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Women

The Fantasy of Normalcy: Neoliberalism, the Family, and the New Right

- Features - Feminism -

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In a comment published in *New York Magazine* in 2018, Andrew Sullivan warns the LGBT movement against its leftist “excesses,” which run the risk of jeopardizing the achievements of the gay rights movement and of opening the doors to a reactionary right on the rise:

The Trump era is, I fear, not just about this hideous embarrassment of a president. It’s also fueled by a reaction of many ordinary people to the excesses of the social-justice left “on immigration, race, gender, and sexual orientation. If the gay-rights movement decides to throw in with this new leftism, and abandon the moderation and integrationism of the recent past, they risk turning gay equality from being about a win-win process for gays and straights into a war between “LGBT” people and the rest. [1]

Sullivan’s commentary refers to a GLAAD poll that, according to him, would show that support for LGBTQ rights has stalled (a questionable interpretation of a poll the stated conclusion of which is that support for equal rights for LGBTQ people is stable at 79%). [2] Sullivan’s view is not an isolated one and analogous approaches to the question of the rise of rightwing forces across the globe have also started spreading among self-declared left-leaning scholars and commentators, not only in relation to gender and sexuality, but also with respect to migration policies. [3] In the left-leaning version of this argument, rightwing forces on the rise voice a popular reaction to the toxic fusion of neoliberalism, identity politics and cosmopolitanism, which have left the large mass of the working and poor population – the so-called “normal people” – behind. [4]

However, various recent polls concerning people’s beliefs about sexual freedoms, gender identities, and abortion rights, from countries as diverse as the United States, Italy, and Brazil, offer some challenge to this interpretation of recent electoral trends. [5] Based on these polls, it would seem that feminist and LGBTQ campaigns and mobilizations have been successful in contributing to shifting popular opinion over the course of the years in favor of broadening individual rights and freedoms, including access to abortion. This has obviously come with *some* social and cultural backlash, but the various polls available show that anti-gay, anti-trans, and anti-abortion sentiments in countries governed by the new far-right, such as Brazil, Italy, and the United States have remained in several cases minority positions and, where they are not, they are progressively losing social appeal. Why, then, has the crusade against the so-called “gender ideology” – a derogatory term coined by the Vatican – become a central tenet of the new far-right and how has it come to be perceived as representing widespread popular beliefs? [6]

A first step toward the clarification of this issue is to qualify the current rightwing backlash as a politically and institutionally orchestrated one, and not as one arising from people’s spontaneous reaction to the “excesses” of feminist and LGBTQ campaigning. The example of the World Congress of Families is telling in this regard. [7] The concerted action of elected representatives, Church officials, grassroots organizations, and social media rightwing activists operates as an amplifier of fears and insecurities, bias and prejudices that are indeed present among the electorate but are far from representing what the majority thinks in terms of sexual freedoms, gender identities, and women’s rights. This concerted amplification of concerns and fears, in which the use of social media by new far-right leaders such as Trump, Bolsonaro or Salvini has played a key role, has managed to fuel the social perception of a majority of “normal people” hostile to women’s and LGBTQ people’s rights. To express this dynamic in other terms, far-right governments and parties are actively creating their own political/cultural base, rather than representing a political and cultural majority bloc that is already in place. In order to understand the basis for the far-right successes in this operation, it is useful to address the more general question of the relation between neoliberalism and the family.

In her book, *Family Values*, Melinda Cooper has argued that neoliberalism has from the start been committed to strengthening the family and its social role. [8] Focusing on the United States case, she shows how neoliberal cuts to

public spending in education, healthcare, and welfare were predicated upon the assumption that kinship-based relations would replace the “impersonal bonds” of social insurance through self-care, mutual support, and intergenerational debt. While – in contrast to Fordism – neoliberalism is not bound to specific disciplinary sexual mores and the hetero-normative family, it does rely heavily on the family to absorb the shocks and vagaries of the free market. This dynamic has obviously deepened in consequence of the 2008 crisis, with the subsequent acceleration in the implementation of austerity policies and public spending cuts, and increases in unemployment and casualization of labor. Family bonds have become increasingly central to people’s very survival.

The multiplication of sexual identities and practices, the increased visibility of queer and trans gender identities and gender-non conforming life styles, as well as their commodification and promotion as market niches and new sources of profit and sites of investment, has contributed to obscuring a reality characterized by increased reliance on kinship bonds for material survival and psychological well-being. In spite of Melinda Cooper’s stated hostility to Social Reproduction Theory, this phenomenon can be better understood in light of the structural role played by what Marxist feminist thinkers call the social reproduction of labor power (and therefore, by the family as the main site of social reproduction under capitalism) and its subordination to production for profits. [9] Alan Sears’ theoretical reflections about the relation between social reproduction, gender norms, and sexuality, for example, are a useful complement to Cooper’s analysis of the relation between family and neoliberalism in the United States. As Sears argues in a recent essay, while the proliferation and increasing visibility of sexual and gender identities may be mistaken as a mere symptom of increased individual freedom, this freedom is better understood along the lines of Marx’s double freedom. For Marx, under capitalism workers are endowed with a paradoxical double freedom: freedom to dispose of their own bodies, but also freedom, in the sense of *dispossession*, from all the means necessary for their survival. Having been dispossessed – and being continuously dispossessed anew – of the means of production, they are both free from the bonds that tied them to the land and free to sell their labor power, but they are also *coerced* to sell it in order to survive. Alan Sears proposes to extend this insight to the sphere of sexuality:

Capitalism prepared the ground for the rise of forms of sexuality that combine freedom with compulsion. Freedom of sexuality under capitalism is based on the social reproduction of “free” labor, as the working class under capitalism is distinguished from other subordinated classes through history in that workers can lay claim to formal ownership of their own bodies. Yet the freedom of labor based on self-ownership is necessarily combined with forms of compulsion. [10]

Rightwing forces on the rise – from the European Union to Latin America and India – have often campaigned, in one form or another, for economic protectionism, and for supporting the economic interests of their nations and of their national working class in the face of an all-too-powerful global market with its international trade agreements and transnational institutions (NAFTA, IMF, WTO, EU). For this reason, these new far-right governments are often interpreted as anti-neoliberal. As a matter of fact, the concrete policies carried out by the new rightwing forces once in power have done nothing to mitigate the social and economic effects of neoliberalism or to challenge neoliberal dogmas in the management of the economy, in spite of their propagandistic claims to the contrary. Just to give some examples, both Trump’s administration and Italy’s Five Star Movement/League government have put forward regressive tax reforms heavily redistributing income from the poor to the rich. Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazilian government combines a nationalist and protectionist façade with an unchained neoliberal agenda (see, for example, his proposed reform of social security and his interest in privatizing the state-owned oil company Petrobras). [11]

What differentiates rightwing reactionary projects and the forces that Nancy Fraser has labeled “progressive neoliberalism” is, therefore, not opposition to or endorsement of neoliberalism: it is rather a different mode of political management of the same neoliberal economic dogmas. [12] This also applies to the question of the family. In fact, progressive neoliberalism also relies on the role of the family as a precondition for the implementation of neoliberal policies. Rather than witnessing an opposition between family values and liberal values of personal independence and autonomy, what we are witnessing today is a competition between two different modes of culturally regulating the family in its central social role. Progressive neoliberals have no particular attachment to specific disciplinary forms

of interpersonal relationships, and for this reason they can support divorce, abortion, alternative kinship relations such as same sex marriage, provided that – to use Melinda Cooper’s words – these alternative kinship relations can “successfully internalize the health and welfare costs of partners and children.” [13]

The neo-traditional right, on the contrary, is pursuing a different mode of regulation of the family. Having understood that under neoliberalism the family has become the primary source of security for everybody, both of economic security against the unpredictability of the free market and of psychological security against the psychic effects of unemployment, precariousness, and loss of social status, rightwing parties are pursuing a project of return to neo-traditional values reinforcing heteronormativity, paternal authority, and the social and cultural hierarchy among partners within strictly heterosexual couples. The right’s fixation on neoconservative family values plays an important ideological and self-legitimizing role. Rightwing governments have in many cases managed to gain power on the basis of platforms denouncing the disintegration of national and communitarian bonds at the hands of a financial elite, often characterized as cosmopolitan, amorally committed to sexual freedoms, and oblivious to the plight of normal working people. However, as already mentioned, these governments have already proven that they have very little to offer in terms of concrete policies addressing the root causes of social insecurity: on the contrary, they are promoting policies that will further dismantle social safety nets, leaving the family again as the only available resource. What they can offer is a mobilizing fantasy according to which people feel insecure because the *family* is in danger: threatened by both “gender ideology” and by an invasion of immigrants “carrying” different values, different cultures, and a sexual propensity to prey on national women.

In the feminist Manifesto I co-wrote with Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser, we argued that “today’s liberation movements are caught between a rock and a hard place: one side wants to deliver us to religious/patriarchal domination, while the other would hand us over on a platter for direct predation by capital. Feminists for the 99% refuse to play.” [14] The game we claimed we should reject is the one that sees in progressive neoliberalism and sexual reaction the only two available options. Our worry was that emancipatory movements, facing the rise of an aggressive far right, may be tempted to embrace progressive neoliberalism as the shield that may protect us from reaction. I would like to add here another concern, namely the temptation to throw women’s and trans and queer people’s rights and freedoms under the bus, in an attempt to appeal to a phantasmatic idea of “normal people,” who may be attracted by programs of economic redistribution but may be put off by the so-called “excesses” of identity politics. In other words, the danger I would like to emphasize is that of trying to compete with the right by accepting some of its self-narrative. A similar worry applies, for example, to the growth, in Europe, of a sovereignist and even nationalist left supporting the cause of closed borders under the pretext of protecting national wages or even trying to steal away notions of fatherland and nation from the right. [15]

As argued earlier, the rise of the far right should not be read as the political representation of wide-spread feelings and opinions, that is, as giving voice to an existing social reaction and institutional expression to an existing social and cultural majority bloc. On the contrary, the constellation of forces I discussed earlier is actively trying to create a reactionary social bloc by parasitically exploiting existing feelings of insecurity and re-interpreting them as produced by a crisis of the family following the spread of “gender ideology.” Mimicking the right and appealing to phantasmatic “normal people” as the proper social base of the left, in this context, would be a political suicide with dear consequences for the oppressed social sectors in question.

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