

Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, eds., *Transgender Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021)

Dan Irving

Volume 89, printemps 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090055ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0034>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)
1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Irving, D. (2022). Compte rendu de [Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, eds., *Transgender Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 89, 333–335. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0034>

down like dead weight into the 1930s and 1940s, a burden too heavy for even the vigorous New Dealers to overcome. Rather, even progressive organizations like the ACWA actively participated in the reproduction of racial and gender hierarchies within labour markets and within their own organizations. It is a sobering finding, albeit one tempered in Carson's account by the extraordinary heroism of the laundry workers themselves.

GABRIEL WINANT

University of Chicago

Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, eds., *Transgender Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021)

TRANSGENER MARXISM, an edited collection of work from radical trans scholars, professionals, and community organizers, is a timely response to debates among Marxist scholars, the labour movement, and leftist community organizers. Contributors draw upon historical and current transgender Marxist praxis to advance historical materialism and radical politics in the context of neoliberal austerity, the resurgence of conservative right-wing family values, and the galvanization of fascism. This anthology taps into radical hope for systemic change, witnessed via recent demonstrations and resistance movements occurring globally. *Transgender Marxism* challenges class reductionism, as well as binary thinking concerning the unionized workers and unorganized labour in wider communities, the labour economy, and the household, as well as political economy and private or intimate aspects of everyday life.

Editors Jules Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke's aim to "collect theoretical perspectives by transgender writers" (1) from 'zines, blogs, and social media posts to emphasize the invaluable contributions

transgender Marxists are making to advancing revolutionary thought and class struggle. Transgender Marxism, a theoretical intervention informed by gender transition and the lived experiences of trans people, is introduced to recognize the complexity of sex, gender, and sexual relations within the capitalist mode of production and to understand transitions to communism as viable.

Transgender Marxism intervenes in mainstream LGBTQ+ politics (i.e., trans human rights) and strains of feminist activism (i.e., trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF)) to challenge identity politics and emphasize the necessity of materialist analysis and class struggle for gender liberation. Transgender Marxism refutes the "vulgar Marxist" (3) claim that trans oppression is peripheral to working-class politics because it is rooted in the culture, not economics.

Transgender Marxism invites a deeper analysis of why specific knowledge concerning bodies, gender, and sexuality emerged and whose interests such knowledge serves. Many contributors render explicit how sex, gender, and sexuality are integral to capitalism as a mode of production. Gender transition highlights the ways that "class struggle also passes through the body" (124) and how capital and the state turn gender-based norms into material forces (e.g., gender as "bounded by property relations" (26)). Contributors emphasize that trans oppression stems from a refusal of sexed embodiment, gender performance, and biologically determinist approaches to the heteronormative nuclear family. Drawing from Marxist and socialist feminism, they underline the primacy of the household as a central space for unpaid socially reproductive labour that buttresses exploitative wage relations and legitimizes neoliberal attacks on social programming and services.

Some contributors focus on the historical marginalization of queer and trans bodies in specific economic sectors (e.g., entertainment, HIV/AIDS services) or criminalized economies (e.g., sex work); nevertheless, more attention is paid to trans people as disposable populations. Trans unemployment illuminates how the workplace functions as a site of “gender discipline” where “genitalization” is imposed on all workers (123). The appearance of embodied sex and gender expression, or behaviours, determines whose bodies are valuable to exploitative labour relations.

Transgender Marxism challenges leftists to reflect on capital as productive and interpolative through constructing “affects, attachments, ... and hatreds” (17) that affirm exploitation, alienation, and dispossession and, thereby, ensure its survival. Leftists are complicit in abetting capital when trans oppression is marginalized within, or excluded from, radical theory and praxis. More attentiveness to affect would lend deeper insight into tensions within leftist organizing concerning trans inclusion. Moreover, expansions on the affective dimensions of labour and trans people’s affective attunement to workplace dynamics for our safety would augment discussions of effective strategies to dismantle capitalism.

Nevertheless, such provocations open space for receptivity to the fact that lived experiences of gender transition are rife with revolutionary potential. Trans people’s lives demonstrate an “abdication” of expected gender roles and concentrated efforts to “upend” tacit agreements to fashion new ways of living (37). Contributors do not romanticize trans communities. While transition “rupture[s]” property relations, understandings of work and labour, as well as ruling knowledge of family life (18), trans people are not inherently revolutionary and can be subsumed by

capital (e.g., “pink dollars” and corporate EDI policies). Nonetheless, undergoing transition processes and surviving in hetero-patriarchal capitalism shapes “trans epistemologies,” which offer specific knowledge that can facilitate locally based transitions to communism. Trans people’s agency vis-à-vis their refusal of birth-assigned sex and normalized expectations concerning gender roles and sexuality; the socially reproductive labour performed to support other trans people coming out and transitioning; establishing alternative kinship bonds that replace the family; and the labour to “keep one and other alive” (82) exemplifies such insights.

Detailed accounts of the labour of trans women of colour are provided to demonstrate the already established centrality of trans people within radical politics. The labour of the late Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson to found Street Transvestite Activist Revolutionaries (STAR), which provided emotional support, sex education, food, and housing to trans women of colour, is discussed frequently. While avoiding a wholesale celebration of the survival work performed by trans communities, such liberatory pursuits reveal ways that class politics can be organized to “pursue full human development.” (60)

Transgender Marxism is poised to advance Marxist and labour studies. This collection assumes a rudimentary knowledge of Marxist theory and debates concerning labour movement renewal. Contributors offer a reading of Marx emphasizing the primacy of bodies in exploitative labour relations, capital as a social relation wherein bodily sex and value are co-constitutive, the physical and affective governance of its gendered subjects to obscure capitalist relations, as well as human agency as key to social transformation. Marxist theory concerning the nature of contemporary un/

waged and socially reproductive labour, and current strategies for organizing must be “refracted through analysis of gender and sex transition.” (62)

Transgender Marxism fails purposefully to engage with normalizing questions like: “why [do] some people become transgender.” (70) Transgender Marxists voice confidence and rebelliousness, which may read as disruptive to those expecting the “confiding and confessing tone” (2) that trans people often use to gain mainstream approval. Such a tone challenges leftist paternalism, often rooted in whiteness and androcentricity – trans people require solidarity, not saviours. Additionally, amplifying trans voices as active agents for change eschews the necropolitical drive of even the most well-meaning of Marxists, whose magnification of trans alienation, dispossession, and lumpen-status debilitates their capacity to work with others to create other possible worlds.

This collection advances trans studies by emphasizing the primacy of capital as a social relation mediating trans oppression. Unfortunately, trans scholars interrogating whiteness or focusing on trans people of colour will not encounter intensive or sustained engagement with racial capitalism and its intersections with sex, gender, and sexuality.

Contributors to *Transgender Marxism* refuse “trans exceptionalism.” (43) Since sex is a governing category within capitalism, trans people, especially those reduced to survival-based existences, should “not [be] distinguished by [their] victimhood” (43) but seen as vital to class struggle. Transgender Marxism addresses the specificities of trans subjectivities whilst demonstrating that gender is not a private phenomenon; instead, all gender is a structure “formed under violence.” (43)

Transgender Marxism facilitates grounds for solidarity across differences. This collection urges Marxists, leftists,

and union organizers to learn from surplus populations rendered disposable by capitalists in an act of class warfare. Trans people’s insistence on transitioning in aspiration of better lives and the work of dispossessed and alienated trans communities to foster alternative economies to share with, and care for, each other lends a beckon of hope during these times of crisis.

DAN IRVING

Carleton University

Jennifer Delton, *The Industrialists: How the National Association of Manufacturers Shaped American Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020)

JENNIFER DELTON’S *The Industrialists* details how capitalists in manufacturing sought to influence economic policy and labour relations, often being forced to scramble to keep up as capitalism shifted beneath them. Her study centres on the trade association, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), from the late 1890s until the early 21st century. In Delton’s account, the association shifts back and forth between making waves in the world and trying to stay afloat in situations beyond its control. Through the prism of NAM, Delton conveys a great deal of business history, the history of US economic policy, and a fair amount of labour history.

The book’s first part examines the organization in its early days, from its founding in 1895 through 1940. NAM was founded by a group of 600 manufacturers as a response to the economic crisis. Their most general goal was to make capitalism work better for themselves and to better weather the times when capitalism seemed to work against them. They initially placed a strong emphasis on increasing their ability to sell goods to