

The Liberatory Family

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This is a working document meant to express general thoughts brought up in recent political conversation. This document does not represent a final view of thought on this subject and is meant only to further our understanding.

Family is a central part of society. A free family, therefore, is a central part of a free society. Bring the Ruckus proposes that to create a free society we must look to the struggles to create a free family, a liberatory family.

The family, particularly in the feminist context, has come under considerable critique, and justifiably so. For this reason we make it clear we are not talking about the patriarchal family but the liberatory family. The liberatory family is the form taken by those who, for strategic as well as moral reasons, recognize struggle against white supremacist capitalist patriarchy as a totality. Simply put, the liberatory family is the struggle of the oppressed to maintain close social relations and have those relations recognized. The family cannot and should not be defined by the state. The struggle to define oneself and one's relation to others against the pressures of capitalism is the struggle for the liberatory family. These efforts often incorporate all the elements of a liberatory family: non-patriarchal leadership, prison abolition, fights for a living wage, a focus on health care, the call to recognize extended families as legitimate, and the recognition that women are the ones who keep the family together. We propose this struggle as the basis from which any movement for freedom and justice will develop its most successful structures.

We see family struggles as feminist struggle even though mainstream feminists often argue against the family unit. For example, attacks on reproductive freedom do not simply affect those seeking abortion rights, but also those seeking to have families at all. LGBT families, for example, are often engaged in struggles to have and maintain family units. The attack on reproductive freedom does not only include the right to have a pregnancy terminated, but also the right to create healthy families. To attack reproductive freedom is to attack the liberatory family, especially those families who are not seen as legitimate by the state or who have been living under state encroachment.

The United States is structured by race and class. Thus, it should be no surprise that we often see this struggle to build a free family coming from women of color, who frequently act as bulwarks against social control. Their struggles to keep families together in the face of mass incarceration, invasive policing, or repressive immigration policies are struggles for a liberatory family.

The idea of liberatory family is an idea we in Bring the Ruckus are still struggling to flesh out. It came from observing and participating in two struggles: one working against social control and one focused on workplace organizing. We hope in developing the concept of the liberatory family we will help identify where radicals need to focus their struggles for a free society.

Work, Social Control & the Family

Struggles around work and against social control are at the heart of the struggles for the liberatory family. We recognize that women are key political agents for social change because women have been and continue to be key targets of oppression.

Women are often at the centers of campaigns against social control because the state has always had a gendered view of social control and it has always been aimed at containing people of color. During chattel slavery, there were essentially no gender distinctions between men and

women of color. A Black woman could be whipped just as heinously as a Black man because they weren't considered to be men or women— just property. After abolition, systems of social control changed in order to keep the newly freed population in line. These systems treated men and women of color differently. For example, prisons were designed to lock up Black men in order to do two things. First, they “protected” white women because it was believed that the newly freed Black man endangered white women's “virtue.” Thus things like miscegenation laws were enacted to prevent race mixing while prisons and lynch laws were aimed at keeping Black men off the streets and “in their place.” However, these systems of social control recognized the usefulness of Black female domestic labor even as they took many Black men out of the labor market. States couldn't lock up Black women like Black men because they were doing all the domestic labor. These systems of social control ultimately preserved Black domestic labor while it systematically locked up 1/2 of the Black population. The legacies of these systems of racialized social control continue today.

Social control systems have had a direct impact on wages, particularly for families of color. The earning power of all women in the workplace has always been below men. During the time of the welfare state, when social programs kept extreme poverty within limits, this impact was somewhat muted. Today, neoliberalism has ended the family wage pact. The result is that more women of color are now often forced into the workplace at substandard wages while other family members are incarcerated. This has made entire populations superfluous to society.

Since the days of chattel slavery, the function of the family under capitalism in the United States has not been the same for people of color as it has been for white folks. While white women have been struggling to emancipate themselves from a family system that subordinated them to their fathers and husbands, women of color have been struggling to be able to even have a family and have it recognized as legitimate. Whereas in the days of slavery Black women married men in secret and struggled to keep their families together as they faced the prospect of having their partners or children being sold off, today women of color are consumed with struggles to keep their families together as they face the prospect of their partners or children being sent to prison and/or deported. As part of this struggle, many women of color have in practice expanded the nuclear family to include extended families and partnerships.

If we are going to do radically feminist work, we must begin by re-imagining and reconstructing the family in the ways that women of color are already doing. We must support the struggles of these women to redefine, legitimate, and keep their families together. To challenge the structures of social control that break the family up leads to a different type of radical feminist politics and in fact is a more radical form of politics than is being done today.

A radical feminist praxis focused on the systems of social control can help to link the struggles against prisons and police with struggles in the workplace. Rather than competing areas of struggle they can be viewed as connected. For example, the activist-scholar Ruthie Gilmore has done excellent work in showing how patriarchy is the primary system used to determine who is a danger to society and who must be protected. Focusing on women in the workplace and why they are there could lead to a greater and more complete understanding of capitalism's pressures on the family.

What Needs to be Done

In discussing the liberatory family one thing becomes very apparent: we have a lot of work to do. We must define and flesh out what the liberatory family is and how it compares to our common understanding of family. We should further define “what is a family?” and “what is a liberatory family?”. We must also further define gender and how the construction of gender is significant to the family and the liberatory family. In terms of expanding our feminist praxis and family discussions, we must also develop a new framework that engenders the notion of freedom, not choice as most feminist literature does. This new framework of freedom must include a discussion around families and health as well as politics.

Studying the family and developing feminist praxis around the liberatory family must look at and understand how communities are struggling to maintain their families in the face of state intervention. It must also dive deeper into the connections of our work around systems of social control (e.g. prisons, police & immigration) and the workplace through the lens of feminist praxis. We must understand what women in the workforce means for the perpetuation of capitalism. We must look at the different roles that women of color have played in the workforce. After all, they have always been a part of the working class. How does this historical fact change our understanding of workplace organizing? How does this relate to our understanding of race and the workplace? How does it change our examination of all our political work? Ultimately, what is the relationship between the racial patriarchy and capitalism? These are only some of the questions we must examine more closely.

But engaging in study is only half of our task. We must also engage in work. Because systems of social control have been developed and refined in the South, Bring the Ruckus feels the southern region of the US is vital to revolutionary change. Having first-hand experience in the region will help in understanding the multitude of ways systems of social control function. Furthermore, it will help us to understand and engage in the already existing work around radical feminist praxis, and see how people are struggling to establish forms of the liberatory family.

Revolutionaries must continue to examine current work through the lens of feminist praxis. If we truly seek to build a free society, we must have a theory and engage in work that fully incorporates a radical feminist praxis that ultimately struggles for the liberatory family.

Key Questions:

1. What has it meant for capitalism to have women in the workforce? How has women’s racially differentiated experience in the workforce impacted capitalism?
2. What is the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism?
3. Is globalization changing the relationship between patriarchy & capitalism? If so, how?
4. How do we define family? How do we define the liberatory family?
5. How might a theory of the liberatory family challenge existing constructions of gender and sexuality?

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