

## **Why should we return to “The Family Question”? by Chris Kortright**

*The Family is a moral and ideological unit that appears, not universally, but in particular social orders.*

— Jane Collier, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, Sylvia Yanagisako<sup>1</sup>

*The State and the Church approve of no other ideal, simply because it is the one that necessitates the State and Church control of men and women.*

— Emma Goldman<sup>2</sup>

### **A return to The Family**

The struggle over the normative/moral value of “The Family” has been central to the anarchist movement from its inception. Large portions of the anarchist movement have struggled for gender and queer liberation as well as the abolition of the nuclear family, marriage, monogamy, and the age of consent. For many anarchists, the struggle for a better world is aimed at the personal as much as the social. Because we are struggling to live in a world where people have active power and not alienated power, all social relations that produce alienated power are in question for anarchists. Questions around the institution of The Family and marriage has run through most anarchist currents from anarchist communism to egoism. Individualist anarchist such as Benjamin Tucker, anarchist communists like Emma Goldman and Errico Malatesta and anarcho-syndicalists like Lucy Parsons as well as Voltairine de Cleyre who advocated for an “an-

archism without adjectives” all engaged in debates over marriage, the family, free love and child rearing. Journals and newspapers such as (but not limited to): *The Alarm*, *Clothed with the Sun*, *Egoism*, *The Firebrand*, *The Kansas Liberal*, *Liberty*, *Lucifer: the Light-Bearer*, *Mother Earth*, *Regeneración*, *Social Revolutionist* and *Twentieth Century* carried long standing discussions over the question of an anarchist position on the family. These discussions covered an enormous range of questions regarding marriage, abolition of marriage, children and divorce, the importance and structure of the home, sexual abuse in the family, The State’s interference with the family, as well as motherhood and specifically radical motherhood. These discussions not only addressed the family in the context of the present society, but also the future societies anarchists were struggling for.

Discussions, in anarchist circles, of “The Family” (and of families) have not been as active as they have been in the past. The institution of marriage does not hold the same legal status as it did in the late 19th century when anarchists were challenging the “slavery” of women. Also, divorce and separation is now more normalized removing some of its stigma. Same-sex marriages are legal in many places and becoming more accepted. But I would argue, it is still a topic that anarchists should think through and take seriously. Partially we need to think through possibilities, practices and formations that we desire as anarchists which strengthen and create liberatory social relations. We also need to still take note of the institution because of its moral/ideological power as well as its continuing relationship with The State. Wilhelm Reich argued that the patriarchal family is a central location for the production/reproduction of authoritarian political power (and the rise of fascism).<sup>3</sup> As we see a rise in authoritarian politics in the US and Canada, we see calls and demands for reestablishing “traditional values”

and morality. These calls come equally from politicians and those in political power as well as from those in the patriot movement, white nationalists, the men's movement, religious fundamentalists (of all faiths) and anti-immigrant groups. For all of these groups, reestablishing institutions of authority start with The Family as a moral unit of purity. The Family still matters. So if it matters, what is "the family" I am talking about?

## **The Family**

When a person speaks of "family," there are two different (yet connected) sets of relations that this person could be talking about. The first set is the personal relations of an individual understood as "my family." This is my relationship to my parents, siblings, children, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and partner(s). The second is a cultural unit, or institution, that mediates the proper or normative structure of social relations in the personal relations of "my family." Part of the power of the The State is the ability to produce the cultural unit called "the modern family" which is understood to be universal. I am interested in the second, institutional, set of relations because of the effect and power this institution has over how individuals and communities organize "their families." In other words, I'm interested in the institution of The Family because of its power to produce normative/moral forms of social relations that are thought to be more natural, thus, the healthier way to organize this specific set of social relations.

The family has been, and continues to be, an important location of control over the organization of culture, intimacy, child rearing, property relations, and sexual relations to mention just a few. "The modern family" as a normative/moral unit in US and Canada, as well as much of Europe (and many of Europe's former colonies), is comprised of the relations of a male and female

(parents) and their children. With industrialization in the 19th century, “the modern family” was organized with the male as the breadwinner and the female as the homemaker who were in a monogamous relationship. This unit can be in a relationship to the parents and siblings of the male and female parents. This is the normative/moral unit of organization; in the lived lives of most families, the female parent needed or chose to work. In the recent past, there has been a semi-successful struggle to open this normative/moral unit allowing breadwinners to be both male and female. Today the struggle for same-sex marriage is generally a struggle to be accepted into the normative/moral constitution of “the modern family” with all the legal “rights” and “responsibilities.”

### **The Family as a “civilizing” tool**

The State has used The Family as a weapon to control different populations. During the establishment of the present settler-states of the US and Canada, The State disrupted many matrilineal and extended kinship systems through treaty rights and land titles that were only available through or to male heads of nuclear family units. Kim TallBear argues “So marriage was yoked together with private property in settler coercions of Indigenous peoples. The breakup of Indigenous peoples’ collectively held-lands into privately-held allotments controlled by men as heads-of-households” as she illustrates and deconstructs the relationship between settler colonialism, the nuclear family and compulsory monogamy.<sup>4</sup> The nuclear family as a normative/moral unit was seen as a “civilizing” tool. This was followed by Residential and Boarding Schools that sought to break Indigenous traditions and struggles by destroying the kinship systems and family structures while “killing the Indian within the child.” In Canada when this did not work, Indigenous children were taken from their families by The State and placed in foster

and adoptive homes in what is now known as the Sixties Scoop. Today the practices continue under different policies such that there are more Aboriginal, First Nations and Métis children in the custody of The State than during the height of the Residential Schools.

During Reconstruction after the US Civil War, the Freedman's Bureau promoted the morality of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family among former slaves. Because of the political and economic structures of slavery (i.e. slaves were property and could not create a legal family), many slaves engaged in serial cohabitation, multiple sexual partners, and different forms of plural marriages. The nuclear family as a normative/moral unit was seen, again, as a central tool for "civilizing." All forms of polyamory—be it polygamy, polyandry and group or conjoint marriage—were, and still are, seen as deviant and less "civilized." The Republican Party platform of 1856 tied together polygamy with slavery as the "twin relics of barbarism." Laws were not only established against how many people could constitute a family, but *who* could constitute a family. Same-sex individuals could not be a family, nor could individuals of different "races." Anti-miscegenation laws were an important part of the US race relations both legally and socially. Anti-miscegenation laws banned the marriage of white individuals to non-white individuals—primarily African-Americans, Native Americans and Asian-Americans. Although anti-miscegenation laws ended in 1967 with *Loving v. Virginia*, the social and cultural stigma of multi-racial relations continues into present day.

### **Other ways to see a family**

So what does it mean to have an autonomist or free family; what is the ideal or mixed family unit of the future; and how will children live under anarchy? In the struggle for a new world, the creation of non-alienated

personal and social relations is as important as creating new economic relations. I am arguing for families as a liberatory and experimental space. Here, I mean “families” with a small “f,” not “The Family” as the normative/moral unit. In other words, I am arguing that the understanding of families needs to be open to a diversity of possibilities. I am not saying that there should not be families that are structured in a nuclear family (male/female and their children), but I am arguing that it should not be the measure by which the family—normative/moral unit—is understood. In *Families We Choose*, Kath Weston argues for the importance of a “more comprehensive attack on the privilege accorded to a biogenetically grounded mode of determining what relationships will count as kinship.”<sup>5</sup> The structure and organization of families must be opened up to satisfy the needs of those living in these families. There is no reason that two mothers (in a sexual or non-sexual relationship) co-parenting children are not a family, but that is a simple move from the normative unit we have today. A family could also be made up of multiple partners with interrelated sexual relations co-parenting as well as any configuration of sexual partnering that does not involve raising children. Also, a family need not be centered on sexual relationships, but could be based on mutual living and caring of individuals who do not have a sexual relationship. The configurations are limitless, but they must be based on the needs of the individuals involved and their relations with each other and their larger communities.

The family should not be a normative/moral unit reinforcing and supported by alienating institutions like The State, The Church or The Economy. The family should be one of the many units of active social relations centered on the support and care we are a part of. We need to support individuals who desire building new family units. We must actively engage in building new relation-

ships that meet the physical and emotional needs of everyone. Most importantly we must be prepared to defend those who come under attack by The State for living in new egalitarian family units. The State might open up its definition of The Family to let a few more people in, but The State will not give up the normative/moral unit of measure that defines how families need to be structured. Most anarchists would agree generally with the idea of multiple or differing family units, but in practice I think the morality of the normative family structure is deeply ingrained. Most anarchists are comfortable with variety in sexual partners, but much less comfortable with variety in family members. The idea of long term relations with multiple individuals that co-parent or reside in the same home is harder for people, even anarchists, to feel comfortable with because the idea of what constitutes a parental unit has moral and value residues from The Church and The State.

## **What ideas of the family teach us about anarchist tendencies**

Not only can we learn about the family by exploring it from an anarchist lens/critique, but we can learn a lot about anarchism(s) by exploring the object of the family. Differences are articulated when exploring intimate and personal relations. How we view/articulate individuality or collective responsibility emerge when we discuss raising children or parental custody. Throughout this book there are debates on whether a child is the “property” of the mother and at what point a child is an autonomous individual. In these debates, there is a more nuanced discussion about the concept of property or a contract than when it’s argued over as a product of labor. There is also a deeper question of individuality, freedom, and play when the person under discussion is a 6 or 8 year old. This is just one example, but when discussing intimate relations abstract concepts become less

abstracted and subjectively lived making them powerful objects to explore our concepts, ideas and practices.

### **This collection on The Family**

This collection is not an exhaustive collection of anarchist debates on The Family. As a matter a fact, it barely scratched the surface. To create such a collection would take volumes with content spanning at least two centuries and multiple cultures/countries/languages as there have been anarchists the world over that have critiques of marriages, argued for free love and different family structures. This collection is only a small introduction. It is limited in its scope and frame. The text in this collection appeared in anarchist publications between 1888-1908, so only a 20 year span. Most of the articles are from *Liberty*, *Firebrand*, *Lucifer The Light-Bearer*, and *Mother Earth* with a few articles from other publications, so they are all English language journals published in the US whose readers and authors were primarily from the US, Canada and the UK. I compiled this small (and limited) book because I felt the question of the family has been dropped from anarchist discussions. I felt going back to older debates and discussions of the family could give us an interesting place to think about, return to, or re-open anarchist discussions about the family.

When I first started this project, I thought to organize the book by themes "children," "marriage," "the household," "motherhood" etc., but most of the articles address multiple themes as the issues are so inter-related. Many of the articles speak back and forth to each other and others are in direct dialogue, so I decided to just organize them in chronological order. If the article is in direct response to a text that does not appear in this book there is a footnote identifying this text. There are other footnotes throughout the texts identifying individuals that are referenced. By reading these texts we are entering



into the middle of a discussion and not all the individuals referenced or context are apparent to all readers. All the footnotes in the texts are mine as the editor. I left all grammar and spelling as they were found in the original publications with [sic] to clarify issues.

If as anarchists, we are trying to create a new world that is more than just economic relations, we must take seriously and explore our most intimate relations as well. How we treat our loved ones and how we raise children are central to a free society based on autonomy and mutual aid. Our most intimate relations are also the relations that are our most active relations and where we learn to express our own and support others' active power and creativity, but it is also where we too often can't see where we are alienating others from their active power. The family, our children and our loved ones are essential in creating a new world.

## Notes

1. Jane Collier, Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Sylvia Yanagisako (1982) "Is there a family? New anthropological views." In *Rethinking the family: Some feminist questions*. London: Longmans
2. Emma Goldman (1914) "Marriage and Love" In *Anarchism and Other Essays*. Mineola: Dover Press
3. Wilhelm Reich (1980) *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
4. Kim TallBear (2018) "Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family" In *Making Kin Not Population*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press
5. Kath Weston (1991) *Families We Choose*. New York: Columbia University Press.