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Family

Against Left Pronatalism

- Features -

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Neoliberalism enforces family responsibility with a cruel logic: a couple who can't afford rent without both their incomes are a couple who stick together. A young adult who can't afford college without student loans is a child who remains bound to her parent. Lack of public spending on public goods forces poor and working-class people into economic dependence on their relatives. Meanwhile, for the rich, the private family is reinforced as a main conduit for wealth transmission.

Dustin Guastella is worried about birth rates. In a recent essay titled "In Pursuit of the Family," this former national DSA leader argues that the nation is in decline, which can only be reversed by its citizens reproducing. [1] The convergence between Guastella and the US paleoconservative right, represented today by figures like Vice President JD Vance and Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts, is noteworthy. For those familiar with Guastella's writing, particularly over the last five years, this may be unsurprising: he's one of the loudest voices and bluntest thinkers of the right flank of the social-democratic left, and has long favored lopping off the "fringe" antioppression parts of the left's platform. Guastella's newly proclaimed pronatalism is of interest, first, because he is part of an increasingly influential tendency on the US left and, second, because the pronatalist right now holds decisive political power. [2]

Guastella argues that the US left should advocate raising the national birth rate—that is, increasing the number of babies born to native-born citizens. He sees this as a way to address both economic concerns (such as the Social Security funding cliff) and social ones (such as loneliness among the elderly). In a neat elision of women's role in reproduction that he maintains throughout the piece, Guastella states that families provide babies. Moreover, he maintains that encouraging family formation is the best way to teach altruism. Guastella reasons that we ought to pass social-democratic policies because they are profamily (and prosocial). Conversely, the virtuous family spirit will be conducive to achieving social democracy, since unions and other mass organizations are best built by altruistic individuals.

We've been hearing something similar from the new vice president. As Vance said in a speech at the 2025 March for Life, "We failed a generation, not only by permitting a culture of abortion on demand, but also by neglecting to help young parents achieve the ingredients they need to lead a happy and meaningful life...It is the task of our government to make it easier for young moms and dads to afford to have kids." One can hear Vance positioning himself in "opposition" to neoliberalism in his reference to the government's failure to encourage nuclear family life. This break is not new: there have been aspects of it in Trump's protectionist stances, for example. Trump's politics owe something to 1990s Republican contender and paleoconservative standard bearer Pat Buchanan. Vance's have an even greater affinity to the right's paleoconservative wing; he leans hard into pronatalism (also a signature issue for Buchanan). But although newly empowered paleoconservatives like Vance and Kevin Roberts talk about investment in parents (and in other things like national infrastructure), their intention is to invest only in a particular family form, and it won't go any way toward making society more free and equal. [3]

Guastella sounds like JD Vance Lite. This isn't necessarily his intention. A Millennial on the Bernie-adjacent left could end up at economic nationalism and social conservatism if they simply stopped their ears to the anti-oppression demands of liberation movements. While the work of feminists, welfare-rights militants, antiwar activists, and many other movements that flowered in the 1960s and 70s is still crucial to the progressive left today, the transformative potential of these groups' critiques—among whose targets were the family and the nation—won't be fulfilled automatically. The first step is to listen to them. Valuing these antioppression demands is precisely what Guastella argues against.

Although Guastella writes as though to a gender-neutral audience, his proposal for family promotion has far greater consequences for women—who, after all, are the ones who “provide” babies and are (still) largely the ones who care for them. Guastella never mentions the ongoing struggle against the denial of women’s reproductive rights. His omissions are convenient: the ugly, coercive side of a pronatalist state is best left out of the picture, because if we don’t all agree that women’s interest is in having a family, his whole economic plan for the nation falls apart. There is no clear method for reversing birth rate trends in developed countries and the notion that a society with a below-replacement-level birth rate is a society on the decline, are ideological claims that we should not accept. What is certain is that a society in which women have reproductive and sexual freedom will only be achieved by disrupting the current and longstanding social order.

Trying to recreate midcentury social democracy, as Guastella wants the left to do, won’t help defeat either capitalism or patriarchy. Guastella’s familialism and nationalism is in fact symptomatic of a conservative, “tradition”-preserving tendency within capitalism itself, which needs this type of institution. Redistribution of wealth among families (at least, according to a certain standard of what constitutes a legitimate family), leaves the family’s key function intact: to pass down wealth, to reproduce class (and race and gender inequality). Social democracy need not get in the way of capitalism: a little social protection from market forces for those with: “a stake in the future of our country,” as Vance frames it, may even help capitalism continue to reproduce itself.

In this political moment, the progressive left should not back off its ambitions, or sell out its most vulnerable members, but should at every turn seek to present alternatives to both the increasingly bankrupt liberal order and a vindictive far right bent on reversing all efforts to eliminate traditional hierarchies. The major divisions among the working class, including race and gender, are the ones we should focus on bridging.

Because Guastella’s views overlap with those of the party in power as well as a growing portion of the liberal-centrist left, it is useful to understand his analytical failures as well as the points at which he abandons commitments to the liberation of oppressed groups. Below, I will deconstruct Guastella’s claim that the family is an antidote to individualism and neoliberal market logic—two things he collapses into one. Firstly, to elevate the family as against individualism takes liberal ideology at face value. A little inquiry reveals that the original framework of liberalism overlooks the situation of women: the very idea of the autonomous individual is premised on women’s denial of autonomy (via women’s attachment to the family). Second, I will turn to Guastella’s other attempt to oppose family values to something the left agrees is bad: the unfettered market forces of neoliberalism. Once again we find that his reliance on the most basic conventional wisdom has led him astray: as left theorist Melinda Cooper has shown, family responsibility is a constitutive goal of neoliberal state policy in the US. If counteracting neoliberalism is the goal, a left “embrace” of the family won’t accomplish it. Overall, in surveying what Guastella gets wrong, I will attempt to make plain the antifeminism of a pro-family, pronatalist politics.

However, before we undertake that journey, we must understand the context of Guastella’s reactionary turn. Different left fractions are currently vying to determine the direction of the progressive coalition that coalesced around Bernie’s presidential runs under the “big tent” of the DSA. Guastella is among those who want to shift the progressive agenda away from antioppression demands—which is also the lesson some liberals drew from the Democrats’ November defeat. [4] It is unlikely to be a winning strategy in the short term, and is certain to fail the socialist goal of defeating capitalism.

We should not interpret demobilization as equivalent to acceptance of the status quo.

Left Defeat and Left Reaction

Today Guastella professes surprise that leftists would critique the family, and complains about the “antisocial” character of the progressive left. [5] He frames his call for promoting family formation with a morbid account of a Japanese man’s lonely, long-unnoticed death, and threatens that we as individuals and as a nation will meet the same fate if we don’t get to work marrying and bearing children. [6] Contrast these grumpy opinions with where he was at a few years ago: then he was a leader of the Philadelphia DSA chapter, and served a term on the DSA national leadership—he was elected at its 2017 convention, which I attended. At that time he was a proponent of the DSA making the Medicare for All campaign its priority. What happened?

The question is less interesting as a portrait of Guastella, whose half-baked thinkpieces are all over the internet for anyone who wants to retrace his career, and more interesting when we look at what this political shift says about the progressive US left today. In my view, that left has not yet recovered and regrouped from Bernie’s 2020 defeat. This includes the DSA, the organization I belong to and have helped lead (including as Chicago chapter cochair from 2019 to 2021). The Bernie coalition that the DSA participated in was broad and driven by a social-democratic vision. When that apparent window of political opportunity closed, the coalition dispersed. The DSA, as an organization, has not yet been able to grapple with the difficulty that Bernie’s loss presents for its various theories of social change.

The popular, unifying demand for universal healthcare serves as an example: there is no strategy for achieving this goal in the DSA or among the broader progressive left at present. It has not yet been possible to reconstitute the groups of activists who worked on campaigns such as Medicare for All to formulate a new strategy. The founding assumptions of the M4A campaign, and others, have been scuttled by the dramatic political shifts of the past five years.

The progressive (or, as some prefer, socialist) left has become a more unstable quantity since the DSA ceased to be its level-setter. With the exception of a new bump as of last November, its member count and participation rate have dropped off since 2021. Consequently, it no longer serves the center-defining role that it did from 2016 to 2020. We should not interpret demobilization as equivalent to acceptance of the status quo. For some who’ve lost badly and can no longer see a way to win, temporarily sitting out the “fight” is the best option. However, another response to defeat is to modify the goal. We should treat this second option with a great deal of scrutiny.

There has been a conspicuous shift in online left discourse post-Bernie. [7] There is a new inclination to critique that thing, until recently called “identity politics,” and now referred to as “wokeism” or “DEI.” On a January 29 Jacobin Radio podcast on wokeness, Vivek Chibber states that this phenomenon “comes out of a historical process of trying to stamp out the socialist left.” [[<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/confronting-capitalism-the-end-of-wokeness/id791564318?i=1000686682682>]] A February 4 article on UnHerd titled “The Left Won’t Let Go of Woke” suggests that the social media mobbing of Chibber post-podcast is proof that wokeness is the ideology of the “professional,” “identitarian” left. [8] The proliferation of such attacks is disturbing, not because liberal identity politics is beyond critique, but because of their caricature of the positions they criticize and their orientation toward pushing their proponents out of the left coalition. It is hard to find anything positive in developments that bring prominent left voices into collaboration with rightwingers. Jacobin founding editor Bhaskar Sunkara has been publicly friendly with Compact magazine founder and “postliberal” Catholic conservative Sohrab Ahmari, even speaking at his August 2023 book launch. Compact itself—which combines a (narrowly defined) pro-worker perspective with social conservatism and nationalism—is exemplary of this blurring boundary between left and right. Many Jacobin authors have published in it, and both publications share one columnist, Ben Burgis. The DSA’s analysis and vision were always partial, as is true of any democratic social movement. But these new calls for a left economic agenda shorn of its antiracist, feminist, and internationalist tenets would, if adopted, substantially shrink that vision.

What magazines publish doesn’t have a one-to-one relationship with what most people think. I don’t know of any such change in DSA members’ politics. That said, Guastella’s political convergence with the paleoconservative right on pronatalism does accord with a certain understanding of the left project. When you notice his investment in the

period of postwar social democracy, you can begin to intuit how a similarly situated DSA progressive could go in his political direction. [9] For a downwardly mobile Millennial child of Boomer parents, the frustrated desire to have the same standard of living as one's parents can and has led to working-class consciousness. But this can easily shade into the yearning to live in the same America as they did—which, politically speaking is reactionary when untempered by other influences.

Guastella's blinkered view may find an audience; the progressive left that has been on its back foot since the late 70s and has seen public goods continually slashed as the goal of fully funded social-democratic programs has receded into the horizon. It is also largely made up of people of the Millennial generation or younger, who came to the left via their own radicalization, and have no personal experience in—or interpersonal, cross-generational connection to—those '60s movements. Furthermore, the bifurcation between class politics and identity politics that has stymied the progressive left since 1980 continues to hold strong. [10] These circumstances contribute to making the compromises of social democracy appear acceptable—at least when they are presented as the only alternative to our current political reality.

However, the height of social democracy in the United States was not an Edenic golden age. Study of the social-democratic period and its end will likely show us, first, that reversing some of our new circumstances is not possible, and second, that reversing others is not desirable. The late '60s, with its high level of left mobilization and radical ferment, was not a time of contentment: women didn't like being cast as a dependent on their husband's breadwinner wage, welfare recipients didn't accept being subject to degrading interrogations and surveillance by state officials as a condition of aid, and students rejected universities' *in loco parentis* rules, which policed sexuality and gender norms by way of curfews and dress codes. In the postwar social order, longstanding racial and gender hierarchies of US society took a particular form, in the social norm of the Fordist family wage. This norm inscribed a middle-class male worker at the top of the social hierarchy. During this time numerous left movements, as diverse as the working class itself, demanded liberation and, in doing so, challenged this norm. Most of those demands remain unmet.

Nostalgia for social democracy was never the sum total, nor even the dominant impulse of the 2016 to 2020 Bernie left. It worked in coalition with and included many leftists whose political priority was the liberation of oppressed groups. [11] Antioppression demands are indispensable—they are the interventions that sharpen our strategy and take us beyond a dead-end reformism. We must not make it our goal to claw our way back to midcentury social democracy—to do so would recodify oppressive social hierarchies whose Fordist basis has been repudiated and to a great extent dissolved. To carry the point through: to attend to feminist critiques of the family and of pronatalism is not, as Guastella contends, to elevate “fringe” elements of a left agenda—it is to value the interventions of crucial allies in the anticapitalist struggle.

The “individual” and the “family” are historically specific concepts that arose together.

A Man Deplores Individualism While Women Struggle for Personhood

Guastella's writing is brisk and smug, like an unscrupulous salesman. He never defines key terms (such as family), marshals evidence for his claims that doesn't actually support them, and brushes off potential interlocutors by grossly mischaracterizing their arguments. [12] This is easy enough for him to do when he is arguing that the family is a good—that is, something that most people believe already. Canards and cliches abound on this topic, and Guastella makes much use of them. My approach is therefore not to address his argument point by point—its flimsiness is obvious enough to anyone who reads it—but to tease out the concepts that he vilifies in contrast to the family. These can show us something about the contemporary discourse about families and childbearing.

Guastella falls into a common trap for those whose political vision is backward-looking: everything newfangled looks to him like the enemy. He spares no time or attention for the hopeful possibilities of connection in the twenty-first century, such as “chosen family,” the urban intermingling of races and classes, or queer intimacies that defy the norms of middle-class respectability. All he can see when he looks upon contemporary US society is a sea of alienation and meaninglessness. When he tries to explain why we went adrift, he variously blames it on a dominant “market logic” (something like the neoliberal rationality), the philosophical concept of liberal individualism, and, in a real throwback, “unchecked consumerism” in the form of people buying dishwashers and microwaves. The full force of his nostalgia can be felt in his longing for a predishwasher era. He collapses these distinct phenomena into a single caricature.

Guastella makes an important and common error when he contrasts familial altruism with the “vice” of individualism. This adopts both the erroneous theorization of the individual as separate from the family and the uncritical conception of the autonomy of the individual as conceived by liberalism. In that, he ignores (or willfully mischaracterizes) a broad swath of Marxist feminist critique that shows the fallacy of the individualism-versus-family values opposition.

The “individual” and the “family” are historically specific concepts that arose together—just as we know that, for every person who strides forth confidently and independently into the public world, they were supported and propped up by somebody at some point (probably that morning). The individual’s autonomy is the flipside of the individual’s dependence on and responsibility for his family.

In classical liberal theory, as Wendy Brown writes in “Liberalism’s Family Values,” women were imagined as attached to and subordinate to a man and obligated to children. They were not granted the status of individuals. Instead their bonds enabled the men they supported to act as autonomous free agents in the public sphere. [\[13\]](#)

The autonomy of the individual is a construct of liberalism, the dominant ideology of capitalism. Marxists know that liberalism imagines free contractual relations only by ignoring unfreedoms in the broader social context. For example, when a worker takes a low-wage job because their other option is eviction and homelessness, this is hardly a choice. Liberalism is premised on the steadfastness of certain unspoken illiberal bonds—obligations that are not optional. Women’s work in the home for the family is one of those bonds that the liberal story of individual autonomy conceals. This hidden, uncompensated labor—known by Marxist feminists as social reproduction—includes the daily care, feeding, generational birthing, and rearing of workers. Capital couldn’t exploit workers without it. To justify this gendered division of labor, liberal family values encourage selflessness for women: to this day the family is premised on women finding their fulfillment in service to the family. Liberal familialism is thus structurally oppressive to women as a gender.

The structural nature of that oppression is key, and it is one of the most glaring omissions in Guastella’s discussion of the family. A husband and father himself, Guastella must understand that the production of babies requires the labor of women, but he spends more time extolling the reward of family life than he does thinking about the burdens it places on women (and of course, a man would). Indeed, he barely mentions feminism or the gendered division of labor and seems to be both ignorant of feminist critiques of the family and uninterested in learning what they are, much less addressing them.

Women are still struggling for the autonomy that liberal individualism grants and attributes to men. The family, as a unit of social reproduction, is a primary site of that struggle. Right now, the United States denies women their basic human rights by criminalizing abortion in two-fifths of states, on the basis of the state interest in “fetal life.” As we’ve long known, when a legal system and health system deny women reproductive care, it harms women’s health, even to the point of death. Moreover, abortion bans deprive women of bodily autonomy. The state’s current orientation is toward protecting “fetal life” over that of the woman carrying it. Guastella’s family promotion proposal begs the question: which comes first, the abstraction of the birth rate and the supposed revitalization of the national economy

through raising it, or women's value as people rather than reproductive vessels? You can't have both.

Guastella's pronatalism trods obliviously on women's status as persons. In effect, his proposal conscripts women into the work of making babies as a duty to the nation. In the gendered division of labor that we live with, childbearing is a form of labor that only women can do. Childrearing is a form of labor that is still mostly done by women, and men rarely do it alone (single father-headed households are a small minority of those raising children). Absent the socialization of childbearing and rearing, calls to raise the birth rate are dictates to women about their life's path. On this basis, there is a strong feminist case against any scheme that holds up raising the birth rate as a solution to problems of the economy or of national "vitality." While it is doubtful that a pronatalist policy program would improve the economy as working-class people experience it, it is certain that such a program will diminish women's freedom and deepen their subordination.

Ultimately, promoting the institution of the family as a good is antifeminist, because it demands women's social reproductive labor, while simultaneously concealing and devaluing it. If the family is the institution to uphold, then everything possible must be done to direct women's self-expression to a maternal role—including, when necessary and when politically feasible, denying women bodily autonomy. Nevertheless, conservatives continue stumping for the joys of family life because their project can't get anywhere without some cooperation from women. This is why the pronatalist paleoconservatives such as Vance hold that the one indispensable source of self-fulfillment in life is in sacrificing oneself for family and children. Against this claim, feminists insist that women must have the right to follow their own interests, desires, and aspirations even if these don't include childbearing.

Neoliberalism enforces family responsibility with a cruel logic: a couple who can't afford rent without both their incomes are a couple who stick together.

Family Values Whether You Like Them or Not

Guastella seems to be frustrated by nuance, which is a good reason not to appoint him strategist for our movement. This is on full view in his treatment of Melinda Cooper's argument in *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. According to him, Cooper "argues that neoliberalism is not a regime built around the individual, but one built around the family." He counters that "families dissolved in the neoliberal era," and exposure to market forces is to blame. [\[14\]](#)

The relationship between neoliberalism and the institution of the family is not so simple as this. As Cooper clearly and inexorably demonstrates, the family was neither targeted by neoliberals for destruction, nor neglected. The view that the family is a mere victim or casualty of neoliberalism is simply wrong. Rather, promoting family responsibility is a constitutive goal of neoliberalism, one that has guided US state policy in the era from the 1970s to the present. [\[15\]](#)

Guastella doesn't give any sign of having read Cooper's book, much less engaging with her argument, which explains why his thinking doesn't extend beyond the oft-repeated sentiment that neoliberalism is "hard on families." There is a kernel of truth to this. More state funding of public goods would benefit everyone, including parents and children. But this cliché doesn't tell us whose families, in what way it is hard, by what mechanisms, what reasons the neoliberals give for inflicting it, or whose interests "making it difficult" may serve. As Cooper recounts, family values were central to the concerns of US neoliberals. The chief initiator of British neoliberalism, Margaret Thatcher, was herself arguing in favor of the (family) value of mutual obligation when she made the famous "no such thing [as society]" statement that Guastella misconstrues. This should give pause to any serious left thinker sympathetic to Guastella's proposal to promote the family as a "good," and should inspire us to review such a proposal with scrutiny.

Neoliberalism enforces family responsibility with a cruel logic: a couple who can't afford rent without both their incomes are a couple who stick together. A young adult who can't afford college without student loans is a child who remains bound to her parent. Lack of public spending on public goods forces poor and working-class people into economic dependence on their relatives. Meanwhile, for the rich, the private family is reinforced as a main conduit for wealth transmission. In the context of neoliberalism, promoting family responsibility is a means of increasing the wealth and power of the asset-owning and business classes, while tying the hands of poor and working-class people, by overloading them with private household debt that forms what Cooper calls intergenerational "webs of economic obligation."

Neoliberals reached back to the Elizabethan Poor Laws, and their corollaries in the American colonies, to find precedent for punitive family responsibility. But to find assumptions about family structure baked into state policy, they didn't have to go back so far. The idea that the state is filling in for an absent family member—usually, a wage-earning man who headed the household—is a recurrent premise within welfare history in the United States. In the Progressive Era, activists secured "mothers' pensions" at the state and local level by arguing that (white) mothers should receive public aid in order to promote children's welfare and ease the burden of raising children without a male income. The welfare state's creation with the New Deal and expansion with the Social Security Act still divided its programs along class, gender, and racial lines. Women who fit the norms of respectability—having been married to a man who earned enough to pay into Social Security—received aid from the higher-status federally administered Social Security program. Never-married single mothers got Aid to Dependent Children (ADC, later AFDC)—a lower-status program administered by the states, which, in the 40s and 50s, loaded up the program with administrative roadblocks designed to police its recipients' morality. These included "man-in-the-house" rules barring women from receiving benefits if they were in a sexual relationship with a man.

As Cooper observes, state imposition of family values was not limited to the neoliberal era, nor perpetrated solely by the right. Up until the 1960s, Democrats and Republicans were both in favor of redistributive social welfare, as doled out according to the principle of the Fordist family wage. (As we will see shortly, that consensus would fall apart by the mid-70s, marking the end of the social-democratic era and the beginning of the neoliberal one.) In the tumultuous period of the 60s and early 70s, prominent voices on both the left and right located the cause of pressing social problems in the Black family, which they saw as having been weakened by a number of factors including the incentives of a welfare system that disincentivized marriage and male breadwinning. Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote in his infamous report that the "pathological" female-led Black family structure was the root cause of Black poverty and crime. [16] Many on the left objected to Moynihan's statements about the causes of Black people's disadvantage—yet they broadly agreed with his conclusion that both the means of remedying that disadvantage and the end goal of its redress would involve repairing the Black family. [17] Toward this end, liberals thought the administration and incentive structure of welfare could be manipulated to encourage the male breadwinner family model. Thus, in the age of welfare state expansion, liberals saw the welfare state as a means to encourage the formation and stability of traditionally structured families.

If we jump ahead to Bill Clinton's signing of TANF into law in 1996, we see similar messaging for a markedly different public policy. Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) was a piece of welfare reform legislation that rolled back (redistributive) payments to low-income households, making benefits both temporary and dependent on work requirements. Once again, the stated goal—this time the goal that reducing public spending on welfare was intended to accomplish—was to strengthen families by strengthening family responsibility.

Promoting the family, then, was an explicit goal of two drastically different policies: welfare-state redistribution and antiredistributive neoliberal policies. The history of state welfarism's interventions in regard to the family is sobering: time and again, it has determined deserving versus undeserving recipients based on their fulfillment of family responsibility. It is largely a story of state-imposed family values, rather than the state's enablement of a variety of different ways of life. [18]

The progressive left should heed the calls of the women of the 1960s welfare rights movement to stop using a moralistic, racist schema to separate the deserving from the undeserving poor. Moynihan was wrong to locate the source of social problems, such as poverty, in a particular Black family structure; it is equally wrongheaded to blame loneliness among the elderly and the lack of social provision for end-of-life care on the chosen childlessness of young adults. Guastella demonstrates the limits of this type of chauvinistic outlook: when he posits that “strong family life, in any given society, is not contrary to progress but coincident with it,” he defines progress as nothing more than his own reflection. [19]

The family is only one form of sociality, one way of human life. People are inventing other ways of life all the time. These are legitimate too even if they don't involve bearing or raising children. To suggest that society is only making progress when people are forming families is to delegitimize whatever doesn't fit your definition of a family. To say families are the best place to learn altruism and selflessness is to say by implication that non-family-forming individuals are selfish. These charges are both untrue and counterproductive for the progressive left project. As feminists such as Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh have pointed out, it is the family that is antisocial, insofar as its dominance discourages the formation of other, more collective human connections. [20] References to history reinforce this point, since we find that the notion of private family relations as the place to learn and express altruism is a middle-class ideology, which emerged in the Gilded Age to justify that class's withdrawal from broader social responsibility [21]

The left fights for a freer and more equal world. Regarding the family, it should support policies that free people from the need to reproduce oppressive family structures and dynamics. Among the means of doing so, encouraging solidaristic social bonds that cross and transcend families will be one of the most important. Valorization of the private family is a cause of atomization, rather than a cure. Against Guastella's call for “more and stronger families,” we should call for more and stronger solidarities.

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A Fighting Left and a Smaller Role for the Family

The particular form of redistributive state welfare that poor and working-class people enjoyed in the mid-twentieth century has ceased to be. The left needs to understand why, to inform our strategy in the long-term fight against capitalism. I disagree with Guastella when he argues that we should pursue a quixotic effort to recreate postwar material conditions, and with him and other leftists when they dismiss and disparage left critiques of hierarchies other than class. If we study the social-democratic period and its end, we will find much to learn from the radical antioppression movements that came into being then, particularly in the 60s and 70s. The experiences that motivated these struggles, their strategies, their theoretical critiques, and their outcomes are all instructive. If the progressive left's goal is to enable greater human freedom and equality, then we ought to pay attention to historical moments when these things were struggled for in a militant way, and sometimes (even if only briefly) achieved.

One edifying example is the welfare rights movement. During the '60s, through the efforts of welfare recipients in the National Welfare Rights Organization and civil rights lawyers, many state-level welfare rules were overturned. Per Supreme Court decisions such as *King v. Smith*, states could no longer use “man-in-the-house” or similar intrusive rules to prevent women from receiving federal welfare benefits. This led to a window of time when federal welfare came without (familial) strings attached: a moment of what we might identify as a true increase in freedom for poor women——especially for Black women, targeted by these rules. The welfare mothers' victories got under the skin of

neoliberal economists and social conservatives. Their obsessional grudge against AFDC is revealing: these people didn't want women, especially poor Black women, to evade the social norm of the Fordist family wage. For these women to have the means to live and raise children without having to give up (to name one important example) sexual freedom, was read as betokening the collapse of the social order.

Looking back, it appears that these observers had cause to be nervous—at least for themselves. At that time, federal policies were weakening inherited wealth's class-determining power—that is, in other words, weakening the family. Moreover, radical movements were trying to level social hierarchies and explode their justifications. Both liberal and neoconservative thinkers connected the supposed excess, irresponsibility, and libertinism of these movements to the (perceived) crisis of inflation. It bears underscoring: this fear of social change was not limited to the right. Efforts to preserve the current order also spoke to the interests of liberals, insofar as they were not at the bottom of its hierarchies. As Cooper details, starting in the late 60s, both liberal and neoconservative thinkers honed in on the primary concerns and assumptions of neoliberalism, while converging in their thinking and goals. They then worked in concert to turn the political tide against redistributive welfare and Keynesian federal spending, and toward the gutting of the public sector that we now recognize as a defining aspect of neoliberalism. In other words, the reaction was so significant that it seems to continue to this day. Crucially, neoliberals have insistently emphasized the family as a corrective to excess, irresponsibility, and libertinism.

Given this context, we must interrogate Guastella's investment in the family, especially a normative family consisting of two married parents and their children. I don't think Guastella spent much reflecting on these issues before gracing us with his essay, but we need to consider his convergence with both a newly ascendent reactionary paleoconservatism and a neoliberal political project that's been immiserating working-class people for the last half-century. Moreover, given that the left is not a monolith, whose interests are served by viewing social democracy as the be-all end-all and advocating that left try to make its way back there? Why not imagine a different way of life, that creates new structures of care instead of reproducing unequal and oppressive ones?

To envision a society that is equal and free for all people, the progressive left must incorporate radical critiques of institutions and ways of life that are near and dear to some of us. I've sought to demonstrate ways that political demands from some of the segments of the working class that are the most oppressed, such as poor Black women, sharpen our analysis of capitalism and point a way forward in our fight for freedom for all.

I hope that few DSA leftists will fool themselves into thinking that pronatalist economic nationalism constitutes progressive politics. I have dwelt in this essay on the subordination of women that this scheme assumes and reinforces. It is clear—perhaps even more viscerally—that it also punishes immigrants. Guastella scoffs at the concept of open borders and what he flippantly describes as the idea that we should “import” babies rather than invest in making them. Vance and Trump, of course, are currently enacting an ostentatiously cruel anti-immigrant program, and claim to be arresting hundreds of undocumented immigrants each day. Guastella shares the paleoconservatives' desire to maintain the subordination of undocumented immigrants in the hierarchy of citizenship. Though immigrants and refugees are members of US society, in Guastella's scheme they literally don't count (for population numbers), and by implication their interests are discounted. The same is true for other people who reside on this planet outside US borders. At a time when new international solidarity is needed to confront capitalism's global crises, such as pandemics and climate change, this is an especially wrongheaded view. Trying to solve US workers' woes in the twenty-first century by narrowing the focus to the nation and the family is the strategic equivalent of billionaires buying islands to hide out in; it simply sells out everyone not on our metaphorical island.

Finally, if Guastella's aim is to water down progressive demands to make the left more approachable, this too is a losing proposition. This would have the effect of making us less distinct from both liberal centrists (whose politics seem to be fast losing their appeal) and right-wing socially conservative nationalists (who will always beat us at the game Guastella wants us to play). While Guastella presumes that “profamily” is an enduringly common-sense, populist position, the progressive left shouldn't accept this. It's not simply a matter of rhetoric: how the left frames its

program both demonstrates its commitments and educates its members. Feminist critiques of familialism and pronatalism counsel us not to accept elisions of women's labor in our economic schemes. By demanding that we do not default to the family but continue to come up with other ways of organizing how we reproduce ourselves, they keep our vision transformative, which is what we need. If welfare militants won gains in the 60s, leftists today, with the perspective of that struggle's history, can win new freedoms as well. To that end, the progressive left's vision needs to stay capacious enough to include the goal of defeating capitalism as well as its specific oppressions. Guastella's framework does neither, so we should reject it. The left can do better than JD Vance Lite.

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[1] Dustin Guastella, "In Pursuit of the Family," *Damage*, November 18, 2024, <https://damagemag.com/2024/11/18/in...>

[2] Dustin Guastella, "Where Do We Go After Last Night's Defeat," *Jacobin*, March 11, 2020, <https://jacobin.com/2020/03/bernie-...>; Jordy Cummings, "From the Socialism of Fools to Social Democracy in One Country: Averting the Red/Brown Temptation," *Spectre*, July 21, 2020, <https://spectrejournal.com/from-the-...>

[3] Emma Green, "The New Pro-Life Playbook," *New Yorker*, November 11, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/mag...>

[4] Maureen Down, "Democrats and the Case of Mistaken Identity Politics," *New York Times*, November 9, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/09/...>

[5] Dustin Guastella, "Anti-Social Socialism Club," *Damage*, March 22, 2023, <https://damagemag.com/2023/03/22/an...>

[6] Guastella, "In Pursuit of the Family."

[7] Additional examples to this trend than the ones listed below can be found in Janakiram and Lessards "Tradwives and Femcels." Emily Janakiram and Megan Lessard, "Tradwives and Femcels: The Women of the New Right Work Hard to Make Marriage Edgy Again," *Lux*, no. 8 (2023): <https://lux-magazine.com/article/tr...>

[8] Catherine Liu, "The Left won't let go of Woke: So much for the 'vibe shift,'" *UnHerd*, February 4, 2025, <https://unherd.com/2025/02/the-left...> Over at the more reactionary *Quillette*, we find a self-identified conservative writing "Trump and the DEI Revolution," an approving commentary on Trump's evisceration of federal DEI and affirmative action. [<https://quillette.com/2025/02/08/trump-and-the-dei-counter-revolution-affirmative-action-civil-rights/>]

[9] Dustin Guastella, "Is Nostalgia a Dead End?" *Jacobin*, February 4, 2024, <https://jacobin.com/2024/02/postwar...>

[10] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, (Beacon Press, 2003), xv-xvi.

[11] <https://midwestsocialist.com/2018/04/15/how-should-socialists-organize-reflections-on-the-lift-the-ban-campaign/>

[12] From his call to raise the marriage rate as well as the birth rate, we can infer that Guastella has something like the two-parent household in mind. For purposes of my opposition to family-promotion, I mean the institution within and by which the rich build up their wealth and keep it to

themselves, and the institution that divides and opposes the interests of people by gender and age within households, and by race and class between them.

[13] Wendy Brown, "Liberalism's Family Values," in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 135–65.

[14] Guastella, "In Pursuit of the Family."

[15] Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Zone Books, 2017).

[16] Office of Policy Planning and Research United States Department of Labor, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," U.S. Department of Labor, March, 1965, <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdo...>

[17] Cooper, *Family Values*, 40-42.

[18] A different outcome from state welfare programs is possible, however. These programs could meet people's needs for economic support in such a way that depending financially on partners and relatives would no longer be necessary, or drastically less so. I believe there is liberatory potential in, for example, delinking romantic love from economic codependency, the better to allow it to flourish—a change that Engels and Kollontai might approve.

[19] Guastella, "In Pursuit of the Family."

[20] Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-social Family* (Verso, 2015).

[21] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, (BasicBooks, 1992).