

A collage of torn paper and paint. The text "The Future is Female" is written in black marker on a piece of white paper that has been torn and layered over other colors like red, yellow, and green. The background is a textured blue surface.

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LOVE POLITICS

Hi, I love you all.

But what does it mean? What does it all mean?

Of course I'm speaking about love. I'm a woman. I'm so cis I haven't worn a pair of trousers in a year. Love is what being a woman is all about. Still speaking of cis women here.

We don't just gender bodies, we gender emotions as well. Is love an emotion? Good point! Let's talk about that later.

So in our society women are supposed to desire love... well, being loved. To see love as their raison d'être. Which is why they are also supposed to do all the work of love. The caring and talking and thinking. And because they do it for love they do it for free.

And this is a problem.

I don't have to tell you that. We all know that this is a problem.

That's why we have become suspicious of love.

The political left, artists and activists have become suspicious of love. We can have kinky sex and talk about taboos till the cows come home to be fucked – but love is... urgh.

Because Love is the colored beads we get offered instead of equal pay or any pay often... I could spend this lecture ranting about the ideal of romantic love. BUT I'M NOT GOING TO. Because attention is energy and I don't want to waste any more energy on romantic love. And because when we do one thing we can't do another at the same time. And I want to talk about love in a political sense.

I want to talk about the function of love in and for communities. I want to talk about the role of love in politics. And why I want a politics of love.

So what does love politics mean?

I don't want to fuck you all. Or at least not in that sense. Even though I think we could all do with a lot more sex. Or am I just speaking for myself? Anyway.

Even without politics, love is a revolutionary act. And why is love a revolutionary act?

The first thing we teach people we want to subdue/colonialise/discriminate against is: that they aren't loveable, are less worthy of love. This is so important because we only have empathy for people we consider worthy of love. Which is also why only these people can claim empathy.

The feeling that all marginalized peoples share is that they are less worthy than others, to be more precise: less worthy of love. And that is no coincidence. "Somebody like me can't be loved/doesn't deserve love" isn't an individual sentence or an individual problem. It is a structural problem. Of course it can become an individual problem. But that is another lecture.

I remember a famous author telling me that she'd always had the feeling of being so inferior as a woman that nobody could love her. I was shocked because she was so lovely and impressive. She was also another generation.

Surely all this has changed now?

But then so many of my female friends do not feel loveable because they are too "fat" or too loud, or not loud enough – or too feminist.

Love isn't distributed equally in our society. Love is treated as a privilege. Which is why so many people have watched the wedding of prince Harry and Meghan Markle – and not other weddings. Very telling for this love economy is also the idea: who has the power to bestow love or withhold love.

And by love I also mean respect, attention, empathy, interest...

This is not always true, but it has an impact on us if we think we are dependent on other people to give us love. The fear of not being loved – to have to do an enormous amount of work to deserve love – does something detrimental to us.

And this is the trick with love, with the threat of losing love: it is a political weapon. And it doesn't even have to be a real threat. Just the fear of losing love, never getting (enough) love is enough to cripple people, psychologically and physically.

The author and anarchist Gustav Landauer said: The first political act – before we learn to love our enemies – is to start treating our friends better.

I never managed to find this quote in Landauer's writing. The nearest thing is this quote from his work: "The state is a relation, it is a relationship between people, it is a way in which people interact, you destroy the state by forming different relationships."

Because authoritarian systems know they have to usurp love. People who love each other and themselves are a lot harder to dominate. So in authoritarian systems, love is instead channeled onto a leader/dictator/king. Because people who really love each other are already living in this utopian society where we see eye to eye. And that is central to love politics: to recognize the other as human, as equal and as equally worthy of love. To put their cares on the same level as ours.

On the same level. Not higher not lower.

I don't sacrifice myself for you. By the way love politics is not my idea, it is not even a new idea. I am very influenced by bell hooks's work.

The philosopher bell hooks defines love as the need to nurture each other's growth, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

She also says: Who says that love is not an emotion, love is a verb, love is what we do!

A couple of keystones:

For a politics of love we need a Community of Memory.

That means that we need to celebrate the memory of all members of society – in our archives, in literature, in the media, in statues and remembrance days etc. And not just of some members of society – e.g. only white mainly male rich people.

Also: We need Civic Trust.

We may not have a politics of love but we live in a – if I may say it that dramatically – culture of hate. We just have to turn on the news. Politicians always tell us we have to be more tolerant/open/etc. While at the same time the whole cultural rhetoric is aimed at fear and threat.

What we need is a rhetoric of de-escalation of trust.

And of course we need Civic Grace: the willingness to relinquish political resentments in service of common ideals and goals. As opposed to political resentment, which is a threat to democracy.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt writes that love cannot be political, because it negates plurality.

While the philosopher and author James Baldwin on the other hand understands love as embracing plurality. Love needs plurality.

I'm sorry, Hannah, I'm with Baldwin all the way. Even though I love Hannah Arendt. Probably because I love her. Despite the inherent racism in her writing. Hannah doesn't have to be perfect to warrant my love.

That is plurality. To see others as different from us and still love them. To not need them to be us.

The sociologist George Yancey calls this: "I want you to listen with love." Which is a different way of communicating.

Love politics also means to look at ourselves in this loving way, with this loving eye.

Originally I thought the fourth cornerstone would be Empathy.

But I've been thinking a lot about the difference between Empathy and Compassion lately.

Compassion sounds very Christian but that's not what I'm on about.

Empathy means: I have empathy with people I recognize as similar to me. And – presumably – I hate the others.

Compassion on the other hand is something that is not limited to an in-group.

To achieve this we need a cultural appreciation of love, and of the work of love. In capitalism, the only social values are things that you can evaluate: i.e. count. Like money, or titles or at the moment infection rates. But these are not the only values as we all know. But how can you evaluate the others? Because if we haven't got a shared value system for love, it will be marginalized people who do the work of love – for free – and very little changes. SO we need a value system that is based on love.

And we need education about love and love strategies: like compassion, empathy, de-escalation, radical happiness, non-violent communication, etc.

Because love is one of the most effective ways to build a community.

Martin Luther King saw Whiteness as a state of lovelessness. And I've been thinking a lot about that lately. He said: "They seek their goals through power devoid of love and conscience. Power without love is reckless and abusive. And love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice."

Also our politics must include an idea of reconciliation – after the political fight has ended, or even while we are negotiating.

But what does reconciliation mean?

And even more controversially: what are we going to do with the perpetrators?

And we need to address that.

That goes as far as our justice system. Which is built on punishment. And not on redemption and reconciliation. Not just individuals. The whole system. You can't go to court and say: someone has mistreated me, I want them to understand what they have done to me and to change. You can say: I want them to go to jail. Or: I want them to suffer. And that is all. And that is a problem.

Very often, when we speak about political love, we think we must make our individual heart bigger. Which is always nice. But I am talking about structures. I want a structure that makes it possible for us to interact in these life affirming ways.

And even more so, we've got to find answers to this: how can we address healing on a global level? How can we overcome the trauma of colonisation, of racism, of sexism...

In the 60s, love was seen as the path to the revolution – make love, not war – nowadays love is seen as the opposite, as capitalism par excellence, desire is seen as a commodity, and so the political left is suspicious of the lure of love. But that results in a lack: concepts of self love and self care that don't immediately turn into consumerism. And it also makes it incredibly hard to imagine utopias: how do we want to live?

I've spent the last years writing against: racism and sexism and the new right and Trump and islamophobia and all that. And I noticed eventually that I needed to write for something. We need to see to our own agendas and not just try to prevent the worst. We need to have our own discussions and not just react to what the political right puts in our way.

And we need utopian thinking. And for that we need love.