

*Between Socialist Transformation  
and Capitalist Incorporation:  
A Feminist Critique on Work and Care  
in Polyamorous Relationships*

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## **Abstract**

In recent years polyamory as a specific kind of consensual non-monogamous relationship received growing attention. While much has been said about the “emancipatory potential” of poly arrangements empirical evidence of such potential is quite rare. The few existing studies suggest that there is a huge gender gap in taking responsibility within such relationships that reflects unequal shares existing within mainstream (love) culture. Given the huge amount of care and emotional labour needed to maintain such complex arrangements this paper formulates a feminist critique on polyamorous relationships focusing on the core dimensions of human interaction: (Emotional) Work, Care and Love. To do so it draws on strands of feminist critics dating back to the 1970s and connects them with more recent scholarship on images and concepts of masculinity. Faced with a growing trend to implement phrases, feelings and narratives of the ideology of love into everyday practices of capitalist production and consumption this paper aims to contribute to a change in the ways women and men interact and engage with each other by raising awareness of masculinity as an increasingly flexible social construct (re-)defined by every men's everyday action.

## **Bio Note**

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## Introduction

*“We must discover the power of love, the power,  
the redemptive power of love. And when we do that,  
we will make of this whole world a new world.*

*But love, love is the only way.”*

(Martin Luther King 1957: 323)

Listening to Bishop Michael Curry’s address for the royal wedding of British Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in May 2018 I was overwhelmed by a fiery feeling of revolutionary consciousness.<sup>1</sup> This is because of the combination of different socio-logically relevant factors connected to the context of the speech: (1) Bishop Michael Curry who held the royal wedding ceremony is an Afro-American Bishop whose parents overcame slavery and who was the first Afro-American Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church practicing in the United States of America (USA) (Curry 2015: 2). (2) He was speaking in front of a mainly white and privileged audience in Winchester Cathedral (3) opening up his speech with the above mentioned quote of Martin Luther King as one of the most visible spokespersons and leaders in the civil rights movement from 1954 until his death in 1968 titled “Loving Your Enemies”. Being confronted with this scene while having its socio-political background in mind my belief that it is worth to stand up for social and political change no matter how strong the forces of reaction might be revived.<sup>2</sup> While following Michael Curry’s words I got reminded of some thoughts I had months ago connected to the issue of love, power, and change which circled around the potential of alternative love practices to contribute to a more general transformation of peoples ways to interact and engage with each other. This thoughts were connected to the love practice of polyamory, which in my perception received growing attention during that time. Since the issue of love has rarely been in the focus of sociological research till the early two thousands (Jackson 1993) little knowledge has

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<sup>1</sup> For the full text of Bishop Michael Curry’s royal wedding address see CNN 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Still taking into account that this quotation was presented without the context in which Martin Luther King embedded it in his original speech, which was the idea to “organize mass nonviolent resistance based on the principle of love” (King 1957: 323) with the aim to resist the ongoing oppression of black women and men in the USA. And of course the fact that Bishop Michael Curry delivered his speech to seal a traditional and conservative marriage between a heterosexual couple with a privileged socio-economic background by which his speech as a whole as well as Martin Luther King’s quotation was embedded in a specific context and thereby limited to a specific function: To welcome Meghan Markle, whose mother is African American, into the British royal family by using the words of one of the most powerful orators of the civil rights movement and American history in general (TIME 2018).

been acquired in understanding the social mechanisms, dynamics, linkages as well as consequences of what was described as an assertion of the irrational in opposition to the ration (Weber 1948), as a sense of disreality (Barthes 2010) or as a compulsive authority (Macfarlane 1987) by leading (male) sociologists. While been hardly investigated in all its complexity romantic love still is one of the key narratives of western culture that traditionally was situated within the private heterosexual, monogamous family and was thereby understood as a noneconomic relationship that is effectively the opposite of economic interests.<sup>3</sup> Different developments challenge this interpretation: On the one hand love has been seen as a powerful transformative force by activists as well as scientists, who see the social dynamics connected to sympathy, belonging and solidarity in love relations as guiding forces towards a broader understanding of collective empathy and engagement. For those advocates it is ultimately love that will provide the basis for a future that will end human exploitation and oppression. On the other hand there is a growing trend to implement phrases, feelings and narratives of the ideology of romantic love into everyday practices connected to capitalist ways of production and consumption. Both developments show how love is increasingly rendered as an emotion that can (and should) be found beyond the romantic couple. Chapter two draws on this trends to show how the issue of love in the twenty-first century is narrowed between contradictory interpretations and appropriations. Chapter three continues by shortly presenting polyamory as a specific love practice to provide the basis for understanding how supposedly alternative ways to life and love are shaped and reshaped by hegemonic as well as counter-cultural forces. To highlight potential traps, contradictions and challenges within poly arrangements that call into question its “alternative/transformative” power chapter four develops a feminist and anticapitalist critic on poly relationships with the aim to show where (and if) there is a revolutionary falme of love within poly relationships (per se) and to outline what could be done to let it progress in growing towards a future world of emancipation (if it is evident at all). To do so this paper draws on strands of feminist critics focusing on questions of work and care partly

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<sup>3</sup> “This romantic narrative has long served to present marriage as a noneconomic relationship and to code unwaged domestic work as nonwork, a labour of love that helps maintain the integrity of the home as a compensatory ideal and haven in a heartless world” as Shulamith Firestone (1970: 131, 201) as a central figure in the early development of radical feminism and second-wave feminism put it.

dating back till the 1970s feminist struggles that have been relatively neglected in more recent feminist scholarship (Jackson 2001: 254).

## **At the Forefront of Capitalist Incorporation or Socialist Transformation? - Love in the Twenty-First Century**

As I got more and more engaged with love as an issue of scientific discourses on the one hand and activist ones on the other I got the feeling that it somehow seems to be trapped between two fundamentally different tendencies: On the one side its dynamics and logics in modern society are analyzed by critical writers to understand its function in maintaining - and potentially changing - the status quo whereas it is often connected to the idea of a socialist transformation (Hardt 2011; Jónasdóttir 2014). On the other hand, a growing tendency to implement ideas and concepts of love and intimate relationships into capitalist logics of efficiency and profit maximization can be observed. This trend gets most visible in the numerous books and articles which are directed at employees to find love and happiness at work published in recent years.<sup>4</sup> After decades in which western civilization distinguished sharply between tasks and practices that were considered to be “rational” and those that are connected to more emotional and interpersonal interactions - a distinction often criticised by feminist writers<sup>5</sup> - the ideology of romantic love seems to be transformed to direct all employees - no matter their biological or social gender - to find love and happiness at work (Weeks 2017: 40). Where once there was a dominant narrative according to which “women live for love and men for work” (Firestone 1970: 113) nowadays it looks like heteropatriarchal capitalism is going to recruit all wage workers into a more intimate relationship with work (Weeks 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Hirsch, Arlene S. (2003): *How to be Happy at Work: A Practical Guide to Career Satisfaction*. St. Paul, MN: JIST Publishing; Pryce-Jones, Jessica (2010): *Happiness at Work: Maximizing Your Psychological Capital for Success*. Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell; Baréz-Brown, Chris (2014): *Free! Love Your Work, Love Your Life*. London: Penguin; Kjerulf, Alexander (2014): *Happy Hour Is 9–5: How to Love Your Job, Love Your Life, and Kick Butt at Work*. London: Pine Tribe.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Wollstonecraft, Mary (2016 [1792]): *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Original 1792 Edition*. Ballingslöv: Wisehouse Classics; de Beauvoir, Simone (2011 [1949]): *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Book; Firestone, Shulamith (1970): *The Dialectic of Sex - The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Kipnis Laura (2003): *Against Love: A Polemic*. New York: Pantheon Books.

This tendency is driven by forces subject to deeper capitalistic developments which emerged in synergy with a general transformation of characteristics and justifications within modern capitalism (Boltanski/Chiapello 2003). To secure a steady accumulation of capital in the face of continuous social and political changes it is inevitable for a capitalist logic to update its ideological foundations and narratives. Such kind of actualizations primarily focuses on discourses within management circles and higher levels of employment but tends to “trickle down” into all segments of society over time to change the “spirit” of capitalism in general (Boltanski/Chiapello 2003: 142). This is how capitalist activities transformed from dynamics and logics focusing on the person of the individual bourgeois or entrepreneur (first) towards centralized and bureaucratic industrial enterprises and then (second) towards global enterprises and transnational corporations during the last two centuries (Boltanski/Chiapello 2003: 54-57). Each step of this transformation includes the adoption of certain strands of critique - while neglecting others<sup>6</sup> - to develop a new basis for widely accepted ongoing capital accumulation. Focusing on the latest of this transformations it is observable that what is called “artistic critique” is given space within this new form of capitalism (Boltanski/Chiapello 2003: 81 ff). This critique mainly focuses on questions around authenticity, autonomy, spontaneity, mobility, creativity and competence as well as feelings and emotions<sup>7</sup> and is widely integrated into this new capitalist “spirit” - most notably by the emphasis to organise working relations around arrangements with a high degree of autonomy based on network interactions (Boltanski/Chiapello 2003: 143 f).<sup>8</sup>

Given this socio-economic background the relevance of a more intimate relationship towards the workplace is quite understandable: In an economic sphere relying on network-based interactions formerly feminized characteristics such as flexibility, caregiving, emotionality, cooperation, and communication become of key importance

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<sup>6</sup> Namely those that have a more fundamental and radical basis (see footnote 7 below).

<sup>7</sup> While the more fundamentally “social critique” focuses on questions about justice, equality, opportunism and solidarity and is in its core driven by socialist and Marxist analysis with the aim to overcome capitalist sociality in general (Boltanski/Chiapello 2003: 80).

<sup>8</sup> From a materialistic point of view it is obvious that this transformation mainly takes place primarily in segments of higher-waged labour since the majority of waged work is connected to tasks and operations that are bind to more monotonous and strict working conditions, nevertheless it is evident that its basic logics are spreading on a wider level both within the working sphere as well as private life (Weeks 2017: 45; Boltanski 2006).

for fulfilling and successful relationships. Hence more and more of workers' subjectivities become folded into and fused with their identity as workers whereas borders that were once thought to separate waged work from non-work time, "male activity" from "female inactivity",<sup>9</sup> have been broken down by the transmission of the ideal of romantic love into the work sphere (Weeks 2017: 38).<sup>10</sup> So today we can observe that management discourses are obsessed with love and happiness, or as Miya Tokumitsu (2015) puts it: "Happiness, love, passion, and self-fulfillment are today's work virtues" (11). One of the main advocates of this new vision of love and intimacy with one's work was Steve Jobs, former chairman, CEO, and co-founder of Apple Inc., according to whom loving one's work is a necessary step on the way to personal satisfaction:

"Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it. And, like any great relationship, it just gets better and better as the years roll on." (2005)

Jobs' statement can be seen as a perfect illustration of how love and happiness become more and more detached from their traditional location in the romantic couple and the nuclear family and increasingly bound to waged work.<sup>11</sup>

This transfer of love and intimate relationships into the work sphere takes place in a time in which the modes of operation in more and more occupational fields – particularly in the area of academic and creative jobs – are increasingly transformed towards network- and project-based kinds of interaction (Boltanski 2006). No matter if it is in non-

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of the production/reproduction nexus connected to the gendered division of labour and the feminization of care work embedded in a wider theorization of class relations from a Marxist and materialist feminists point of view see Delphy/Leonard 1992; Ferguson 1989; Hartmann 1979.

<sup>10</sup> A trend of emotional reversal of commitments to work and family that led increasing numbers of people to find work more homelike and family more work-like was first illustrated by Arlie Hochschild (1997) in her work *The Time Bind*. Later Melissa Gregg (2011) wrote about the more intimate relationship that many workers have to work and the romance narratives they use to characterize their love for and happiness with work in her book *Work's Intimacy*.

<sup>11</sup> Interesting in this context is that Jobs and other mentors of this upcoming paradigm who usually address the rule of reason, self-interest, and the sovereign will, resort to highly romanticized and idealised fairy-tale narratives that pose a mixture of imprudence and passivity as the keys to satisfaction and fulfilment (which in this case first of all means unlimited productive activity) when it comes to falling in love with ones work.

governmental organizations, start-ups, big corporations or in the area of scientific research: More and more employees find themselves in working structures where there are multiple projects running side by side which bring together people from different backgrounds who sometimes work on several projects simultaneously (Boltanski 2006). As projects have a starting point as well as an end they are constantly replaced by each other while the appropriate team members are reassembled from one project to the next. This is how a network-based and connective working structure emerged that is based on the particular justification of projects according to which all processes and interactions have to be in line with the logic and concern of the specific project (Boltanski 2006). Correspondingly the advocates of the love-your-work-paradigm insist on the identity of interests of both employers and employees and underline that both will profit equal share from increasing love and happiness at the workplace (Weeks 2017: 44).

At the same time, this narrative adopts some core critics of capitalist motives, namely that of unlimited utility maximization expressed in the allocation of money, according to which money itself has no distinct use on its own since it can not buy happiness or satisfaction. This point of view that could slow the motivation for waged work at a certain level is adapted to the love-your-work-paradigm in a way that deinstrumentalizes the relation to waged work as an income-generating instrument and recodes economic necessity as personal freedom: Work is no longer about earning money, but about being happy and experience love (Weeks 2017: 45). This is how such guidebooks update the old “do what you love” paradigm by an up-to-date “love what you do” slogan since you may not be lucky enough to do what you love (Hannon 2015: 161) and by this create “a labour force that embraces its own exploitation” (Tokumitsu 2015: 8).<sup>12</sup>

Being embedded into the above mentioned general economic transformations these advice books tell their readers not to mistake a specific employment relation for a relation of care or security as they insist to “love work and only work [...], but rather than overinvest in any particular employment relation, stay open to a lifetime of work

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<sup>12</sup> And of course, this call resonates with high acceptance in a culture in which there is no real choice but to work. Or as one of the self-help manuals puts it: “On average, we only have 27,350 days on this planet, and 10,575 of those are working days” which means that “life and work are intrinsically linked. They are not separate; they are one” (Baréz-Brown 2014: 10-12).

on the model of serial monogamy” (Weeks 2107: 49). This way love and happiness are rendered not as affective emotions attached to particular persons or objects, but as a wellspring within an individual and autonomous subject that needs no outside referent. This notion of an autonomous and self-determined individual guiding its way through a world of temporary employment-relations resonates powerfully with what is described as the “entrepreneurial subject” by critical social scientists: The ideal of a subject that is defined by its steering of action which is based on feelings, thoughts and a will to orientate on the criteria of economic efficiency and entrepreneurial calculation (Bührmann 2005). This kind of entrepreneurial self to which these self-help books refer can be seen as the “neoliberal subject par excellence” (Szeman 2015: 474) that emerged during the later part of the 1970s and according to many studies now appears to be the hegemonic conception of subjectivation and thus the hegemonic form in which individuals view, perceive, and experience themselves and others under the conditions of capitalist superiority in the twenty-first century (Bührmann 2005).<sup>13</sup> This background paved the way for the discourse of love and happiness at work which today circulates widely in western culture as an unquestioned value becoming increasingly hegemonic as a cultural script and normative ideal (Weeks 2017: 40). According to this hegemonic narrative we have to take full responsibility for our individual situation, which also includes our personal happiness and satisfaction at work as well as in our private lives since in modern capitalism it seems like *it’s all about choice*.

Just as the Protestant work ethic in the early stages of capitalism proclaimed hard work as a sign of one’s status among the Christian elect (Weber 2006 [1904/1905]) this new paradigm renders employees’ satisfaction towards waged work as a question of reputation and status. Faced with a precarious labour market and often short-lasting employment relationships the maintenance of wide social networks is critical. This is

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<sup>13</sup> This is why one of the central aims of these advice books is to guide individuals a way they can feel as vital and sovereign actors who have the best chances of surviving today’s global economy (Binkley 2014: 1, 36). According to them if we want to feel free, we just need to act free (Baréz-Brown 2014: 72). Following this advice a worker can reinvent himself as a productive hero, a true “love machine” (Baréz-Brown 2014: 56).

why nowadays it is important for employees to achieve a state of emotional flexibility and affective tractability where social networking remains essential.<sup>14</sup>

As this outline illustrates love in modern, network-based capitalism plays a crucial role in stimulating individual self-sacrifice to make remaining reservoirs of passion and dedication which were formerly reserved for private interaction outside the sphere of economic activity accessible for individual profit maximization. Love and happiness in this trend become questions of self-optimizing and autonomy based on occasionally changing network interactions. In this regard, it is arguable that “the discourse of love and happiness at work encourages (productive) cooperation while discouraging (resistant) solidarity” (Weeks 2017: 47).

This is why nowadays it looks like the socialist utopia of a life free of exploitation and full of love is overtaken by hyper-capitalist forces that will wither away the remaining boundaries between work and life in a dystopia of discipline (Weeks 2017: 52). But like Shulamith Firestone (1970), as one of the most influential thinkers of 1970s feminist critic on love and capitalism, declared that the idea of romantic love is in fact corrupted by an imbalance of power she also expresses her hope that love could be experienced differently in an alternative institutional and ideological context. Besides this utopian hope, there is a more rational line of thought led by the awareness that even confronted with this shattering trend of modern capitalism it can not be an option simply not to love supporting the same hope. This is why this paper investigates polyamory as a love practice that is in a sense uncommon within this tendencies, while it is still considered as somehow embedded in and not fully detached from them. For this purpose it focuses on the question to which degree polyamory can be considered as resistant to or incorporated by this latest capitalist offense. In doing so this paper hopes to contribute to the critical understanding of recent capitalist dynamics and subversive practices that aim to limit their advance.

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<sup>14</sup> So according to Tom Peters, former McKinsey consultant and best-selling author who was considered to be one of the top three business gurus by the New York Times (Wayne 1995), in this economic system “it’s all about the size of your Rolodex” (cited in Hirsch 2003, 105).

## Polyamory - Broadening Work and Care in Alternative Relationships?

The focus on romanticism and intimacy within private as well as work relations outlined above is reflected in discourses on alternative love practices as well. While polyamory differs from mainstream heterosexual monogamy in the sense that it allows all participants to engage in multiple romantic, sexual, and/or affective relationships simultaneously (which marks it as a specific form of consensual non-monogamy (CNM)), discourses around this alternative kind of lifestyle show a predominance of love and romance as well (Sheff 2006: 621; Wilkinson 2010). This may partly be due to the continuously increasing attention polyamory received in mainstream culture after it first emerged in the 1950s/1960s from where on it spread throughout spiritualistic counter-cultural milieus in the United States (USA) and United Kingdom (UK) (Anapol 1997, 2010, Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004; Kaldera 2005; MacDonald 2010; Aviram 2010).<sup>15</sup> From the early 1990s onwards polyamory as a practice to love and live differently gained increasing momentum in mass-marketed pop-psychological relationship manuals and mainstream media. In recent years It also received growing attention in popular psychology and social science literature (Klesse 2007a; Klesse 2014b: 203). Nonetheless it can still be considered as an under-researched topic (Barker/Langdridge 2010; Klesse 2014b: 203). Since polyamory emerged and evolved within a variety of subcultures there is also a large number of definitions and actual relationship practices connected to this term which emphasize different aspects. While for most definitions the main core feature of polyamory is that it is about *more than just sex* some draw an even wider circle and state that polyamory “means *loving* more than one” (alt.polyamory 1997). This indicates that the substantial “more” (in this *more than just sex*) actually means love (Klesse 2014a: 65).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Polyamory spread first namely within lesbian, gay male, bisexual, queer, transgender, queer-feminist, BDSM (Bondage & Discipline, Dominance & Submission, Sadism & Masochism – short: SM or Sado-Maso), anarchist, ecological, spiritual, religious and other tendencies within the so-called “new left” and “new age” as well as the commune movement (Klesse 2014: 64).

<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on love as one of its core features distinguishes polyamory from other forms of CNM (Klesse 2014a). But as “this love may be sexual, emotional, spiritual, or any combination thereof, according to the desires and agreements of the individuals involved” ( alt.polyamory 1997) strictly speaking it is not fully appropriate to define polyamory as a specific kind of CNM. This is because such a definition implies that poly relationships are of an erotic or sexual nature while it is not uncommon in poly circles to encounter

The outstanding significance of love as an affective emotion within poly philosophy helped polyamorists to gain continuously more positive representations within mainstream culture after a long period in which they were often stereotyped as delusional and narcissistic (Ritchie/Barker 2006; Ritchie 2010). So today polyamory is often used as an umbrella term for all “ethical” or “responsible” forms of nonmonogamy (Lano/Parry 1995). This is why some argue that polyamory is not actually a specific relationship form but rather a set of values (Klesse 2014a: 64). This values mainly situate around shared knowledge, integrity, and consent while some authors insist that feminist values of egalitarianism, mutual assistance and care have shaped polyamory as well (Emens 2004; Ritchie/Barker 2007; Klesse 2010).

Guidebooks directed towards a poly lifestyle declare it to be a love practice that helps both women and men to overcome the limits of exclusiveness, boredom, routines and jealousy connected to monogamous relationships and emphasise the practice of pooling resources common within poly arrangements (Emens 2004; Easton/Hardy 2009; Pieper/Bauer 2005; Riggs 2010; Schroedter/Vetter 2010; Sheff 2010).<sup>17</sup> Others light the potential of symmetric relationships between autonomous and equal partners which they estimate to be more likely achieved within such arrangements and that it can function as a practical sketch for a more universal relationship ethic (Hofmann 2012: 130 f.). Typically such books situate polyamory in a long line of counterculture and socialist critique on and struggle against heteropatriarchal constructs like marriage, monogamy, gender hierarchy and private property (Pieper/Bauer 2005: 61 ff). According to this narrative polyamory is connected to a countercultural potential that can guide an “exodus out of existing/ruling<sup>18</sup> kinds of relationships” (Pieper/Bauer 2005: 68). Some who live a poly lifestyle underline that they can not imagine another kind of arrangement since only the clear commitment to autonomy which constitutes the basis

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the argument that non-sexual relationships, too, can be polyamorous (Munson/Stelboum 1999: 1; Scherrer 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Although there remains a lack of detailed research into the household arrangements of poly families, existing studies show that many earn multiple incomes which extends the pool of resources they can use for mutual assistance and resource sharing (Sheff 2011).

<sup>18</sup> The original text is written in German and states „sie stellen den Exodus aus einem herrschenden Beziehungsmodell dar“ - whereat the German word „herrschend“ can mean both existing and ruling.

of polyamory provides them with the feeling to engage in every single intimate relationship truly based on their own individual choice (Ihlefeldt 2008: 83 ff.).

What gets evident here is that while love itself is associated with inexhaustible powers to transform not just individual lives but societal relations in general (see chapter two) polyamory as a specific kind of love-relationship is no less overloaded with expectations and promises. It is observable that discourses around polyamory tend to connect this kind of relationship to the promise of self-fulfillment and mutual empowerment (Anapol 1997; Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2009). Some advocates see it as a bi-/queer offense against heteronormativity (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2009) or connect it to an eco-revolutionary force (Heddle 1999) or a practice of anarchist subversion (Heckert 2010). Others even regard to it as a starting point for the development of environmentally sustainable and anticapitalist ways of life (Wilkinson 2010).

Since the most common commitment of intimate love relations - namely that of exclusiveness and dual togetherness in monogamy - does not correspond to the ideology and logics of poly relationships one can ask whether the idea of wider nets of love and intimacy is (respectively in a normative sense *should be*) connected to an alternative kind of commitment? Or - in another words, given the high prospects proclaimed by its advocates - whether it is *enough* to just “promise to love more than one” (Klesse 2007)? The next chapter will deal with this question in more detail.

## **Towards an Emancipatory Future? - A Feminist Critique on Work and Care in Polyamorous Relationships**

As the advice to “love your work”, as well as parts of the literature on polyamory, conform to the model of mere propaganda<sup>19</sup> the striking question is how to formulate a critic that vanishes away the heteropatriarchal tendencies of capitalist incorporation while it keeps the potentially emancipatory core features alive that lay within the

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<sup>19</sup> I.e. consciously propagated ideas intended to induce an expedient response. Feminists understood romantic love and happiness as an ideological phenomenon due to the mystification, depoliticization, and subjectivication connected to it. This is why Firestone described romanticism as a “tool of male power” (1970: 131).

alternative relationship constellation of polyamory. This chapter makes an effort to outline elements of such a critical approach.

As the first step in any critical analysis is to make the familiar strange, we can start by wondering with naiveté how the emergence of a network-based love-your-work-philosophy is connected to the growing popularity of poly lifestyles, what values both shares and how they might interact. In asking these questions we have to acknowledge that love is a notoriously difficult target of critique since it is usually considered not to be an issue of public or political debate but one that is up to private and personal considerations only (Weeks 2017: 42). However, this makes it even more important to develop such a critique since “the panic felt at any threat to love is [nothing more than] a good clue to its political significance” (Firestone 1970: 113). Furthermore, it is true that every kind of relationships is “a social relation, one that necessarily falls within the paradigm of all other capitalist social relations, no matter what form it takes” (Peller 2013). This is why it is inevitable for every critical investigation of polyamory to understand the forces that shaped - and continue to shape - it in theory and practice.

In face of the emphasis on flexibility and potential freedom, many guidebooks to polyamory state the seeping of networked-based interactions into more and more spheres of private life outlined in chapter two has to be considered.<sup>20</sup> This is why a conscious dealing with it is of crucial importance.<sup>21</sup> From a feminist point of view, this means to underline that even though both women and men have access to multiple partners in poly relationships there are still gendered implications of participants’ experiences as well as possibilities (Sheff 2006).<sup>22</sup> To illustrate the relevance of gender within poly arrangements I draw on critical investigations addressing men's refusal to

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<sup>20</sup> Another similarity can be seen in the fact that both the self-help manuals to love work and the literature on polyamory point out that love in both cases is not merely romantic but “much more down-to-earth and hardworking” (Anderson 2004: 11) and that “falling in love with your job will take effort” like “good relationships take work” as well (Hannon 2015: 32). For a detailed investigation on a general project-based lifestyle see Boltanski 2006.

<sup>21</sup> This is particularly true for questions in regard of love since “the most elegant forms of social control, are those that come packaged in the guise of individual needs and satisfactions, so wedded to the individual psyche that any opposing impulse registers as the anxiety of unlovability” (Kipnis 2003: 94).

<sup>22</sup> While many guidebooks to polyamory emphasize the flexibility and autonomy of this kind of relationship when underlining the possibility and necessity of individual negotiations within each relationship (gendered) power imbalances (within a heteropatriarchal society) for example are rarely taken into account. As empirical evidence confirms consent within poly arrangements is contingent and always compromised by (gendered) power imbalances between the partners involved (Klesse 2007).

engage in emotion labour<sup>23</sup> or to contribute a fair share to domestic labour, including child care,<sup>24</sup> to briefly outline starting points for further commitment in this particular field.<sup>25</sup>

As empirical investigations within poly communities suggest the actively promoted rhetoric of intimate relationships with multiple partners is not necessarily fully matched by actual practices (Klesse 2005; Klesse 2007a; Klesse 2007b; Sheff 2006, 2011). As the scientific knowledge gathered so far shows polyamory may not be confined to any particular sexual identity category in terms of gendered object choice but still poly-identified people are mainly heterosexual while most poly communities are predominantly heterosexual in composition (Sheff 2011).<sup>26</sup> Even though men participating in poly relationships tend to value women as well as their (bi)sexuality<sup>27</sup> higher than mainstream culture and claim to desire equitable power relationships with women this does not mean they are protected from failing to reach their goals and instead recreate patriarchal power structures in their relationships (Klesse 2007b). While solidarity is clearly recoded as a pathologized (and, not coincidentally, feminized (Weeks 2017: 47)) codependence in the love-your-work-discourses this is different in discourses around polyamory. However empirical evidence suggests that there is a huge gap between rhetoric and practice in poly arrangements that calls the degree to which solidarity and mutual care can be considered integral parts of actual poly practice into

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<sup>23</sup> This term was first introduced by Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) to describe the labour required to “induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (7).

<sup>24</sup> As Polyamory is considered to be a parenting practice with the potential to transcend biological kinship ties that are prime examples of the „chosen family“ (Weston 1997) it should be noticed first of all that raising children within multi-partner relationships increases the complexity of such arrangements (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al. 2013; Sheff 2010).

<sup>25</sup> See footnote 28 (below) for a short note on the sexual objectification of women by men within poly communities in addition.

<sup>26</sup> A large majority of poly men participate in triadic arrangement between one (heterosexual) man and two (bisexual) women. This might challenge the hegemonic norm of monogamy while heteronormativity itself is challenged only in part if at all since heterosexual male fantasies of having sex simultaneously with multiple women is one of the most frequently illustrated forms in pornography produced for heterosexual men (Jenefsky/Miller 1998). As Sheff (2006: 626) underlines participation in such triadic arrangements makes it possible for men to attain both their ultimate fantasy of sexual satisfaction and a supreme proof of their sexual prowess.

<sup>27</sup> Members of poly communities often view sex between women in a positive light - partially because of many men’s desire to ‘get in on it’ - which fetishizes bisexual women while it devalues bisexual men (Jenefsky/Miller 1998; Roof 1991; Swedberg 1989). This may be explained by the fact that homophobia is considered to be one of the central organizing principles of same-sex friendships for men while it is virtually non-existent for women (Kimmel 2004: 221).

question. According to this findings, emotion work and scheduling in many poly relationships are tasks that are primarily the domain of women (Sheff 2006: 627). Often it is up to women to act as central schedulers for complex and sometimes familial groups of people (Duncombe and Marsden 1995). Performing this task takes a tremendous amount of time and “sometimes [...] feels like a burden” as Morgan, a 29-year-old woman who is taking part in a poly relationship, puts it (Morgan, cited in Sheff 2006: 627).<sup>28</sup> When it comes to emotional involvement men tend to use a categorial separation between sex and love/emotions which can be seen as part of the traditional socialization of masculine men quite common within mainstream culture as well as typical masculine “power play” patterns of “emotional distancing” to elude themselves from inferior (power-)positions (Sheff 2006: 628-629). Meanwhile, many men tend to feel as subject to emotional ineptitude and thereby again use a typical male privilege to excuse them from taking part in emotion work and at the same time denying their skills to navigate emotional intimacy (Sheff 2006: 628).<sup>29</sup> This way they can enjoy the sexual freedom inherent in a poly lifestyle while neglecting their own responsibility for taking part in the (emotional) creation of arrangements that fit the needs and preferences of all individuals involved. In analysing material of participant observation, content analysis, internet research, and in-depth interviews during a seven-year period in western USA Elisabeth Sheff (2006) describes what she calls a “poly-hegemonic masculinity” (625): A masculine identity that fits largely to common hegemonic characteristics and is practiced by many men in poly arrangements.<sup>30</sup>

Besides this widespread copy of hegemonial masculine patterns, there are other forms of discrimination and privilege that are reproduced within poly communities. A fact that not just leads to the marginalization of certain groups within such communities but

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<sup>28</sup> Even though such division of labour leaves the woman who are performing it with a theoretical source of power since they can arrange times and dates with and for others that best suit their own needs such theoretical power can hardly be seen as a true power compared to men’s economic and social power which are on average greater in a culture dominated by patriarchy (Sheff 2006).

<sup>29</sup> In regard to emotional patterns, men are typically more reserved and less likely to disclose personal feelings since they fear vulnerable to other men while women tend to be more open and disclosing (Kimmel 2004: 218).

<sup>30</sup> Even if this men tent to contrasted themselves compared to monogamous men as more open, authentic, and egalitarian this does not mean that they cannot fit perfectly to the socio-biological narrative of an “alpha male” connected to a “male ego stand-point” (Carl, cited in Sheff 2006: 630) that commands whether or not someone else/new is allowed to enter the relationship they take part in (Sheff 2006: 629).

betrays the egalitarian values of polyamory in general (Klesse 2014b: 208). This applies not just to questions of gender but particularly to those of class and race as well. Just like the love-your-work guides target a specific segment of the workforce<sup>31</sup> polyamory seems to be a lifestyle especially adaptable for individuals equipped with a variety of social privileges (Sheff 2006: 625; Klesse 2014b). Therefore polyamory is somehow connected to an exclusiveness which processes mainly in-line with racial and economic characteristics and thereby reinforces social segregation while the overlap of certain privileges according to gender, race, heterosexuality, and class reinforces traditional power structures within poly relationships themselves (Sheff 2006: 638-369). The absence of proactive debates around such issues raises questions regarding the common claims that polyamory could be seen as a transformative/revolutionary practice (Song 2012). Focusing on the gendered implications within poly arrangements we can note that caring as well as emotion labour remain to be widely feminized and consequently work to disempower women (Ferguson/Jónasdóttir 2014: 5). While surely it's not just men who struggle to fully translate their articulated ideals of openness and egalitarian (gender) equality into actually lived practices within poly relationships it seems like for men it is more difficult to unconsciously overcome their hegemonic advantages (Sheff 2006: 630). This is why there might be a fruitful approach for changing settings within such constellations through a focus on males position and masculine identity. Such an approach might be fostered by the fact that even though there are hegemonic tendencies within poly arrangements that widely equal mainstream culture there are many poly men who perform more egalitarian, sex-positive, and gender-neutral behavior in practice and willingly resist characteristics of dominant hegemony (Sheff 2006). By engaging with care and emotion labour as core features of a male poly lifestyle men can contribute to overcome the production/reproduction nexus constantly (re-)produced through the gendered division of labour and the feminization of care work (within as

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<sup>31</sup> It is obvious that under capitalist working conditions one's relationship towards waged work is more likely to be romanticized the "less one is forced to work for wages due to the availability of other means of economic survival, and the greater mobility a worker has to move to a different or better job" (Weeks 2017: 51). A similar relation exists in regard to love and women as Firestone underlined when stating that under hetero-capitalist conditions "women can't afford the luxury of spontaneous love" (1970: 124-125). Translated to the work-your-love paradigm the same is true for most working women and men, who live a life under restrictions of economic necessities that force them to sell their labour force no matter if they like what they have to do in exchange for their salary or not.

well as outside of poly relationships). Although it has to be acknowledged that men can potentially experience negative effects from such identity shifts in the long run there is much more to gain than to lose for both women and men while the more men engage in such identity changes the less the negative implications affect every individual man.

What this change is all about is to accept the fact that care and emotion labour are basic human necessities that can neither be obtained individually (this is most obvious in the fact for large parts of our lives we are net receiver of care, i.e. as children or elderly) nor can it be taken for granted. Everyone who receives care – that is to say every single human being since without care no one could exist – can and should be willing to also give care. In this sense, an egalitarian society has to be organized around care instead of work which for the present state status quo means that there has to be a “care revolution” (Winker 2015) not just within (poly) relationships but on a more general level. As poly arrangements prove to be effective in challenging certain hegemonic norms to transgress the feminized production/reproduction nexus by changing masculine identity according to caregiving and emotion labour they can deliver important contributions towards a more egalitarian way of life. This is to say that through a focus on caregiving and emotional commitment love within poly relations can be reimagined as a revolutionary force and turned into a transformative political project. In regard to a study by Jennifer C. Nash (2011) on second wave black feminist writings about love and politics it is conceivable to define love not in line with the individualizing and depoliticizing modes of romanticism but instead as a more capacious kind of communal affect and practice of care directed towards a future of radical possibilities (14, 16–17). To cultivate such a mode of affective relationality that can fuel new forms of social solidarity and political organization options of manhood have to be enlarged by resisting hegemonic masculinity and transgressing the feminization of care work. Such an approach can be flourished with reference to the typology of “queer-straight men” by Robert Heasley (2005). Such masculine identity is defined as a way of being masculine outside heteronormative constructions of masculinity that disrupt (or at least have the potential to disrupt) traditional images of the hegemonic heterosexual masculinity (Heasley 2005: 310). This is to say that men can cultivate alternative masculine identities when they differ (i.e. consciously try to differ) from hegemonic masculinity in the area of beliefs,

attitudes and/or values (Heasley 2005). By doing so men can actively contest boundaries of existing masculinities and countermand some of its structures to give way for alternative masculinities that from a feminist egalitarian point of view can include a special emphasis on questions of care and emotion labour. While such action raises awareness of masculinity as an increasingly flexible social construct it confers additional choices upon men and stresses the emancipatory and transformative potential of poly lifestyles.<sup>32</sup> Since the need for love and care is imagined as deeply entrenched in the structures of feminine subjectivity in western society it is up to everyone participating in any form of intimate relationship to not just personally recognize the importance of such relationship for ones individual well-being but to underline this fundamental basis openly as such in conversation with the other partner(s) involved. This applies even more to those who are in mainstream narratives not associated with such strong and fundamental feelings, which in western culture are heterosexual men.<sup>33</sup> On a first step this means for men that *our* – since the author of this paper himself is a white heterosexual man - "task in creating solidarity is to open our ears rather than our mouths" (Sara Ahmet, cited in Carty/Mohanty 2015: 89) to first honour the actually existent injustice. As Silvia Federici (1995) declared in regard to the production/reproduction nexus (that e.g. labels care as non-work): "We want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love" (192). This first step needs to be linked to actively engage in shaping new male identities by acknowledging our own emotional needs, engaging in emotional conversations, cultivating emotional connections and take a fair share of care, emotion as well as hands-on work.

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<sup>32</sup> Faced with a lack of detailed research on the organization of care work in poly relationships and households we have to rely on observations of monogamous arrangements to underline that only those who can afford childcare or draw on substantial out-of-home services come close to an egalitarian ideal of shared responsibilities (Carrington 1999). Since such services in a racialized (post)colonial organization of labour in global capitalism continuously reproduces inequity and exploitation there is no way to egalitarianism alternative to men taking share in hands-on work as well as emotional (care) work (Aulenbacher et al. 2018; Lutz 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

<sup>33</sup> As de Beauvoir (2011 [1949]) underlines in western society love is seen as "merely an occupation" in the life of men and as "life itself" for women (699). Or as Firestone (1970) describes "women [in a patriarchal society] must have love not only for healthy reasons but actually to validate their existence" (138) as women who desire to be safely ensconced in institutions like marriage and family that will help them to secure it (Weeks 2017: 49).

Klesse (2014b) underlined that “polyamorous communities will only be able to measure up to their self-set expectation to advance egalitarian routes to intimacy and eroticism if the culture of privilege which underpins current poly relationship and community practices is fully understood” (208). Given the huge amount of care and emotion labour needed to maintain such complex relationships, this is especially true for privileges connected to gender since empirical findings within poly communities suggest that there is a huge gender gap in taking responsibility in this field of activities/work that reflects unequal shares existing in mainstream culture. On the other hand polyamory as a consensus-based relationship between several participants which is practiced in parts by individuals who already situate themselves outside a binary gender ideology, can be considered as a field for fruitful engagements to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity, redistribute gendered social power and bring about changing patterns in regard to emotion work.

As empirical analysis indicate that both women and men are equally attracted to engage in polyamory (Moors et al. 2014) while open relationships show slightly higher sexual satisfaction and orgasm rates and equivalent levels of general satisfaction to monogamous relationships (Conley et al. 2018) polyamory seems to be not just theoretically equipped with the potential to gain ever more popularity. The mandate to love more and be happy with it (might it be in one's personal life or at the workplace), while simultaneously reorganizing further parts of life according to network-based interactions has a very simple and straightforward rationale: The dictate to not just keep the status quo as such but even enhance the increasing forces of commodification that are actually going to transform even the core human activities of care and intimacy into exchangeable goods in a network-based society.<sup>34</sup> For a poly lifestyle, this indicates the need to develop a clear consciousness of gender inequity and other forms of discrimination. Otherwise widely practiced poly relationships could end up being nothing more than a lifestyle update for renewed modes of heteropatriarchal and capitalist exploitation. To develop and cultivate real emancipatory power within a poly

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<sup>34</sup> That this tendency opens up a new field of necessary social struggle in which polyamory as a network-based relationship practice is embedded becomes apparent when Boltanski (2006) acknowledges that “with the expansion of capitalism to the once private world of family, sexual and emotional life, fueled by new biotechnologies, a new field of social struggle emerges, that can be called a biopolitical axis following Michel Foucault. It is not about the production of goods, but about the production of life, especially human beings.”

lifestyle it needs to be connected to the re-definition of terms like „independence“, „strength“ and “autonomy” in accordance to values of gender equality, mutual aid, and acceptance as well as solidarity on a wider scale. This way it can help to recode our relationships towards each other so that love and happiness might be made available for reinvention in and redirection to other spaces and different ends (Weeks 2017: 56).<sup>35</sup>

Heidi Hartmann (1979) in her work “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a more Progressive Union” illustrated that there is a tendency in anti-capitalist theory and practice to emphasize certain aspect and neglect others (i.e. in this case those of feminists who outlined gender discrimination). Since (gender) privileges can only operate on the background of structural forms of oppression it is important to gain clear consciousness about their roots, dynamics, and effects as a first step in the struggle to overcome them. The failure to do so might be one reason for the failure of most socialist attempts to create more egalitarian ways of life. This is why there needs to be an intersectional approach in investigating the current status quo that takes all relevant forms of discrimination and oppression into account and considers the connected strands of critique as integral parts of a vision and practice for a desirable future. As shown in this chapter (with a focus on the alternative love practice of polyamory) any further attempt to replace the capitalist present by a desirable alternative has to first of all change the (gendered) ways of interaction to overcome existing forms of privilege/discrimination and generate a transformative potential (Erel et al. 2010; Klesse 2014b).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> One empirical fact that underlines this potential is that heterosexual men, as well as women who adopt a poly lifestyle, do so mainly motivated by the hegemonic ideal of having sex with numerous partners while during practicing polyamory many realize that it is not (or at least no longer) their desire for sexual activity, but mainly their demand for a non-hegemonic emotional connection that leads them to stay connected to the community and their principals (Sheff 2006: 638). This means that there is hope in finding ways out of the heteronormative patriarchy status-quo by showing best practice within poly arrangements and maintaining an open community which excuses certain discrepancies in favor of the chance to not just change the value orientation of single individuals but - as social change takes place through active practice - contribute to wider transformations towards gender aware mutual acceptance, respect and solidarity.

<sup>36</sup> As Bini Adamczak (2017) explains it was mainly due to the lack of attention given to the actual forms of interaction that past revolutionary upheavals like the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and the student revolt of 1968 failed in their attempts to contribute to wider social changes in an emancipatory sense. Being not equipped with such focus any attempt to change hetero-patriarchal capitalism by adopting a poly lifestyle runs the risk of realising hyper-masculine phantasies encrusted in red painting rather than automatically contribute to more egalitarian ways of interaction. for an analysis of the failure to do so within the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and the student revolt of 1968.

## Conclusion

As outlined at the beginning of this paper love in the current historical stage (still) seems to be trapped between revolutionary and reactionary tendencies. While romanticism in the past functioned as a cultural tool to re-enforce the division of labour (Firestone 1970: 131) after successful feminist struggles to open the labour markets for women it looks like it is used nowadays to accumulate a maximum of productive energy within the sphere of waged work while having a smaller effect on the gendered division of this labour itself.<sup>37</sup> When Firestone underlined the wicked features of love, she also expressed her hope that in an alternative institutional and ideological setting love could be experienced differently (Weeks 2017: 55). To discover a path towards contexts which allow more space for love to cultivate its transformative potentials it is important to insist on calling work what is work (might it be paid for or not<sup>38</sup>) and not take up with the incorporation of love into the work sphere outlined in chapter two.<sup>39</sup> While this counts equally for all forms of relationships poly lifestyles are at the forefront in this struggle due to the fact that the majority of participants in this kind of relationship (both female and male) declare their motives to cultivate relationships based on egalitarian principles of gender equality and mutual respect (Sheff 2006: 628). This is why poly communities who are truly committed to realise a more egalitarian way to live and love can gain much from feminist critiques of capitalism and patriarchy. Equipped with this fruitful analyses and stimuli a poly lifestyle might foster ideas and practices to overcome existing forms of injustice and exploitation. Which on the other hand means that they reproduce - and faced with continuing capitalist tendencies of affiliation and adoption maybe even strengthen - such exploitations when practiced with an unilateral focus on sexual and

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<sup>37</sup> Note that this counts in the sphere of waged work in general while there still is a strong gender segregation within this sphere when it comes to income and status in working hierarchies. Meanwhile the sphere of unpaid reproductive work and care-giving within the private households (which Firestone refers to as well) continues to be considered as a inferior side of life which is strongly feminized and devalued (Dill et al. 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Since waged employment is not magically transformed by our love for it into non-work the same is applies in the opposite direction: Not just because we love to care and house-/emotion work does not mean that this activity is not equipped with all characteristics that would qualify it to be transformed into an exchangeable good on the market as the growing markets for (foreign) care workers show.

<sup>39</sup> If such refusal is based on a process of general disidentification with the work ethic itself that places work as the highest calling and necessary center of social life it can lead towards wider social change (Weeks 2017: 54).

emotional openness committed to a wider understanding of equality only on a rhetorical level.

Since the 1970 feminist movement has identified that “the popularized version of love has [...] been used politically to cloud and justify an oppressive relationship between men and women” (New York Radical Feminists 1973: 381) it is up to active engagement in activist, as well as private and academic discussions and negotiations to determine whether the current capitalist offensive that uses love and network-based interactions as central tools will be successful in penetrating further levels of life following the neoliberal doctrine of maximized productivity that ends in itself. Or whether a love understood in an emancipatory sense as well as polyamorous relationships at the forefront of alternative love practices will be able to keep the future open for ideas of mutual solidarity and shared responsibilities. Theoretical as well as practical advices on how to resist this superior forces can be gained from feminist debates and analysis dating back to the radical feminist movement of the 1970s as shown in chapter four. More recent studies on second wave black feminist writings about love and politics show this as well (Nash 2011). According to Kathi Weeks (2017) in such understanding “[l]ove can function as a mode of affective relationality that can fuel new forms of social solidarity and political organization directed towards a future of radical possibilities” (Weeks 2017: 56). This is how 1970s black feminist love-politics demonstrate the possibility to cultivate forms of love unbound from the clichéd scripts of heterosexual romance for the purposes of living together differently (ib.). Polyamory as a actual practice can create an alternative space in which individuals - aware of the above mentioned tendencies of hijacking and incorporation by capitalist (love) narratives fueling the current advance of polyamory in mainstream society - can experiment with alternative ways of living and loving.

As this paper has shown one starting point for such fruitful and emancipatory experiences within (other as well as) poly relationships can be found in the long history of radical feminist critics on work, care and love itself. Only by combining this critics with the goal to reimagine love as a revolutionary force alternative relationships like polyamory can operate as part of a transformative political project towards changed ways to interact with each other that can also contribute to a more general “care

revolution” as an integral part of post-capitalist transformations (Winker 2015). As such questions are virtually unexplored territory in regard to the study of polyamory the linkage between Marxist and feminist theories can be seen as an ideal starting base for attempts to accomplish the “unfinished feminist revolution” by an rebellion from the kitchen (Federici 2012) and create a world were falling in love for women does no longer mean: “It starts when you sink into his arms and ends with your arms in his sink” as a famous slogan from the 1970s stated (cited in Jackson 2001: 255)

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*»If you want to go fast, go alone.  
If you want to go far, go together.«*

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