

Love as Politics

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Thank you to the symposium organisers for giving me the opportunity to visit Japan again, to meet with old friends and make new friends, to share our ideas and discuss love and care. I deeply appreciate your gift of encouraging me to put more time and effort into thinking about the politics of love. Over the past decade this has been my main theoretical and practical focus. I began this exploration of love following many years of involvement in progressive social movements and political projects, where I tended to find people concentrated on the horrors of capitalism, their opposition to existing society, and macro forms of political organising. What was often neglected were interpersonal relations and more caring ways of collectively organising the present. Over time, it became apparent that what I wanted more of in my personal relationships - love – was the same thing I wanted more of in politics. So, I have attempted to escape from my own sadness and what has been termed ‘sad militancy’ (bergman & Montgomery, 2018), that is, being overly rigid and ruthlessly critical of people in their efforts to organise better ways of living. This political journey has involved rejecting traditional leftist cultures of sectarianism; the denouncing, attacking, or policing of other people, and more clearly recognising the dangers of hatred and the striving for an unobtainable purity or perfection.

Reflecting on my previous trip to Japan for the *Crisis and Commons Conference* in 2012, I wrote about the importance of how we take care of ourselves and others, the problem of activist burn-out, and the relationship between self-care, individual fulfilment, collective engagement and social solidarity (Southall, 2013). In our paper, Alexander and I (Brown & Southall, 2012) investigated how contemporary global revolts were producing political projects addressing desires for freedom, democracy and love. We concluded by arguing that emerging forms of democratic government have the power to subvert capital as they develop and extend autonomous networks and institutions built upon qualitatively different social relationships, creating ‘future(s) that are already living’ and that communism is and will always be, unfinished and emergent and can only be realised in multiple, ongoing, and incomplete ways. Likewise, the struggle for love is a continuous project.

But what is love? Is it a feeling, an instinct, an emotion, an ideology, a passion, a project, an activity, a form of power, struggle, work, wealth, action, a need, desire, intention, dream, illusion, utopia? Or is it all of these, and more? I usually define love as the struggle to create, maintain, and develop caring social relations. A friend of mine sees love as ‘the act of valuing another being's existence and flourishing for its own sake.’ Love isn’t a single thing but a complex of different concerns. This

suggests some of the problems of love. “When we try to love we are not actually trying to undertake a single endeavour; rather, we are trying to do a whole range of different, and sometimes not very compatible, things simultaneously” (Armstrong, 2001, 12). How we imagine love – what we think it is and how we think about it - is learnt during childhood and developed through our relationships with each other and the world around us. What it’s like to love and be loved depends on social and individual histories. Our understandings and beliefs about love change as we change, as those around us change, and as society changes.

For Natasha Lennard (2016) “the key questions are not about what love *is* but about what love *does*. Or perhaps more precisely, what we can do with it.” Pessimistic views of love suppose that it weakens, disarms or enslaves us, making us needy, or dependent. Love is often seen as outside of our control, inevitable, and overpowering. Many definitions of love “emphasise its spontaneity” and “refuse to acknowledge that it could involve any element of effort or intention.” Here the separation between love and our labour is both misguided and conservative, “to the extent that it suggests that we have no agency, no power to shape the world as we recreate it” (Lennard, 2016). bell hooks (2000a: 4-5, 13) advocates a conception of love as action, since this assumes responsibility and accountability. She uses Scott Peck’s and Erich Fromm’s classification of love as “an act of will namely, both an intention and an action”. As she explains, “Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love”.

In my writing I often conflate communism and love because they both involve freedom, association, and caring activities. However, Mao Zedong (in Žižek: 2007) is quoted as saying that “communism is not love. Communism is a hammer we use to crush the enemy.” Many on the left have a similar view and mobilise around the hate of capitalists and various ‘class enemies’, often others on the left branded as ‘revisionists’, ‘splitters’, or ‘agents of the ruling class’. This hatred of individuals, rather than a hatred of capitalist power and its effects, hinders and stunts love. By contrast, understanding that subjectivities can and do change helps people to reject all capitalist subjectivities, including their own, while avoiding a destructive loathing of themselves and others.

The focus of my PhD. was on the strategic vision of political theorists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, most famous for their accounts of contemporary capitalism and class struggle. They understand capital as a social relation and describe the current capitalist form as Empire, where power is organised in a global network based on a complex web of socio-political forces. Yet, within Empire is a more powerful force, the multitude, a political project brought into existence through collective struggle against capital and for freedom, democracy, peace, and love. To explore class struggle, Hardt and Negri (2000) use Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower. For Foucault; ‘Power is

everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' and he makes a distinction between power in its negative sense as constrictive and power in its positive sense as enabling and productive. Foucault uses the concept of biopower to understand the power of capital, arguing that rather than this power being exercised through the state, the state acts as a support for more diffuse and decentralised forms of control which reach into every aspect of people's lives, the depths of people's consciousness, their bodies, and across the entirety of social relations. The concept of biopower can also help us to understand the self-organised emancipation of people through taking back control of their own lives.

Hardt and Negri (2000) identify the most important organisational characteristics of contemporary social movements of the multitude, as their insistence on autonomy; their refusal of centralised hierarchy, leaders and spokespeople; their collaborative decision-making and coordinated affinity groups. Here the concept of autonomy focuses on the types of power people create together, not power taken or given, recognising and supporting the autonomy of everyone as well as the interconnectedness of their lives with others. Revolutionary autonomist praxes emphasise the development of revolution, rather than the power of capitalism, where autonomy involves the affirmation of proletarian agency in the struggles within, against and beyond capital and its state forms. As Marina Sitrin (2018) explains; "Autonomy has been used to distinguish both movements and groups, as well as individuals. Deciding for ourselves or oneself. Not having a party or politician dictate what to do or how... autonomy is a practice and dynamic – not an ideology and theory – and the danger of calling it a theory is that it can become less 'alive' less of a practice." The struggles for autonomy from capital and its state forms is about concrete practices and politics based on our power to determine the form and content of what we produce; our ability to organise and govern ourselves, our communities, and our everyday lives; where we decide what is valuable.

Today, the contestation over what is valuable is growing in intensity and the value of love as politics is a crucial arena of struggle. Political conceptions of love assist in the clarification of the multitude's power and how it flows from the strength of the social relationships opposing and negating capital. Yet love is often absent from political discussions and analysis, even though it has long been recognised as an important component of social struggles. For instance, in 1911, the revolutionary Emma Goldman (1911) pointed out that love is "the strongest and deepest element in all life, the harbinger of hope, of joy, of ecstasy; ... the defier of all laws, of all conventions; ... the freest, the most powerful moulder of human destiny." During the Russian Revolution, Alexandra Kollontai (in Ebert, 1999) promoted the value of "love-solidarity" based on comradeship and equality, arguing

that love “is a profoundly social emotion” not “a ‘private’ matter concerning only two loving persons.”

During the 1960s, political conceptions of love flourished as Martin Luther King Jr. described the campaign for civil rights as a powerful form of love, “the tough and resolute love that refused bitterness and hatred but stood firmly against every shred of injustice” (Vincent Harding in Morgan, 1991, 39) and Che Guevara (1965, 211) wrote that “the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love.” A new understanding of love as politics was also manifested during the ‘Summer of Love’ in 1967. The politics of the ‘Summer of Love’ permeated the peace, civil rights, and revolutionary movements of the time, encouraging a rejection of authoritarianism, hierarchy, and representation, helping to spark the uprisings of 1968. As love became a motor of political composition, it ruptured the spectacle of both the establishment and the traditional left and led to growing conflicts with capitalism. However, rather than just placing demands on capitalist state forms, the praxes of revolutionary love began to contest them more clearly. As Carl Oglesby (in Morgan, 1991, 94) observed, the struggle for genuine democracy during the sixties was a struggle “to make love more possible” by removing “from society what threatens and prevents it”.

During the following decades, love continued to be a major focus of political struggle, including the widespread rejection of patriarchal and homophobic restrictions of love. Feminist and queer movements helped to popularise love as politics through understandings that ‘the personal is political’, focusing on interpersonal relations and the importance of care work. More recently the Zapatistas have articulated their revolutionary struggles as forms of love. For them it is learning to love which has countered their isolation and connected them globally to their allies. The Zapatista’s message to “those who are resisting and fighting in their own ways” is “that you are not alone” and “we love you” (EZLN, 2005). After political negotiations with the Mexican government failed, the Zapatistas “wondered in our hearts what we were going to do. And the first thing we saw was that our heart was not the same as before, when we began our struggle. It was larger, because now we had touched the hearts of many good people”. Rather than relying on the goodwill of the Mexican government, the Zapatistas began to rely on their capacity to love and be loved. They started sending their words and material aid to others struggling all over the world, and many reciprocated. Importantly for the Zapatistas, their change of heart also revealed that “our heart was more hurt, it was more wounded. And it was not wounded by the deceits of the bad governments, but because, when we touched the hearts of others, we also touched their sorrows.”

The recent ‘affective turn’ in politics has promoted a recognition of love as a political concern and Marina Sitrin describes contemporary experiments in autonomy and direct democracy as “the new

politics of affectivity” established on the basis of “solidarity and love”. The social activists interviewed in Sitrin’s book *Horizontalism* consider this new politics as a process of learning to love and respect others and themselves, while resisting, managing and demolishing internal and external capitalist subjectivities. This affective politics is centred on “the creation of loving and trusting spaces” where direct democracy fosters a collective agency which “changes the sense of the individual and the sense of the collective”. These politics are “affective in the sense of creating affection, creating a base that is loving and supportive” (Sitrin, 2006, vii). This understanding of the connections between micro and macro politics is at the heart of a vast array of solidarity teams; groups of people who care for each other and acknowledge the value of each other’s efforts to make positive impacts on society (Reynolds, 2012). These teams can include family, work mates, friends, and political allies, constructing reciprocal caring relationships and networks of support helping people create living alternatives to capitalism face to face, in neighbourhoods, communities, and across the globe. So it’s not surprising that today climate change and peace protests highlight the importance of loving environments, that grass roots responses to terrorism and hate crimes emphasise love as a powerful form of defence, or that the Black Lives Matter movement began with a ‘Love Letter to Black Folks’ which explained “We need to love ourselves and fight for a world where black lives matter. Black people, I love you. I love us” (Sydney Peace Foundation, 2018).

The creation of love is a shared praxis, produced by individuals and collectives that co-ordinate, organise and plan this sharing. Ann Oakley (1986, 140) argues that “[t]he extraordinary intimacy experienced by people who have fallen in love is akin to that felt by participation in great political movements: one’s sensory world expands, becomes more intense, the boundaries between people become diffused, ordinary human selfishness is replaced by an unusual altruism”. These moments of liberation enable people to love each other more completely. The lived experience of alternative society transforms norms, values, and beliefs, from those of self-interest into those of class and human interest. As people come closer to each other they are “better able to share resources, knowledge, ways of doing things, cultural forms, experiences, musical traditions . . . enriching the lives of people and communities, opening up new horizons for creativity, and deepening exchanges” (De Angelis, 2007, 153). Progressive social movements generate different types of interpersonal relationships through the creation of affective spaces, open to diversity and common activity. And as bell hooks (2003, xviii) explains, it is not only for strategic reasons that social movements bring people together, as movement meetings are in themselves the realisations of a desire that is at the core of human imaginings, the desire to locate ourselves in community, to make our survival a shared effort, to experience a palpable reverence in our connections with each other and the earth that sustains us.

None-the-less the ambiguities of love expose us to a range of relationship uncertainties and because loving involves vulnerability it is often seen as a form of weakness. So, when we consider love as politics, it helps to appreciate love as a form of power. For instance, Karl Marx (in Fromm, 1960, 25) explains that “love is a power which produces love”. Erich Fromm agrees with Marx arguing that love needs a “productive orientation” which relies on people’s agency. Those who view love as a weakness don’t appreciate how caring connections can transform social conditions. They fail to account for the positive impact of love and ignore how the work of love, care, and solidarity, produces positive developments. Love is an achievement; it is something we create, both individually and collectively, and love can be hard work. However, a major obstacle when discussing ‘work’ in relation to love is that the term tends to be limited to the re/productive work of and for capital and neglects the work of constructing living alternatives - the work of love.

Through care work, people both function as instruments of capital and live as social beings, affirming themselves and others by actively producing the power of love to satisfy human needs and desires. When care work is waged labour it can be extremely alienating, as what is sold by the wage labourer and commanded by their client and/or boss is the worker’s ability to make human relationships. Increasingly we’re supposed to love what we do and find our passions in work. Yet many of us find our paid jobs less and less fulfilling. Working for a boss or a bureaucracy, competing with others in a ruthless struggle to ‘get ahead’, undermines our ability to love, leaving too little time or energy for what is most important - those we love and learning the art of loving.

The politics of time and the politics of love are deeply intertwined and autonomist praxis has revolved around struggles for shorter work hours, control over our life time, and work refusal. The recognition of love as work, points to the importance of class struggles to liberate ourselves from capital in order to organise our own labour, as love. In his book *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm (1960) argues that love is an art and that learning this art can be divided into two parts: theory and practice. Love requires a great deal of practice, and theoretical knowledge and the results of practice need to be blended together. But, according to Fromm, there’s a third factor necessary for learning any art, it should be a matter of ultimate concern, and here lies the answer to why people struggle to learn the art of love. Despite a deep-seated craving for love, almost everything else tends to be considered more important: success, money, possessions, etc. According to Fromm, love is the only thing that can fully connect people and since he believes that being disconnected from other people is the central problem of our times, love is the solution to the key problem of human existence.

It is widely understood that the labours of love are disproportionately borne by women, most of which is unpaid, with the value, power, and influence of this care work under-estimated. At the

same time, many people believe that sacrificing their lives to stultifying work is an act of love for the family they're meant to provide for. There's a common perception that love tends to be 'women's work' and that women are more loving. "Females are more likely to be concerned with relationships, connection, and community than are males", but this is not because women are inherently more loving than men, but because "they are encouraged to learn how to love" (hooks, 2003, xvii). Since patriarchy has always seen love as women's work, it has degraded and devalued the labours of love. Feminist theory has drawn attention to the task of promoting the value of caring labour and the extension of the power of love to the whole of society. Struggles against gendered divisions of labour aim to share the work of love and break down distinctions between the work of love and other forms of work, so that all work can eventually become labours of love. Today these struggles are manifested in international women's strikes, the MeToo movement, and mobilisations around safety, reproductive rights and caring work, part of a growing transnational movement for women's autonomy and emancipation for all.

In response to communistic struggles for love, capitalism is constantly erecting barriers and obstacles to our caring activities, atomising the social networks of the multitude, and violently destroying loving social relationships. This situation reflects a more general pattern, where our ability to care is under attack, where frustration and anger is being channelled into a crisis of compassion, and where many people become resigned to not caring. In her recent work Silvia Federici (2019, 180-181) has explored what she calls "the crisis of everyday life" involving "a breakdown in social solidarity and family relations", the disintegration of working class communities, and "weakening social bonds". She argues that; "Under these circumstances, everyday life, which is the primary terrain of mediation among people, has been allowed to shipwreck; it has become a terrain from which many are fleeing, unable to sustain interpersonal relations that appear too laborious and difficult to handle. This means that care work, either by family members or friends, is not attended to, with consequences that are especially severe in the case of children and the elderly." For Federici this is a 'crisis of reproduction' in the sense of a drastic decline in the resources devoted to it, a decline as well of the work of caring for other people, beginning with family members, and a further devaluation of everyday life" where "daily experience is characterised by a profound sense of alienation, anxiety, and fear."

Capital is anti-love and erodes the social fabric of love which it requires for social re/production and cooperation, violently destroying social relationships by incessantly producing poverty, hunger and war and the destruction of people, communities and the environment. Capital relies on the sociality of labour while simultaneously using violence and repression to impose commodification and

exploitation, trying to protect itself from communism. Many of the transformations in work practices, including intensification, casualisation, precarity, flexibility, nomadism and speed-ups, have detrimentally affected the capacity of the multitude to engage in caring labour for capital and themselves. People who become physically and emotionally distanced from each other, often don't have the time, money, resources and social support to sustain strong connections and loving relationships. Capital consumes our ability to care, while promoting a selfish culture in which things matter more than people, and where the passion to connect is replaced by the passion to possess.

As Hardt and Negri (2009) explain, love has long been corrupted by the family, the corporation, racism, populism, and fascism, and rulers manipulate love to defend the status quo via love of the nation, love of god, love of the monarch, or love of the leader. Today, resurgent right-wing forces have demonstrated their ability to address the 'affective turn' in politics, powerfully mobilising around hate, but also rallying around love; the love of shared identities, ethnic ancestries, or cultural identifications, and the right is successfully attracting those feeling angry, lonely, and alienated by offering them a sense of community and togetherness with the idea that 'you should care, but only about yourself and your own people'.

George Orwell's (1949) exploration of the politics of love in his dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, locates the main instrument of futuristic authoritarianism in the Ministry of Love. The Ministry of Love enforces loyalty to the ruling regime through fear, a massive apparatus of repression, and systematic brainwashing. The Ministry's ultimate purpose is to instil a love of Big Brother and to force people to betray their loved ones. This is a betrayal many people know well and while people tend to say they value family and friends as more important than money, work, and possessions; how they spend their time indicates the value capitalist society puts on the accumulation of capital, the control of people's labour, and their social relations; getting us to surrender much of our lives to the competitive and often hard-hearted pursuit of 'making a living'. As capitalist culture tries to divide and separate us, it represents love as centred on ownership and control, teaching people to treat each other as possessions and competitors. As capitalism fosters lovelessness, it offers to satisfy the desire for love with commodities and alienated relationships, producing capitalist subjectivities for capitalist commodities and capitalist commodities for capitalist subjectivities.

In response to the 'crisis of everyday life' Silvia Federici (2019, 183) calls on us to "Retake Our Own Lives" and asks how we can "reconstitute the social fabrics of our lives and transform the home and the neighbourhood into places of resistance and political reconstruction?" Arguing that today these "are some of the most important questions on humanity's agenda." Discussing the importance of care work; for people, relationships, communities and social movements, Federici (2016) uses the

example of Greece, where capital and its state forms have been in deep crisis, to highlight the networks of social solidarity and support that are helping people to survive and to create living alternatives to capitalism. She also discusses the leading role of women in creating these alternatives, arguing that while wages and wage struggles remain important these need to compliment struggles to expand our autonomy from capital, and to reappropriate the wealth we create. Many of those concerned about the state of society believe there isn't much they can do about traditional politics or the redistribution of wealth. Instead they focus on areas of their lives where they still feel able to make changes – altering social relations in homes, communities, and 'workplaces', where personal, local, and mutual needs can be more directly addressed - where they can and do care and where care is valued. These activities are part of more widespread political projects which produce a wealth of alternative subjectivities via complex and dynamic collective processes to remake everyday life every day.

Since the terrain of political struggle is all of society – the ability to organise socially is the same as the ability to organise politically. As the multitude learns to increase its powers of communication and cooperation and to act in more loving ways, it affirms its autonomy, interdependence, and commonality, as a productive, networked, and affective global community. This is a powerful basis for long-term political transformations and loving relationships make our lives worth living despite, against, and beyond capitalism, not just after it. The extension of love weakens the power of capital, making loving easier and increasing collective human capacities for self-organisation. Liberation struggles are increasingly concerned with protecting and embracing biodiversity and the creation of loving environments, focussed equally on humans and the nonhuman world in a dynamic of interconnection, care, and mutual transformation. The love of the multitude resists, refuses and exceeds development organised around notions that human advancement and human joy can be measured by productivist or consumerist economic indicators. Only within communistic biopolitical relations is love genuinely valued, not as an economic form of value, but as a quality of life, as the well-being of living things. Ignorance of how to love is a serious obstacle to any revolutionary political agenda and combating the anti-love of capital depends on the multitude's capacities to act in loving ways, to build love in families, among friends, throughout communities, social networks, and movements. Today there's a global movement to promote love as a power for social development and political change. Working together we are already part of an alternative community, struggling to strengthen our autonomy, our capacity to organise, to make our own decisions, and to produce non-capitalist society, as a revolution of love.

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