

THEORISING TRANS LIBERATION

Sabine Sharp

Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke (eds), *Transgender Marxism*, London, Pluto Press, 2021, 305pp; £16.99 paperback, £75.00, cloth

Over the past five or so years, a media firestorm has erupted in the UK over trans rights. Attempts to reform the Gender Recognition Act (2004) have seemingly unleashed a torrent of hostility towards trans people, whose rights to access public services have come under intense scrutiny. While the Left has been largely supportive of trans rights, some have questioned the legitimacy of trans people's existence. *Transgender Marxism* seeks to shift the terms of these recent debates. Over the course of fourteen chapters – and a generous afterword by Jordy Rosenberg – the book's contributors bring a range of Marxist perspectives to bear on contemporary life for trans people.

In this distinctly unwelcoming political climate, *Transgender Marxism* joins a few other key works of trans scholarship over the past decade in challenging the approach of mainstream trans activism. The dominant liberal framework promotes awareness, visibility, and civil rights as the keys to acceptance, tending to neglect the material conditions of trans lives. *Transgender Marxism* resonates with both *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (ed. by Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, 2011; 2015) and *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (ed. by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton, 2017) in presenting a collection of essays analysing trans people's experiences of precarity and theorising strategies for resistance. Where *Captive Genders* offers a prison abolitionist perspective, and *Trap Door* a re-evaluation of representation's efficacy as a political strategy, *Transgender Marxism* examines the significance of Marxist theories, methodologies, and political organising tactics to struggles for trans liberation.

In their introduction, editors Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke establish *Transgender Marxism's* overarching argument: that transgender ways of being in the world are intimately bound up with class struggle in intriguing and complex ways that demand closer examination. New writing by critical trans voices, the essays that follow aim to show that Marxist theory provides a wealth of resources for trans scholars and activists. Adopting different writing styles and forms, the contributors 'think with Marx' to examine various aspects of transness (p7): Rosa Lee reconceptualises Judith Butler's gender performativity as a scientific paradigm shift; J.N. Hoard reads trans cultural organising through Althusser's aleatory materialism; and Zoe Belinsky finds commonalities between trans and disabled people's relationships to socially reproductive labour. These authors' conceptual collaborations with Marxist

theories produce innovative connections that will hopefully be extended in future writing.

Transgender Marxism advances a much-needed alternative to the predominance of life-writing in mass-market trans publishing. This tendency towards memoir individualises trans struggles in stark contrast to the collectivity described by Gleeson, Noah Zazanis, and Nat Raha in their chapters on trans communities and social reproduction theory. Their analyses of the unpaid labour of sustaining trans lives allow us to envision alternative structures of care and support beyond the normative family unit. While Farah Thompson, J.N. Hoad and Nathaniel Dickson's chapters weave in their personal experiences, they do so in order to examine what it means to inhabit communitarian politics as trans people.

As might be expected with a collection of essays, the quality and significance of the contributions varies. Michelle O'Brien's portraits of trans work and union activities and Kate Doyle Griffith's identification of strategic 'chokeholds' are particularly compelling. Detailing opportunities for trans resistance to the dehumanising conditions of late-stage capitalism, these chapters reveal the frontline role trans workers play in collective organising against exploitative working conditions. Some chapters are rather weaker though: 'A Dialogue on Deleuze and Gender Difference' disappointingly offers only a very meagre takeaway on the violence of dysphoria, while Anja Heisler Weiser Flower's frustratingly hesitant chapter dawdles over well-trodden territory, leaving too late the enticing connections between Marx, ecocriticism and transness. These dissatisfactions aside, the book as a whole successfully demonstrates the continued value of Marxist ideas, methodologies and approaches for trans thought.

Gleeson and O'Rourke position this collection not as a call to begin creating a transgender Marxism, but rather to give a more enduring form to conversations already taking place in 'activist circles, book clubs, and social media, in zines and social media DMs' (p1). That said, the text does invite further trans reworkings of Marxist theory, particularly in response to its shortcomings. Despite the book's supposedly international remit, as the introduction concedes, almost all the chapters sit within US and European contexts. Virginia Guitzel's engaging essay 'Notes on Brazil' provokes further questions about the relationship between socialist organising and gender variant communities across the rest of South America. Meanwhile, the state of Transgender Marxism in African and Asian contexts is notably absent. Furthermore, the anthology tends to flatten distinctions between communist and anarchist schools of thought. The introduction describes the collocation of 'trans' and 'communist' as 'routine' (p3). Yet the book gives little attention to the more established traditions of queer and trans anarchism, an odd oversight given the rise of trans mutual aid organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the excitement that greeted the launch of *Transgender Marxism*

gives some indication of the urgency of this book, the editors are quick to dispel misconceptions about the novelty of fusing trans and Marxist theory. Indeed, though 'transgender Marxism' is a recent coinage, this pairing can be understood as a return to the field formation of Transgender Studies. Leslie Feinberg's pioneering *Transgender Warriors* (1996) offered a historical overview of the emergence of collective transgender activism from an unapologetically communist position, drawing on his involvement in the Workers World Party. A decade later, Viviane Namaste's *Sex Change, Social Change* (2005) offered a scathing analysis of queer theory's tendency to utilise trans bodies as postmodern allegories. Instead, Namaste urged researchers to focus on the most vulnerable transsexual and transvestite populations, with attention in particular to their lived experiences of HIV/AIDS, accessible healthcare, housing security and work. *Transgender Marxism* draws on these traditions in trans scholarship to examine the ways in which a Marxist attention to the experience of exploitation and alienation under capitalism might illuminate not only the situation as it stands, but also routes to better futures.

This return to Marxism contributes to a wider movement to wrest materialism back from certain strands of anti-trans feminist thought. The 2010s saw heightened interest in thinking trans alongside New Materialisms – as well as the development of new forms of feminist transphobia that dismiss trans politics as ideology. For these so-called 'gender critical' feminists on the Left, the struggle for trans lives is at best a distraction from tackling the material disadvantages of womanhood under capitalism, at worst, a conspiracy to undermine the working class. It is worth noting that the mainstream publishing landscape on trans issues into which Gleeson and O'Rourke's collection emerges also features transphobic feminist texts such as Kathleen Stock's *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* (2021) and Helen Joyce's *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality* (2021). These works deploy the vocabulary of ideology and materialism in order to dismiss trans identification as a fundamental misunderstanding of the immutable materiality of sex and position trans activism as politically suspect. While these works are hardly Marxist, they participate in the same discursive framing of 'trans' as empty 'identity politics' that Gleeson and O'Rourke note has been taking hold in some Marxist circles (p3). Several chapters in *Transgender Marxism* reject this framing by demonstrating the necessity of trans theorising in challenging labour exploitation and mobilising a revolutionary opposition.

Reading *Transgender Marxism* as a turn back to the early Marxist and materialist concerns of Transgender Studies provides a frame with which to make sense of the decision to publish this collection with a popular rather than university press. While the book distances itself from academia, the text is nonetheless in conversation with Transgender Studies' institutionalisation. The field's first non-medical academic journal *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* is currently entering new editorship and is now joined by the recently launched *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies*. Despite these signs

of institutional memory and longevity, the publication of *Transgender Marxism* also comes at a time of precarity for trans students and scholars, with many forced to work outside the academy due to the scarcity of secure full-time positions. *Transgender Marxism* speaks to this tension: while the paperback is accessible to the popular market of progressive publishing, many of the essays demand familiarity with not only Marxist theory but also the work of Monique Wittig, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, Jasbir Puar, and Sigmund Freud. This engagement with a broad range of theoretical approaches in a text meant for a more general progressive readership speaks to the fragmentation of trans writing, scattered across the boundaries of academia, activist organising, and creative/community projects. In this context of higher education's neoliberalisation, *Transgender Marxism* urges us to engage more closely with writing and thinking beyond the academic circuit of monographs, journal special issues and conference papers. A remarkable contribution to trans theory, this collection allows us to imagine radical alternative futures for both Transgender Studies and trans political life.

Sabine Sharp, University of Manchester.