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A Queer Marxist Perspective on Gens

Generating Capitalism, Generating Gender

The question of how non-normative sexualities and genders relate to political economy animates a diffuse and dynamic literature that has compelled our interest over the past year. Following initial conversations at the European Association of Social Anthropologists conference in Belfast in summer 2022, driven by a strong desire to articulate forthrightly queer perspectives in political and economic anthropology, and thanks to meeting fellow queer anthropologists also interested to explore questions of production, accumulation, labour, class, value, exploitation and reproduction, we together formed a group with the slightly unserious name Q*ARX: queer Marxism and queering social reproduction in anthropology. A beacon for our pursuits is the influential piece revisited by this *boasblog* series, the Gens Manifesto (Bear et al. 2015). In our contribution, we elaborate on the role the Gens Manifesto can play in scholars' research. We consider the Manifesto to be fruitful, fertile ground for drawing connections between otherwise disconnected areas of research. We try in this piece to elucidate its fertility for scholars interested in Marxian, Marxist-feminist and queer perspectives and especially in their convergence. We offer some notes on how the *Gens* project might be developed even further along these lines – in particular, we propose to extend the Gens Manifesto's de-essentialised concepts of gender and sexuality through a consideration of how the formation of queer and trans subjectivities may itself be a site of reproductive labour.

Gens and social reproduction

We read the Gens Manifesto, published in 2015, as an attempt to summarise some of the contemporary approaches in political, economic and feminist scholarship in anthropology (and, to a lesser extent, such that works on race) into an analytical

framework to study the generativity of capitalisms. As such, it enhances our understanding of both the radical situatedness of life lived and critical theoretic attempts to explain capitalisms. For people working across disciplines, and especially such that work ethnographically, having such a text was and is a welcome contribution. To illustrate the usefulness of the Manifesto for the purpose, we will relate its propositions to a key text in the critical social sciences, Alessandra Mezzadri's "The Value of Social Reproduction" (2019).

Mezzadri writes her text as an approach to studying social reproduction, committed to understanding what the *Gens* authors would call "capacities and generativities" of global capitalism. The *Gens* authors do this from an explicitly feminist-substantivist perspective, which serves as a declaration to avoid an analytical dualism between formal/informal, economic/domestic, and productive/reproductive, or male/female for that matter. The authors of Gens propose a move away from naturalised or essentialist understandings of gender and kinship and towards exploring social processes and dynamics that organise the generation and capture of value – some of it directly, some indirectly related to capital accumulation. Mezzadri is more focused on understanding the "value-producing work of wagelessness" (2019, 33), and proposes a few themes to observe where labour is not directly remunerated, but still crucial for producing value to be eventually captured by capitalists. The examples are the externalisation of labour in dormitory regimes, where mutual support and control between workers takes place in corporate residences but outside of salaried time. The second is the responsibilisation of kinship, friendship, and neighbourhood for labour that capital is unwilling to remunerate. The third is the increase in putting-out systems in which value-producing labour is outsourced to home-based workers (ibid., 38f). The Gens Manifesto is less specific in its examples, and less focused on a Marxian understanding of labour and the wage-form. They propose an understanding of inequality that centers on heterogeneity and incompleteness:

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> "*inequality emerges from heterogeneous processes through which people, labour, sentiments, plants, animals, and life-ways are converted into resources for various projects of production. We recognise that these conversions—although tremendously powerful—are not always complete, consistent, or coherent*" (Bear et al. 2015).

This analytical breadth lends itself to a range of processes that articulate capital accumulation and the social organisation of the generation of value. The Manifesto can thus be read as an epistemological formulation of the "unitary theory" of social reproduction that Lise Vogel calls for in her foreword to Tithi Bhattacharya's volume "Social Reproduction Theory" (2017). Mezzadri also works towards such integrative understandings of social reproduction (2019, 39), but is closer to a second-wave position that thinks about "women" and "men", while the Manifesto focuses on the "making of categorical distinctions among human actions and actors that [generates] inequality". Avoiding an analytic frame of "men" and "women", Bear et al. focus on the processes in which gender is re-created or contested. The very idea of working with the Roman "gens" imply a highly situated approach to what gender is or signifies in a given setting. Hence, for a unitary theory of social reproduction, the Gens Manifesto proposes an analytically open formulation that allows for a wide variety of actors and processes, including a deconstructive understanding of sex and gender, but also the inclusion of plants and animals.

While the Manifesto can be read as a proposal to go beyond sex/gender in thinking broadly about generativity in capitalism, it could have been more timely by adding a radical deconstruction of the analytics of gender. Explicitly queer or trans approaches are missing, although these processes often lead to understanding the role of relatedness, divisions of labour, and violence within the life projects the authors write about. The potential is there to begin an analysis with open questions about the role of binary and often heteronormative understandings of sex/gender, but it is not openly spelled out. This is despite the authors working in regions where

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the historical violence, by which the Euro-American bourgeois model of gender was forcefully applied, is evident.



"These gays, they are trying to organize for better working conditions" Credit: AFL-CIO https://twitter.com/AFLCIO/status/1682207847457648641 / www.instagram.com/homocommunist

Parallels between *Transgender Marxism* and *Gens*

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Another work with parallels with the Gens Manifesto is Gleeson and O'Rourke's *Transgender Marxism* (2021). This suggests scope for dialogue between feminist substantivist economic anthropology and trans/queer Marxist theorising. Gleeson and O'Rourke's book takes a materialist approach to transgender lives in the face of widespread dismissals of trans liberation as "identitarian." It expresses a sensibility that is ethnographic, or at least auto-ethnographic, in seeking "a theory which views trans politics as…generative of its own theoretical conclusions" – from the experiential ground up, so to speak – rather than having theories imposed (ibid., 13). Supporting a long-standing feminist commitment to cut across "the conventional limits of political and private life, workplace and household" (ibid., 2), Gleeson & O'Rourke follow the spirit of *Gens* when they set out to "develop an understanding of the interconnection between the loftier abstractions of political economy and the often brutal demands of [gender] transition" (ibid., 15). Thus, they avoid opposing capitalism and gender transitions as macro and micro respectively.

This echoes the Gens collective's critical reflections on scale and moreover their insistence that rather than take capitalism "a priori, as an already determining structure," it is better "to ask how its social relations are generated." Doing so highlights the way gendered, racialised, and heteronormative dynamics are crucibles for class relations. Gleeson & O'Rourke write that if capitalism is often characterised as "a heartless machine that tears apart homes, communities [and] all that is precious for human flourishing," then it is equally if not more important to explore also "the ways in which capitalism constantly renews its social foundations" through "affects, attachments, fierce passions, commitments, hatreds" (Gleeson & O'Rourke 2021, 17). This aligns with the *Gens* authors' suggestion that capitalism is constituted by "unstable, contingent networks" that are "more fragile and more intimate" than conventional Marxist accounts of core contradictions would have us think. A divergence of the two texts is that while *Gens* generally avoids the term "social reproduction" (perhaps faithful to Mies' (2012 [1980]) critique of the production/reproduction dichotomy), Gleeson (2019) has developed an expanded

concept of reproduction to include the way that "merely" surviving as a trans person inadvertently provides possibilities for other trans people to survive too, and hence reproduces trans life.

Extending *Gens* by considering trans and queer social reproduction

Where queer and trans Marxist perspectives may bring an extra dimension to that of *Gens* is to extend the latter's de-essentialised concept of gender and sexuality. Queer and trans Marxist perspectives offer this through their more explicit, sustained reflection on how the process of creating queer and transgendered subjectivities, identities and social locations can itself be a site of labour, struggle, exploitation, inequality, and sometimes mutuality. (The same point may also apply to the creation of heterosexual or cisgendered subjectivities.) A stand-out insight of *Transgender Marxism* is that "our [gender] transitions…reshap[e] the demands of social reproduction" (Gleeson & O'Rourke 2021, 3). This pithy claim is developed in Nat Raha's (2018; 2021) account of queer and trans social reproduction. Raha draws on the 1980s Wages Due Lesbians campaign, an offshoot of the Wages for Housework movement, which demanded recognition and remuneration for "the particular physical and emotional housework of surviving as lesbian women in a hostile and prejudiced society" (2021), as well as the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries of 1970s New York City. Raha observes a complex layering of unrecognised, devalued, and naturalised labour, beyond childcare and housework, to include also a form of work necessary to help women and femme people survive the imposition of a caring role (Raha 2018, 125). Raha advances a view of trans and queer social reproduction that is generally benign: while she acknowledges that trans and queer bodies may be incorporated into labour markets, she argues that the work of "queer and trans community building" has "a different orientation to the reproduction of labour-power for capital's consumption" (2018, 119). In short, this is the reproduction of queer/trans lives without the reproduction of capitalism. This benign view is undermined by the many instances of affinity between capitalism and

LGBTQIA+ identities in their contradictory historical relation (Chitty 2020; D'Emilio 1997; Duggan 2002).

Yet Raha also creates conceptual possibilities for recognising that the performativity of gender, in Butler's sense of making-real (rather than faking), may in some circumstances also be a matter of production or reproduction in the Marxist sense: a creative labour. Similar insights have been made by other trans scholars, too: Hil Malatino (2020) and Scott Branson (2023) each argue that the care exercised among trans people to assist either their gender transitions or their survival in hostile milieus constitutes the social reproduction of transness as a modality of gender. Branson takes the right-wing trope that transness is a contagion and re-works it to consider what is involved in the social reproduction of transness, in order to sustain it in the face of structures of violence that would repress it or worse. The collective care and mutual aid that trans communities and other trans social formations perform enables trans people's gender transitions and therefore also allows them to socially reproduce themselves as such.

If these writers view the performance of gender as value-creating labour, research in other settings highlights a different set of processes. Take Rosemary Hennessy's (2013) ethnography of non-normative passions in factory work and labour organising on Mexico's northern border, especially among lesbian, gay, and trans workers and trade unionists. Hennessy builds on materialist feminist theory, such as Christine Delphy's (1993) argument that gender is an intrinsically hierarchical and relational social phenomenon which, as long as it continues to exist, always arises from a division of labour unnecessarily pinned on procreative function. Hennessy (2013) inquires into the relation between the exploitation of factory labour and the socio-cultural marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ identities for the workers she met. She develops the theory that an abjected social identity – such as being lesbian, gay or trans in a homophobic and transphobic workplace – facilitates a process of feminisation. Feminisation, she argues, involves certain tasks being deemed natural

for a contingent group and is therefore the basis for hyper-exploitation. This feminised (and so hyper-exploited) group may, at times, comprise only cisgender women, yet in slightly different political-economic conditions may also encompass gay men and trans people. Hennessy's theorising of femininity as always abjected from the start is echoed more recently by Andrea Long Chu (2019) in the central provocation of her polemic *Females*: "everyone is female and everyone hates it."

In one view, someone's gender is an accomplishment, the function of a collective labour of care, and often at odds with surplus value appropriation. In another view, a feminine gender is generally associated with an imposed negative value and the basis for hyper-exploitation. The tension between these differing accounts of the creation of gender points to theoretical knots in thinking about transgender and queer lives in terms of labour and social reproduction. Kneading and unravelling these knots is a challenge that promises to deepen our understanding of the connections between generating capitalism and generating gender. We have discussed this in an effort to extend Gens: not to highlight limitations in the Manifesto, but to join threads. Our interest is to make explicit the potential resonances between the Gens Manifesto and the writing of queer and trans Marxist siblings, while also identifying and exploring new theoretical and ethnographic conundrums that doing so may reveal.

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