



Sophie Lewis on Abolishing the Family

The Final Straw Radio

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We're happy to present this conversation between Scott and Sophie Lewis, author of *Abolish The Family: A Manifesto of Care and Liberation*.

In this episode, Sophie speaks about the book, the ideas and inspirations she's pulling from, the critique that the family form not only passes property and generationally allows concentrations of it, but simultaneously limits our horizons of care to these small, private and often abusive relationships. Here we also find ideas of Child Liberation, a challenge to the state form and capitalism, and an invitation to imagine beyond what we've been taught is the natural nucleus of human relationships in what turns out to be a long lineage of ideas cast back through Black feminisms of the 70's and beyond.

Anyway, there was a lot here and we hope you enjoy. For a related chat, check out Scott's July 10, 2022 interview with Sophie on the site, and you can find more recordings and essays at her site, **LaSophieLle.org** and support her freelance writing on her patreon.

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TFSR: I'm really excited to be talking with Sophie Lewis today about the new book *Abolish The Family: A Manifesto of Care and Liberation*, which is out now with Verso Books. Can you introduce yourself with any pronouns and any affiliations that you want to name?

Sophie Lewis: Yeah, I go by they and she. I have a visiting scholarship that's unpaid at the University of Pennsylvania in the Gender Studies department. So I have a login for my academic writing and for research purposes. And I teach at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research as well. Which is online courses on critical social theory. Those are the two affiliations, I suppose.

TFSR: In your first book, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family*, you're already critiquing the family. I was really interested in this book and how you talked about how you're going full throttle "abolish the family," but when you were talking in public about your book, you found yourself maybe softening the message of family abolition in terms of expanding kinship. Would you say that is something that other feminists who were talking about family abolition had done in the past? I was wondering if you just might talk about why you felt, at that point, that you needed to soften abolition? And then what what's making you feel like that wasn't right or enough?

SL: Yeah, thanks. I think there are several slightly distinct things in that question, which is a great question. So, I would say just briefly that I didn't quite recognize the extent to which family abolitionism was not heard of. I mean, I knew that it had been largely forgotten, an active forgetting and un-remembering that took place in the 80's, with regard to lots of different liberatory projects had made that that term disappear completely from the collective vocabulary. But I didn't quite realize the extent to which that was the case. So I used 'family abolitionism' almost as a tacit background assumption of my book about gestating and the labor of pregnancy. I really found that I had to contend with way more surprised than I had bargained for. Perhaps I should have expected it. But I was a little bit isolated in the research process of my PhD, which lead into *Full Surrogacy Now*. It's nice to actually be in conversation with people. I now am on these topics, but at that point in time I wasn't.

So that's one very pragmatic circumstantial comment. I would also say that there were feminists that I talked about in my little new pamphlet who were in the milieu of the 1967 to 1975 Women's Liberation efflorescence, for example, in the United States, but who very purposively decided to walk the agenda back. So Kathi Weeks used that phrase: "Walk it back." Kathi Weeks has a really great essay, actually, about how abolition of the family was the infamous proposal of the feminists. Which was a joke about it being the infamous proposal of the communists in the Communist Manifesto. But was very much also the high point of women's

liberationist and gay liberationist ambition, which, in the late 70s and throughout the 80s, feminists such as Gloria Steinem, notably just denied it. They just adopted a stance of erasure towards it. “That didn’t happen. We did not want to abolish the family.” That’s was a decision that was made by certain Liberal Feminists who were fine with that discourse at the peak of the New Left, but were then strategically ingratiating themselves to the capitalist establishment and the state in the 80’s by saying, “Those people were crazy. In fact, we never said that. Maybe one or two, maybe Shulamith Firestone, maybe. But barely anybody.” Which is a lie. That’s a pragmatic decision that liberal feminism made because Liberal Feminism is, in my opinion, an enemy feminism and very much a part of capitalist hegemony.

There is something quite different which I talk about in this new book, which is very much not Gloria Steinem, but rather a whole ecology of comrades who like to celebrate, very rightly in many ways, the emancipatory effects of survival practices on the margins of private property and bourgeois family-ism. So queer Black mothers, queer Black mothering practices, indigenous practices that are held on to, wisps, little remnants of indigenous ritual or kin-making ethics. Little vestiges of things that predate the imposition of the colonial gender binary and the bourgeois private nuclear household, or practices which were innovated under conditions of captivity, for example, under slavery in the United States. Those sorts of practices get called expanded kinship or queer kinship.

Those discourses were the ones that in *Full Surrogacy Now*, I was alluding to. The scholarship surrounding those practices often based on books classically, like *All Our Kin* by Carol Stack, which is an ethnography of Black kin-making projects. That’s one of the key texts of this whole field. In *Full Surrogacy Now*, I was gesturing towards it. You could have read me and saying, “Well, that stuff kind of is family abolition.” I didn’t really say that outright, but it was kind of implied that I wanted to simply affirm the celebrating of those forms of expanded kinship and survival. It wasn’t quite clear. I hadn’t quite finished the thought whether that indeed, is the same thing as family abolition or adjacent to it or whatever.

So in *Full Surrogacy Now*, I was talking about the untenability of the concept of surrogacy outside of a system of proprietary parenthood. I was making the point that “surrogates” are everywhere and nowhere at the same time in the capitalist family model. There are shadowy figures cut out of the family photo who are really quite fundamental to the maintenance of this supposedly autonomous, self-managing unit, the family. I talked about how there is a dystopian character to that, and at the same time, potentially, a utopian horizon that could be envisioned by saying, “Full surrogacy now. What if we became capable of acting as though we were all reciprocally and equally, on an equal basis, the makers of one another. Rather than segregated along the basis of class and coloniality?” So I talked about broadly having a family abolitionist commitment, undergirding that, and then I also talked about the contradictory-ness or the illusory-ness of the family in the present. In the sense that these surrogates are always there, even though the definition of the family excludes them.

But those are two quite complicated things to hold and think together. So, I hadn't quite finished the thought is the completely honest answer, Scott. Part of the reason I became motivated to write a follow up, which also I was asked to do, transparently. I was asked to write a follow up explaining what family abolition means. It was sold to me as a pamphlet that wouldn't take me long to write and it was also paid at the level of a pamphlet rather than a book. I was sufficiently backed up, at this point, by other family abolitionists from whom I have learned. So, the more courageous character, I guess you called it 'full throttle,' is also because of being less isolated.

TFSR: Yeah, and that's a lesson perhaps of family abolition too. Yeah. If I was going to reduce Full Surrogacy to a couple moves, one of the things that I take away from that is that there's this deconstructive move to be like, "we have this idea of the family, but it's not but really how things are working and if we actually look at the way things do work, we learn that the family structure is in itself insufficient." You use the the example of paid surrogacy to show first that gestation is a form of labor and one that has the stratifications of class and race. And then in a move that I feel is similar to what Federici does in *Wages Against Housework*, "if we can acknowledge this as work, then we can refuse to do it under these conditions." That's helpful because with family abolition, I'll speak for myself, I have my own experience of a visceral response to being like, "Yes." Which I think also people have the visceral response of, "No." But I hear the term 'family abolition,' and I'm like, "I hate the family," like Andre Gide said, and experienced it as this suffocating space, even if I love the people in my family and care for them too. The family structure itself felt like that. So, I have that response.

But then, it's really hard, I think, in conversation with people to go from like, "Well, you know, the family sucks," especially if they have different experiences to this more liberatory horizon of like, "What would it look like to do something different?" To make that into a question, I'm wondering how do you connect to those differing responses? Which are often visceral, of yes or no, to that. To theorize it, or even make it seem more practical, beyond pointing out the contradiction, we currently aren't actually operating under the nuclear family. Everything that everyone does is bolstered by all these other things. If you have thoughts about that. Just in conversations with people, how do you approach those those reactions?

SL: Yeah, it's interesting to me, ongoingly, how people whose experience is actually forced into unusual levels of dependence on family. So, for example, someone who is classified as having some kind of disability and who has options that are very reduced, artificially, by this world, so like institutionalization or kinship based care, for example. And how people in that situation might have a particularly clear understanding of how that constraint, those two options, the reduction of options

to those two things. It's pretty dreadful, it perhaps doesn't have to be that way, you could imagine. But perhaps has a psychological response of like, "Well, statistics show that people in my position get maltreated in worse rates in the institutionalization setting as compared to the kinship care setting." Even though you might then also ask the follow up question like, "What are those stats on each side? Is the is the difference significant? Are we trying to look at the lesser of two evils here? Or what is this framework that we're operating within, of the possible?" But sometimes I find that there's quite a visceral reaction of like, "How can you attack the family?!" from people who are in fact, in a situation that you could almost call blackmail. Being blackmailed into support for the family because of acute dependency on the family.

All of us, however, are dependent, to some extent, on the family. Even those of us who are in unusual situations, vis-a-vis, biological or legal or juridically acknowledged kin have very few such people or live in dormitories or in unusual, perhaps creatively different situations are still, impacted in some way by the world of normative, narrative, romanticization of family. The very language we speak is saturated by metaphors of blood and reproductivity and as a question of self, legacy, and immortality. Ideas about ancestors, questions of genes, literal biological descendants. And indeed the aspiration of a work society: which is to work your entire life for the purpose of someone and someone's... I insist very much in this little pamphlet that work and family are very much inextricable. The regime of work is the regime of family, at least right now. I don't know if there's a conceivable other way in which capitalism could organize itself and the work. Society could organize itself maybe worse, maybe there are worse things than the family. I'm completely open to that. You can see that there are dystopian warehousing and dormitory style situations for reproducing the bodies of workers. Amazon warehouses in Czechoslovakia, for example. I don't know, that's just a really random example, because my friend was organizing and in literal dormitories.

But there are people who might find it particularly hard to imagine a utopian end to the family, rather than a dystopian one, precisely because of their vantage point. So, since you asked me about how I deal with the emotional reactions, I do try and see where someone is coming from materially, because it is really important to me to stress over and over again that the family really does keep many of my comrades alive. It keeps us alive. It's the one naturalized care structure in our society. It is bound up with practices of resistance to the State in racialized or undocumented communities. The family is often celebrated and romanticized in immigrant communities. There are basically no real ethnic sub communities in this nation State where there isn't an enormous cult of the family. Family values, right? With a certain proud, almost micro-nationalist flavor, and they sometimes effectively feel like distinct things from the overarching hegemonic cult of the white bourgeois family. The image of the president's family, the image of ultimate property owning, cis-heteronormative productivity and reproductivity.

If you ask people about their associations with the family in culture and

literature, you can sometimes find people have all these associations like the Simpsons, all these ironizing takes on the disappointment of that nuclear domestic life. You can sometimes get people quite far along. People resist it, initially are resistant to the phrase: ‘abolish the family,’ you can sometimes show people that there’s an anti-utopianism baked into the satirical vibe. The way that we will roll our eyes and go, ‘You know, Thanksgiving.’ Right now on social media... I’m leaving social media. I’m sure many of our common friends and comrades were on this list of ant-fascists are now deactivated. But I still notice the overarching tone of popular discourse about Thanksgiving is a series of jokes about escaping from the family dinner table, right? There’s a joke about having red eyes because you go on a walk, to get to get stoned, to escape. So there’s this collective open secret of how much it sucks to hang out with your family. Even if it’s ambivalent. It’s ambivalent and nevertheless, right? And nevertheless, and nonetheless.

I think that satirical tone is part of the identifiable-ness of it, the relate-able-ness of it. That’s what prevents us from having a conversation about, “hang on a minute.... What if the world was organized completely differently?” Yeah, you’re completely right. There’s some thing that needs to be addressed first, about the initial affective reaction. You brought up Andre Gide, the *Familles je vous hais*, the “I hate you” families, which I think a lot of queer people find that the straight mainstream doesn’t appreciate the extent to which that is a materially produced affect and experience for many of us. There is a total crisis, an epidemic of dispossession, refugees from the nuclear family. Still today, in this era of LGBT acceptance and mainstreamization, and homonationalism, and homonormativity, there are still ultimately huge populations of dispossessed rejected queer youth, whose relation to the family is ultimately going to justifiably be one of resentment, bitterness, and hatred.

I think you can also move beyond the initial reaction to talk simply about what you actually want for the people in your family if you love them, and you might find that those things you want for those people is actually family abolition. That maybe sounds kind of glib, but I find that if you focus on the love that people often do feel for the people who juridically, legally, or biologically are family right now, you can often actually bring them around almost paradoxically that way, to the political project of creating a world in which the care that all those individuals receive is not dependent on this infrastructure of organized scarcity. Where the ties between people are ultimately predicated on a kind of reciprocal blackmail. Where there are ultimately no other alternatives and that is supposed to be romantic. So I really mean it when I say, “if you love your family, you want you want family abolition for them.” We can unpack that more. But I think I can work with both the very pro and the very anti knee jerk responses.

TFSR: Yeah, that actually makes a lot of sense. For some reason right now, I’m coming with personal reactions to this and this is one of the ways that you define what love might mean in the book, but wanting freedom for your

loved ones, wanting autonomy for them, the kind of autonomy that doesn't seem to exist within the family structure. And the desiring for that, that in itself is a liberatory desire. That really makes sense to me.

But also, I can imagine the fear, right? You were saying that under the structure of capitalism that works through the nuclear family as the cell of reproduction, it also provides us with the meaning of our life, what you are working for is the family or your children or whatever, so stepping outside of that structure is daunting. Because then you have to find some other reason to be living. You lose that alibi and have to face... I like that you brought it up work abolition too, because then you have to face what you're working for, who you're working for maybe in a different way.

Maybe we should, at this point, talk a little bit about what we even mean by the family, because it could mean so many different things. When we're saying 'abolish the family' what exactly are we talking about? And what is included within that abolition and what might not be included in that?

SL: Yeah, absolutely. I think people find this quite surprising if they've not thought about it before. But the definition I propose is for the family, the family is the name we have for the fact that care is privatized in our society. It's the form that the privatization of care takes in a class society. So under feudalism, before capitalism, care started to be privatized in households that were collections of servants and slaves. That's where the etymological root of family comes from. There was very little love in the ideology whatsoever. The institution of marriage wasn't an institution with any real love narrative until relatively recently in human history. It's just property institution.

Federici was brought up just now and her narrative about the way that care is privatized and enclosed inside the domestic space. During the enclosures, in a context of witch hunts, that is the starting point of the family in the sense that I'm mainly talking about. I do think that there's a pre-capitalist family or a feudal family that forms the basis (which also involves privatization of care). But I think the family was perfected under capitalism. So really, concretely, I'm talking about the capitalist family.

So what I really focus on, as I've mentioned twice now, is this privatization of care. If people aren't used to thinking like that, it's the fact that our needs for care are directed towards kinship and the private sphere, and they are met almost exclusively there in a certain sense. So, by the way, that also means that if you get an Instacart shopper to do your groceries, or a TaskRabbit to clean your kitchen, or an au pair to look after your kid, that's still privatized care.

Although the social reproduction picture has changed quite a lot under neoliberalism. In 1972, the Wages for Housework Committee that you were talking about was trying to make visible the labor that was done, often exclusively by one housewife, in the domestic sphere. In the context of overwhelmingly ra-

cialized, feminized people that same household labor would be done for a wage in the homes of wealthier, overwhelmingly white women. But now, there's a creative fragmentation and dismemberment of all of the tasks that might go on. It's much more complicated than that situation which which was already bisected by class and race. But today, you can have all kinds of tasks outsource, but at the same time, that's still a private realm. The care that we have can be purchased in or purchased out, but the unit of meeting our needs is this private realm.

What it would mean to have our needs met in the common or public realm would be, if you imagine, no longer expecting to have to take care of your hunger via you or your partner, or your mom, or whoever, cooking for you in a private kitchen, or buying food, but having that need met in a central canteen or eating place where food is just provided all the time, right? Or if you had a need for friendship and intimacy, which we have, not always meeting that or not feeling the need to meet that in a little team of designated people under whose roof you live. It's fun to live with people, so that's not like something that anyone would want to proscribe or take away, right. But finding the sphere of the public, sphere of the common, has stuff going on because people are not all at work or trying to survive. You can go and get your therapeutic needs met, mend stuff collectively, mend your clothes, maybe swap, stuff like that.

Think about the needs that you get met in the private realm of your family and imagine the infrastructures that would have to be in place for you not to even necessarily think of going straight home to fix that, to get that need met. So laundries in the past, I'm not saying this is cool and romantic, but like women would have to do the laundry for the village together in the public realm collectively, which was really hard work and "why is it just women doing it? That's ridiculous." But at the same time, it's quite efficient. It's efficient to do things like laundry.

We do want to think about things like efficiency if we are interested in anti-work, which is a horizon of minimization of the alienated work tasks that all of us carry on our backs. Not just elimination and automation of work, but also redistribution and changing the qualitative character of things through that redistribution, right? It's not just a quantity thing. It's a quality thing, collapsing the distinction between the two, right? So maybe it doesn't really feel like work to look after a one year old for two hours every other day, but it is work if you have to do it for 20 hours a day, every single day. That's the kind of distinction I'm talking about.

TFSR: That's really helpful. I was thinking one of the things you say in the book that really struck me, you quote Margaret Thatcher's really famous claim that there's no such thing as society, only families and individuals. And from that claim, you make this your own claim, that that means that family is an anti-social institution which I think at first would seem not right, because you said that we have this idea of family as where we get our connections, or where we know we can connect with people, perhaps. But I think within that phrase, there's something really interesting, especially

thinking about ideas of social war.

I wonder if you might unpack that idea about about family as anti social a little bit, which I guess would just expand on what you were saying just a minute ago?

SL: Yeah. Well, I'd love to take credit. It's really Michelle Barrett and Mary McIntosh with their title, *The Anti-Social Family*. I think they wrote this in 1982, 1984. I can't remember. But in any case, yes, they are in this kind of Thatcherite moment in the United Kingdom, and they are two Marxist feminists who are kind of refusing to go along with the generalized feminist strategy I mentioned earlier of pretending that family abolition was never dreamed off by anyone apart from maybe some really crazy people. And they're holding aloft the promise, the need... the Orthodox Marxist imperative, really, although it's not Marxist's really took that part of the Communist Manifesto and honored it ever, but that's another story.

But yes, they say in their book, *The Anti-Social Family*. As I read it, basically, Margaret Thatcher says, "There's no such thing as society. There's only individual men and women and families," and they say, "Yeah, exactly, because of the last part, the first part is true." The fact of the family is what turns all of human life indoors into the domestic realm for private satisfaction. And so, the social is kind of what happens on the opposite end of that impulse, it's when we cease to turn inward and meet one another in the commons. So the social is like starved, systematically and structurally, by the family. Because the family is not just the narrative and the ideology, but also the material means for telling us that all the good feelings that we require, and all the very basic functions that we require, to be able to get up in the morning are located in the private nuclear household. They cannot be generated together outdoors.

It's the competitiveness of the family, the sort of 'Keeping Up with the Joneses,' chauvinism, 'us and them' mentality, the rat race mentality, the mentality we touched on earlier about, pure survival, working for your entire life, is easily recognizable as unbearable. Indeed, during the Big Quit or Great Resignation that people were talking about a lot last year and to a lesser extent recently. Well, earlier this year people did start to reach a tipping point of saying, "well, actually fuck this!" But the thing that makes it very difficult to reach that point is the doing it for your children. The doing it so that your children can have a better life than you had, or the doing it for your sick Dad or your sick Mom who doesn't have enough money to pay for needed medical care. So on and so forth, these are the reasons why is the love of another, the love of family, that forces us into these sorts of deeply dis-empowered encounters with the labor market as wage slaves.

TFSR: Some of the last things you said was making me think, because you brought up the Great Resignation and I was thinking about COVID and how when the pandemic first hit, it really brought home the insufficiency of the family as a location of care, especially for people that are parenting

or like you said, or caring for disabled or ill family members. Because most people still have to work in some way, but then they were also caring. Their structures of care that they need, they relied on school for children, weren't available.

It's kind of interesting, I was just thinking about how there's this huge right wing reaction to that, trying to force the schools back open, through COVID skepticism, or COVID denialism, which then turned into this whole anti-Critical Race Theory and anti gay and anti trans movement against schools. I'm wondering, if you have any thoughts about that, because, again, it's one of these experiences where COVID hits, and I'm like, "Oh, everyone's gonna be face to face with the contradictions of the world that we live in and they're going to have a fire lit under them to organize things that are better." Then we have this reactionary and really hateful outcome.

I just wonder if you have any thoughts about that? Like why, when faced with the insufficiency of family, and the need for larger care structures, did it take such like a fascist turn?

SL: Yeah. I mean, this is the question I'm asking myself. I think it's a really important question. I've been listening to the Death Panel Podcast, and going on that show a lot, because I think they have such wonderful things to say, both about the concrete policy developments that some of us might, certainly I find it quite difficult to follow. They do that hard work, but then also the political and theoretical ramifications from a disability liberationist perspective. I'm reading their book *Health Communism* to try and find clues as to how historically critical utopianists sought to de-privatize care from a perspective of anti psychiatry and unionized sickness.

The socialists patients collective in Heidelberg in Germany in the 1970's, sought to "turn illness into a weapon" and resist the regime of capitalist health by dreaming of a communist health that is not about repairing yourself and curing yourself for the purposes of productivity and work. But on the contrary, for the purposes of becoming ungovernable and unproductive.

Sorry, that's a bit of an evasion, because I don't know how exactly the potential that we all felt, I think so many people felt the potential of the moment where people were forced to develop "pods." Slightly enlarged little units of temporary non-familiarity, or maybe a prosthesis to the family, another household that you decide to pod with for the purposes of epidemiological prudence, but allowing the social reproductive isolation of one private nuclear household to be attenuated slightly for a period. Pods were on the one hand, allowing people to get a glimpse of what it's like to slightly opened the door, throw open the doors paradoxically, of your private nuclear household. But then the State of Emergency logic governing all of that, and the ongoing simultaneous retrenchment and turning inward that was going on... Family abolition isn't something that changes overnight. It's not

like the world could be remade on the basis of State law, State discourse, architecture. Things like the apparatus of custody, the apparatus of parental rights and so on and all of that.

It's just so interesting how there was two things simultaneously going on: an affirmation of the sanctity of family; the primacy of family; the need to stay indoors; stay at home. Obviously, some of us anarchist utopians, anti capitalists, we're asking, "whose home?" "In what ways can the private home, in private property, the very location where the vast majority of sexual violence, and for women, murder occurs? How can you be forcing people into that space under the aegis of safety and wellness?" People are going to explode in this pressure cooker situation. And indeed, people were reporting that domestic violence rates went through the roof. People who were battered or abused, found it especially difficult to flee their partners or their abusive family members because there was an intensification of the imperative to stay with your own.

This idea of 'us and them' is on one level, really intensified under a lockdown, but then at the same time, this antagonistic moral imperative arises, "What about your neighbors? How are we going to make sure everybody's okay? People are not okay." So all this mutual aid was simultaneously made necessary, made really obviously necessary. It's necessary all the time, but COVID raised a little bit more awareness of it.

I just don't know what the collapse was. I think there was a real demoralization, at one point. There was a real normalization, a desire for the normal, which very nihilistic, a forgetting of the George Floyd uprising. Amass pardoning against the, fact the ongoing fact of death, mass death. A failure to grieve, which is the only way you process and integrate the knowledge of this kind of loss, and our collective implicated-ness in the unnecessariness, the brutal, almost un-face-able unnecessary-ness of all this death, and our collective co-responsibility for the for the world that that produced it.

Those are just some random thoughts. What about you?

TF SR: Well, I think that that nihilism is really apparent, especially in the right wing reactions that took the opportunity to attack the idea of being taught about racism, or being exposed to queerness and other family structures. Another thing that comes to mind is one of the things about the pandemic that goes along with the anti-social aspect of the family, is that it made us feel unsafe around other people that we weren't aware of what their exposure risk would be or whatever. So, that was a further isolating element, that I felt even internally as I navigate the pandemic as a chronically ill person. I think about that a lot, about my exposure risks and other people's willingness to tolerate more risk.

One other thing, I don't know what you think about this, but a failure on the... whatever we want to call it, but the Left or an anti authoritarian perspective that comes to mind. I'm thinking about this particularly

in relation to children. This gets to another point that I want to ask you about: In most left or radical or anti authoritarian spaces, there are still spaces that are segregated adults and children. Usually, there are no children there, maybe in an occasional space, there'll be some kind of childcare, but children aren't integrated into it at all. So I feel like in that way, by reproducing the adult and minor hierarchy that we're limited to in thinking are about the kind of collective care that you call for in *Family Abolition*.

To tie this historically to what you're talking about, part of the gay liberation, the historical gay liberation movement of the late 60's and 70's, part of what they were calling for or in the idea of family abolition was a liberation, a Youth Liberation too, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that, where children fit within this idea?

SL: Yeah. Well Youth Liberation and Children's Liberation are concepts, or is a concept, that I feel people have heard of even less than abolition of the family somehow. Sometimes people have heard of 'smash the church, smash the State, smash the family' those three used to go together a little bit in Gay Liberation history. But children's liberation and the analysis of adult supremacy, those are currently cultivated, I think, only among anarchists. As far as I can see, in the United States for example, there's a really great collection that came out from AK Press by carla bergman called Trust Kids, which has stories about confronting adult supremacy, in small, voluntarist, small scale ways, trying to develop different radical democracies as generationally.

I do think that, for me, abolition of the family is very much about a radicalization. I don't know if I really feel attached to the word democracy, but the idea of a truly de-hierarchized space of negotiation of care. So, elderly people and very young people currently are positioned in our society, culturally and socially, very much at a disadvantage because of their relation to the workplace. So when capitalism is not yet able to use you for the production of surplus value because you're too young, or you're too old and you've been used up, or because you've been classified as disabled, disability can be thought of as a form of in-utility, usefulness to capital. In that sense, there's quite a lot of similarity and overlap between Youth Liberation and Disability Liberation. I think some people find that quite startling. And want to hit back and say, "Are you saying that disabled people are like children?" "Well, no. And do you think that children are not people?"

TFSR: Yeah. Why is that a bad thing?

SL: Yeah. I think the history of experiments in children's autonomy and equality with adults is quite easily criticized from a Marxist or revolutionary perspective, because they're so piecemeal. Often it was quite small projects, like fee paying schools even. So really not even outside of marketized education. For example: There was a school called Summerhill that was quite famous. It was in England. I think it

began in the 40's or even 30's, I can't remember. But it became sort of famous in the 60s and ran for a long time. Summerhill was a radical educators project. Parents sent children there and paid fees, but while they were at Summerhill, there was all this radical pedagogy that was being put into place with total horizontality around decision making, too. Well, that was the theory and people spoke holes in it and said, "Well, no, the school master, in a sense, is still a school master. He still pays the taxes on the property." Lots of people were really keen to poke holes in it from all directions. It was ultimately a private school, right?

But it was also an anti-school: there was a principle of the only classes that people took, were the classes that they wanted to take, they were not obliged to do anything at any point. Things like bedtimes were all collectively decided. I really found it quite delightful, reading some of the negotiations some of the accounts of meetings.

Because we we live in this world, it was always asked, "Could the children who came through Summerhill get jobs in the normal world?" The answer to that was always like, "Yeah, in fact, actually they were creative individuals who excelled at whatever vocation they decided to study in the end, because they really wanted to study." Sometimes, apparently, young people would not do classes or schooling for two years at a time before they felt any desire to, because they were so burned and traumatized from the world of hierarchize schooling that they had left in order to come to Summerhill. Then they would actually decide, "No, I do want to learn engineering."

They're these stories like that. It's quite inspiring as a tiny little glimpse into what might conceivably be possible in terms of relations between the young and the not so young. With all the caveats I've already given, I'm in a way more and more inspired by the youth led or youth run collectives and social centers that are talked about. Like, the Purple Thistle in Vancouver is the subject of some of Carla Bergman's writings, for example, in that. I don't think it necessarily has some of the same utopian aspirations of some of the radical pedagogues such as A. S. Neill of Summerhill in the 60's and 70's. But in many ways, it's more true to its own form, because of its attention to the actual voices and thoughts and writings of actual children or young people who may or may not actually share the same sorts of Youth or Children's Liberationist ideas that people like I do.

You run into these sorts of paradoxes and problems when you try and liberate people against their will in the abstract level of theory. There's a contribution by Carla Bergman's comrade or kid who isn't really sure about the idea that children do not belong to anyone. Which is a phrase and a concept that comes up in a poem famously by Khalil Gibran, "your children are not your children, they are the sons and the daughters of life's longing for itself." There's a commentary on that by a teenager who isn't sure it sounds good to them.

The idea that children don't belong to anyone but themselves or belong to all of us equally as a responsibility, as a care necessity, was very popular among Black and so called 'Third Worldist liberationists,' Black and third world gay and lesbian

conferences in the 70's often caucused to the effect that "children must be liberated, not just from the patriarchy, but also from the ownership model of parenthood, full stop." So even lesbian parents, for example, would would say, "we're not trying to mimic the proprietary structures of patriarchal parenthood in our own lesbian communities. We want to completely revolutionize the whole concept of parenthood and the private public distinction all together."

But then again, you need a model for how children who have entitlements and needs to very specific forms of care. There often need to be, especially for the very early years of human life, very stable in some forms, very reliable arrangements of care, provision, and delivery to extremely young people. Although it's not clear that it has to be the same exact adults at all. It could be several. You have to come up with imaginings for what the model might be, and so for that reason, it's nice to visit speculative fictions, or science fictions, like Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, where there's a society called Mattapoissett. I think she wrote this in 1976. She was influenced by Shulamith Firestone's, *Dialectic of Sex* with its ambivalent openness to the possibility that some forms of technology could help liberate proletarian gestators, pregnant people, from the burden of necessary compulsory pregnancy if they want it. That's very much in a post-capitalist scenario rather than the present scenario of techno patriarchal capitalist evil, where she is very clear, if something like a artificial womb were to be developed, it would be a nightmare, it would be for all the wrong reasons, and with all the wrong consequences. Which is indeed how ectogenetic technology is being developed right now by people with very strong pro-life commitments and "fetal personhood" commitments.

But anyway, in this speculative fiction, where working class gestating pregnant people have thought about their needs for gestationally assistive technology, there's a communal tank with fetuses. After the fetuses are finished gestating in this "mechanical brooder", as it's called, the community, parents, according to a three tier system, where there's an expert called a 'kid binder', who's professionally given over to the vocation of looking after kids, because it's a serious business, it's a serious art. So, there's people like that, a kid binder parents for all the children in the community, and then everybody else is also responsible at the same time. Then the third level is that every single individual child has three designated parents. So there's those three levels.

I quite like those concrete proposals, because it gives your mind something to work with. If you know children and can talk to them about what they think about that, I think you can advance a little bit into a less abstract level of Children's Liberation in 2022.

TFSR: Right. My experience of reading those things is always like, "Oh, my God, that sounds so exciting." But then, that reaction that you mentioned of like, "Well, I'm not so sure. That's such a good thing." That speaks to another desire that could get lost in some of the discussions about wanting to be cared for. And what the distinction is between wanting to be cared for

and wanting someone to have power over you. In both of the situations of caring for children or caring for sick or disabled people, that can be transformed into power and control. I mean, that's what the right wing literally calls it, in terms of parental rights.

But there's another kind of care, that doesn't totally destroy your autonomy. I think maybe it's hard to see that from our perspective now. Right? Maybe even from our desires, because we're so exhausted of caring for ourselves, that the desire to be cared for might be some kind of totalizing desire, just like an escape, you know?

To phrase that as a question: how do you think family abolition, the idea of family abolition or the movement for it, could transform our understanding of care? Along the lines of Federici saying, "We don't even know what love is because of being forced to do this for us work." What is the utopian vision of care that comes from a family abolition perspective?

SL: Yeah, that's a great question. A part of me is content to tolerate not fully knowing and being up for finding out along the way, because I think definitionally some part of it can't be known in advance. It would be a little bit like that very moving line of thought that you're citing or gesturing towards, implies that we want to find out what it would be like to conduct these same labors, these beautiful moments that are beautiful even in the present, where they are stolen from us in large part, not 100%, but a large part of these sorts of creativities and affects are being expropriated by capital from under our noses. Nevertheless, we experience some of the nicest, most pleasurable, joyous, liberated feelings, while teaching a very young person how to speak or learning things back from them... what do we learn from one another transgenerationally, or just in general? It's the worst and the best of life in the contemporary organization of maternal drudgery, for example. Wiping a child's nose, as I said earlier, every day on your own with no assistance is a bit of a living hell, but at the same time, that the relationship with that same child might be giving you some of the best ideas, the most nurturance feelings and so on and so forth.

But we want to find out what it would be like to not have that whole situation circumscribed by capitalist privatization, such that the isolated intensity of that co-dependenc... Because in a weird way, parents are almost, I'm not gonna say equally, but like similarly dependent on the children who are so totally dependent on them for their care and survival, because of the way that your whole identity as a worker would fall apart if you were not the exclusive authority, quasi-exclusive authority and bearer of responsibility over that child's existence. So, you would have to find out, and this is the kind of curiosity that Federici and her comrades were talking about, have to find out what it would be like to love freely, you know, truly freely.

So, care, as you say, in the present is often bound up in power and powerlessness. And I'm not sure that it never intersects with autonomy in a somewhat constraining way. I don't know. We will find out whether care and autonomy can

be interlaced with no friction. I wonder. I think that's the question. My definition of love is about both care and autonomy. To love someone is to struggle to strive for their immersion in care, like maximum abundant care, at the same time as as having maximum autonomy. I don't know the extent to which those two things in the future might rub up against one another.

Love is so proprietary in the present. We don't really want people to be loved by others. Well, I think some of us do. Maybe all of us somewhat do at our best moments, but because of the enforced scarcity of care. The care crisis of capitalism, or the care crisis, that is capitalism, we don't feel it's safe. We don't trust ourselves or others to be cared for by many, or indeed, to be autonomous from from us. I hope and believe, and to an extent I know, that it can be otherwise and that the enthusiasm and excitement for those anti-proprietary, anti-possessive modes can spread like wildfire in moments of high intensity struggle, or in moments of mass occupation of a public space where things stay and develop and become creative, become experimental, people live together in moments of insurgency.

Somehow, the proprietary logic of our emotion, what Alva Gotby calls 'our emotional reproduction of one another and ourselves' on these proprietarian lines, is weakened and loosened, as a 'Red Love' as Alexandra Kollontai called it, becomes a bit more palpable. Mark Fisher also, I'm not sure he's down for our family abolition at all, but he has a nice phrase, 'red plenty.' I think the emotional level of 'red plenty' is where we feel secure in the contingency of our caring and cared forness. We don't need containers like the family, like marriage, like private property, to reassure us that we will be held tomorrow, as well as today.

Indeed, those containers that I just mentioned, family and the mechanisms that come along with it like inheritance and marriage and so on: they are already quite fallible. They do fulfill certain social reproductive functions adequately from capitalism's point of view. From our point of view, if your husband walks out on you, everyone knows a husband can walk out on you. In fact, marriage doesn't actually like... or a wife can walk out and you, although statistically that happens less, which is curious. I'm going to too many parentheses deep right now.

I keep noticing that the conversation about the crisis of white masculinity in America doesn't really refer to the ample evidence, the sociology that shows that men benefit massively from heterosexual marriage. Even with all their complaints like "there's no male breadwinner household anymore" and "women aren't respecting men anymore." Whatever narrative is being peddled by Jordan Peterson, basically. The hard evidence is basically that marriage is a great deal for men. It's a great labor deal for heterosexual men. That's why they don't leave marriages, they cheat but they don't leave. Anyway!

TF SR: One of the things that you said that's really important that comes in feminist and Gay Liberation texts from the 70's is this idea that the family gives to the worker this mini hierarchy. You get yelled at by your boss at work, but you come home and you get to lord over your wife and children.

And then there's a chain of hierarchy there too, where the husband has power over the wife, or the wife maybe has power over the children. It's the little laboratory in learning your place. And then also the violent pleasures of having power over someone, too.

I think that's really an important thing to pull out. That's how I tried to explain to myself this current movement of, in a moment of devastation and economic precarity for so many people, why there's a parental rights movement. Why is that the thing? That's one place where these people are naturalized into having power over someone where they have no power in any other situation perhaps?

SL: Yeah, yeah. That's fascinating.

Gosh, there's something I literally thought just a minute before getting on this podcast with you, Scott. Someone shared a snippet of Hannah Arendt, who is a philosopher I've always kind of disliked. Very, very conservative, it's always surprised me that that's not just established as what Arendt is, a conservative philosopher. In my opinion, anyway. But there was a section of an essay by her that I'd never read, which was her essay opposing desegregation. I didn't even know. But she argued that it is too great of an infringement on parental rights, basically, to demand that children go to desegregated schools if their parents don't want to create a desegregated family culture. So, she has this fantastically clear and strong statement in favor of the primacy of family, ie parental authority over the realm of the public. I don't know if this is actually useful, you may want to cut this from the recording, but I was just thinking about the social crisis that she was writing from within the tumult. She's writing from this moment of racial justice, upheaval and movement and she's saying, "The Family is threatened by this, and I choose to uphold the Family."

I think we need to get braver, especially if you want to create a comparison. Maybe I'm being too bold here, but I think there are some similarities in this moment of organized assault on trans children and trans life more generally, do people have the guts to understand the structure? The way in which the far right is sometimes onto something when it accuses anti capitalists, feminists, leftist of seeking to undermine the sanctity of the Family? They are not exactly wrong about that. Like... we do against Arendt, for example, insist that that parental rights can go get fucked. In my opinion, most things, but certainly when it comes to white supremacists morays and views, when it comes to the right of children to access health care that they need be that... To be honest, vaccinations, like these anti Vax moms who want to put oil on young people who need antibiotics. That's a pet peeve of mine, or who want to prevent young people from determining their own gender affirming health care pathways.

I think the missing part of left discourse is the willingness to say, "Yeah, we do oppose the Family on these on these fronts," or even criticize it. We do not consider parental rights like a supreme value in this terrain. You have to be very clear

that at the same time as saying that, you can very well and must and should oppose the devaluation and dehumanization of Black parents, for example, whose parental rights are always already null and void to a certain extent within the Child Protective Services industry. Null and void is an overstatement, but Dorothy Roberts has important scholarship on family policing and the very, very white supremacist structure of parenthood, in law and in child protection generally. So you can, according to her, and I agree, seek to abolish family policing, and to that extent, basically argue almost for the voices of Black parents to count more, while at the same time, fighting for family abolition in a long term way. And for parental rights to be limited compared to the rights of children, or balanced out relative to the rights of children.

But family abolitionist is full of these slightly tricky to think through on the face of them contradictions, because we live in a world in which family is always already a racially bifurcated technology. Which is not to say that Black, or racialized, or immigrant, or queer, or proletarian working class families aren't part of the privatization of care into private households, which is the main thing about the family. So even these alternative forms of household and social reproduction and kinship, that in many ways have skills and experiences that are going to be super useful for family abolitionism, it makes no sense to make exceptions for these sorts of marginalized and underserved and under benefited families. By which I mean people who benefit the least really from the edifice of family values and the regime of familism as an as an economic system. Saying like, "Oh, we don't mean those families, we just mean like the white bourgeois family." Which on some level, people always want me to say. They want me to specify when I say family abolition, I mean the white bourgeois family.

But I think if you define the family, as I think it is correct to do, as a mechanism that really affects everybody and is reproduced, wittingly or not, by everyone then then you really have to be talking about the privatization of care and how in a way that non bourgeois, non white, non settler families are going to benefit the most from family abolition. In that sense, deserve it the most, and should not be exceptionalized, or for that matter, romanticized. Because the private nuclear household is not somehow a wonderful thing, just because it happens to be situated in a racialized, proletarianized community, unfortunately.

TFSR: Yeah, I want to get to the trans stuff, but where you're leading me is thinking about the selling out of the radical liberationist movements of the women's movement and gay movement by taking family abolition off the table. Is that another moment of white supremacist consolidation? I'm thinking about gender abolition, for example, or the word gender itself already includes the power structure. I think family maybe does, too, by thinking that family is related to blood and naturalized relationships, it erases other forms of relating to people that happening, but get called the family maybe, wrongly, and reproduces a kind of racialized logic that our belonging is

based on blood.

So, what I'm thinking about here, and what I want to ask you about is on the one hand, why was it taken off the table? Do you think it has to do with this racialized logic? On the positive end of this question, how do we relate family abolition to these other kinds of abolitionist movements? Connecting it back to the abolition of slavery, but also police and prison abolition, which is explicitly Black liberationist and fighting against an anti-Black world? Do you have thought on why that was sacrificed in the vision of the movement and how we can make those connections now?

SL: Yeah, it's really interesting. The collapse of that imaginary at the height of the struggles that proliferated around 1970 is definitely linked to the material defeat. The murder, frankly, and repression that the State successfully carried out, was eventually successful in carrying out. Our people with some stomped into the dust and we can't really state that enough.

You can look at the beginning of the 70's and the end of the 70's and almost compare the texts. I found two things that struck me that were amazingly different. I guess the early 70's, and the early 80's. A text by Pat Parker, who is a Oakland-based Black liberationist radical nurse and third world feminist who has a speech that she gave at an anti-imperialist convergence that is all about how white women on the left need to get with the program of family abolition and stop being scared because capitalism and the State will not fall until women and children explode the cell of the family of the private nuclear household.

So, that text is amazing, because it puts Black women really squarely at the forefront of that politics, which I personally until I looked in the archive, kind of imagined, like everybody else imagines, was probably most forcefully articulated by the white, Jewish feminist Shulamith Firestone. It's just not the case, actually, Black women were saying it way harder, as I discovered. But then 10 years later, and you think of all the successful State repression of Black liberationist struggle in the interim, you have Hazel Carby's very famous and also very well articulated, almost like an open letter, *White Woman Listen!*, I think that's from my 1984 and it's basically about why feminist excessive emphasis on the family as an oppressive structure. And she says, "Black feminists do not deny that the family can be a source of oppression, but it's also an important site of survival and resistance to the State for us." That's the text that everybody knows. They don't they don't know the previous one the 10 years before that. Because as I said, the memory has been erased.

I find it so interesting that essentially, we're talking about the defeat of Black feminist abolitionism in the widest sense. The abolitionism of the present state of things in its entirety: Family, capital, State, criminal justice system, all of it. That intensity was actually voiced by the Black feminist imaginary. Which makes sense given, for example, Hortense Spillers' analysis of how it is the Black woman who falls out of the symbolic logics of gendered humaneness in the grammar of American life. And it is the Black female social subject who needs to be made a

place for. We don't know what that place would be. She says she doesn't know whether that place would be called a family anymore. That's possible.

Tiffany Lethabo King reads Hortense Spillers' epochal text, *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, as potentially family abolitionist. Tiffany Lethabo King is one of the Black family abolitionist theorists thinking and working today and she's not the only one. I quote, Lola Olufemi and Annie Olaloku-Teriba, who's working on "patriarchal motherhood" from a Black radical perspective in the UK right now, in my in my little book as well. I do think maybe it is the defeat of Black power that you can almost point to, to explain why family abolitionism was no longer thinkable by the end of the 70's.

TFSR: Thank you so much for this wide ranging discussion. There's just so much to talk about and it's such a central and big idea. So I really appreciate you getting into the nitty gritty. For our listeners, if there's anything you want to say in terms of ways people can support you or follow you, you're getting off social media, beyond buying the book, which we'll link to in our notes.

SL: It's always a massive pleasure to speak with you on *The Final Straw*, Scott. I learned so much from you. Thank you for prompting me. It's true, I have a Patreon, [Patreon.com/reproutopia](https://www.patreon.com/reproutopia) it is my only regular and reliable form of income. It's really appreciated when people help support my freelance writer life. I'm not sure yet. I'll probably be on Mastodon at some point. But yeah, reproutopia is the handle you can find me on. My website is LaSophiElle.Org You can look at some archives of video and audio on there and a list of all the essays that I've written, which at this point are very, very many on all kinds of concepts from octopus erotics to the political economy of heterosexuality and more. But yeah, I look forward to our next conversation on on here.

TFSR: Thank you for being willing. And yeah, we'll link to all that stuff. It's always a pleasure to talk to you and also really a pleasure to read your work because you are also just a wonderful writer. So I just put that up there too.

SL: Oh, thank you. Thank you very much.

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