavery; genocide of settler colonialism	Coerced heterosexuality through Jim Crow sharecropping and land allotments to Indigenous families; consolidation of whiteness as respectability	Racist state welfare policies against Black and Indigenous motherhood; suburbs as whiteness	Continuing racist state attacks in border enforcement, police violence, and mass incarceration
Family abolition visions	Destruction of bourgeois family in war on bourgeois society (Engels, Fourier, most socialists and anarchists)	Collectivizing unwaged reproductive labor, moving working-class women into wage labor and freeing them from compulsory family (Kollontai)	Radical feminists, queers, and Black women seek to abolish the suburban, isolated family unit toward sexual and gender liberation	New wave of family abolition: trans Marxist, queer communist, Black feminist, and beyond to the commune

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Chapter 5 turns to the racial capitalism of nineteenth-century North America, considering settler colonialism and plantation slavery. Anti-indigenous genocide and the natal alienation of slavery attacked kin relations. Concurrently, racial capitalism consolidated the white heterosexual family, both among slave-owning oligarchs and frontier homesteaders. Later in the nineteenth century, the family politics of white supremacy shifted, as Jim Crow mandated heterosexual marriage on Black sharecroppers, and land allotments sought to break up Indigenous life into private, patriarchal families.

Chapter 6 counterposes the oppressive family politics of nineteenth-century capitalism to glimpses of proletarian sexual transgression: sex workers, sodomites, and transfeminine proletarians engaged in rebellion and resistance, emancipated Black people forming nonnormative family relations during Reconstruction, and the thinking of French utopian socialist Charles Fourier.

Chapter 7 traces the rise and consolidation of a particular form of the workers' movement toward the end of the nineteenth century. A strata of workers won access to a kind of family that resembled those of their bourgeois adversaries: based on a single male breadwinner, children in school, and an unwaged housewife. Socialists of the Second International grappled with the place of the family in their thinking, torn between the movement's conflicting commitments to gender equality through full proletarianization and to the stability and respectability of the housewife family form. Briefly, the Bolshevik Revolution opened a vision of family abolition through the full collectivization of household labor.

Chapter 8 turns to the uprisings of the Red Decade, a phrase for the global insurgencies from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. The family again came under attack by revolutionaries. Multiple movements contested the suburban, heterosexual, white, housewife-based family form. Here I focus on three specific struggles, focused on the United States: Black women radicals, including as welfare rights organizers; radical feminism; and gay and trans liberationists.

Chapter 9, concluding Part II, returns us to the present. Since the mid-1970s, working-class family life has been increasingly thrown into disarray. This has been a result of a deeper, protracted

global crisis in profitability, and the displacement of this crisis onto the working class. The housewife form is no longer viable for any sector of the working class. Further, people are increasingly pursuing new modes of living outside of traditional family structures and its normative regime of sex and gender: queer relationships, gender transitions, living alone, postponing or avoiding marriage, and much else. But these have been concurrent with increased dependency on the private household.

Part III considers resistance to the family. Chapter 10 argues that the struggle to move beyond the family can link multiple constituencies. Progressive anti-family reforms are policy changes that materially expand people's ability to choose their own household arrangements, or undo the regulatory policies that bolster normative families.

Chapters 11–13 move into family abolition as a horizon of a freer society. In chapter 11 I begin by outlining other writers' visions of family abolition. Then I theorize the essential qualities of what I call *communist social reproduction*, based on the maxim, "From each according to their ability, to each according to their need."

Chapter 12 looks to existing protest movements to consider how they practice care and interdependence beyond the market and the state. At protest camps, mass occupations, and other struggles, people form collective practices for social reproduction. Like the Oaxaca Commune, these can point toward the potential mechanisms of family abolition. Chapter 13 speculatively sketches the commune as one possible mode through which new forms of social reproduction emerge in the course of mass insurrection and revolutionary struggle. In the conclusion, I use Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of beloved community alongside Marx's notion of *Gemeinwesen* to argue that family abolition can be a guiding ethic of interdependence and care.

Overall, this book is a work of communist theory that draws from multiple political and theoretical traditions. It depends on prior rigorous research in historical materialism, social reproduction theory, family abolitionism, Black Feminism, Black theology, Indigenous Studies, socialist and anarchist politics, Gay Liberationism, Queer Theory, and writing by trans and queer radicals. At multiple points, I also engage relevant dimensions of a specific and

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somewhat obscure communist theoretical tradition called *communization*. In understanding communization theory, I draw from the work of the French collective *Théorie Communiste* and the Anglophone journal *Endnotes*. I introduce and outline their work gradually in relevant sections, beginning in chapter 7.

In the spirit of the Oaxaca Commune, let us advance.