

Review: The Politics of Some Bodies - On “Feminism, Queer Theory and Marxism at the Intersection”

Tuesday 21 March 2017, by [DRUCKER Peter](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2017).

Review of *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory and Marxism at the Intersection*. By Holly Lewis. Zed Books 2016, 340 pages, \$29.95 paperback [Amazon price – Zed price only in GBP].

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AT A TIME when Marxist politics is struggling more than ever against the current, queer Marxist scholarship is enjoying a slight, startling, heartening resurgence. [1] Holly Lewis’ *The Politics of Everybody* is a major contribution to the trend.

While uncompromisingly committed to the politics of class, Lewis insightfully interweaves Marxism and feminism. On one front after another, *The Politics of Everybody*’s arguments about queer struggles raise debates to a qualitatively higher plane.

The scope of Lewis’ contributions is too vast to sum up in a review. If I have to pick out one that outshines the rest, though, it’s the way she deploys social reproduction theory to illuminate how gender and queer oppression work in capitalist society today. Our understanding of anti-lesbian and anti-trans violence in particular will never be the same after this book.

To clue the reader in from the start: Lewis and I are comrades in arms and friendly sparring partners. We agree much more often than we disagree.

On a wide range of issues I think she’s 100% on target. Even when we disagree, I find that her perspective challenges me forcefully to rethink my own — in beautifully accessible prose. Not that Lewis simplifies anything: her command of a whole range of theory and her ability to expound its intricacies are impressive. [2]

Yet in the last analysis, her brand of queer Marxism is not exactly the same as mine. [3] If I may sum up what distinguishes us: in my book *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*, [4] I argue for a feminist, anti-racist Marxism in which class, gender, race and sexuality can only be fully understood in relation to one another.

Lewis is absolutely a feminist, anti-racist Marxist — she especially criticizes the pre-1960s left's neglect of gender (190) — but she emphasizes more the ways in which class is ultimately decisive.

Sometimes I feel that Lewis' clarity comes at the cost of nuance. I'll come back to this.

Gender Under Capitalism

The *Politics of Everybody* offers a compelling analysis of how, “within capitalist social relations, [people] inhabit complex bodies that are collectively coded into different functions.” (13)

The way bodies and sexualities function fits into a grid in which gender is key. And the way gender functions under capitalism is (for Lewis) determined above all by its role in the social reproduction of bodies, human beings and the mode of production.

Many Marxist feminists over the last several decades have explored the role of gender in what Marx and Engels described as capitalist social relations of production and (especially) reproduction. The Marxist feminist theorist on whom Lewis mostly relies is Lise Vogel. [5]

Vogel sums up the social reproduction of labor power as involving three key processes: daily activities outside working hours (such as preparing meals and other forms of care) that renew workers' energies; care for people who are not wage workers at the moment (children who are future wage workers, old people who are no longer wage workers, temporarily sick and unemployed wage workers, and caretakers who are not themselves wage workers); and the generational replacement of workers through childrearing.

Throughout capitalist history, women in private households (families) have done the bulk of reproductive labor. This makes women “objects to be traded for sex, household labor, and mothering.” (97) [6] It also gives cisgender, straight, working-class men a stake (from a narrow, shortsighted point of view that accepts the limits of gendered capitalism) in women's oppression.

Furthermore — one of Lewis' key insights — a “queer, trans-inclusive reading” of social reproduction (103) goes a long way toward explaining many men's rage at lesbians and trans people.

Open lesbians, together with trans people who (as either trans men or gender queers) transition away from their originally assigned female gender, are the people who most flagrantly rebel against women's assigned task of caring for men. If men “view lesbians and (misgendered) transgendered men as housewives who refuse to provide free household and affective labor, their violence begins to make sense politically.” (155) [7]

Particularly men who are already suffering under capitalism from a loss of income, power and status can experience lesbians' and trans men's rebellion against women's “natural” role as a personal attack that cries out for vengeance.

This analysis makes more sense of lesbophobia than a narrow focus on sex does. In fact, many straight men find images of lesbian sex titillating — as long as lesbianism is not perceived as a threat to men's social and sexual primacy. (Sex may well be more of a factor in straight men's revulsion at gay male sex, but this is not as much a focus in Lewis' book.)

Lewis' analysis gives her a solid basis for insisting on lesbians' central role in the women's movement and on trans people's integral role in feminism. “Historically,” she points out, “working-class trans women and femme lesbians have taken the brunt” of women-blaming misogyny. Feminist

women need to defend them: “An injury to one is an injury to all.” (277-8)

Instead, trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) have aligned with the religious right on issues ranging from bathroom bills to UN recognition of trans rights. (32) By putting the emphasis on the socioeconomic meaning of gender, Lewis avoids getting bogged down in essentialist arguments about who’s really a woman. As she points out, these arguments too often cloud polemics between TERFs and trans advocates, and risk creating a new, rigid male-female binary in place of the old one.

Diversionsary “Sex Wars”

Lewis also exposes the utopian character of second wave cultural feminists’ attempt — notably in lesbian separatist communities — at living genderless lives free of masculine or feminine behavior.

These attempts ignored the reality of life under capitalism, promoting illusions that on their own women could escape from class oppression and violence, which were blamed exclusively on men.(31)

Cultural feminist ideology bore toxic fruit in the “sex wars” of the 1980s. Lewis points out that treating women “as pigs and collaborators for their sexual choices” became a diversion from women’s collective social liberation through struggle in the broader society. It wrongly put the blame for women’s oppression on women themselves.(97)

In short, Lewis’ reliance on Vogel’s social reproduction theory proves to be extraordinarily fruitful. I would, however, suggest that Lewis could give more weight to another, complementary Marxist feminist approach to linking class and gender: Iris Young’s emphasis on the gendered division of labor.

Young’s approach need not be at all in tension with Vogel’s. [8] But Lewis cites Vogel as arguing that since the “gendered division of labor had not produced inequality at earlier points in human history ... there was no theoretical reason why it should do so now.”(177)

Vogel’s argument is dubious. Feminist anthropologists may still debate whether the gendered division of labor was a source of inequality among gatherers and hunters, but in every state society gender has been tightly enmeshed in the inequalities of class.

Under capitalism, too, women are oppressed in production as well as reproduction. They are not just subordinated in the home, but also paid less, disempowered more and fired earlier in the workplace.

This dual reality helps explain the pervasiveness and persistence of lesbian oppression. Lesbians may be somewhat less exposed to women’s oppression in the sphere of reproduction, but they suffer all the more as women in the sphere of production: even if lesbians are freed from taking care of men, they are all the more burdened by women’s average low income and status in the economy and society.

This is a second key argument for lesbians’ key role in the women’s movement, complementing the argument that Lewis stresses.

Homonormativity?

This is a mere footnote to Lewis’ outstanding theoretical achievement. I do have a real difference with Lewis, however, around the concept of “homonormativity.” Lisa Duggan coined the term in

2002 [9], defining it as a mindset that does not “contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them.” [10])

Since then, the idea has become central to radical queer activism, theorizing radical queers’ anger notably at the mainstream movement’s focus on same-sex marriage and equal rights in the military. In *Warped* I used it as a global description of the antithesis of a queer anti-capitalist politics.

Lewis rejects it. She has many criticisms of the way radical queers use it, most of them well taken. “When queer subculture is raised to the level of political principle, it becomes an elitism that ultimately can be inhabited only by” financially secure white people, she writes. (164-5)

Lewis tells the story of how an alternative queer and trans pride march in Austin, Texas, quickly dropped its anti-capitalist planks because it “was never anti-capitalist — it was merely anti-corporate and anti-consumerist.” (220) It fit into a postmodernist agenda of “little ways of resisting Power”: “buying local, reusing and recycling, promoting ‘fair’ trade, and eating organic.” (193)

This kind of middle-class, individualizing and moralizing politics exists among queers as among others. In *Warped*, I insisted that an anti-homonormative politics should not focus on judging people’s personal choices.

“No one has the option of living entirely free of norms,” I wrote. “Nor does it make sense to label every LGBT person who is not visibly, confrontationally queer at any given moment as homonormative, or to condemn every working-class gay person with a reasonable income for overconsumption.”(10)

Rather, as Lewis agrees, we should resist the imposition, through laws and economic and social pressure, of straight-like norms on queer people.

Interestingly, Lewis supports the use of two other concepts that are closely related to homonormativity. She embraces Jasbir Puar’s critique of “homonationalism,” a term that targets “the Eurocentrism of the Western lesbian and gay movement, with its focus on marriage, military service, and the language of citizenship.” (222-3)

Lewis also insightfully explores and critiques “transnormativity”: pressure on trans people “to look identical to a cis [gender-conforming] person.” (304 n. 22) Yet Lewis neglects other dimensions of homonormativity that go hand in hand with homonationalism and transnormativity.

For example, the mainstream lesbian/gay movement insists that LGBTI (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/intersex) people are a fixed minority of people who were “born that way.” Many lesbian/gay venues exclude or marginalize gender nonconformists. Lewis knows this, but seems not to recognize how pervasive it is.

In fact Lewis is critical of many forms of mainstream gay (especially gay male) assimilationism. If she seems allergic to the word “homonormativity,” it’s particularly because so many middle-class queers use it against working-class lesbians.

It’s true: many queer critics of homonormativity are middle-class, and many working-class lesbians are attached to gender roles and families. In fact, there are even working-class lesbians who deeply disapprove of transgressions against what they see as proper sexual behavior.

So what? Marxists have understood at least since Lukács that no subject position under capitalism guarantees revolutionary consciousness. Some middle-class, queer, non-Marxists are capable of having insights about capitalism and sexuality that some working-class lesbians don’t. We need to

support anti-capitalist struggles, whoever wages them, in all their complexity.

Families and Their Contradictions

Lewis thinks that critics of homonormativity are too censorious about same-sex marriage. She writes that the marriage equality movement demanded “freedom from interference from the state” (236); she fails to acknowledge all the ways that marriage inevitably binds same-sex couples to the state (given the 1,138 consequences that marriage has under federal law alone). [11]

Nor does she do full justice to all the pressures on same-sex couples to comply with norms for household stability, self-sufficiency and respectability in the interests of neoliberal austerity.

On this point I wish that Lewis had a more critical view. It must be possible to defend same-sex couples’ right to marriage equality and, at the same time, recognize and resist the homonormative pressures that restrict their freedom to shape their own relationships.

Lewis prefers to emphasize ways in which working-class families are tools for mutual support. (234) She draws on Angela Davis’ *Women, Race and Class* to point out that Black families have struggled to stay together as slaveholders (in the past) and poverty (in the present) have been tearing them apart. (156) She adds that higher percentages of Black and Latino same-sex couples than white ones are raising children. (305 n. 28)

As Lewis and I both acknowledge, all this is an important side of the reality of families, but only one side. Working-class, African-American and Latina feminists, while making these points, have also highlighted the many ways these same families can be oppressive to women and queers.

Multiply oppressed LGBTI people have no reason to imitate white middle class queers, but they have every reason to fight to transform families that are smothering them. Lewis thinks that the family is not intrinsically good or bad, because it means different things at different times. I would put more emphasis on oppressive features of existing families that are structurally embedded within the capitalist society in which we live.

Neoliberalism and Global Hierarchy

The constraints that families put on poor and working people have been made even more stifling in recent decades by neoliberal cuts to welfare state programs.

Lewis knows this. She certainly knows that gender and sexual patterns changed radically in the course of the 20th century. But many passages in *The Politics of Everybody*, like those defining “abstract labor” and “necessary labor,” could pay more attention to ways in which the social changes of our times have drastically changed the capitalist infrastructure that Marx described in *Capital*.

Lewis expresses reservations about a number of Marxists, from latter-day Leninists (although she values Lenin’s own work) to Herbert Marcuse, because she fears that their attention to shifting geopolitical or psychic structures distract us from the labor theory of value. (64)

I’m afraid that Lewis’ focus on continuities in capitalism could obscure the ways in which neoliberalism has been reshuffling the global imperialist hierarchy, transmuted earlier forms of racism into new ones targeting immigrants and Muslims and transforming the gender and social

mechanisms of social reproduction. [12]

The catchy title of *The Politics of Everybody* sums up a tension I see in Lewis' work between her emphasis on deep structures and her recognition of differences within capitalism. For her, "everybody" is a more accessible way of referring to the Marxist concept of "totality," which I agree is crucial. But for me, a Marxist totality is always complex, contradictory and multilayered, while "everybody" sounds like it applies to people across the board.

In reality, Lewis' book reveals throughout her profound understanding of how actual human bodies are gendered, racialized and shaped in manifold ways by history and geography. In this sense, wide-ranging as the book is, its title promises somewhat more than she actually claims to deliver (or than anybody could deliver).

What she does outline, cogently and powerfully, is a politics of some bodies: specifically, queer bodies, mainly in the United States, under neoliberalism.

Lewis' emphasis on the persistent structures of capitalism may reflect her reliance on Vogel. Unlike many feminist theorists, Vogel argues that while traditionally women in families do the lion's share of reproductive labor, this is not intrinsically necessary to capitalism.

Workers can be housed and fed in dormitories, as was done in 19th-century New England and is done today in 21st-century China. They can eat at MacDonald's and sleep in motels. If not enough children are born to renew the workforce (as in almost all European countries today), immigrant labor can be imported. For that matter, instead of adequately feeding and caring for workers, employers can just work them to death and round up new ones (as in Auschwitz and other Nazi camps).

Lewis concludes that queer resistance to homonormative families does not necessarily challenge capitalism, because even if capitalism makes use of the family "capitalism does not actually care about the family." (279) If gay assimilationists can be coopted into capitalism, she reasons, so can radical queers - to some extent under neoliberalism today, and perhaps even more under some future form of capitalism.

Logic and History

As Lewis realizes, however, even if one can imagine a capitalism that reproduced itself without centrally relying on gendered family structures, no historically existing capitalism has ever done so. Alternative modes of reproduction like dormitories and work camps have always been geographically and temporally restricted. And a mode of reproduction that would fully grant radical queer demands is difficult to imagine today.

Cinzia Arruzza has argued that taking the abstract requirements of capitalism as our point of departure for anti-capitalism mires us in a "bookish understanding of political struggle ... that neglects the lived experience of exploited and oppressed people."

Because "logic and history have a dialectical relationship," even if gender inequality is not a logically inescapable feature of capitalism, it is a "structural characteristic of capitalist social formations." Its abolition is not practically plausible in any currently foreseeable capitalist future, Arruzza concludes. [13]

This means that queer challenges to homonormative families are a threat, if not to capitalism in the abstract, then to the neoliberal capitalism we are actually up against. In this actually existing

capitalism, oppression as Lewis defines it — which “is oppression because it is felt” — and exploitation, which she calls a “mathematical discrepancy” between the value of labor and of labor power (274), are inextricably interwoven.

Generations of Marxists since E.P. Thompson have shown how enmeshed class is with lived experience, community and culture. Generations of Marxist feminists and anti-racists have shown how structurally central gender and race are to capitalism. So a unitary, historically aware theory is indispensable.

Hard-edged

Lewis is a politically committed, forceful writer. She not only makes her arguments clear, she grabs the reader’s attention with powerful images and blunt assertions. Often I’m jealous of the power of her prose.

Her exposure of the limitations of both narrow identity politics and of its economist critique, for example, is trenchant. While “identities exist and ... being stuck with a particular label has political consequences,” she explains, identity politics is “irreconcilable with Marxism” if it means that feminists in Texas and Tokyo cannot truly connect, or that queers in Uganda do not want the respect that U.S. queers do.

I relish Lewis’ summing up: “Welcome to the seedy underbelly of relativism.” (83) I wish I could write this way. But sometimes Lewis’ striking formulations leave me a bit ambivalent. Sometimes I feel that her skill at scoring points comes at the expense of the nuance that is implicit in the text.

For example, when she discusses intersectionality — the feminist approach to understanding class, gender, race and sexuality in relation to one another — she focuses on criticizing what she calls a “vector model” of oppressions, writing: “Oppressions cannot be pinned to the wall like so many dead butterflies.” (195) That’s a great phrase — but it doesn’t do full justice to many feminists’ sophisticated understanding of intersectionality, which is reflected elsewhere in the book.

Lewis is skilled at summing up contemporary debates and explaining that only a correct Marxist approach yields the right answer. But sometimes her correct Marxist approach gives too little credit to theorists she dismisses.

She is scornful of contemporary queer theory(14) in general, often rightly; but she is respectful of a leading queer theorist like Judith Butler, whose performative understanding of gender Lewis finds important and far from “incompatible with materialist analysis.” (199) It would be nice if Lewis showed the same generosity toward other queer theorists that she does toward Butler.

Even if Marxism were intellectually hegemonic today, being open to other schools of thought could lead to fruitful dialogue. In today’s world, where Marxism is on the defensive, it could also be tactically wise.

Lewis sets the best possible direction for this discussion when she calls “for a future where there is no need for Marxist-feminism or queer Marxism” because the battle against gender and sexual oppression is recognized as part and parcel of “the international movement to expropriate the expropriators.” (281) To that I can only add a heterodox but heartfelt “Amen.”

Peter Drucker

P.S.

* Against the Current n°187. March-April 2017:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4913>

Footnotes

[1] Certainly if the annual Historical Materialism conference in London is a barometer — this year's edition features no fewer than seven panels in its new queer track.

[2] Perhaps Lewis' skill at forceful communication has been honed by teaching philosophy to largely working-class, Chicano students at Texas State University at San Marcos.

[3] Lewis herself summed up our agreements and differences in a presentation at a panel on my book *Warped* at the Historical Materialism conference in London in November 2015. Her paper will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of the International Network on Sexual Ethics and Politics*.

[4] Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket, 2015 (reviewed by Alan Sears in *ATC* 179, November-December 2015).

[5] Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory*, Chicago: Haymarket, 2014.

[6] A point made in Gayle Rubin's classic essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

[7] Following Julia Serano, Lewis describes defenders of the gender binary as "oppositional sexists." (120) I find this term confusing. Serano and Lewis mean that these reactionaries oppose masculinity and femininity rigidly to one another; but the term could easily be misread as suggesting that they are somehow in opposition to the power structure.

[8] Young's classic essay, "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory," in Lydia Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, Boston: South End Press, 1981, is not included in Lewis' bibliography.

[9] Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (eds.), *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2002, 179.

[10] *Warped*, 258.

[11] Nicola Barker, *Not the Marrying Kind: A Feminist Critique of Same-Sex Marriage*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 181-2

[12] My own analysis of neoliberalism and homonormativity in Warped is part of a broader account of shifting “same-sex formations” over the last century and a half of capitalist history. Lewis’ piece on Warped in the *Journal of the International Network on Sexual Ethics and Politics* will include a critique of this concept of “same-sex formation,” a critique which I think is in many ways justified. I hope in my response in that same issue to recast the concept, eliminating its flaws while retaining its periodization of changing sexualities. However, this debate is not directly relevant to *The Politics of Everybody*.

[13] Cinzia Arruzza, ESSF (article 40526), [Logic or History? The Political Stakes of Marxist-Feminist Theory](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40526):
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40526>