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## The Affective Economy of Marriage: Or, No Spouse Left Behind

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# THE WORLD NEWS II

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Ian Falconer, The New Yorker

True to form, Dean Spade & Craig Willse deliver a fierce critique of the liberal politics surrounding same-sex marriage from the left of left in their recent "Marriage Will Never Set Us Free." Following suit on a spate of similar such critiques from such collectives as Against Equality, Beyond Marriage, and their own I Still Think Marriage is the Wrong Goal, Spade & Willse eloquently and incisively lament the way in which "same-sex marriage advocacy... has made being anti-homophobic synonymous with being pro-marriage," and, in the process, cast "Left political projects of racial and economic justice, decolonization, and feminist liberation" into the dustbin of history (and activism).

I cannot agree more with Spade & Willse that "civil marriage is a tool of social control used by governments to regulate sexuality and family formation," as well as a tool of 1) anti-Black racism, 2) colonialism, 3) xenophobia and immigration enforcement, 3) gendered social control, and 4) protecting private property and ensuring maldistribution. Marriage is guilty as charged, on all counts.

However, I diverge from Spade & Willse on two key points: 1) the loose characterization of not only all those who wish to marry but cannot, but also, implicitly, all those who are already members of The Charmed Circle, as anti-revolutionary lemmings eagerly chasing after the 1,138 benefits, rights, and protections listed by the HRC on the website to which Spade & Willse direct readers, and 2) the solutions Spade & Willse offer to what they characterize as "The Big Problems" today facing many LGBTQ-identified people (e.g., the healthcare crisis, closed borders, and little or no family protection for those on the outer limits of The Charmed Circle). In contrast to "The Official Lesbian and Gay Solutions" contingent upon legalizing same-sex marriage, Spade & Willse exhort readers to dig their heels in "against inclusion" in civil marriage and to instead take such "Other Queer Political Approaches" as joining the fight for universal health care, the fight for decriminalization of immigration, the fight for community and family self-determination, and the fight for a radical redistribution of wealth and an end to poverty.

My first point of departure—the characterization of those "for inclusion" in marriage as sadly misguided (at best) lemmings or (at worst) greedy lemmings—is a concern of mine not only with Spade & Willse's critique, but also with the

aforementioned spate of critiques in this vein. Contrary to popular left-of-liberal belief, most people do not marry, by and large, for those 1,138 benefits, rights, and protections. Historically, many, many heterosexually identified people have not actually been able to access the "vital life resources like health care and paths to legalized immigration" that they need through marriage. But they marry anyhow. Unlike many of my comrades on the left-of-liberal spectrum, I want to resist the temptation to accuse people who marry of false consciousness when they say that they marry for love (gah, unromantic grumps)—if only because such posturing runs dangerously close to suggesting that it is possible for some brilliant radical few of us to resist capitalism's affective siren song. In reality, to make the "choice" to forego marriage is often a privileged position rendered possible only by a given subject's access to compensatory alternative material and/or cultural capital (e.g., the perks of membership in the academy and/or "an aestheticized radical queer counterculture"). It is also a decision that no small number of people (e.g., folks reliant upon Medicaid, SSI, and/or Social Security) make in order to preserve the limited material resources they do have. And many, many folks who most definitely do not enjoy "the most access" are angry because they feel that they can't afford to marry, or to remain married, even though they want to do so (Hess 2013). To argue that "it is unethical for movements to prioritize those with the most access...[and instead] we should prioritize those vulnerable to the most severe manifestations of homophobia and transphobia" as a counter to marriage assimilation is to mistakenly suggest that those who wish to marry are those who enjoy "the most access" and that those most vulnerable to homophobia and transphobia don't want to marry. This is certainly true in some cases, but we would be naïve to assume that it is true in all or even most cases. And we would be presumptuous to infer that people who strategically prioritize resistance to marriage assimilation are somehow more revolutionary than people who, say, regard today's preoccupation with same-sex marriage advocacy on both the right and the left as epiphenomenal to capitalism—a red herring that, yes, requires critical consciousness, but whose abolition ("dismantling marriage as a system of rewards and punishments") will also "never set us free." Finally, I'd like for us to consider whether rhetorically undercutting individual self-determination in lieu of changing the structural conditions that make certain choices available and desirable (and other choices impossible or undesirable) isn't itself an "unethical" prioritization.

I want to ask what it would mean to take what so very many people say about what they do and/or want to do (in this case, marry) seriously. Yes, of course, the decision to marry is incentivized with these 1,138 benefits, rights, and protections. But to imagine that this is all there is to marriage is to miss an important opportunity for consciousness-raising and political organizing around the current affective economy of marriage and its fountainhead, capitalism. It is also to miss the opportunity to generate specifically affective solutions to "The Big Problem" of a political economy wherein originates the very need for what Spade and Willse offer as end-goal solutions: redistribution of wealth and the shoring up of defenses for family forms that fail to reproduce "submission to the rules of the established order" (Althusser 1971: 132). If we are to move beyond a finger-wagging shaming of misguided and greedy lemmings, then we must attend to the way in which our conventional notions of family have, historically, been "defined against the heartlessness of a capitalist system that was, in fact, the material source for its ideological evolution" (Eng 2010: 27). In other words, problems facing LGBTQ-identified and other people enumerated by Spade & Willse issue from The Big Problem of a political economy that requires marriage as affective container and shock absorber for the myriad ills of capitalism; marriage and the family are an ideological soft place to land when we inevitably fall from "the caterpillar pillar" (Paulus 1973, 114). In this sense, marriage is not, as Spade and Willse qua Emma Goldman suggest, a failure, but rather a veritable success, in as much as capitalism is very much alive and flourishing today in no small part due to the enduring power of marriage as an safe haven (in theory, if not in reality). We hate our jobs (that we're supposed to feel lucky to have, if we have them) but "you complete me."

At the podium before a 2010 talk, Angela Davis fiddled with her new iPhone. "You know," she said, "Capitalism teaches us to want these gadgets." "But what are you going to do? You can't just tell people not to want them." Naomi Klein, who grew up a mall rat, similarly argues against shaming people for their complicity with capitalism: "I know the only way that I escaped the mall—which is not to say that I don't ever go, or enjoy it—the only way I got consumerism and vanity into a sane place in my life, though I don't think we are ever rid of them, was just by becoming interested in other things. It's that simple. Saying that you're a bad person for buying this or wanting this only turns people off." Those of us interested in pushing back on marriage advocacy, same-sex and other-sex, would do well to heed the old anarchist call to destroy with one hand and to build with the other not only materially (as Spade & Willse et al. have done so well) but also affectively. We can't pull the affective container of marriage out from under people unless we have something else to offer. More specifically, a critique of same-sex marriage advocacy must incorporate a radical anti-capitalist agenda that not only seeks to do away with the need for such shock absorbers for our political economy as marriage, but also offers routes toward revolutionary new (or old) affective arrangements capable of occupying the ideological space that marriage presently occupies in psychic landscapes. Telling people to demand the radical redistribution of wealth instead of getting married isn't problematic because it's impractical; it's problematic both because it leaves capitalism in place as a political economy (it's the capitalist production of wealth that creates the need for redistribution to begin with) and because it shames people for seeking solace in one affective container without offering them a viable alternative. In the same vein, exhorting "the biggest, richest gay organizations" to put "big fights...to stop immigration enforcement expansion, end border militarization, detention and deportation and stop health care profiteers from bleeding us all dry" at their centers instead of same-sex marriage misses the capitalist forest for its most visible tree. What Spade & Willse deem "unfortunate" (e.g., big rich organizations heavily investing in the accumulation of capital) is actually business as usual, under capitalism.

Judith Butler proposes that "the task at hand is to rework and revise the social organization of friendship, sexual contacts, and community to produce non-state centered forms of support and alliance" (2002: 21). I would further add that this task is most difficult but most urgent when the state in question is a seemingly all-powerful neoliberal state operating hand-in-glove with the multinational corporation. (I would also add that would-be revolutionaries do well to

ask ourselves whether we want all conceivable states out of our intimate affairs, or just this one, specifically.) For starters, I wonder whether we might look to polyamorous explorations of compersion as a prefigurative, interpersonal model for political solidarity that, in inviting us to cease regarding the people we care most about as private property, invites us to abolish private property altogether. It's time to capitalize (pun intended) on the current momentum both for and against marriage, and to find ways to build solidarity with those who, yes, already got married, are getting married, or want to get married. For as Mike Ely recently observed, "you can't judge the revolutionary potential of people by what they currently think." But you sure can diminish the revolutionary potential of people by presenting them with a zero-sum scenario that makes them out to be losers for wanting what we've all been told to want, rather than eliciting from them a radical insider critique of marriage. (Lest we forget, marriage punishes those who DO participate in it, too.) Unlike Spade & Willse, I don't think it's a foregone conclusion that "we certainly can't expect any solidarity" from spouses. (Besides, same-sex marriage looks to be a done deal and we need a new platform.) Yes, "queer politics should be about dismantling the sexual and gender hierarchies"; but if, in the process, we forget capitalism's extraordinary capacity to morph hierarchy itself to the exigencies of economic exploitation, then we'll just be pushing down marriage to watch another conservative affective container pop up.

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