

Kathi Weeks on The Abolition of the Family

Prompt 3

1. Explain Kathi Weeks' argument that the family should be "abolished." To do so, you'll need to do the following:
 - Explain Weeks' claim that the institution of the family is part of a system of "privatized social reproduction."
 - Next, explain one of Weeks' criticisms of the family as part of a system privatized social reproduction.
 - Explain how this criticism supports her conclusion that the family should be "abolished." In doing so, briefly describe one of the ways Weeks answers the question "what might replace the family?"
2. Evaluate Weeks' argument. Do you think her argument shows that the family should be abolished? Why or why not?

In this paper, I will explain Kathi Weeks' argument for abolishing the family. First, I will clarify Weeks' use of the term abolition. I will proceed by defining privatized social reproduction, and then explain Week's criticism of the family existing within a system of privatized social reproduction. I will explain how a Universal Basic Income would provide an alternative to the family structure. I will then provide a consideration against Week's argument using a case for the cultural and developmental importance of the family structure. I will then conclude that Week's idea of abolishing the family to reduce exploitation is logical, however, could pose a threat to the cultural importance of the family.

Rather than getting rid of preexisting families, Weeks uses the term "abolition" to describe reducing the necessity of the family structure. She argues that the family causes exploitation and reinforces a social hierarchy. Weeks recognizes that families are an important source of care, but suggests that there could be better ways to organize this care that wouldn't

result in the exploitation of household labor that women are typically subject to. Weeks is referring to a broader transformation of society that would reduce the need for a family while still giving people the option to start one (Bowman).

Weeks claims that the institution of the family is part of a system of privatized social reproduction. Social reproduction is a technical term used in Marxist and feminist discourse, describing all activities necessary to generate and regenerate workers (Bowman). This could be the energy, money, and time that goes into raising a child, who will then contribute to capitalism through their labor later in life. It is the cycle by which a capitalist system perpetuates itself.

Weeks states that social reproduction is privatized, which means that it is viewed as the responsibility of households, rather than of the government (Bowman). Therefore, the family structure is a case of privatized social reproduction. She argues this to be the most consequential element of the family structure. Because social reproduction is typically concentrated in households, families are expected to devote a substantial amount of labor power, and other resources like time, money, and energy, towards the development of their children (Weeks).

For an example of how to generate a worker through social reproduction, take the case of a newborn named Yuki. The child-rearing, education, emotional support, and housework such as cooking are all contributors to the child's social reproduction (Bowman). These resources go into Yuki's development and will eventually contribute to Yuki's capacity to work and contribute to capitalism through the labor he will exert. Social reproduction is the overall labor power that goes into forming Yuki into a laborer. Because social reproduction is privatized, it is the responsibility of his family to provide him with these necessary resources. Labor power is the commodification of labor as a unit that can be compared to other units of value, for example, money (Bowman). Typically, one would exchange their labor power for wages. Yuki's mother,

however, is not compensated for the labor power she exerts and is therefore performing unpaid labor.

One of Weeks' criticisms of the family being a part of a system of privatized social reproduction is that caretakers, typically women, are exploited for their labor power (Weeks). Capitalists benefit from such exploitation as they gain labor power from unpaid labor. In other words, Yuki will put forth labor, which the capitalists themselves did not need to contribute resources towards as Yuki's family was responsible for investing their resources. Because the family exists in a system of privatized social reproduction, caretakers are simultaneously exerting financially uncompensated energy towards developing an individual who will benefit the capitalist class, while detracting from the flexibility of their own life. Through Marxist theory, capitalism benefits from unwaged housework (Bowman). Time spent on tasks that go towards social reproduction could be devoted to other tasks, should the responsibility not be placed on families as private units (Weeks). This is one of the reasons Weeks believes the family should be abolished.

Privatized social reproduction relies on unpaid domestic labor which is primarily performed by women. There are two issues. The first is that caretakers are exploited for their labor. The second is that the family structure naturalizes a social hierarchy where women are expected to be the primary caretaker. This norm has arisen due to the dated ideal of the home as the working man's castle (Weeks).

Weeks claims that abolishing the family would aid in redistributing social reproduction, therefore addressing the exploitation of women that results from unpaid domestic labor. Since the responsibility of social reproduction has been concentrated in families, abolishing the family would disintegrate this exploitation and social hierarchy that she claims has been engendered in

the family structure. Her argument is as follows: The family is a part of a system of privatized social reproduction. Privatized systems of social reproduction result in exploitation as the labor power and investment of resources into childrearing goes unpaid. Therefore, the necessity for the family structure should be abolished as to not exploit those who currently bear the responsibility of facilitating social reproduction, who are typically women.

One of the ways Weeks addresses the question “What might replace the family?” is not necessarily by offering an alternative to the family, but by thinking about methods of making the family less necessary. She does this by finding alternative ways of meeting people’s needs. One of the proposals is a Universal Basic Income (UBI). A UBI involves giving all members of a society a basic income. A UBI is typically regular (given in uniform intervals), universal (given without regard for socioeconomic status or income), unconditional (granted whether or not an individual wants to receive it), and individual (not granted to entire households) (Bowman).

Weeks offers several reasons why a UBI would mitigate problematic aspects of the family structure. This could enable someone to escape an abusive family and weaken the need for a traditional nuclear family configuration as they wouldn’t be economically bound to the family. A working mother would need to put forth less of her resources into social reproduction, as the child-rearing work could be outsourced to care services, and she would have more economic flexibility due to the UBI (Weeks). Because women often bear the burden of being the primary caregiver, a UBI should be introduced to weaken the grip of the nuclear family on caregivers’ autonomy and give caretakers more flexibility. Abolishing the family would reduce the social burden that is commonly placed on women, give them and caregivers the freedom of choice in regards to social reproduction, and weaken the expectation that is placed upon them.

Next, I will evaluate Weeks' argument that we should abolish the family. Weeks uses a descriptive definition of abolition, meaning that it refers to a specific restructuring of society to reduce our reliance on the family, rather than getting rid of the family. Weeks' argument that abolishing the family would reduce exploitation and reduce an engendered social hierarchy is plausible as she is defending an ideal, rather than prescribing a program. She is making an argument against exploitation under capitalism which I agree with.

The biggest issue surrounding Weeks' argument is that reducing the necessity for the family structure may have unintended consequences for the socialization of children. In sociocultural psychology, the family plays an important role in processes like enculturation, where one will internalize the values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior of their culture. A proposed UBI to abolish the family could cause outsourcing child care to become the status quo, due to how it would simplify a caretaker's life. I don't believe that it is feasible to institutionalize cultural education, due to how much variance there can be within individual families in how a culture is practiced and expressed. The ratio of caretakers to children would also need to be much larger if cultural education were to become institutionalized. The individual attention made possible through the family structure is important for the proper socialization and cultural education of children and should not be determined by the government. Standardization of cultural education and other aspects of child-rearing could overlook individual needs that would be addressed in the tightly-knit family structure.

Weeks might respond by saying that people would still have the autonomy of choice as to whether or not care would be outsourced. She might also say that the freedom of choice that abolishing the family would create could outweigh the costs of less individualized care under the family. She would argue that cultural education could still take place, but that it would be

organized in a way that doesn't rely on the family, and therefore wouldn't exploit women. The stability and tightly knit nature of the family structure as a cultural entity is important, and difficult to replicate.

I agree with Weeks' argument for abolishing the family in terms of reducing exploitation and gender hierarchy. However, I think this disregards aspects of the family that are difficult to replicate should the status quo be changed under her proposed ideal of family abolition.

Works Cited:

Bowman, Caroline “Weeks: Abolition of the Family” Ethics and Society, 11/9/23, New York University, New York, NY, Lecture.

Weeks, Kathi. “Abolition of the Family: The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal.” *Feminist Theory*, vol. 24, no. 3, 18 May 2021, p. 146470012110158, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211015841>.