



## Queer and Gendered Oppression: Its Origins and its Abolition

Amidst a backlash against hard-won but partial victories for LGBTQ+ people, this pamphlet by **Noelle T**, based on talks she gave for Marx21-US, addresses the origins of women's and LGBTQ+ oppression and what that means for liberation today.

Women have been oppressed for centuries and even, in many societies, for millennia. As such, unlike the relatively young phenomenon of racism, we can't blame gendered oppression solely on capitalism. Women's oppression under the current system may look different than in previous societies, but how did they come to be oppressed in the first place? And what do trans and queer people have to do with this?

If you ask a radical feminist what's behind it all—and that's “radical” as in “attacking the roots”, not as in extreme left—the answer would likely start and end with the Patriarchy, meaning in this context an innate, largely unchanging, monolithic male/masculine need to dominate and oppress, especially when it comes to women. Were things truly this rigid, women's best bet might just actually be to join the lesbian separatists in completely removing themselves from male society. Whether or not trans women would be allowed to join them would depend on just how far the radical feminists in question take the “unchanging” part of the analysis. The non-exclusionary radical feminists might give trans women a pass: they're renouncing their maleness and removing that nasty testosterone, so that's something? Or maybe trans women really were just born with female brains in otherwise male-ish bodies, so they're good anyway? The trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs, however, as the term implies, would give no such benefit of the doubt: Male is Male, they say, and since those assigned male at birth can't escape that, they must therefore be trying to gain entry to women's spaces for nefarious purposes. Never mind that transition under capitalism is hard, and if all trans folks really wanted was just to assault women, they'd skip transitioning and take the far simpler route of joining the police.

If you think this outlook sounds bleak, with half of humanity being irrevocably bound to oppress the other half, it is. Aside from flipping the tables and preemptively oppressing men, or just getting rid of men entirely and switching to artificial insemination, it's not entirely clear what a possible outcome would be for women's liberation, much less what actual material processes could even achieve such goals.

If outcomes like these sound like problematic bridges too far, it's also because they are, and there's fortunately a more solid basis for saying this than just seeing TERFs as a morally reprehensible threat to trans people's existence.

Contrary to the slogan that it's "NERF or Nothing", rejecting TERFism doesn't mean that we're left with Non-Exclusionary Radical Feminism as the only recourse: there's plenty of room to argue for a historically and materially grounded Marxist analysis of gendered oppression and the actual roots of patriarchal systems, that is to say, an analysis rooted in the gradual and contemporaneous rise of settled agriculture, class society, and heritable property.

## Evolution of the Family Form

Friedrich Engels examined this at length in his 1884 book, [\*The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and The State\*](#), based in large part on posthumously fleshing out Marx's notes on Lewis Henry Morgan's 1877 book, *Ancient Society*. Some of *Origins'* factual details and predictions (not to mention some rather... *Victorian* prejudices) have been superseded by subsequent scholarship, but in a similar way to how the discovery of modern genetics enriched Darwin's theory of natural selection rather than discrediting it, the basic thrust of Engels' historical framework has fared remarkably well in the face of modern anthropological discoveries.

One thing we know from this framework is that gender in hunter-gatherer societies was little more than an early division of labor, lacking the oppressive or coercive aspects that would later appear. Men and women may have had their different spheres, yes, but both were of similar dignity, and, aside from literal pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing, the bodies filling these roles weren't even so rigidly and exclusively phallic hunters and vulvaed gatherers/child-rearers—and that's before we even get into the existence of biologically intersex people. In a society where having too many children could actually be detrimental to the tribes' survival, women who weren't currently pregnant or nursing could also go on hunts with the men, and if all the women were busy, men would gladly step in to take care of the children without any societal shame. The whole community took care of the whole community's children.

Society did change over time, however. As humans developed and improved settled agriculture, they started being able to have actual surpluses for once. As these surpluses grew, so did a separate group of people whose role it was to manage and keep track of them. And with such divisions in society growing and turning into separate social classes, it became more and more important to know whose children were whose, i.e. who would inherit the extra wealth. This was especially true in areas where the men were doing the managing while women were rearing the larger number of children that agriculture both could support and needed to work the fields. When tracing inheritances switched from the mother's line to the father's, propertied men then needed stricter control over women's sexuality in order to ensure that their children were actually their own. Engels referred to this as "[the world historical defeat of the female sex](#)":

The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. This degraded position of the woman [...] has gradually been palliated and glozed over, and sometimes clothed in a milder form; in no sense has it been abolished.

Throughout the history of class society and to this day, ruling classes have used once-but-no-longer-egalitarian gender divisions to ensure the reproduction of the labor force (among the exploited/oppressed classes) and heirs (in their own). Capitalism also uses this gender divide to set its laboring classes into self-destructive internal competition.

Where do trans and queer people fit back into all of this? People whom we might today call transgender have been around for a long time, from two-spirited people among the first nations of Turtle Island, to the hijras of the Indian subcontinent, to the likes of Joan of Arc and other notable crossdressers in Europe and the (so-called) New World. Different societies have treated gender-variant people in different ways, with the particulars varying based on with the details of each society's construction of gender roles and norms. Some condemned them, but some societies viewed them as good luck or even magical. (Oh, to live in such a society!) With the rise of the capitalist mode of production, however, and with its especially brutal imperial export to the colonies, this traditional acceptance started to come crashing down.

While there hasn't always been a solid line drawn between trans and other LGB/etc people, especially in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is a long historical record showing that people have been hooking up with others who have the same genitals since time immemorial. The fact that it even warranted a *mention* in the third book of the Bible indicates that it was happening in the Mediterranean Iron Age.

That said, like the ‘traditional’ nuclear family itself, the gay *identity* as we know it now is only a couple centuries old. As capitalism’s enclosure of land forced people out of the countryside, it concentrated them together in unprecedented numbers, and with that came more opportunity for same-sex liaisons and experimentation, especially for women workers, who were now outside of the peasant home and more integrated into public life.

At the same time as people were leaving the old gender roles of the countryside, however, and opportunities for same-sex relationships were booming, so too was Capitalism’s contradictory need to repress away these effects of their industrial revolution.

Individual capitalists need to squeeze all the profit they can out of their workers lest they be out-competed and driven under by other capitalists. This means paying the bare minimum salaries that they can get away with to sustain the workers enough to come back to work the next day. The capitalist class *as a whole* needs wages to be just high enough to ensure that there will be enough new workers to replace the current workers when they die or are just finally too worn out to continue working. Capitalism needs babies, but capitalists don’t want to pay for them. In most capitalist societies, this means forcing the working class, especially working-class women, to do a *lot* of unpaid labor in the home.

Women having control over their own sexuality—whether through abortion or even just simple contraceptives—throws a wrench into this process of reproducing the workforce. Meanwhile, cisgender gay sex doesn’t make babies at all, and trans people’s mere existence in the public eye can potentially call into question the very legitimacy of rigidly prescribed and segregated gender roles and the nuclear family structure itself.

## **Fightback, Rollback, and Future**

In the wake of World War I—and as a product of the revolutions and workers’ uprisings that ended it—more space opened for the public flourishing of same-sex love and transgressive gender presentations.

In Russia, the fledgling workers’ state scrapped the entire Tsarist legal code. Their eventual replacement conspicuously and intentionally left out any criminalization of homosexuality, the first time this had happened anywhere since the Great French Revolution more than a century previous. Women’s rights in general also surged forward, with divorce and abortion being legalized and many social reproductive functions such as laundries and kitchens being brought back into the public social sphere.

In Germany, Magnus Hirschfeld's *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* was founded to study the science of sexuality and was starting to figure out the difference between sexual attraction and gender identities, even performing some of the first gender affirmation surgeries.

Sadly, this opening for LGBTQ and women's rights had its limits and didn't last.

In Russia, thanks to counterrevolutionary international siege and civil war, the economy collapsed, and they simply didn't have the resources to sufficiently implement all the aforementioned social programs.

In Germany, the defeat of the workers' revolutionary movement and failure to form united fronts to defeat fascism led to the tragic losses of Hirschfeld's library being burned by Nazis and many communists and LGBT people ending up with red, pink, and black triangles in the concentration camps.

The failure of workers' revolutions in the rest of Europe further isolated Russia. The bureaucracy became increasingly disconnected from its decimated working-class base and, lacking that active grass-roots accountability, slid further into counterrevolution. To protect this newly forming ruling-class's interests against western market capitalism's encroachment, The Counterrevolution Needed Babies just as much as the western bourgeoisie, and thus were homosexuality and abortion recriminalized.

During World War II, the need for qualified staff led to some acceptance of—or at least turning a blind eye to—homosexual activity in Allied militaries, but post-war repression pressed a large section of the gay rights movement into attempts to appear respectable. This focus on respectability started to change amidst the ferment of the 1960s, with a number of militant outbursts occurring. And then on a late night/early morning in June 1969, NYC police raided a well-known gay bar that they had raided many times before, but this time, the [gays had had enough](#). Led front-and-center by a line of drag queens, they fought back and sparked what we now know as the modern gay rights movement.

The struggle has continued since then, but due to various influences, including the aforementioned trans-exclusionary radical feminists and erasure of the Black and Hispanic queens so prominent in the 60s uprisings, trans rights have often been sidelined or used as a bargaining chip to be traded away in return for passing gay rights protections. As an example, New York State's Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act of 2002 had its gender expression language stripped out. GENDA was only passed years later after further struggle.

Of course, not everyone who espouses TERF talking points about trans women trying to assault cis women are reactionary feminists. It's technically only TERFism if it comes from the radical branch of feminism; otherwise, its just sparkling

transphobia. Whether or not [J.K. Rowling](#) and other ‘gender-critical feminists’ have seriously studied such wayward offshoots of second-wave feminist theory, we can be fairly certain most of the right-wing talking heads whipping bigots into a furor—not to mention the majority of those bigots themselves—have not.

To be clear, just as white workers who give in to the scapegoating of racism and anti-immigrant nationalism sabotage their own wages and working conditions, any transphobes who fancy themselves feminists are shooting their feminism in the foot. If the capitalist state can take away trans people’s bodily autonomy, their right to alter their bodies to match their genders, it can attack abortion rights with strikingly similar justifications, and, as we’ve seen, it has been doing exactly that. Attacks on gay rights have also ramped back up, and as the US Supreme Court’s 2022 [Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health](#) decision suggests, even regular prophylactic birth control, which many of us take for granted, appears to be queued up for the chopping block.

We can’t afford to let our struggles be separated when the enemy is the same, and we can’t rely on any capitalist parties to liberate us: they actively do not want to. We need to unite and fight; we need to join LGBTQ struggles to the general working-class fightback. And whether Marsha P. Johnson or Sylvia Rivera were actually the first brick-thrower(s) at Stonewall or whether it was some other unnamed queen, we should remember that queer, trans women of color have been at the front lines for a long time: the fight must be continuously rejoined with Black, Indigenous, and People of Colors’ liberation struggles and others as well. Fortunately, we’ve seen this happening more often of late. The 2020 #BlackLivesMatter protests overcame siloing divisions from the previous #BLM wave and explicitly brought trans issues into the conversation, [and the solidarity returned](#), with Pride marchers raising slogans for Black lives and calling for an end to police brutality, especially against their BIPoC siblings. More than just bringing together different fights, however, we need to remember that so long as capitalism exists, it will need to control the reproduction of its workforce, and it will need to divide that workforce against itself in a downward spiral. Ultimately, we must dismantle the entire capitalist system and bring the economy under mass-democratic workers’ control.

Thus, to paraphrase the Bolshevik revolutionary, [Inessa Armand](#):

If queer, trans, and women’s emancipation is unthinkable without fully automated luxury space communism, fully automated luxury space communism is unthinkable without the full emancipation of women, trans, and queer people.

As for what gender will look like under fully automated luxury gay space communism, whether nigh-infinite genders flourish, whether gender is made obsolete and abolished entirely, or whether those two possibilities might amount to

much the same thing in the end, we can't yet know. Perhaps the best conclusion is to chuckle at the friendly irony of paraphrasing queerness into a [quote from that 'stodgy' old Victorian, Friedrich Engels](#):

What we can now conjecture about the way in which [gender and] sexual relations will be ordered after the impending overthrow of capitalist production is mainly of a negative character, limited for the most part to what will disappear. But what will there be new? That will be answered when a new generation has grown up: a generation [...] who never in their lives have known what it is to buy [someone]'s surrender with money or any other social instrument of power; a generation [...] who have never known what it is to give themselves to a [partner] from any other considerations than real love, or to refuse to give themselves to their lover from fear of the economic consequences. When these people are in the world, they will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion about the practice of each individual – and that will be the end of it. ■

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<https://marx21us.org/2022/06/17/>

[origin-and-abolishment-of-queer-and-gendered-oppression/](https://marx21us.org/2022/06/17/origin-and-abolishment-of-queer-and-gendered-oppression/)



**Marx21** (Marxism for the 21st century) is an organization of revolutionary socialists across the United States. We stand by the following principles:

### **ANTI-CAPITALISM**

We believe that workers create all the wealth under capitalism, which is a system run by a tiny, wealthy elite. A new society can only be constructed when we the workers collectively seize control of that wealth and plan production and distribution according to human need.

### **SOCIALISM FROM BELOW**

We stand in the tradition of socialism from below: the idea that workers can only emancipate ourselves through our own struggles. We do not believe that current social democratic and labor governments around the world represent socialism, nor do we believe states that use the language of socialism (like the former Soviet Union, China, Venezuela, Cuba and elsewhere) offer a model for true liberation. Socialism cannot be handed down to us. We need a fundamentally different system in which we actively participate and democratically control.

### **ACTIVISM**

We are activists and organizers. We do not stand aside from movements and activity in the streets, we strive to lead them. We read theory, debate ideas, and learn history in order to understand the world, and to argue for and implement strategies and tactics that give us the best chance of winning radical change. One function of our website/bulletin is to intervene in movements and demonstrate through our activity that the politics of revolutionary socialism is the only path to creating the world we know is possible.

### **REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM**

We believe that only a revolutionary break with the current system can deliver us socialism. We believe in fighting for reforms, because they are both an essential part of improving people's lives and preparing our side to run society in our own interests. We believe in the need for a mass, working class, revolutionary party in order to lead a future successful socialist revolution.

### **OPPOSITION TO ALL FORMS OF OPPRESSION**

The working class is multi-racial and multi-gendered. It benefits capitalism to oppress and divide us because capitalism's greatest enemy is

worker solidarity. We need a world free from racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and every kind of oppression. We fight against all these forms of oppression wherever they arise. The only way we can win true equality is with solidarity.

### **NON-SECTARIANISM**

We are an outward-looking, non-sectarian organization that seeks to work together in movements and campaigns, and alongside the wider left. We believe in being honest about our political differences with other groups and having comradely disagreements, but we work with all forces that seek left wing change.

### **INTERNATIONALISM**

Marx21 stands in the international socialist tradition and is connected with other like-minded socialist groups around the world in the International Socialist Tendency. We support the IST's politics, and we work alongside the organizations associated with the tendency, but we are an independent organization that makes its own decisions.

### **DEMOCRACY**

We are a member organization where every voice matters. Any elected leadership bodies are accountable to and instantly recallable by the membership. We make decisions together in our local branches, caucuses, and national meetings. We are accountable to one another as a group.

### **WHAT MEMBERSHIP MEANS**

- We agree with the principles outlined above.
- We attend Marx21 meetings and events as often as possible.
- We write for and share articles from the Marx21 website and sell the Marx21 bulletin where possible.
- We identify ourselves as Marx21 members in meetings and movements wherever possible and practical.
- We pay dues to support the organization's work (based on financial ability).
- **We welcome any non-members who are interested in our politics to attend our meetings and work alongside us.**