



FORUM

All happy families

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Abstract

This forum contribution explores the strengths and limits of Noam Yuran's innovative call for a new political economy of sex and desire. It has three prongs. First, I discuss Yuran's compelling focus on the curious durability of monogamy as an institution. Second, I examine his analysis of thinkers such as Mandeville and Weber. Finally, I turn to the question of love. I suggest that Yuran's approach opens a pathway to a more loving and more realistic political economy of intimacy and familial love, one that I suggest is missing in much critical theory today, particularly in the rhetoric of family abolitionists.

Keywords: anti-binarism; family abolitionism; monogamy; sexual economy; sociology of love

Introduction

Noam Yuran's book, *The Sexual Economy of Capitalism*, starts with an arresting thought experiment.¹ He asks the question: why is it under capitalism, a system where almost anything can be bought, men don't buy themselves more wives? They can afford to, but contrary to the logic of market domination, which assumes everything has a price, they don't want more wives. The cultural cachet of monogamy has deepened the stronger the hold that capitalism has over daily life.

Yuran turns to the work of the economist Mariana Adshade to offer a nice summary of how behavioral economists have explained this conundrum. He then turns to what he finds lacking in the standard economic explanation. The book he cites is Adshade's *Dirty Money: The Economics of Sex and Love* (2013), which takes a behavioral economics approach to modern dating and courtship rituals, sex, and marriage. It's basically *Freakonomics* but with sex (Levitt and Dubner, 2006).

As Yuran describes, Adshade offers two different economic explanations for why monogamy has endured under capitalism. The first is an institutionalist explanation. Adshade suggests that monogamy laws arose in response to the governmental dilemma of needing to comfort and to pacify men who are left out in a wealth-driven polygynous society. If rich men can buy as many wives as they want, that leaves poor men disenfranchised from a stake in the marriage market, unable to secure a wife or even a sexual partner. To avoid the civil unrest that could ensue, governments have a self-sustaining incentive to impose monogamy laws.

Adshade's second economic explanation draws on human capital theory, the dominant theory of choice among neoclassical economists from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Yuran quotes Adshade: 'Monogamy has emerged as the dominant marriage institution because the demand for high-quality children has increased the value of high-quality

women in the marriage market, making it difficult for even wealthy men to afford more than one wife' (3). Yuran adds the sarcastic quip: 'just imagine the supreme quality of Jeff Bezos's wife!' It's a nice example of Yuran's compelling, entertaining writing style throughout the book, delivering on his provocative title *The Sexual Economy of Capitalism*. If a reader is promised sex, it's good not to disappoint.

A little more problematically, Yuran introduces a binary when it comes to his summary of the two economic explanations. He suggests that economists have posited a dichotomy between a socialist explanation, in the case of laws against bigamy, on the one hand, and then, on the other hand, an extreme market-based rationale to explain why monogamy is so popular. When it comes to the second explanation, 'it is not laws and politicians that sustain the *socialist* regime in the allocation of wives, but market forces themselves' (3, emphasis added). Yuran's description of the first economic explanation, where laws are implemented to avoid too much scarcity in wives, as a 'socialist' one, and the second explanation as 'market-based' is a debatable framing choice, particularly given that monogamy laws are hardly unique to socialist nations. The binary of 'socialism' versus 'market' poses problems for his overarching theory I'll return to later.

First, though, let me give an overview of the structure of this forum contribution. The first section summarizes the main premise of the book. Next, I focus on the merits of Yuran's approach. Finally, I offer some critical points.

Capitalism's sexual economy

Yuran's core premise is a deeply valuable one. He argues that a distinctive aspect of capitalism is the exact *opposite* of what other economic sociologists and historians have seen as novel. In contrast to those who believe that what is unique is the increasing commodification of human life and social interaction, Yuran points out that a nakedly instrumentalist, transactional approach to love and marriage was dominant historically only *until* the arrival of the modern industrial age. His point is that today's increased veneration of romantic love is an aberration of the long-standing tendency in patriarchal societies to treat women as property (think of dowries). Against the assumption that capitalism is marked by 'everything having its price', the converse is true when it comes to love. People who live under capitalism revere 'love' for being a pure thing situated outside the market.

The fact that this veneration of romantic love has occurred in tandem with the rise of modernity, a period when purportedly our lives become more commodified than ever before, leads to new questions. According to Yuran:

the whole theoretical infrastructure of economic theory needs to be reworked once sex and the family are included within the economy. A whole set of ontological economic questions needs to be rethought in that light: What is ownership? What is money? What is market exchange? What are good and commodities? What is capital? (2)

These are important questions, and it is to Yuran's credit that he is willing to state them baldly. He doesn't shy away from an ambitious approach, insisting that current theories of capital and market exchange are lacking and new theories needed. He engages in innovative and original ways with foundational thinkers across political economy, such as Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith, to theorize how a renewed focus on love, sex, and intimacy shifts core assumptions in the social sciences about the nature of capitalism.

He doesn't necessarily answer the questions he poses above. For example, he doesn't reach a new answer to the question of 'what is capital?' I finished the book wishing a few

more chapters were available to provide more concrete suggestions. One of the most interesting implications that he reaches is that capitalism functions by expanding the limits of what *cannot* be commodified. Non-exchange value – and not exchange value – is a sort of holy grail. But he doesn't put this point in conversation with recent political economy that makes similar arguments, such as the 'capital is power' approach advanced by political economists who are similarly dissatisfied by weaknesses with both Marxist and neoclassical value theories (Nitzan and Bichler, 2009; Cochrane, 2020).

Can't buy me love

When it comes to Yuran's engagement with both classical economic theory and economic sociology, there are both strengths and weaknesses to his analysis. The main merit is his willingness to take seriously some of the weaknesses of various critical theories of neoliberalism, which have largely assumed we are sliding headlong towards the inevitable empirical endpoint of total market domination while sidelining the reality of ongoing forms of social relationality that don't obey a market logic. The persistence of monogamy is one such reality.

He draws on Melinda Cooper's work, particularly in her book *Family Values* (2017), to make this point. He applauds Cooper for pointing out that left-wing critics of market domination – those who fear that markets will one subsume families entirely – are unwittingly conservative in tone, upholding the family as a hallowed institution that deserves to be protected from market vagaries. Cooper's point is that by fretting over the nuclear family's capacity to survive market forces, leftists accidentally get into bed with the same conservatives they purport to criticize. They treat the family too sentimentally, and this makes them – in Cooper's view – politically conservative.

Yuran agrees with this point, but he feels that Cooper does not go far enough. 'What should be added', he writes, 'it that critics alarmed by the possibility of the market overpowering the family disclose a historical shortsightedness. There actually was a time when sex and procreation were fully submerged in the economy. It is called traditional patriarchy' (12). Yuran therefore goes beyond Cooper's argument to stress something different, which is that dominant theories of market oppression – those that see markets everywhere – tend to skirt over realms in society that remain persistently non-commodifiable. He doesn't cite thinkers such as Gibson-Graham (2006) who have offered related arguments, but the importance of Yuran's point still holds. Thinkers on the left *have* posited a framing of market domination to the point of being dominated themselves by their own theoretical framework, leading them to assume market hegemony lurks everywhere. Every human gesture, every glance, every touch is seen as commodifying ourselves ever more.

But markets don't lurk everywhere. Love lives outside the market. What's more, love has managed to distance itself from profitmaking in the *very* era when profiteering is purported to homogenize human beings as commodities. We resist. Evermore, we resist. We love each other. Many people love God, while others love the hope of finding another soul or multiple souls who hold us forever in their hearts. I visited a cemetery recently in Granada, Spain, and this promise is inscribed on nearly every grave: *permaneceréis en el corazon de los que se quieren*. You will remain forever in the hearts of those who love you.

Elon Musk can father as many children as he wants and still die uncertain of whether he was ever loved in this timeless way. It's a love that can't be bought with money, no matter how high the sum. Why? How? And for how long? Is it eternal: the non-commodifying nature of love? Only God knows, or perhaps the part of you that *is* God.

I do love Yuran's book for helping me to ponder these beautiful things. He turns to an impressive range of thinkers and texts to consider these questions, from the early modern

scholars mentioned above to leading economic sociologists today such as Ashley Mears and her important work on the political economy of status, sex, and the exploitation of women as markers of male prestige (Mears, 2020). And yet, it's also in his treatment of some of these thinkers that I disagree with Yuran. I'll focus on three – his treatment of Mandeville, Smith, and Weber – to make a larger point at the end about love, and the dearth of sufficient attention to love in sociology today.

Who are you calling *laissez-faire*?

Mandeville is an early eighteenth-century thinker whose work influenced Smith. Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* was a text reworked and expanded over twenty years, after he first published an early version of the text as an anonymous poem in 1705. The thrust of his message has been deeply influential. In contrast to the lofty ideals of Christian statesmen and church leaders who claimed that selfless action was a driver of societal growth and civility, Mandeville's poem portrayed a busy beehive where endless grumbling, vice, lust, and greed fueled a feverish, dynamic economy. The bees' petty conflicts and their coveting of each other's wealth helped to create a 'great Nursery/Of Science and Industry'. It was only when the bees turned honest that industry and luxury dwindled, and the bees flew into a 'hollow tree', stripped of creativity and sweetness.

Mandeville's idea was the kernel of Smith's theories of economic exchange. Smith devotes key sections of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to it, in a sort of grudging way. 'Though the notions of this author are in almost every respect erroneous', Smith writes of Mandeville, the notion that selfishness and self-love, and not virtue, lead to dynamism and wealth 'in some respects bordered upon the truth' (Smith, 2010/1759: 362, 368). *Moral Sentiments* was published in 1759. By the time *Wealth of Nations* was published over a decade later, Smith's embrace of Mandeville's original idea – that self-love generates prosperity – was complete.

In some ways, at least. Yuran focuses on the familiar origin story of Smith's thought. He rightly points out that Mandeville influenced Smith, and that both thinkers incorporated discussions of love, sex, greed, and other human 'vices' in notable ways that we should reclaim today to develop better critical theories of capitalism, learning, as Yuran puts, from Mandeville's 'more open-ended concept of economy, which aims to integrate various levels of inquiry' (5).

But Yuran also seems to accept a starkly anti-government, libertarian picture of Mandeville and Smith. For example, Yuran writes that 'Both Smith and Mandeville view exchange as beneficial to all parties involved and thus to society as a whole' (70). Later Yuran adds the following: 'To be sure, in both Smith and Mandeville the concept of economy involves a totalizing outlook, in the sense of viewing it as [an] all-encompassing system governing by laws unique to its own' (75).

This is not an accurate picture of either's understanding of the role of the state and the law. Contrary to how he is perceived, Smith places considerable stock on the need for state regulation, including laws to prevent usury. As I have described elsewhere, it is an aspect of his thought that was ignored by later scholars such as Hayek (McGoey, 2019). Mandeville, as well, recognized that vice only translates into 'public benefit' through the 'Skillful Management of the Dextrous Politician'. The mid-century Chicago School economist Jacob Viner admits this point. In early writing, he celebrates Mandeville as a precursor of *laissez-faire*, but he later walks back from this assertion after acknowledging that Mandeville placed 'great and repeated stress on the importance of the role of government' (Viner, quoted in Rashid, 1985: 315).

Yuran's decision to propagate a narrow reading of Mandeville and Smith links to my earlier critical point about his tendency to treat socialist and capitalist systems as if they

are binary systems, with laws and a strong state evident only in the former. He thus ignores the ways that capitalism has long relied on preferential state laws to achieve unrestricted gains for merchants. Yuran's analysis, in sum, is overly rooted in abstract theoretical readings of the economy, treating idealized, competing ideologies – socialism versus capitalism – as if they are useful overarching heuristic tools.

This assumption is evident, for example, in the conclusion of the book, where Yuran returns to his opening premise about the distinction between socialist versus capitalist explanations for monogamy's persistence. He puts it this way: 'This book opened with the pondering of some contemporary economists over the persistence of monogamy: how is it that advanced capitalist societies maintain a socialist regime in the allocation of women?' (217). So, monogamy and monogamy laws are 'socialist', while unfettered limits over sexual partnering and conquest is 'capitalist?' That's a problematic simplification. To be fair, Yuran is not claiming that this juxtaposition is *accurate*, but he is claiming that a binary framing of socialism versus capitalism is a useful way to encapsulate the economists' explanations for monogamy. Even critique, he implies, needs to stay at the level of an explanatory contest between socialism and capitalism.

Perhaps it is time to challenge and transcend this binary and scholarship that perpetuates it. Critical theorists need to stop treating the socialist-capitalism pendulum as if it were their sole analytical tool, as if the pendulum bob must constantly, monotonously tick-tock between the two camps of socialism and capitalism rather than veer off course. I want to see the pendulum bob take flight, as if in an animated dream. I'd like to see the metal pendulum bob sprout sudden wings, shapeshifting into a hysterical hummingbird darting at the theorist's eye. I'd like to see social theorists dancing in a jittery, embarrassing way as we try to dodge the chasing pendulum bob. We can't shake it off! It's a ridiculous image, but at least we're on the move: free to dream of new, wilder imaginings of what escape from the socialism versus capitalism binary tunnel might look like.

Thinking in threes

Max Weber came, perhaps, closest to an analytical escape from the prison of dualism through his spherical thinking and fondness for thinking in threes. This is evident most famously in his typologies of human life and domination. Yuran's engagement with Weber is compelling, but I was surprised given Yuran's subject matter that he doesn't mention a little-known aspect of Weber's thought pertaining to sex and love.

I am referring to Weber's brief discussion of the 'erotic sphere'. This compelling phrase is used by Weber in an important essay published in German in 1915 and later included by Gerth and Mills in a collection of Weber's essays (Weber, 1946).

It is an important essay in many ways. In it, Weber steps back from an evolutionary framing that characterizes his discussion of the transition from traditional to charismatic then legal-bureaucratic domination as it appears in *Economy and Society*. Instead, in this earlier essay, Weber sees human beings as immersed in intersecting spheres of authority that morph and shift, ebbing and flowing as sources of domination. The teleological presumption of an inevitable primacy of legal-bureaucratic domination is far less clear in this essay. Weber also offers routes out of domination, and one of those routes is the realm of the 'erotic'. As Sam Whimster writes, Weber suggests that the erotic sphere is to serve as a 'gate opening to the most irrational and hence most real centres of life in contrast to the mechanisms of rationalism' (Whimster, 1995: 451, see also Bellah, 1999). The erotic experience offers a 'communion which is experienced as the becoming of one and the erasure of the "other" [Du]' (Whimster, 1995: 451).

Weber's touching discussion of the erotic sphere is highly relevant for Yuran's analysis, even if he doesn't unpack these points directly. The main reason why is because Weber's

earnest, almost aching description of love and the erotic offers an important contrast to the rather clinical discussions of love and partnership that can be read in much recent social theory on the family, such as Cooper's criticism of 'family values' or calls for 'family abolition' from scholars such as Sophie Lewis.

Cooper and Lewis are on high alert to detect and disparage any social thought that valorizes the family as a source of solace or respite. Cooper, for example, is deeply critical of feminists who turn to the 'family wage' as an option for redressing deep inequalities. She criticizes Nancy Fraser's hope that an 'improved family wage' might 'disrupt the gendered division of labor itself' (Cooper, 2017: 12). Fraser is reactionary, Cooper insists: 'her analysis leads inescapably to the conclusion that resistance demands the restoration of family, albeit in a progressive, egalitarian form' (2017: 13).

Lewis's (2022) work is in a similar vein, but it is even harsher on any scholarship that values the 'family' as a notion or as a social reality. Because Lewis and Cooper presume that the 'family' is the core locus of capitalist reproduction today, this gives them license to denounce any scholarship on the positive affordances of family life or any call to pay 'family wages' as clearly reactionary, pro-capitalist, even fascist. All families are fascist, the implication seems to be – especially the happy ones.

But this is a deeply narrow reading of the family, guilty of the same overestimation of market domination that Yuran rightly critiques. The nuclear family existed before capitalism, and it will likely thrive in some form in any post-capitalist world. To denounce any rhetoric of family protectionism as 'reactionary' is itself deeply reactionary, because it polices the boundaries of 'acceptable' terminology and makes it harder to develop a widely appealing politics of anti-capitalist praxis, one that can unite different families and average voters in a broad anti-capitalist coalition.

The quest of family abolitionists to think new configurations of 'family' might be well-intended. They pepper their work with references to nineteenth-century precursors as if this makes their arguments unassailable. But their denigration of those who value the terminology of family and want to retain it is not defensible. There are probably few left-wing groups more rigid in their thought than 'family abolitionists' today. Family abolitionist dogma places left scholarship in a bind, disinclining critical theorists from writing about the emancipatory sanctity of love in the same earnest way that Weber does. *Weber*. Hardly a Rilke himself. This is especially true if the people *in* love happen to be heterosexual. While poetic celebrations of queer love flourish across critical, left-wing thought today – as they should flourish – any similar valorization of heterosexual unions tends to be maligned. Lewis makes this clear in her book *Abolish the Family* (2022), when she jeers at novelist Sally Rooney for writing positively about straight couples who find happiness in marriage. How dare Rooney praise cis marriage!

Yuran, too, seems to be unfortunately weighted by this bind. Even though his book is purportedly about love and sex, he writes mostly about sex and offers very little about love, except to treat it as a sort of literary conceit. It's as if love has no language to express itself. In the conclusion of the book, for example, Yuran writes with refreshing bluntness about the extreme porn circulating today as the 'priceless' realm of eroticization finds new markets. But I kept wishing he would come back to love, and he doesn't. He refuses to answer his own question, posed compellingly in the opening chapter: 'what is it exactly that persists with monogamy? How does it persist?' (4). There is a good book still to be written that seeks to answer this question in a sociologically rich way, trying to capture the poetry of intimacy, love, and monogamy for those who practice it without apology for the 'sentimentality' of such an effort. Without scorning, disdaining, or loathing the very notion of 'the family' as work by Cooper and Lewis tends to do.

Such a book would not shy away from also discussing capitalism's sexual economy. It would and should probably take hardcore porn seriously as Yuran's book has the merit of doing. But it probably would not end the way Yuran's does, as if a discussion about porn

and rich billionaire ‘whales’ in nightclubs holding bottles up to the mouths of beautiful women and forcing them to guzzle is the final point that can and should be made about sexual economy – or about love, or marriage. It is interesting that Yuran has the commendable courage to write a book about sex and political economy, but not to take the truly needed and transcendental step of returning to consider: What is love? What is marriage?

Interestingly, he comes closest in his acknowledgements at the very start, where he offers a touching tribute to his wife, Sivan, who he mentions died recently after a long illness after they spent 25 years in marriage. He thanks God for her and for her peaceful departure. It’s a beautiful passage. It gave me leave to say a prayer too – for this person I’ve never known. When I came to the end of the book, I thought: I wish he’d written more about that! Perhaps not in a personal, memoirist way, although I’d probably want to read that too. But in a general, theoretical way. What does Yuran’s love for his wife and for God say about us as human beings?

So, to make my point clear: I would like to read Yuran on love in the same way he has written on sex. I would like to read a book on family that takes the sanctity of family love seriously. Right now, to write such a book would be immediately dismissed or attacked as reactionary – especially by left scholars. *Especially* those who have decent and comfortable family lives and the level of home stability often needed to write diatribes against the family. *Especially* those who dearly love their own families and do everything in their power to prepare their children for our cruel world, for our ‘polar night of icy darkness’ (Weber, 2004: 93). The people who love curling up on the sofa on a Sunday and watching Netflix with their families, only to wake rested and ready to pen yet another pamphlet crying: Abolish the family!

I’m not trying to say that families are everything. But they are *something*. The family is not something that can or should ‘die’ or be killed, at least not in any ethical way. Even Jesus Christ tried and failed to kill the family. The fact that Christ wanted you to sacrifice your parents for him – ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:26) – is probably a plus for Christianity in the eyes of today’s family abolitionists. But even Jesus’ sanction doesn’t make ‘family abolitionism’ the final word. What is it about love and the family that endures through so many shifting modes of production, through so many different centuries and modes of economic carnage? Why is family love so special – and it *is*. It’s a gift that can’t be bought. If love is the first and the final gift, then its power is eternal until the final breath of humanity is drawn.

Yuran’s important book returns us to the gates of love once more. But his book ends unfinished. He hasn’t yet walked us through the gate with him. The pendulum bob is paused in a pregnant way. Neither capitalism, nor socialism, nor abolitionism, nor protectionism has offered any final words. We need to roll the ball calmly through the gate, nursing it like an egg, and not rush to judge too quickly the hybrid beings waiting inside to breathe.

Note

1. Quotations from *The Sexual Economy of Capitalism* (Yuran, 2024) are hereafter indicated by page numbers in parentheses in the body of the text.

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