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Gender and Authoritarianism • Canaries in the Classroom • From Courts to Clinics • Trad Values Meets Tech • Feminists Against Women • Sporting Authoritarianism • Calling In Q&A • Authoritarianism, Criminalization, and Reproductive Injustice • The Moral Conservatism Behind Global Resistance to LGBTI Rights

Upon Donald Trump's re-election to the U.S. presidency, the White nationalist far-right provocateur, Nick Fuentes, was among those who publicly rejoiced. The Groyper leader took to social media to proclaim "Your body, my choice"—an inversion of the popular abortion rights slogan, "My body, my choice"—in a tweet that went viral. Fuentes' words were characteristic of a cornerstone of the contemporary Far Right: how it mobilizes misogyny (as researcher Alex DiBranco put it in this magazine, in 2017) and anti-trans campaigns to consolidate its power.

The theme of this double issue—Gender & Authoritarianism—is a growing program area at PRA, and our first article introduces a critical framework for analyzing the centrality of gender to authoritarian politics. As senior research analyst Annie Wilkinson writes (p. 3), when "The idea that gender is not a fixed or natural order threatens to upend the logical underpinnings of authoritarian power," authoritarians deploy the normative family ideal and patriarchal discipline to assert and justify their rule.

In our first feature, Mary Reynolds and Carol Mason examine how the Heritage Foundation wields "parents' rights" and anti-gender campaigns to advance their decades-long project to dismantle public education. In Kentucky and West Virginia, the authors write (p. 6), "Assaults on state public education systems offer early warnings of what the Heritage-led coalition backing the second Trump administration has in store for the whole country." Elsewhere, PRA research analyst Chancie Calliham analyzes (p. 12) how a far-right strategy backed by dark money is reshaping Texas through court capture and the state attorney general's overreach in attacks on reproductive health and gender-affirming care.

Our next two features focus on reproductive politics. Journalist Gaby Del Valle investigates the growing movement of right-wing pronatalism. While divided into "trad" and "tech" wings, as Del Valle writes (p. 15), the movement is (for now) united by an ideological commitment to birthing more babies that reproduces hierarchy and inequality. The flipside of encouraging rich White people to have more children is reproductive injustice and the criminalization of people of color and the poor and working classes under increasingly authoritarian conditions, the subject of our roundtable (p. 28) with movement leaders and advocates.

As federal agencies carry out Trump's executive orders seeking to erase transgender and nonbinary people from public life, several of this issue's articles dissect the Right's anti-trans politics. Hannah Silver examines (p. 22) the Our Bodies, Our Sports coalition of right-wing women and anti-trans feminists mobilizing to exclude trans people from sports. Sophie Lewis, author of the new book *Enemy Feminisms*, makes the case for reckoning with the 200-year history of right-wing and fascist feminisms (p. 19)—from Western imperialism to today's White cis feminism—to organize against them. And scholars Phillip Ayoub and Kristina Stoeckl outline (p. 32) how transnational moral conservative networks have built opposition to LGBTQ rights as part of a broader counterrevolutionary agenda.

As the Right weaponizes notions of "wokeness" and "cancel culture" gone amok in its attacks on racial, gender, and reproductive justice, how can we build a broader human rights movement? In our Q&A, Chancie Calliham speaks (p. 25) with Loretta Ross about her new book, *Calling In*.

Our cover features a collage by genderqueer South African feminist artist Boniswa Khumalo, whose work is part of *Beyond Molotovs: A Visual Handbook of Anti-Authoritarian Strategies*. The Art of Activism (back cover) highlights the handbook's mix of thoughtful and creative strategies for defeating authoritarianism.

Between print issues of *The Public Eye*, visit us at politicalresearch.org and religiondispatches.org for more of PRA's research and reporting on the authoritarian Right.

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BY ANNIE WILKINSON

Gender & Authoritarianism

A Framework for Analysis and Action



Collage of protestors during an anti-Trump rally, and the Women's March in 2016 (Credit: PRA)

Two weeks before the 2024 election, Tucker Carlson, whose documentary, *The End of Men*,¹ laments the persecution of men, spoke at a Turning Point rally for Donald Trump. After describing a nation degraded and feminized by woke culture and Democratic leadership, Carlson cast Trump as a strongman who would restore law and order with a “vigorous spanking,”² personifying the U.S. as a teenage girl requiring her patriarch’s dutiful discipline. The audience enthusiastically chanted “Daddy Don!” in response to this promise of “patriarchal restoration.”³ Days later, Trump delivered on this portrayal, promising at a campaign rally⁴ to “protect” women “whether [they] like it or not.”

Trump’s and Carlson’s statements could be construed as a campaign tactic that uses the dysfunctional family trope as a dog whistle for the culturally and economically downtrodden male and appeals to patriarchal norms. But they also illustrate the importance of gender, cisheteropatriarchy,⁵ and misogyny to authoritarian politics.

Gendered power *inheres* in authoritarianism. Contemporary authoritarians everywhere—from Texas to Turkey to Tel Aviv—mobilize misogyny⁶ to consolidate their power by reinforcing gendered hierarchies led by cis men (and rewarded female loyalists⁷) while preserving racialized, economic, and geopolitical hierarchical orders. They also weaponize gender politics and the gendered domination that animates it as a “core mechanism of democratic erosion.”⁸ Countering authoritarianism in the U.S. and globally thus requires a framework for analyzing and understanding the centrality of gender—and the anti-gender campaigns that mobilize it—to authoritarian politics. This analysis also reveals the power of a robust gender justice front in pro-democracy efforts.

AUTHORITARIANISM’S GLOBAL ACCELERATION

The world is witnessing a wave of autocratization⁹ as established authoritarians consolidate power and antidemocratic movements challenge the liberal democ-

racies from which they have emerged.¹⁰ Anti-gender movements have played a pivotal role in this process. As a political system characterized by power concentrated in a single leader—or a few, most often men—authoritarianism is maintained through limited tolerance of contestations to that power, whether from political rivals, dissidents, democratic social movements, or liberatory ideas—like the assertion that gender inequality is not inevitable.

Many of the world’s recently emerged autocrats have captured and consolidated power from within liberal democracies by employing tactics that exploit these societies’ features. Like their global and historical counterparts,¹¹ authoritarian actors in the U.S. have bent the electoral system¹² to their favor, injected widespread mis- and disinformation¹³ into political discourse, captured and weakened judicial independence,¹⁴ and encouraged the gradual erosion of democratic institutions and will.¹⁵ Their formula also includes attacking the media;¹⁶ curtailing access to information via

attacks on public school curricula,¹⁷ higher education,¹⁸ books,¹⁹ and public libraries;²⁰ cracking down on civil society;²¹ and weakening the independence of civil institutions.²² At the same time, they aggrandize executive power²³—including at the state level, as Chancie Calliham examines²⁴ in this issue—and weaponize the state apparatus to punish or eliminate political rivals²⁵ and expand carceral systems.²⁶

Over the past few years, states under GOP control have acted as “laboratories of autocracy”²⁷ to test, modify, and replicate policies²⁸ that advance an anti-gender politics, seeking to match their counterparts’ successes in consolidating²⁹ enclaves of authoritarian control within the U.S. This uneven authoritarian capture has resulted in a well-entrenched system of subnational (or federated) authoritarianism in which “some states remain committed to inherited forms of democratic liberalism while others cling to (or develop, or resurrect) patterns of illiberal authoritarianism.”³⁰

After capturing the Republican party, the Supreme Court, and trifectas in nearly half of U.S. states, the MAGA-led authoritarian coalition has consolidated its control over the federal government with Project 2025 as the blueprint.³¹ As this process of autocratization accelerates, the dismantling of democracy will become difficult to hold back.³²

Contemporary authoritarians use demographic identity to sow division, en-

national glory and stability, including via an idealized gendered order.

ROOTED IN THE (CISHETERO) PATRIARCHAL FAMILY

Authoritarian regimes and movements often deploy gendered power in two key, interrelated ways: They mobilize misogyny³⁹ to capture power, and they consolidate and maintain it by exercising control over sex, gender, sexuality, and reproduction. One fundamental way that authoritarians mobilize gender stems from the challenge they face in justifying their exceptional power. When authoritarians subvert the consent of the governed, they must legitimate their authority by other means. This is done by activating another source of authority deeply ingrained in most societies: the cisheteropatriarchal family. In the U.S., this manifests in the implicit though elusive⁴⁰ ideal of the White Christian nuclear family.

In this normative unit, women are relegated to biological and social reproductive roles and men serve as provider and protector while regulating women’s sexuality and reproduction. A strict gender binary and hierarchy anchors men’s exercise of authority and dominion over women and children while providing a permission structure for exceptional male behavior, enabling authoritarians like Trump to be found liable for sexual abuse, roll back gender equality, and

Treated as essential and natural, religious traditionalists like the Holy See and the U.S. Christian Right also claim that this arrangement is divinely ordained and thus morally just. This model of naturalized cisheteropatriarchy, especially when framed as the “basic unit of society” and the nation, is used to justify the necessity of a strongman⁴² who, as its patriarch, is empowered to exercise dominion over the national family,⁴³ including through sanctioned violence—like a spanking.

But it is not only those who spank their daughters who find the justification of patriarchal discipline compelling. Research shows that support for group-based hierarchies and inequality as the natural order⁴⁴—a “social dominance orientation”—correlates with an endorsement of hegemonic traditional masculinity and right-wing authoritarian belief systems,⁴⁵ which in turn predicts misogyny⁴⁶ and attitudes toward transgender and non-binary people.⁴⁷ Authoritarians draw on these pervasive beliefs to justify their exercise of control over others, including those who don’t conform to this order, like queer and transgender people who are marked for marginalization or eradication from public life.⁴⁸

The idea that gender is not a fixed or natural order threatens to upend the logical underpinnings of authoritarian power. Denial that gender is multiple and distinct from sex is a universal feature of anti-gender campaigns and the impetus behind Trump’s campaign promise to “defeat the toxic poison of gender ideology and reaffirm that God created two genders”⁴⁹ that underwrote his Day 1 Executive Order declaring that the U.S. will only recognize two “sexes,” “male and female.”⁵⁰

WEAPONIZING GENDER EQUALITY TO CONSOLIDATE POWER

Authoritarian leaders may paradoxically draw on these same imaginaries to engage in the tactics of “autocratic genderwashing”⁵¹ or its counterpart of Israeli innovation, “pinkwashing,”⁵² by adopting limited LGBT rights or gender equality reforms to enhance their domestic and/or international legitimacy⁵³ and deflect criticism of their rights violations or autocratic behavior, forestalling democratization pressures and shoring

Authoritarian regimes and movements often deploy gendered power in two key, interrelated ways: They mobilize misogyny to capture power, and they consolidate and maintain it by exercising control over sex, gender, sexuality, and reproduction.

abling their takeover of state power.³³ Their base-building strategies often combine economic populist rhetoric³⁴ with racialized and gendered resentment politics³⁵ that tap into and exacerbate social and economic anxieties. This frequently involves ethnonationalist fearmongering³⁶ that mobilizes latent and blatant forms of racism to frame racialized “others” as outsider threats. Trump has done this, for instance, by labeling immigrants as invaders³⁷ and promising the sentimental³⁸ restoration of

spew misogynistic rhetoric without imperiling their legitimacy. Those who resist this arrangement are, like Tucker Carlson suggested, disciplined through punishment within the family and criminalization by the state. Such control over female bodies and persecution of LGBTQ individuals is, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat points⁴¹ out, a “throughline of authoritarianism,” and the core message of the all-male chorus of “your body, my choice” in the wake of Trump’s 2024 election.

If authoritarian leaders and their base frequently disparage and repress women, femme, and queer-led movements, it is because they too recognize the power of a pro-democracy feminist front in confronting and undermining their power.

up the stability of their regime. Gender quotas are a common tactic.⁵⁴ They may also endorse international gender equality initiatives—even while pulling out of international agreements⁵⁵ combating violence against women—or forge strategic alliances⁵⁶ with anti-trans feminists, as Hannah Silver analyzes⁵⁷ in this issue. Such tactics reinforce rather than challenge the gender essentialism that grounds cisheteropatriarchy and authoritarian power structures.

The authoritarian family script also orders people and power by race and nation as it intersects with gender. In the U.S. and much of Europe, this manifests as White and/or Christian ethnonationalist projects, for example in Trump's smearing of Mexican immigrants as "rapists"⁵⁸ who are "poisoning the blood of our country."⁵⁹ Similar dynamics manifest in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish ethnonationalist claims of India's⁶⁰ Narendra Modi, Myanmar's⁶¹ junta head Min Aung Hlaing, and Israel's⁶² Benjamin Netanyahu, respectively—leaders who have incited ethnic cleansing and/or genocide against populations by fueling moral panics that portray the women of the dominant group as sexually threatened.

ANTI-GENDER POLITICS DEFINE CONTEMPORARY AUTHORITARIANISM

Authoritarians have learned from each other⁶³ that, whatever their personal ideological commitments, they can strategically instrumentalize others' fidelity to a traditionalist politics of gender and sexuality. These transactional authoritarians⁶⁴ stoke and ride the wave of moral panic to greater power. Vladimir Putin, for example, initially relied on gender equality rhetoric in the early stages of his authoritarian power grab before finding greater traction as a global innovator of anti-gender campaigns. In 2013, he banned so-called LGBT "propaganda"⁶⁵—a tactic adapted by Ron DeSantis

in Florida a decade later—before more recently criminalizing LGBT activists⁶⁶ as "terrorists" and banning "child-free propaganda,"⁶⁷ a policy intended to compel Russian women to have more children. Advised by those like American Principles Project's Terry Schilling who found in 2020 that anti-trans messaging promised significant potential to mobilize Republican voters,⁶⁸ Trump pivoted from his 2012 position supporting transgender women in his pageants and promising LGBT Americans that he "will fight for"⁶⁹ them in 2016 to centering anti-trans politics⁷⁰ in his 2024 campaign, which he opened by promising to end "transgender insanity"⁷¹ and closed with a blitz of attack ads scapegoating transgender people⁷² as enemies within.⁷³

Authoritarian populist leaders and movements have adapted anti-gender campaigns as a modular tool⁷⁴ in diverse contexts around the world. What anti-gender politics offers them is a unifying framework or "symbolic glue"⁷⁵ that coheres political coalitions⁷⁶ across issues, sectors, and geopolitical blocs, re-directing status anxieties conditioned by neoliberal globalization onto scapegoats crafted as existential threats.⁷⁷ Most anti-gender movement actors have cast so-called "gender ideology"⁷⁸ as their primary villain, while some deploy variations like "wokeism" in DeSantis' Florida—a term Argentina's authoritarian president Javier Milei recently resurrected at the 2025 World Economic Forum.⁷⁹

DEMOCRATIC RESISTANCE AND GENDER JUSTICE

As authoritarian leaders turn to gendered hierarchies to justify and consolidate their power at the expense of women, queer and trans people, and other marginalized social groups, diverse feminist movements have fought back. These movements have played key roles in resisting⁸⁰ autocratization globally,

insisting upon respect for the democratic norms and institutions that undergird their demands for gender justice. Recent examples include: Myanmar's women-led front, which mobilized against the 2021 coup; Argentina's Green Wave mobilizations, which helped secure the decriminalization of abortion in 2020; Mexico's women's strike to protest the epidemic of femicides pervading Mexico with impunity; and the U.S. Women's March of 2017, the largest single-day protest in U.S. history, which brought millions to the streets to register dissent against MAGA's antidemocratic threat. This pattern repeats⁸¹ from Poland to Tunisia and beyond.

If authoritarian leaders and their base frequently disparage and repress women, femme, and queer-led movements, it is because they too recognize the power of a pro-democracy feminist front in confronting and undermining their power. Authoritarians have a "strategic reason to be sexist," as researchers Zoe Marks and Erica Chenoweth put it, because they know that "when women participate in mass movements, those movements are both more likely to succeed and more likely to lead to more egalitarian democracy."⁸²

To effectively resist authoritarianism, we must understand its gendered roots and cultivate a robust and intersectional front for gender justice. Only then can we achieve a more just and equitable future for all.

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BY MARY REYNOLDS AND CAROL MASON

Canaries in the Classroom

Public Education and Authoritarian Politics in West Virginia and Kentucky



Collage #RedforEd rallies in Arizona and California and a Chicago Teachers Union Strike (Credit: PRA)

In October 2024, a flyer appeared in the mailboxes of Kentucky residents, promoting an amendment to the state's constitution. "WE NEED TO UPDATE KENTUCKY'S CONSTITUTION: Because Moms Deserve a **Choice** in Education," declared the mailer's text, above a sepia-toned image of six early-twentieth-century White suffragists holding "VOTE" placards. To hammer the point home, it added: "When Kentucky's constitution was ratified in 1891...WOMEN WEREN'T ALLOWED TO VOTE." Now, the flyer implied, they should exercise that right—for school "choice."¹

For more than 130 years, the Bluegrass State's constitution has prohibited public spending on nonpublic instruction. With Amendment 2, a legislative referendum on the 2024 state ballot, right-wing lawmakers aimed to nullify this protection and allow the diversion of public funds into private schooling.²

Kentucky women were unpersuaded, it seems, despite the pro-amendment flyer's sly "pro-choice" appeal to those who had, in 2022, voted down an anti-abortion

amendment.³ Even as President Trump won the state's majority-female electorate by a 30-point margin, 65 percent of Kentucky voters rejected the attempt to eliminate constitutional protections for public education⁴—just as their West Virginia neighbors had. The Mountain State went for Trump by 70 percent, but only two years earlier, voters had rejected an amendment to their state's Reconstruction-era constitution that would have subordinated the Board of Education's decisions to the state legislature's authority.⁵

These results reflect an increasingly common occurrence: voters rejecting attacks on public education by opposing ballot measures couched in the language of school choice and parents' rights. Voters in Arizona, Nebraska, and Colorado have also defeated voucher programs that would undermine public education.⁶

State legislators, however, continue grinding away at popular constitutional protections. In 2023, seven states passed legislation for new voucher programs

and ten have expanded their existing systems.⁷ Recent battles over public educational resources outside Appalachia—North Carolina's segregated academies, Oklahoma's publicly funded religious school, or Texas's school board takeovers, for instance—have attracted more attention.⁸ But West Virginia and Kentucky are key battlegrounds in a state-by-state campaign, led by the Heritage Foundation and its billionaire supporters, to defund public education and secure their ultimate ambition: a Supreme Court decision that removes constitutional obstacles to a nationwide mandate for school vouchers.

Putting public education and democratic decision-making at risk, these efforts are part of broader authoritarian trends. Across the globe, a new coalition of right-wing populists, White evangelicals, Christian nationalists, and oligarchs has been mobilizing anti-gender movements to roll back decades of civil rights and feminist policy gains.⁹ In the U.S., an increase of one-party supermajorities in state legislatures, including West Virgin-

ia and Kentucky, is re-establishing White male minority rule against the backdrop of demands for gender, racial, and labor justice.¹⁰ An acceleration of anti-democratic policymaking has ensued, much of it targeting public schools and their disproportionately feminized and unionized workforces.

A renewed focus on Appalachia allows for a historical perspective on how global and national trends play out in local struggles over state spending and democratic processes. Since its inception in 1973, the Heritage Foundation has been trying to dismantle public education. Where did the organization's work begin? In West Virginia.¹¹ Now Heritage has new tools and allies—anti-gender campaigns, MAGA Republicans, and Christian nationalists—but its underlying goals of upward wealth distribution, privatized public goods, and an end to the separation of church and state remain the same.

Assaults on state public education systems offer early warnings of what the

children,” exhorts the Heritage Foundation's president, Kevin Roberts, in the introduction to *Project 2025: A Mandate for Leadership*, the Right's policy roadmap for dismantling democratic processes and progressive policies in the U.S.¹²

Roberts has a very specific type of family in mind: one based on a male-female binary and a husband-wife-children (in that order) hierarchy. Authoritarians see this structure not only as determined by God's law and biological sex, but also as the ideal political form in miniature. The protective (White) male authority figure has the divine and natural right to make decisions for the family. Patriarchal rule and its centralization of power should naturally extend to, and orient, authorities beyond the family. The church, the military, the Supreme Court, the federal government's Executive Branch, and even the “free market” should have dominion over a subordinate civil society and public sphere, just as husbands and fathers have dominion over women and children.¹³

of online right-wing communities and spilling over into mainstream liberal discourse, reinforcing beliefs that “men and women are natural categories” whose disruption by “gender ideology” is destabilizing society.¹⁵ They have transformed “gender” into an international bogeyman and shapeshifting phantasm that threatens children, family, nation, and economic prosperity.¹⁶ Gender has become the symbolic glue binding two groups with opposing approaches to state power: wealthy, profit-minded libertarians who call for limited government with Christian nationalists who demand the injection of their values into the public sphere through government.¹⁷

Authoritarians across this ideological spectrum share a conviction that schools should be places for training a pliant citizenry, not for teaching critical thinking.¹⁸ They are sites to be ruled over, not democratically governed, and if the people who work in them fall out of line, they should be punished. “The noxious tenets of ‘critical race theory’ and ‘gender ideology’ should be excised from curricula in every public school in the country,” Roberts insists in *Project 2025*. “States, cities and counties, school boards, union bosses, principals, and teachers who disagree should be immediately cut off from federal funds.”¹⁹

Weaponizing state power and undermining local authority by deploying anti-gender and parents' rights campaigns have also become central tactics for authoritarians in mobilizing anti-democracy campaigns abroad. Over the past decade, for example, Viktor Orbán has reshaped Hungary's education system in service of creating a pro-authoritarian populace, banning gender studies, punishing teachers for demanding better pay, and giving law enforcement control over schools and universities—all under the guise of protecting the nation's children from “gender ideology.”²⁰ Such concepts are not foreign per se. They have traveled in and between countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America via transnational communication networks that receive millions of dollars from wealthy, U.S.-based groups.²¹ One such group, the Heritage Foundation, has played an instrumental role for decades.

Assaults on state public education systems offer early warnings of what the Heritage-led coalition backing the second Trump administration has in store for the whole country.

Heritage-led coalition backing the second Trump administration has in store for the whole country. Battles over the future of public education—and democracy—are playing out not only at the ballot box, but in courtrooms, legislative chambers, and school libraries. In West Virginia and Kentucky, parents, teachers, elected officials and wealthy donors are squaring off at the classroom door.

THE FAMILY, GENDER IDEOLOGY, AND PUBLIC EDUCATION IN AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS

Several key beliefs about gender and family underpin the authoritarian coalition's anti-democratic vision. Faith in a family structure operating on a gender-based hierarchy as the appropriate foundation for society is primary. What conservatives call “gender ideology” threatens this family structure, and hence the nation. “Restore the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect our

“Parents' rights” has become the public rallying cry for such beliefs, a deceptively anodyne slogan uniting conservative religious supporters, militant nationalists, and libertarian free-marketeers. Working in tandem with so-called “anti-gender” activists, parents' rights movements leverage the popular affective desire to protect children to mobilize voters behind anti-democratic measures and insulate minority rule. Their campaigns typically induce moral panics by conjuring horror-house dangers to children in schools under public authority, then assert parents' rights as the solution: a natural prerogative and political duty of parents seeking to protect their families. Control over all education in this view should rest with the patriarchal family and its political extensions: the church and the state, as directed by oligarchs, Christian nationalists, and right-wing politicians.¹⁴

Such campaigns have sent emotions surging through the digital pathways

PARENTS' RIGHTS, THEN: THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION IN KANAWHA COUNTY

The Heritage Foundation's experiment in using parents' rights to seize control over education from the state—to unmake public schools and, by extension, undermine the growth of multiracial democracy—began in West Virginia in the 1970s. The recently formed foundation learned to interweave libertarian demands for privatization and profit-making with religious and White supremacist calls to prevent children's exposure to secular, integrated schools.²²

West Virginia had established the right to free, publicly funded schools in its founding constitution in 1863. During the Reconstruction period following the Civil War—an unprecedented moment of multiracial democratic politics—former Confederate states under federal mandate approved new constitutions that included public education as a protected right. Despite the damage to this right during Jim Crow, widespread

public-school guarantees remain a legacy of the first moment in U.S. history that Black legislators wielded real power in significant numbers.²³

In the early-1970s, during another moment of expanded access to the ballot and public education that followed the Voting Rights Act's passage and the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, West Virginia issued new public-school standards that incorporated a wide spectrum of American experiences and voices. These included a multiethnic language arts curriculum, an achievement of the twentieth-century civil rights movement.²⁴

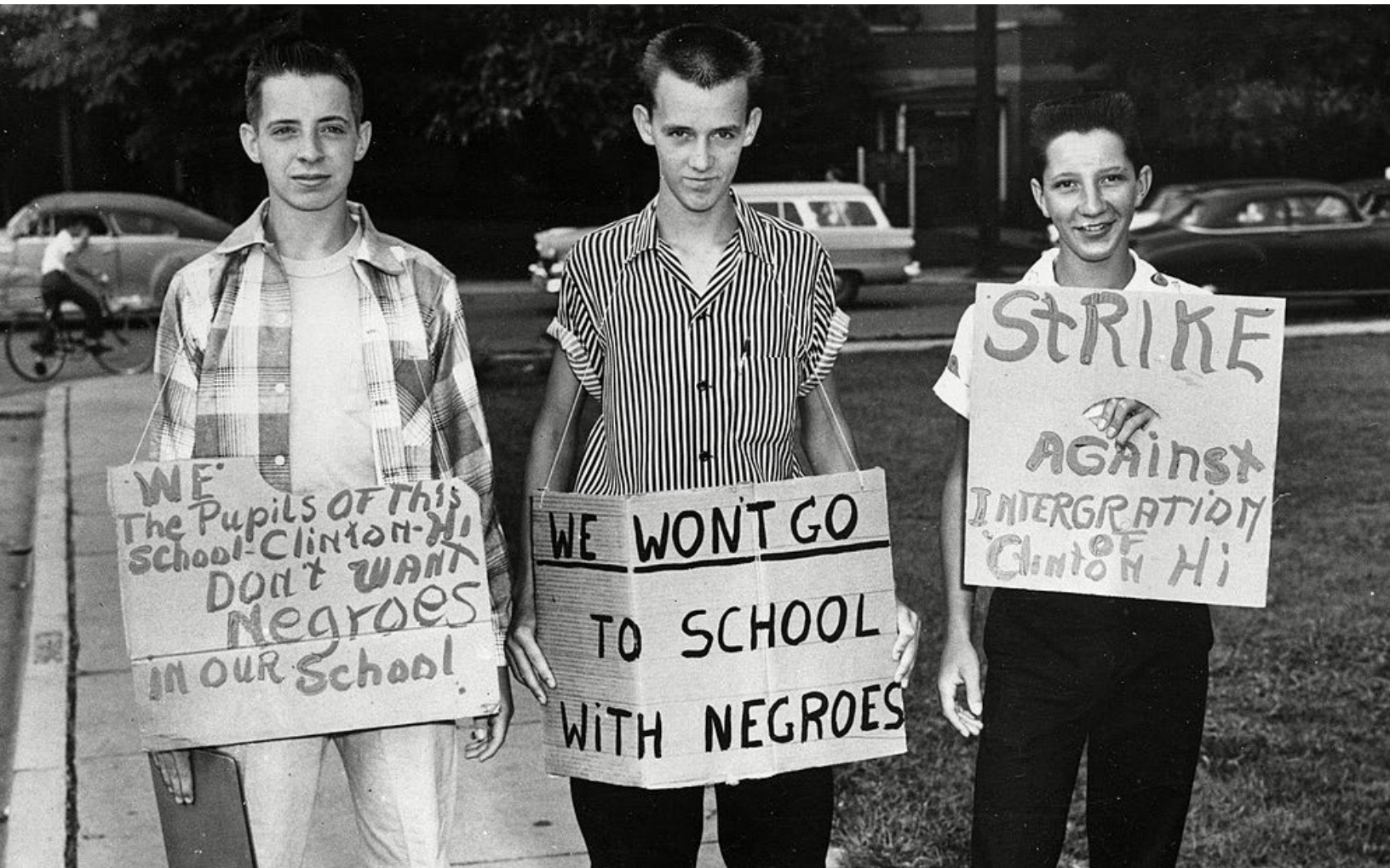
The standards elicited a backlash. When the Kanawha County school board voted to adopt new textbooks, the only woman board member rejected the curriculum with race-based objections and John Birch Society rhetoric. The dispute attracted a variety of conservative groups and made national headlines. Heritage staff recast the dissent as a mother's objection to the government's imposition of

“secular humanism” on children.²⁵ The Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups leveraged the controversy to spread their own more explicitly racist agendas, and the dispute erupted into violence, with dynamite exploding in one classroom and unknown attackers shooting at school buses.

What appeared to the press as a “hill-billy feud” was an early instance of deep-pocketed conservative groups commingling with racist provocateurs and far-right factions and developing new strategies in the process. Although the K.K.K. occasionally made headlines, more influential neo-Nazis quietly recruited new members in the county, while local businessmen spread the “free market” word as part of the opposition to the textbooks. With the media spotlight on the concerned White mother on the school board, these other elements of the protest coalition—more radical and more mainstream—escaped serious scrutiny.

Witnessing how a mother making public demands could capture political attention, Heritage staffers drew important

Three students at Clinton High School picket their school in Tennessee on August 27, 1956 (Credit: The African American Policy Forum/Wikimedia Commons)



Heritage staffers...learned that explicit anti-communism and racism had become less effective than appeals to protect children from elitist bureaucrats and indoctrinating teachers.

lessons from the conflict. They learned that explicit anti-communism and racism had become less effective than appeals to protect children from elitist bureaucrats and indoctrinating teachers. A new strategy emerged: playing the mommy card. In *Blackboard Tyranny*, her 1978 book geared to fomenting a parents' rights movement nationwide, Heritage campaigner Connie Marshner identified the Kanawha textbook fight as the movement's "first inkling," and advised protesters to avoid open talk of race.²⁶

Therefore, in the Post-Jim Crow atmosphere of the 1970s, Heritage found that a populist message about corrupt and meddling government officials could succeed where overt racism and sexism were losing traction. This strategy dovetailed with the conservative movement's post-Vietnam shift from a blue-blood image (personified by William F. Buckley Jr.) to a more blue-collar appeal.²⁷ Appalachia's tradition of left-leaning protest featuring militant unionism and legendary labor battles in the coal and chemical industries had long made it hostile territory for blue-blood conservatives.²⁸ Yet as federal and state austerity eroded investment in their communities, working people's ire turned away from the region's exploitative employers and onto the government.

In the decades since, Heritage's key role in anti-government populism has fed the dramatic rise of religious affiliated and parent-led schools designed to avoid federal and state authority, desegregation, and mandated rights. Now, alongside parents' rights advocates like Moms for Liberty and bearing universal voucher programs, Heritage is coming for public school funding and state constitutional protections.²⁹

PARENTS' RIGHTS, NOW: THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION IN 2025

The Heritage Foundation's parents' rights strategy may be old, but the coalitions behind it are gathering new strength fueled by vast private resources. Billions of dollars are pouring in from the DeVos family, the Kochs, Jeff Yass, Leon-

ard Leo, and numerous others whose aim is to end state constitutional rights to public education.³⁰

In 2023, the American Legislative Exchange Council, along with coalition partners like the Heritage Foundation and Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), launched a state-by-state initiative to introduce copycat legislation for publicly funded school vouchers. They aim to bring vouchers to 25 states by the end of 2025, with the ostensible goal of a Supreme Court decision that would nullify any state constitution's language preventing public spending on non-public schools.³¹ As ADF's General Counsel asserted in a June 2021 conference call to Ziklag, a network of millionaire Christian nationalists: "I think that we can establish [vouchers] as a constitutional right."³² Their efforts are aided by growing state political power in one-party supermajority legislatures and evolving gender-focused political vocabularies.

The discursive weapon of "gender ideology" has been especially useful. Anti-gender discourse first emerged in the 1990s, but it received a major boost after 2010, when resentment among religious conservatives over the expansion of civil rights to LGBTQ+ communities dovetailed with populist anger at government mismanagement of the global economic crisis.³³

In this context, Heritage's plan to re-center the authoritarian family structure and its symbolic head (i.e., father, along with the church, nation, and market) has had widespread affective and electoral appeal, resulting in significant legislative action in state houses around the U.S.³⁴ Although most media coverage of Heritage's *Project 2025* treated it as a plan for the future, the fights over public education in West Virginia and Kentucky have illustrated its salience in real time, long before the second Trump administration took office.³⁵ A tidal wave of *Project 2025*-style legislation—backed by private funding, parents' rights discourse, and other anti-gender

campaigns—has inundated these states, creating profound changes in public education.

These changes create battlelines at the intersections of gender and race, with White male-dominated supermajorities in the state legislature attacking public education's feminized workplaces—more than 75 percent of public-school teachers are women—and teachers' unions, which have among the largest memberships in the U.S. In West Virginia's 134-seat state legislature, Republicans secured a one-party majority in 2014 and a supermajority in 2020. Over the past decade, as the GOP solidified its political control, the percentage of state legislators who are White men increased from 79 percent to 83 percent, while the percentage of legislators who are women—White or of color—fell to under 12 percent, the lowest percentage since 1980.³⁶ In a state where people of color make up 7 percent of the population, only three Black West Virginians—all Democrats—are serving in the 2025 state legislature.

With its growing political power, the state legislature grabbed opportunities to pass unpopular policies that eliminated workers' rights, undermined public education funding, and criminalized the teaching of materials it deemed dangerous to children: actions straight out of an authoritarian playbook. In 2016, the Republican supermajority overrode the Democratic governor's veto to pass the so-called "Workplace Freedom Act," a law that ended the mandate for West Virginian teachers to pay union membership dues. Following this, legislators enacted laws that created the state's first charter schools, first private school vouchers, and first Education Savings Accounts (ESAs).³⁷ In 2021, Republican lawmakers also approved HB 2013, creating one of the nation's most comprehensive ESA programs, while the governor appointed Adam Kissel, a Koch and Heritage-affiliated official in the first Trump administration's Department of Education, to the state's newly formed Professional Charter

School Board (PCSB).³⁸ Legislators also approved a bill that removed exemptions for school, museum, and library employees under existing laws that criminalize the distribution of materials deemed “obscene.” As a result, teachers face up to five years in prison and/or a \$25,000 fine for the “crime” of providing sex education instruction in a state with an abortion ban.³⁹

Despite West Virginia voters’ rejection of the legislature’s 2022 ballot measure and its attempt to usurp the Board of Education’s authority, Republicans contin-

ommendations, from state oversight of sex education curriculum to policing teachers’ use of students’ pronouns and “harmful to minors” materials.⁴³

Yet, even in a state government where one party holds a supermajority, it took two attempts for Kentucky legislators to pass the Education Opportunity Account Act, the state’s voucher program. Some rural Republican lawmakers first voted against it because the total absence of private schools in their districts made the diversion of funds from public

As the rejection of Amendment 2 proves, Kentucky voters overwhelmingly support maintaining constitutional protections for public education.

ue to consolidate their power in the state house. In November 2024, the one-party supermajority expanded to 92 percent—with White men holding at least 89 percent of GOP seats—further solidifying the state’s White male minority rule.⁴⁰ With veto-proof power, the legislature can afford to ignore voters’ democratic will as expressed in ballot measure verdicts. A case in point: During the spring 2024 legislative session, the House of Delegates introduced HB 4313, a “Parents Bill of Rights” that would allow parents to sue schools and local governments for violating their right to ‘school choice.’ The bill passed the House but failed to make it out of committee in the State Senate. It will likely be introduced again in 2025.⁴¹ Meanwhile, by 2026, the ESA legislation will extend universal access to education accounts for all school-age children in West Virginia, siphoning taxpayer money from public school budgets to fund private and religious schools, including out-of-state online academies.⁴²

In Kentucky, where legislators have been trying to run the same authoritarian and anti-gender parents’ rights playbook, the Right’s push to control education has also accelerated.

By the 2024 election, Republicans in the General Assembly—three-fourths of whom are White men—had secured an 80 percent majority. Under the guise of protecting parents’ rights, the state legislature has passed a slew of laws that foreshadow Heritage’s *Project 2025* rec-

schools harder to justify to their constituents who would be disproportionately harmed by the shift.⁴⁴ The Kentucky Center for Economic Policy’s July 2024 report shows that subsidizing non-public schooling with public funds could cost the state over a billion dollars annually.⁴⁵ Kentucky is not alone: Nationwide, state spending on tax breaks and subsidies for private education expenses has increased by over 400 percent in the last ten years.⁴⁶

The legislation would also violate the popular will. As the rejection of Amendment 2 proves, Kentucky voters overwhelmingly support maintaining constitutional protections for public education. In contrast, right-wing lawmakers’ anti-democratic policies promise to be a huge gift to for-profit charters, unaccredited non-union private schools, and religious publishers that distribute “independent” Christian nationalist educational materials that valorize authoritarian family structures.⁴⁷ Trampling actual voters’ rights, officials promise to protect symbolic “parents’ rights.”

BEYOND PARENTS’ RIGHTS: HERITAGE COMES FOR PUBLIC HIGHER ED

With the help of its statehouse allies, the Heritage Foundation has deepened its top-down influence on public education in Kentucky while expanding its purview to the state’s colleges and universities. For example, the legislature’s serial budget cuts and reorganizations have reduced funding to Kentucky’s pub-

lic postsecondary institutions by a third between 2008 and 2019.⁴⁸ In these straitened circumstances, right-wing funders have pounced, pouring fortunes into the University of Kentucky (UK)—with many strings attached that undermine the research university’s public character.

Construction magnate Tom Lewis donated \$23 million to establish the Lewis Honors College at UK, his alma mater. A generous contributor to Heritage—including funding *Project 2025* co-author Lindsey Burke’s video on education policy—Lewis’s eponymous foundation has also supported UK’s on-campus anti-gender programming by right-wing groups Turning Point, USA, and Young America’s Foundation.⁴⁹ Other major right-wing donors followed Lewis: In 2016, the Charles Koch Foundation supplied a four-million-dollar gift for the newly created John H. Schnatter Institute for the Study of Free Enterprise, named for the billionaire founder of Papa John’s Pizza. This donation came with stipulations granting the foundation the right to revoke its commitment if the university deviated from the donor’s intended purposes, which included an academic requirement to “discover and understand aspects of free enterprise that promote the well-being of society” and notification of directorial changes.⁵⁰ As public money dries up, university leaders are tapping private wells, even if the price is academic integrity.⁵¹

In 2024, the UK Board of Trustees went further and abolished the University Senate (which had existed since 1917), a decision that eliminated even the veneer of democratic university governance, leaving faculty with a toothless advisory role. The UK University Senate passed a vote of no-confidence in the university’s president but failed to prevent its own demise.⁵² The following year, far-right provocateur and former Heritage Visiting Fellow Christopher Rufo publicly targeted UK, urging the state legislature to “figure out how to abolish DEI” at UK and “tame” the university’s “racialist ideology.”⁵³ A few months later, seemingly in anticipation of such anti-DEI legislation, the UK president dismantled the Office for Institutional Diversity.⁵⁴ The closure of the of-

office, which had evolved from the university's Office of Minority Affairs launched in 1971, ended more than half a century of overt, centralized institutional support specifically for racial minorities and other underrepresented students. Instead, that support work will be decentralized and transferred to different offices, such as the Office of Student Success and the Office for Community Relations.⁵⁵

These are only first steps toward a new political order based on a vision of the authoritarian family and the dominance of the public sphere. The authoritarian coalition's plan for education, as spelled out in Project 2025's *Mandate for Leadership*, aims to eliminate the separation of church and state in education altogether, allowing taxpayer funds to support church and faith-based nonprofit-run schools with no oversight over spending, curriculum, or admissions. It also recommends cutting federal funding for public and private schools and universities unless they adhere to proposed regulations on curriculum and policy. As outlined, it would eliminate DEI programming, fully privatize student loans and eliminate loan forgiveness programs, abolish tenure and other workplace protections, and adhere to new definitions of sex and race discrimination under Title IX and Title VI, among other proposals.⁵⁶ Project 2025's plan would also direct the White House to allocate federal funding to "international business programs that teach about free markets and economics" and require "institutions, faculty, and fellowship recipients to certify that they intend to further the stated statutory goals of serving American interests."⁵⁷

This is not a vision for education. It is a vision for re-education.

LESSONS FOR DEMOCRACY

With its democratic decision-making and egalitarian purpose, U.S. public education represents a major impediment to authoritarian forces. Ideally, this publicly-funded good promises race and gender equity, local governance, and what philosopher Jason Stanley calls "civic compassion" among students sharing public space.⁵⁸ Generations of civil rights activists from Reconstruction to the present have fought to hold it to these ideals

amid continuing anti-democratic hostility. Thanks to their efforts, public schools remain, in the words of education advocates Jennifer Berkshire and Jack Schneider, "an ongoing experiment in democracy and self-rule."⁵⁹

As such, public education offers lessons for resistance to authoritarianism. In recent years, teachers, students, and community activists have mobilized in democratic coalitions to oppose the designs of billionaires, religious fundamentalists, and right-wing ideologues.

In 2018, two years after the West Virginia legislature passed its anti-union "Workplace Freedom Act," twenty-thousand K-12 teachers, bus drivers, and staff—mostly women—walked off their jobs, demanding better pay and investments in public schools. Their strike inspired school workers in Kentucky and other states, launching the #RedForEd movement. As historian Jessica Wilkerson writes, this "face of the new labor movement" was in "a fight for the common good."⁶⁰ By organizing, they won significant wage increases and were introduced to new political possibilities.⁶¹

University and college teachers are also on the front lines of democratic resistance. In 2023, when a new state funding formula undermined faculty decision-making on budget allocation at WVU campuses, threatening jobs and departments, faculty passed a resolution of no-confidence in WVU's leadership.⁶² They recognized the gravity of the legislature's power grab. As Wilkerson, a WVU professor, and two of her colleagues said in an Open Letter, "We also write out of concern that what happens at WVU this fall—whether these catastrophic cuts are frozen or forced through—will serve as a canary in the coal mine for the integrity and future of public education throughout the United States."⁶³

Resistance is emerging in Kentucky, too. When a coalition of students, parents, and teachers sued to block the General Assembly's school voucher legislation, the State Supreme Court upheld their contention that the program violated the state constitution's language that prevented public dollars from being spent on nonpublic education.⁶⁴ After that, elected officials and their billion-

aire backers mobilized behind a parents' rights campaign around Amendment 2—and failed, despite attempting to appeal to moms as modern-day suffragists. As it turns out, playing the mommy card isn't always a winning hand.

The canary in the classroom serves as a warning and a call to embrace Appalachia's legacies of resistance to reverse the shift from a left-leaning to a right-leaning protest culture that Heritage steered in the 1970s, and that today's anti-gender movements aim to complete. Those opposed to democracy and the very notion of a public sector will not stop demonizing and scapegoating people who refuse to conform to the authoritarian vision of the family and its gender norms.

At the same time, from teachers on picket lines demanding state investment in kids' education to parents challenging attacks on constitutional rights in circuit courts, Mountain and Bluegrass state residents provide a model for action in defending and building on public education's promise. "There's a tremendous opportunity," claims Jennifer Berkshire, "not just to organize people around public schools, but as part of a broader anti-authoritarian project."⁶⁵

After all, this battle over education is also a battle for democracy itself.

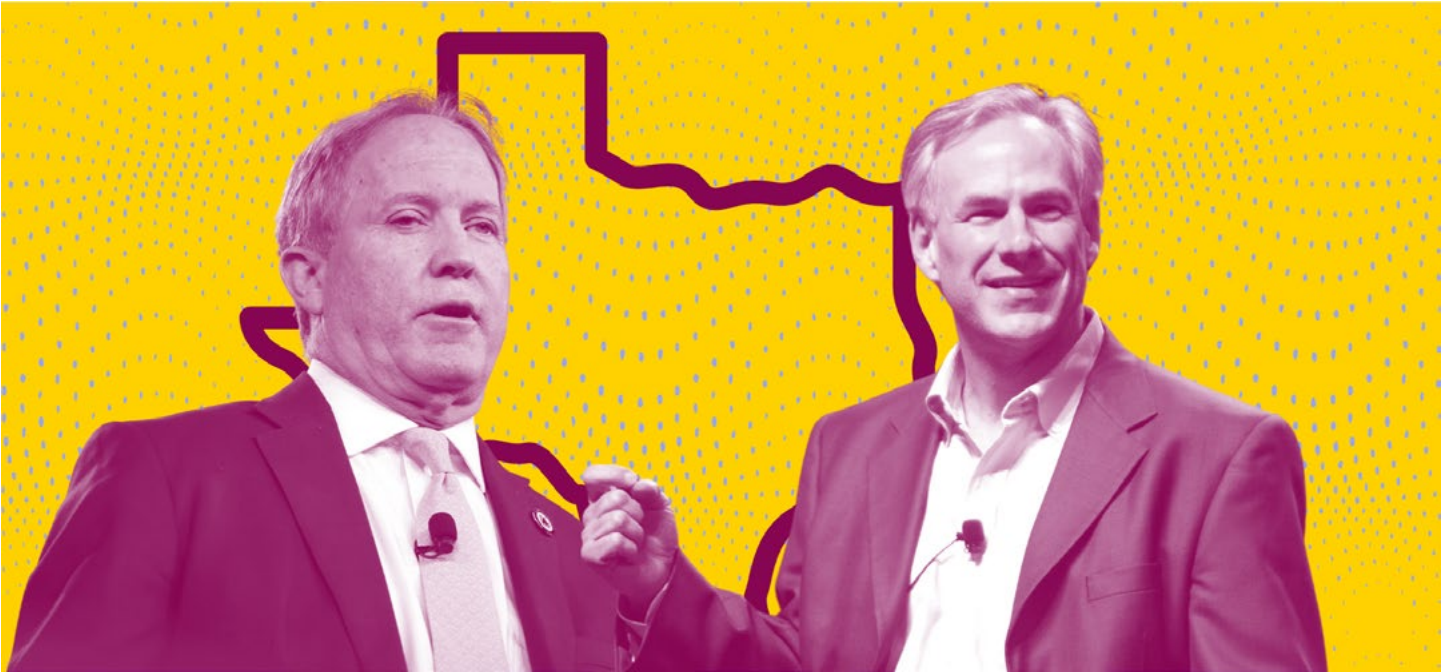
Mary Reynolds, co-founder of the Gender & Authoritarianism Research Collective, has a Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale. A labor organizer in higher education and hospitality for more than fifteen years, she currently consults for the Reflective Democracy Campaign.

Carol Mason, Ph.D., is the author of several books that research different aspects of the Right, including Reading Appalachia from Left to Right: Conservatives and the 1974 Kanawha County Textbook Controversy, and a forthcoming book, From the Clinics to the Capitol: How Opposing Abortion Became Insurrectionary. She lives and teaches in Kentucky.

BY CHANCIE CALLIHAM

From Courts to Clinics

How the Anti-Gender Far Right Is Reshaping Texas



Collage of Ken Paxton and Governor Greg Abbott with an outline of Texas in the background (Credit: PRA)

It seems like the plot of a dystopian novel: A world in which doctors hesitate to save a dying woman because doing so might land them in prison, and parents fear that seeking essential care for their child could mean losing them forever.¹ But in Texas, for a woman needing an abortion or a parent seeking gender-affirming care for their child, this dystopian nightmare has become a grim reality.

These are not isolated circumstances—they are the deliberate outcomes of a far-right strategy that begins with enforcing a rigid gender binary to undermine reproductive and LGBTQ rights. Dark money networks are facilitating this strategy by funneling millions into state races, particularly attorneys general races, to capture legislative control and advance anti-gender policies throughout the U.S., starting with Republican-led states. These anti-gender campaigns are not only about reproductive and transgender rights—they are a calling card of authoritarian regimes. These campaigns stoke a moral panic around gendered expectations as a

tool to centralize power, erode democratic freedoms, and control narratives about family, autonomy, and identity. The state of Texas exemplifies this strategy and serves as a warning, as it provides far-right policymakers with a blueprint for consolidating power under the guise of protecting women and children.

GENDER PANIC AS A TOOL OF AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL

As Annie Wilkinson outlines in this issue, gender hierarchy is central to authoritarianism, which reinforces a cisheteropatriarchal structure that positions cisgender, heterosexual men as guardians of a naturalized social order—beginning, in the U.S., with the White Christian nuclear family.² This worldview relies on bioessentialist notions that justify the subjugation of women to men, queer people to straight people, and transgender people to cisgender people.

The term “gender ideology,” popularized by the Vatican and adopted by the U.S. Right, exemplifies how the anti-gen-

der movement’s strategy has evolved.³ Initially developed in the 1990s to attack feminist and LGBTQ movements’ gains, “gender ideology” is now weaponized against a range of progressive movements that promote secularism, bodily autonomy, and self-determination. Abortion access and transgender rights are cast as existential dangers, making them prime targets for a far-right agenda that consolidates authoritarian control by undermining individual freedoms. Abortion is characterized by the Christian Right as murder and morally wrong, rooted in the belief that life begins at conception, while transgender rights are portrayed as a threat to women and children, with the recognition of gender identities beyond biological sex framed as invalidating the category of “woman” and undermining women’s rights and safety—a narrative reinforced by President Donald Trump’s recent executive order mandating the recognition of women as “biologically female” and men as “biologically male.”⁴ This ideology fosters a

climate of moral panic and justifies policies that suppress bodily autonomy and reinforce male dominance, portraying such measures as necessary to protect families, women, and children from perceived cultural decline.

COURT CAPTURE AND THE RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

This moral panic about gender has laid the groundwork for laws and policies targeting reproductive and transgender rights, with Leonard Leo, a key figure in reshaping the judiciary, playing a pivotal role. Through his network, which raised at least \$460 million between 2005 and 2021, Leo has funded ad campaigns, judicial advocacy, and conservative scholarship to shape public opinion and bolster Republican candidates.⁵ He helped establish the Judicial Crisis Network (now The Concord Fund) to leverage dark money and advance conservative judicial ap-

advance Christian nationalist ideology.⁸ RAGA, funded by tens of millions in dark-money donations per year, plays a pivotal role in ensuring Republican attorneys general are elected.⁹ Attorneys general hold strategic importance as they can drive litigation and shape state-level legislation. One RAGA member has taken to the strategy employed by Leo, pushing anti-abortion and anti-trans legislation in service to his party's decidedly far-right agenda: Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton.

PAXTON'S TEXAS: A LABORATORY OF AUTOCRACY

Despite being impeached by the Texas House in 2023 for securities fraud, Paxton was acquitted by the Senate and shielded by the Texas Supreme Court from testifying in the lawsuit. Since then, he has consolidated his power by endorsing primary challengers against Republican lawmak-

2021, bans nearly all abortions post-*Dobbs*, with exceptions only to save the pregnant person's life, imposing penalties ranging from significant fines to life imprisonment. SB 8, passed in 2021, allows private citizens to sue anyone, including physicians, who "aids or abets" an abortion after six weeks. Procedures like dilation and curettage (D&C), essential for treating miscarriages, are now fraught with legal risks under Texas law, where performing a D&C can carry up to 99 years in prison.¹² The vague language surrounding what circumstances would justify abortion procedures has left physicians hesitant to act, leading to delayed or denied care, reduced medical standards, and the deaths of at least three Texas women.¹³

Under SB 14, some families have been forced to leave the state to access necessary care because of Paxton's mobilization of anti-gender rhetoric claiming that gender-affirming care is "child abuse."¹⁴ In 2022, Texas Governor Greg Abbott ordered the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to investigate the parents of trans kids, stating that "sex change procedures" for trans kids constitutes "child abuse" under state law.¹⁵ Paxton made his support of these investigations clear, framing gender-affirming care for minors as a dangerous adherence to "gender ideology" propagated by doctors and pharmaceutical companies responsible for "transing" kids, vowing to protect Texas children from such "abuse."¹⁶ After the ACLU and Lambda Legal successfully sued the state to halt these investigations, Paxton appealed the decision and, though the Texas Supreme Court later ruled that neither Abbott nor Paxton had the authority to order these investigations, the decision only protected the plaintiffs in that case, leaving other families vulnerable.¹⁷

As a result of this repression, abortion seekers and parents of trans kids unable to find care in Texas have increasingly turned to out-of-state providers or telehealth. Abortion pills—accounting for 63 percent of all abortions in the U.S. in 2023—have been crucial for Texans under these restrictions, with an average of 2,800 residents a month receiving pills by mail.¹⁸ Paxton has tried to expand his power through unprecedented legal over-

With Republican dominance across all three branches of state government, Texas serves as a critical example of how power consolidation creates fertile ground for advancing anti-abortion and anti-trans legislation.

pointments, ultimately creating the U.S. Supreme Court's conservative supermajority.⁶ Under Leo's leadership in the Federalist Society, the nominations of Justices Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, and Barrett were secured, enabling the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the 2022 *Dobbs* decision, which returned abortion regulation to the states and fueled anti-gender campaigns through litigation and state-level legislation.

Leo's influence extends beyond judicial appointments, as his network seeks to reshape cultural and legal norms to align with Christian nationalist ideology. In a 2024 letter, Leo, a devout Catholic, urged his grantees to "weaponize" conservative ideology at the "choke points of influence and power," chiefly by targeting media and engaging in legislative battles to reshape public perception and policies on issues like healthcare for pregnant people and transgender people.⁷ In partnership with the Republican Attorneys General Association (RAGA), Leo's network aligns federal and state strategies, influencing cultural and legal norms to

ers who voted to impeach him, ensuring that key legislative positions are held by loyalists who will advance his far-right agenda unopposed.¹⁰ With Republican dominance across all three branches of state government—majorities in the Texas House and Senate, an entirely Republican Supreme Court, and control of both U.S. Senate seats—Texas serves as a critical example of how power consolidation creates fertile ground for advancing anti-abortion and anti-trans legislation.

Paxton's consolidation of power and Texas' Republican dominance have created fertile ground for advancing anti-abortion and anti-trans legislation such as "The Human Life Protection Act" (HB 1280), "The Texas Heartbeat Act" (SB 8), and SB 14—Texas' law barring healthcare providers from prescribing puberty blockers and hormone therapy or performing gender-affirming surgeries on minors under threat of losing their licenses.¹¹ These laws strip Texans of their bodily autonomy under the guise of protecting women and children. HB 1280, passed in



Protestors at a pro-abortion rally outside the Texas Capitol in 2021 (Credit: Jno.Skinner/Wikimedia Commons)

reach, targeting out-of-state providers who assist Texans seeking care. In December 2024, he sued a New York physician for prescribing abortion pills to a Texas resident, alleging violations of SB 8.¹⁹ Similarly, in January 2024, he demanded records from Qmed, a Georgia-based provider, accusing the organization of offering gender-affirming care to Texas minors in violation of SB 14.²⁰ By challenging the shield laws that states like New York have designed to protect providers from out-of-state prosecution, Paxton's lawsuits test whether states with restrictive laws can enforce them extraterritorially.

RESISTANCE AND WHAT COMES NEXT

Organizations in Texas are resisting Paxton's overreach by fighting these harmful bans. Lilith Fund joined other organizations to file a 2023 lawsuit against Paxton, securing a preliminary injunction to resume funding abortions for Texans forced to travel out of state.²¹ Equality Texas has supported efforts to block Paxton's demands for private infor-

mation about trans individuals and their healthcare providers.²² However, the stakes remain high. Cases like *Skrmetti v. United States* before the Supreme Court threaten to allow states to ban gender-affirming care for youth entirely, mirroring the *Dobbs* decision's impact on abortion. With a Leonard Leo-influenced Supreme Court primed to hand such decisions to states, these campaigns risk expanding anti-gender strategies nationwide.

Combatting the authoritarian Right's anti-gender attacks on women and queer and trans people requires political education to counter the disinformation that fuels them, as well as intersectional resistance. Organizations like Lilith Fund and Equality Texas point to one way forward. By challenging restrictive laws and providing vital support to vulnerable communities, they show how grassroots activism can resist far-right agendas. Their work underscores the importance of collective action in protecting democracy, human rights, and bodily autonomy for all—not just in Texas, but across the nation.

Chancie is a researcher with a focus on reproductive and sexual justice, employing a transdisciplinary and intersectional approach. Chancie understands the importance of bridging theoretical gaps to recognize and counteract attacks on marginalized communities. As a student of political science, Chancie is passionate about using knowledge of political systems to challenge and dismantle all systems of oppression.

Chancie comes to PRA with a wealth of knowledge and understanding of the attacks on reproductive and gender justice and the underlying political motives of such attacks. Chancie is also currently completing a doula program, aiming to become a birthworker and advocate for queer and trans people navigating the medical and reproductive health systems.

BY GABY DEL VALLE

Trad Values Meets Tech

The U.S. Right's Pronatalist Coalition



Collage of Kevin Dolan, Charles Haywood, and Malcolm and Simone Collins (Credit: PRA)

Elon Musk has been warning about the imminent end of human life as we know it for over a decade. Ten years ago, his solution was to colonize Mars as a sort of defense mechanism against climate change; now that his fears of a warming planet have given way to panic over a depopulated one, Musk has determined that the key to saving civilization is having more children. Musk is not alone in his fixation with the global decline in birth rates, though his voice is among the loudest in a growing chorus of pronatalists: people who believe drastic action is needed to make more babies.

Pronatalism has become a pet project for a certain subset of the Right. Indeed, the ideology dovetails nicely with longstanding Republican priorities like banning abortion and limiting access to birth control. Vice president JD Vance has praised the hyper-nationalist pronatalist policies of Viktor Orbán's Hungary, suggested the U.S. should let parents vote on behalf of their minor children, floated the idea of levying additional taxes on people

who don't have children, and, of course, infamously criticized the Democratic Party for supposedly being run by "childless cat ladies."¹

But pronatalism isn't just the purview of the socially conservative Right. As Musk shows, pronatalism is becoming increasingly popular among a subset of tech-futurist right-wingers, some of whom brand themselves as former liberals who have since "left the Left." They are coalescing around an authoritarian agenda guided by anti-trans, gender-essentialist beliefs. Rather than a single movement with a unified ideology, though, right-wing pronatalism is better understood as a coalition of overlapping factions—one that allows traditional conservatives, abortion opponents, and White nationalists to find common cause with tech moguls, futurists, libertarians, and libertines. United as they are in their common goal of increasing birth rates, these groups have distinct visions for how that should happen—and, in some cases, for who should be having more children to begin with.

TRADS AND TECHIES

These oft-disagreeing factions came together in Austin, Texas, in December 2023 for the inaugural Natal Conference. The conference was the brainchild of Kevin Dolan, a former data scientist who was ousted from his job after being outed for his involvement with Deseret Nationalism, a far-right faction within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that promotes an ultra-conservative brand of Mormonism.² Dolan billed the conference as a way of unifying disparate movements under a single goal. "The best thing I can do to move the needle on this issue personally is just unite the clans: throw up a rally point, let people come together," Dolan said in a podcast episode posted shortly after the conference.³ So far, the plan appears to be working: Elon Musk reposted Dolan's speech from the 2023 conference on X, and another conference is slated for this March.⁴ In many ways, the 2023 Natal Conference was a prelude for the coalition that helped

elect Trump: a motley crew of old-guard Republicans, the MAGA hat-clad New Right, and members of the tech elite.

Still, there are rifts. Broadly speaking, the U.S. pronatalist movement can be divided into two factions: the “trads,” often Christian conservatives who see the rearing of large “traditional” families within heterosexual marriage as a divine mandate, and techies who see low birth-rates as a problem in need of a solution—one that, incidentally, they believe they are best poised to solve due to their deep pockets and superior genes.⁵ Both sides agree that declining birth-rates are the symptom of a *mélange* of social and economic problems, some of which overlap with concerns held by the Left. Among them are decreased fertility due to endocrine disruptors in our food and water; a waning interest in conventional family formation among young people attribut-

and a shared contempt for “wokeness” in all its manifestations: from diversity, equity, and inclusion programs to the mere existence of trans people.

“It’s essentially going to be trads or trad-types who seduce the tech people, and/or steal their tech,” Dolan continued. “It’s a lot easier for us to steal their tech than it is for them to crib our values.”⁷ Dolan’s prediction has largely borne out, though not in the way he expected. Though it’s too soon to determine whether the trad faction has stolen the other side’s tech, Silicon Valley pronatalists are indeed cribbing trad values—including a belief in what they claim are rigid biological truths about gender and race that are being suppressed by the woke elite in favor of politically correct lies. Biological essentialism, coupled with a desire to control reproduction, unites right-wing pronatalism’s tech and trad wings.

Biological essentialism, coupled with a desire to control reproduction, unites right-wing pronatalism’s tech and trad wings.

ed to the decline of traditional gender roles, which some view as a denial of biological truth regarding men and women’s respective traits and responsibilities; and a hyper-individualist culture that keeps people atomized, single, and childless. The question for the movement is how to solve these problems in a way that appeals to both religious-minded trad types and tech libertines.

“I don’t think the trads get out of this mess without bringing at least some of the technological firepower and problem-solving ability that these tech people are bringing to the table,” Dolan said on his podcast in 2023. “But I also don’t see a way for these tech people to produce healthy families and communities without somebody from the outside supplying them with some real values, because they’re trying to make them up as they go, and I just don’t think it’s workable. You can’t just believe that having values is useful; you have to actually *believe*.”⁶

For the time being, these various groups are unified not only by their desire to boost the population but also by their support of President Donald Trump

While covering the 2023 Natal Conference for *Politico Magazine*, it became clear to me that while I was witnessing the origins of a movement, it was nevertheless a fractured one. The event had drawn Heritage Foundation staffers, Fox News personalities, and, according to Dolan, former attendees of Singularity Summit, an annual artificial intelligence conference whose cofounders include Trump megadonor Peter Thiel, put on by the Machine Intelligence Research Institute.

Natal Conference attendees, I realized, were split on moral and ideological grounds: they had opposing views on surrogacy, in vitro fertilization, and the still-theoretical realm of artificial wombs, all of which the most steadfast members of the trad faction object to on religious grounds. Despite these differences, the two sides have reached a detente, for the time being, to rally together in support of a subject on which they can all agree: the need to convince Americans to have more babies.

“MORE BABIES OF A CERTAIN KIND”

Among the 2023 attendees was Emma Waters, a senior research associate at the

Heritage Foundation’s Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Life, Religion, and Family. While some conference goers courted the tech types in attendance in the hopes of enlarging the pronatalist tent, Waters was unsparing in her criticism of Silicon Valley pronatalism. “When considering the different kinds of pronatalism—and not all approaches are created equal—I typically rely on a ‘pro-family’ versus a ‘pronatalist’ distinction,” she wrote in 2024. “Those in the pro-family camp recognize the essential role of family formation, beginning with man-woman marriage, as part of the solution. In contrast, those who promote a ‘more babies’ pronatalism tend to encourage childbearing detached from its natural role within the family. The pronatalists of Silicon Valley, however, have a distinct goal that supersedes both categories.”⁸ These technophilic pronatalists, Waters continued, “tend to promote, in practice if not in speech, a selective pronatalism: more babies of a certain kind.” The goal is not simply to have more children, or even to encourage the proliferation of heterosexual families, but to use technology to create better children—an aim some critics say carries unmistakable traces of eugenic thinking.

That ethos certainly sums up the worldview of Malcolm and Simone Collins, the poster children—or perhaps poster parents—of techie pronatalism. The Collinses have four children and plan to have at least three more; the most recent of their progeny were the product of polygenic risk score testing, a controversial form of genetic testing that allows parents to “select” their embryos for certain traits, including IQ and the likelihood that they’ll develop disabilities or mental illness.⁹ The Collinses first branded themselves as somewhat apolitical activists whose sole goal was to boost birth-rates. They founded Pronatalist.org, which they describe as the “first pronatalist organization in the world”—one that sees pronatalism not as a tool for religious or cultural dominance but as an end unto itself. Like others on the tech Right, the Collinses believe in the value of optimization: they founded the Collins Institute, a homeschooling system, to enable “young scholars to become self-sufficient, world-class players in the real world.”¹⁰ Their turn toward ho-

meschooling dovetailed nicely with the religious Right; when Simone ran for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives in 2024 on the Republican ticket, school choice and “education innovation” were part of her policy platform.¹¹

Eager to spread the word about their project, and defensive against accusations that they believe in eugenics or are advocating for anti-choice policies, the Collinses initially branded themselves as ardent proponents of reproductive rights, telling reporters that their choice to have more babies would ensure others aren’t forced to in the future. “People are like, ‘You’re bringing a *Handmaid’s Tale* into the world!’—that’s exactly what we’re trying to prevent,” Malcolm told *The Guardian* in 2024, adding that he and Simone have “quite a beef with anti-abortion people.”¹²

Their beef with “anti-abortion people” notwithstanding, the Collinses are also frequent critics of Planned Parenthood. In an August 2024 episode of their Based Camp podcast titled “Even if you are Pro-Choice You Should Not Support Planned Parenthood,” the couple lambast the organization for providing gender-affirming care to trans people.¹³ The fact that Planned Parenthood is not only the biggest provider of testosterone in the country but also largely serves trans people aged 18 to 22, Malcolm says, is “horrifying.” Planned Parenthood, Simone adds, is a “unidirectional, sterilizing organization.” “What do the puberty blockers do?” Malcolm asks. “They sterilize people.” In a separate episode posted earlier that month, the couple refer to abortion as “a religious act” for members of the “urban monoculture,” the Collinses catch-all term for a “cultural framework that exists around the world, mostly concentrated in urban centers” that convinces people to prioritize their own short-term gratification and comfort above all else, including the continuation of the human species.¹⁴

Despite previous efforts to assure the liberal intelligentsia that they’re fighting for them, the Collinses have, in recent years, been more explicit about their true allegiances. “A lot of people look at us and think we’re secretly trying to save the progressives,” Malcolm said in a July 2024 Based Camp episode. “I would like some aspects of their culture to survive,

but I don’t want them to have the cultural dominance that they have now They basically become Nazis when they gain cultural power.” As if to soften her husband’s statement, Simone interjects that she and Malcolm support many of progressives’ stated goals—like pluralism and “freedom of lifestyle”—which progressives themselves do not actually support. “The parties have flipped, basically, with Trump,” Malcolm concludes.¹⁵

Fellow Silicon Valley pronatalist Elon Musk has similarly claimed Trump is a champion of freedom and a bulwark against liberal overreach, the regulatory state, and the so-called “woke mind virus”—a term Musk has used to decry a host of things ranging from gender-affirming care for transgender people to the proliferation of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies at workplaces and universities across the country.¹⁶ In a 2024 interview with right-wing self-help guru Jordan Peterson, Musk claimed that one of his children was “dead, killed by the woke mind virus.” The child in question, 20-year-old Vivian Wilson, is in fact alive—though she is estranged from Musk, who she has described as a cold, absent father who berated her for being queer.¹⁷

Musk, who has at least twelve known children with three different women, may be who Waters had in mind when she accused Silicon Valley pronatalists of encouraging childbearing while being uninterested in family formation. His first marriage with Justine Wilson ended in a messy divorce,¹⁸ and his relationship with Claire Boucher, the Canadian musician who goes by Grimes, with whom Musk has three children, ended in a year-long custody battle.¹⁹ While Boucher and Musk were expecting their second child, Musk had twins with another woman—Shivon Zilis, an executive at one of his companies—without telling Boucher. “He really wants smart people to have kids,” Zilis told Musk’s biographer, who added that Musk offered to be Zilis’s sperm donor so her children “would be genetically his.”²⁰

If Musk weren’t wealthy, White, or well-connected, it’s possible that conservatives would take issue with the fact that he has had multiple children out of wedlock, is an absentee father, and openly

uses ketamine and other drugs. The more trad pronatalists like Waters could explicitly decry Musk for conceiving children via IVF and surrogacy. (Peachy Keenan, a Claremont Institute-affiliated writer who spoke at the 2023 Natal Conference, has called surrogacy a “nine-month prostitution gig, a ‘wife experience’ commercial exchange, with some bonus child trafficking thrown in”—a not uncommon sentiment among trad pronatalists.²¹)

But Musk is politically expedient, and he plans to use his considerable wealth to advance trad pronatalists’ goals. He has pledged to use the Department of Government Efficiency, a former pipe dream established by Trump on his first day in office, to defund “progressive groups like Planned Parenthood,” a longstanding conservative goal.²² Despite his nontraditional familial arrangements, Musk reportedly believes in rigid gender roles: his first wife claims he called himself the “alpha” in their relationship, and he has accused universities and nonprofit organizations of spreading “gender ideology poison”: the notion that there are more than two genders, because gender identity and biological sex are not inherently connected.²³

Over and over again, pronatalists invoke transness as a threat to the established social order and their dreams of a

Elon Musk at the CPAC conference in 2025 (Credit: Gage Skidmore/Flickr.com)



flourishing population. At the same time, some pronatalists boast that a few generations of prolific reproduction will allow them to outnumber their ideological enemies. “The other side is not reproducing,” Keenan said at the 2023 conference. “The anti-natalists are sterilizing themselves.”²⁴

THE GREAT REPLACEMENT

The 2023 Natal Conference began with a shocking, albeit somewhat uncontroversial claim: all over the world, people

Taylor and Brimelow are among the foremost proponents of the “Great Replacement,” an antisemitic far-right conspiracy theory that claims a cabal of “elites” is importing dark-skinned migrants to the United States, Europe, and Australia as part of a nefarious plot to replace White people with people of color.²⁶

Taylor and Brimelow’s presence at the Natal Conference suggests that for some pronatalists, the goal is not to raise birthrates across the board but to encourage

a eugenicist” and “Embryo Selection: Toward a healthier society.”³⁰

Though Aporia is firmly on the tech futurist side of the tech/trad divide, its writers have attempted to find common cause with religious pronatalists who may be uncomfortable with evolution, not to mention more controversial topics like polygenic risk testing and artificial wombs. A November 2024 article, for instance, attempts to bridge the gap between the tech and trad factions by encouraging Christians to embrace gene editing, which writer Lipton Matthews claims could be harnessed “as a means of fulfilling God’s desire for human flourishing” by eliminating disease and disability.³¹ Meanwhile, some members of the movement’s trad wing have begun reclaiming criticisms lobbed against tech-friendly pronatalists like the Collinses. “Is it eugenics to encourage stable, monogamous breeding pairs to have larger families if they can?” Keenan wrote in a 2023 post for *The American Mind*, a blog affiliated with the right-wing Claremont Institute. “Or is that just brilliant public policy that has the potential to rescue our civilization from its decline over a couple generations?”³² What remains unsaid—by the more prominent figures in the movement, at least—is who “our civilization” includes. Elsewhere, Keenan has asserted that the “great replacement is real.”³³

Thus far, it appears that Dolan was correct in his assessment that the tech and trad camps of the pronatalist movement can not only coexist but also learn from each other while advancing far-right ideologies. Still, some fault lines remain. “My fellow pro-natalists and I share the same goal—to prevent Western civilization from committing suicide—” Keenan wrote, “but I may be the only one standing athwart the CRISPR machine yelling ‘STOP!’” The trad pronatalists may not be interested in artificial wombs, CRISPR-assisted DNA modification, or even IVF, but like their techie counterparts, they want to populate the earth with their own superior progeny. The question is how long this fragile coalition will hold.

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The tech and trad camps of the pronatalist movement can not only coexist but also learn from each other while advancing far-right ideologies. Still, some fault lines remain.

are having fewer children than their ancestors did, a steady decline that, if left unchecked, could eventually lead to mass depopulation. This childlessness, moreover, is largely unplanned—as some speakers argued, it is the result of a socioeconomic system that discourages family formation even among people who want children. But as the day progressed, some speakers became more explicit about their belief in a rigid social hierarchy. Dr. Pat Fagan, the director of the Marriage and Religion Research Institute at the Catholic University of America, described strict gender roles as both positive and necessary for family formation. Charles Haywood, a shampoo magnate who now uses his millions to fund right-wing causes, ended his speech about the need to reinstate male-only spaces with a call to abolish the Civil Rights Act, which he called the “single most destructive set of laws in American history.”²⁵

These public statements nonetheless pale in comparison to the openly racist and eugenicist beliefs of some conference attendees—particularly those who skipped the first day of public speeches but participated in off-the-record workshops held during the second day. At least one workshop was reportedly attended by Jared Taylor, the founder and editor of the White supremacist magazine *American Renaissance*, and Lydia Brimelow, whose husband, Peter, founded the White nationalist website VDARE.

certain groups—specifically, White people—to secure their existence by having more children, an aim that echoes the infamous “14 words” slogan coined by White supremacist David Lane. Not all pronatalists share this goal, but for some, a desire to stave off demographic replacement appears to be key to their plans. Musk, for example, has promoted a softer version of the conspiracy theory that claims that Democrats are importing immigrants in order to dominate elections.²⁷

Other conference participants were sympathetic to the notion that intelligence is biologically determined, an idea common to the scientific racism behind assertions of White superiority. Diana Fleischman, an evolutionary psychologist who spoke at the 2023 conference and is scheduled to speak at this year’s, referred obliquely to “good quality children.”²⁸ She also assured the audience that their “genes are more important than drag queen story hour”—implying that nature always triumphs over nurture, even when “wokeness” goes too far. Fleischman is a regular contributor to Aporia, a “pro-evolution” digital magazine that describes itself as refusing to “cower beneath the god of political correctness.” In practice, this means publishing pseudoscientific screeds about the scourge of wokeness, the biological basis of the “black-white IQ gap,” and the need for high-IQ people to have more children.²⁹ Fleischman’s own contributions include such articles as “You’re probably

BY SOPHIE LEWIS

Feminists Against Women



Collage of Phyllis Schlafly, Mary Allen, and a banner at a protest for trans rights (Credit: PRA)

Sometimes a feminist is a feminist even though she dedicates her time to the dispossession and ostracism of a group of women. Female anti-feminism and right-wing feminism are distinct phenomena, yet contrary to some views on the matter, both exist in the West. The first category is relatively well-established: to evidence it, one can point to available data which shows that 46 percent of women voters in the 2024 election voted for U.S. president Donald Trump, up from 39 percent in 2016,¹ even after a jury found him liable for sexual abuse.² On the other hand, when it comes to pinpointing a feminism on the Right, there is no consensus. Systems of White supremacy and imperial capitalism shaped the birth of European feminisms, often molding them ideologically. Yet today, whenever anti-trans, nativist, and anti-abortion figures of the Euro-American moderate and Far Right self-designate as feminists, they are routinely received by others as insincere, invalid, or prima facie impossible.³ (The right-wing Heritage Foundation-funded group

“Women’s Liberation Front” is a case in point.) “You can’t have a right-wing feminist,” says Britain’s leading lesbian “socialist” columnist, emblemizing this view even as she spearheads the assault on trans lives.⁴

In my book *Enemy Feminisms: TERFs, Policewomen and Girlbosses Against Liberation*, I conversely offer a 200-year overview of cissexist, colonialist, nativist, White-nationalist, whorephobic, capitalist, eugenicist, carceral, and even pro-forced birth forms of Western women’s rights activism. I take seriously these enemy feminisms, even as I insist that Left antifascists must oppose them, because reckoning with these self-described feminisms is necessary for understanding how to defeat them.⁵ While feminist commitment is a *sine qua non* of any rigorous or principled antifascism, some articulations of women’s rights can be and have been fascisms.

This possibility becomes especially apparent in the context of mass disillusionment with liberal feminism and amid various discursive exoduses from

the scene of postfeminism, such as “trad-wifery,” “the femosphere,” and “4B.”⁶ Well-justified reflexes toward radicality, rejecting received forms of feminist mobilization, sometimes collapse into nihilist, individualist, edgily trad, or misandrist-separatist femopessimisms.⁷ The feminism of cisness, however, has spread like a pogrom. Today, it is unsurprising to find self-described feminists at the forefront of policymaking to deny gender-affirming healthcare or make bathrooms and sports lockers cissexual at all costs, in the name of women’s rights.

There is an awful sense of familiarity about this latest right-wing counterrevolution in feminism. When it comes to mob-like zeal spurring sisters-in-arms toward a purge of “the Unwoman”—a chameleonic figure of fantasy who threatens to usurp, invade, or dishonor womanhood—we have been here before, multiple times.⁸ Fifty years ago, a minority of cissexists—notably the group Gutter Dykes—mounted physical and ideological attacks on trans lesbian organizers in the women’s liberation movement, whom

they charged with “invading and draining our lesbian community.”⁹ Far from inherent to the movement, anti-trans feminism first arose as the counterinsurgent retort to sex-radical utopianism: a pessimistic response to a gender- and family-abolitionist efflorescence that was generally welcoming to trans women and aimed to communize care beyond the private household while generalizing “transsexuality [sic],” as Shulamith Firestone put it, toward letting a thousand genders bloom.¹⁰ Building on Alice Echols’s historical account of the U.S. women’s

Act’s passage, segregationist White women mobilized with Phyllis Schlafly to oppose feminism and the ERA. But back in the twenties, “KKK feminism” advocated for female access to divorce and child custody, and berated “the selfish man who insists that woman’s only place is in the home.”¹⁵ Clearly, these race-hierarchized visions of sexed emancipation—for “respectable” non-sexworking White cis women only—were fascistic. But if they were *not really feminism*, then neither was the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft or Susan Anthony.

Far from inherent to the movement, anti-trans feminism first arose as the counterinsurgent retort to sex-radical utopianism.

liberation movement’s fragmentation, I locate anti-trans feminism’s origins in the swamping of revolutionary feminism by a reactionary female biological and cultural nationalism circa 1973—one that still calls itself *radical* to this day.¹¹

But continuities can be found even further back. Over a hundred years ago, the modern feminist project of “women’s policing” took off in Britain as an anticommunist, antisemitic, anti-vice crusade against a fictional sex-trafficking panic about “White slavery” that was itself a backlash against feminist advances.¹² One of the innovators of this “cop feminism,” the lesbian radical and ex-suffragette militant Mary Allen, was a passionate devotee of Mussolini and later Hitler. While many disillusioned suffragists turned to socialism and communism in the interwar period, one radical feminist UK think-tank designated the soon-to-be Blackshirt leader Sir Oswald Mosley parliament’s top member.¹³ Several British ex-suffragettes came to believe that “Fascism alone will complete the work begun...by the militant women from 1906 to 1914.”¹⁴

Meanwhile, in the U.S., the Ku Klux Klan’s women leaders and spokeswomen aligned themselves with the feminist movement’s radical fringe by supporting the Equal Rights Amendment when it was first introduced in 1923, just as they had supported the Nineteenth—as a weapon against Black voters. Fifty years later, post-Jim Crow and the Voting Rights

Much contemporary thought treats such buzz-cut, white-hooded, and black-bloused examples as non-feminisms, implying that these fascist actors’ contradictory commitments must mean that their avowed feminism is necessarily false, trolling, or simply mistaken in referring to itself as such. In this view, “fascist feminism” is an oxymoron; fascist femininities and discourses “instrumentalize” or “wield” the language of feminism in order to dupe.¹⁶ In contrast, the imperialist and White supremacist aspects of canonical liberal legacies like Wollstonecraft’s or Anthony’s can be admitted to and apologized for *without* calling into question their status within feminism or, for that matter, feminism’s integrity.¹⁷ The literary world can apparently talk all day about the sins of the suffrage foremothers, never doubting for a moment that the feminism in question *can* be separated from the, say, racism, without losing its core shape. Feminism, for us, after all, is a word that inherently means liberatory politics.

I understand that it can be profoundly upsetting to sit with the proposition that some feminisms have been deadly to indigenous lifeways, dangerous to sex workers, and even, weird as it may sound, misogynistic and patriarchal.¹⁸ It can be tough to get one’s head around Western feminism’s role in the counterrevolutionary logic of cisness, a modern notion that has harmed all women by bifurcating and

hierarchizing us in relation to maternal potential, very narrowly defined. The temptation is strong to immediately say, “OK, but what about anti-feminists’ much, much bigger role?” Yet none of this justifies institutionalized avoidance of oppressive feminisms. If they are such a minor thread in human history, what’s wrong with getting to the bottom of them?

The past decade saw a welcome attempt to reckon with “White feminism.” Although the questions “ain’t I a woman?” and “what chou mean ‘we,’ white girl?” have roiled organized Western womanhood since at least 1851, the putative Whiteness of some feminisms has received a greater level of scrutiny.¹⁹ Picking up pace in 2013 before seemingly peaking in 2021—and spurred by books from Europe, Australia, and North America by Ruby Hamad, Mikki Kendall, Jessie Daniels, Rafia Zakaria, and Kyla Schuller among others—this development catalyzed a much needed, heartening, and generative reflection.²⁰ From the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen to the critique of some feminists’ reception of the “Karen” meme as a “slur,” the global North finally witnessed prolonged debate on the subject of “nice White ladies.”²¹ This afforded many of us new insights into the racializing effects—and exclusions, witting or not—of contemporary and historic activism, while offering intersectional tools and heuristics designed to broaden the movement.

Inevitably, some of the media reception of these race-critical ideas betrayed a desire to sidestep a deeper reckoning with the anti-liberatory freight of certain kinds of pro-woman politics: the *Observer* thought the bigger injury was making “well-meaning but imperfect people feel terrible about themselves” while the *NYT* focused on the theory that internal criticisms of the Women’s March were being fueled by Russia.²² (Elsewhere, the term “White feminism” is scorned outright as a “tool to dismiss second wave feminists.”²³) Confronting complicities is hard; it is easier to condemn regrettable feminist moments and then issue a blanket premature recuperation: *mistakes were made and that was bad, but feminism is still good, which means that feminists are never the “real” enemy*. By avoiding a



Protest signs at George Washington University in 2024 (Credit: Ted Eytan/Flickr.com)

deeper reckoning, White cis feminism has reflexively denied the possibility of feminist harms.

If there is hope today for the renewal of an internationalist feminism against cisness,²⁴ it might be found in Western feminism being exposed to—and perhaps breaking open in confronting its limits in the face of—Zionist feminism. The latter’s global campaign used since-debunked Israeli government claims of sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas to justify the acceleration of genocide in Palestine post-October 7, 2023.²⁵ Although Anglo-American media will no doubt continue burnishing the IDF’s image via machine gun-wielding Israeli “Zionesses”—“lionesses of the desert” who so vividly embody the seduction of gendered settler-colonial power *qua* rape revenge in the anti-“White slavery” mode²⁶—their credibility is hurt, perhaps irretrievably so.²⁷

Concomitantly, anti-Zionist feminist organizing is growing, even in the heartlands of Empire. It is nourished on Turtle Island by groups like the Palestinian Feminist Collective, a group whose anti-patriarchy organizing begins with—but does not stop at—opposing the occupying state.²⁸ Feminist activists all over the world have been radicalized, if not directly by Palestinian feminists’ analy-

sis of gendered settler-colonialism, then by the unholy spectacle of the reproductive genocide itself.²⁹ This includes trans activists who have been at the forefront of Gaza solidarity protests, not least because, as the U.S.-based Transgender Law Center argues, “trans liberation is inherently anti-colonial and inseparable from the struggle for Palestinian freedom.”³⁰

An optimistic reading of available signs points to the possibility that grassroots anti-colonial feminism is on the ascendant. And the signs are many: The multinational “Feminist Call to Strike for Gaza” on International Women’s Day³¹; Ni Una Menos, South America’s anti-femicide movement; the Kurdish “invading socialist society” known as Jineoloji, under the banner of *jin jiyar azadi* (woman, life, freedom), in autonomous north and east Syria; and the small “Transfeminist International” platform from Greece, to name a few. The collective song of revolutionary feminism can be heard in DIY estrogen undergrounds, abortion networks, transformative justice teams, prison-abolitionist accountability collectives, and in family-abolitionist and disability-liberationist communes attempting to communize care while dreaming of dismantling—for all—the tyrannies of wage, state, and market.³²

We didn’t choose the relationship of enmity, but it is only through fighting it out that we will make it obsolete.

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BY HANNAH SILVER

Sporting Authoritarianism

Anti-Trans Feminists in the Anti-Gender Movement



Collage of Tulsi Gabbard and Jennifer Braceras at the Our Bodies Our Sports Rally, and two protestors supporting trans rights (Credit: PRA)

In June 2024, a group of anti-trans feminists crisscrossed the U.S. with right-wing women activists to “take back” a civil rights law.

“We are stalwart believers in the abolition of gender ideology, a concept that equates to women’s oppression,” proclaimed Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF) board vice president, Margot Heffernan, in front of a banner that read “Protect Women’s Sports.”¹

Heffernan was one of several featured speakers at the Our Bodies, Our Sports (OBOS) coalition’s “Take Back Title IX Summer 2024 Bus Tour.”² The tour gathered prominent anti-trans figures from the arenas of politics and sports—among them, Idaho State Representative Barbara Ehardt, Olympian Martina Navratilova, and conservative activist Riley Gaines—to protest the Biden administration’s Title IX revisions. The April 2024 regulations affirmed gender identity as a protected category from sex-based discrimination in federally funded education by allowing students to present,

engage in activities, and use facilities in accordance with their gender identity (though notably, they omitted school athletics).³ In response, and despite the revisions’ increased protections for parenting students and survivors of sexual harassment, the OBOS coalition warned of “the devastating impact the new rules will have on women and the growing threat to women’s equal athletic opportunity, privacy, and safety.”⁴

Comprised of 12 anti-trans feminist groups and women-led organizations, the OBOS coalition has mobilized against “gender ideology” to exclude trans people from participating in athletics and public life. Their efforts are bolstered by right-wing networks that are attacking reproductive and LGBTQ rights broadly.⁵ While these outwardly unlikely collaborators have long weaponized women’s wellbeing for harmful ends, their alliance comes amid a record-breaking number of anti-trans bills in the U.S.—with 61 targeting participation in school sport alone⁶—and increasing aggression

toward feminist and LGBTQ advocacy internationally.⁷ The OBOS coalition demonstrates the logics and anti-democratic tendencies that are characteristic of contemporary anti-gender politics. While its members frame rights as a zero-sum competition, trans advocates and allies continue fighting for a gender justice that uplifts everyone.

THE GENDER IDEOLOGY PANIC

The Our Bodies, Our Sports coalition—a misleading evocation of the influential feminist health guide, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*—advertises itself as “the largest, most ideologically diverse women’s movement of our time.”⁸ While it’s true that members characterize themselves differently—for example, WoLF is a self-described “nonpartisan radical feminist nonprofit”⁹ while Concerned Women for America (CWA) calls itself a women’s organization that protects and promotes biblical values—the tagline is misleading.¹⁰ The coalition’s improbable allies are unified by their anti-trans ide-

ology, which they view as widespread and necessary for women's equality. Though hardly representative of all feminisms, their claims are not novel.

At the OBOS coalition's inaugural rally in Washington, D.C.¹¹—which was held

everyone to accept these definitions and what flows from them.”¹⁹ Their fearmongering manufactures a panic around gender and sexual diversity that helps justify authoritarian norms.

Defending Education and Speech First, filed a lawsuit that successfully placed an injunction on Title IX implementation in four states: Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina.³⁰

Anti-trans feminists have previously

Anti-trans feminists have previously justified their involvement as a strategic necessity, claiming to be abandoned by the Left and desperately requiring the Right's resources and legal power.

on Title IX's 50th anniversary in 2022—speakers like Maureen Bannon, daughter of far-right strategist Steve Bannon, alerted the audience to a covert agenda of “gender ideology” in women's sports.¹²

But the term “gender ideology” can be traced back to the Vatican, which used it to oppose the emerging integration of reproductive rights, sexuality, and gender into international policy, led by LGBTQ and feminist movements in the 1990s.¹³ While it was initially used with reference to policy objectives that threatened theological and traditionalist understandings of sex and the family, the phrase changed discursively as conservative actors within European and Latin American countries used it over the decades.¹⁴ Thirty years later, denunciations of “gender ideology” span the globe and the political spectrum, and in North America, according to researcher Heron Greenesmith, the term is increasingly used to attack trans people.¹⁵

OBOS members assert that gender-identity recognition is evidence of an unscientific and misogynistic agenda pervading women's sports, academia, and political institutions. Activists and scholars Sonia Corrêa, David Paternotte, and Claire House find that anti-gender mobilizations commonly target five areas: sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTI rights, children's rights, gender mainstreaming initiatives, and protections against hate speech and discrimination.¹⁶ Such issues figure prominently into OBOS members' description of the alleged impacts of the Title IX rules—including how they will make teachers “queer all aspects of school programs,”¹⁷ indoctrinate children “down a dangerous path of social and likely irreversible and harmful medical transition” without their parents' knowledge¹⁸ and “forc[e]

THE (NOT SO) UNLIKELY ALLIANCE

In her analysis of the contemporary alliance between trans-exclusionary radical feminists and right-wing forces, professor Joanna Wuest draws a parallel between its current manifestation and the collaboration of women's groups and the religious Right on victim's rights and anti-pornography legislation during the 1970s and 1980s.²⁰ Though their conceptions of sex had differing origins—the former from biological determinism and the latter from biblical tradition—they mutually agreed women are innately vulnerable and need protection from violent, male perpetrators.²¹ Similarly, coalition members believe that females constitute a coherent, immutable group who are physically inferior to males. They misgender trans women athletes, implying a need to protect cis women from the threat of violent men. Their construction naturalizes the sex hierarchy with the veneer of being pro-woman and projects anxieties over danger, harassment, and inequity in sports onto athletes who, as trans women, disproportionately experience violence.²² These rates are higher for Black and trans women of color based on their intersecting marginalized identities.²³

Before the OBOS coalition's formation in 2022, many of its member groups had connections with right-wing organizations like Alliance Defending Freedom and the Heritage Foundation. They accepted funding,²⁴ awards,²⁵ and speaking invitations,²⁶ cross-pollinated staff,²⁷ shared legal representation,²⁸ and advocated together for anti-trans legislation like the deceptively titled Fairness in Women's Sports Act.²⁹ Now, their alliance has influenced the courts. As of August 2024, Independent Women's Law Center (IWLC), alongside Parents

justified their involvement as a strategic necessity, claiming to be abandoned by the Left and desperately requiring the Right's resources and legal power.³¹ These right-wing allies benefit by having their message legitimized and spread to broader audiences. However, coalitions like OBOS are more than a temporary circumstance. Their anti-gender logic mirrors the authoritarian Right by scapegoating minoritized groups for increasing economic and social precarity and embracing paternalistic responses.³² They promote cisgender supremacy as women's liberation and aid the Right's onslaught on civil liberties and democratic institutions. Being attuned to how feminism has played a role in oppressive projects is necessary to combat these strands and avoid replicating them in our movements.³³

In their analysis of Project 2025, researchers Annie Wilkinson and Chancie Calliham outline how the demonizing of vulnerable communities is a strategy within a larger plan to impose a Christian, cisheteropatriarchal order.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, OBOS is tied to this political infrastructure. Two coalition groups served on the Project 2025 Advisory Board³⁵ and the coalition itself is funded by the Defense of Freedom Institute, a nonprofit founded by two Department of Education officials who served in Trump's first administration.³⁶ While not all members support the President, they are furthering his authoritarian campaign promises to codify the sex binary and ban trans athletes.³⁷

OUR SEX STEREOTYPES, OUR SPORTS

The coalition's sex essentialism defines and constrains fairness and safety in women's sports. Their website includes a report, produced by the right-wing Independent

Women’s Forum and IWLC, alleging that trans athletes will demoralize cis women, decrease their athletic opportunity and success, and increase their chance of injury.³⁸ These claims are as harmful as they are false. Similar accusations have been lobbed against women with hormonal variations and intersex characteristics, and are imbricated in a fraught history of invasive sex testing and unnecessary medical intervention.³⁹ Research has consistently found that binary biological markers for athleticism are myopic and overestimated in elite sports,⁴⁰ and that—contrary to anti-trans activists’ arguments—inclusive policies have resulted in an increase in girls’ participation in youth sports.⁴¹

Any woman athlete whose ability or physicality transgresses the coalition’s stereotypes can be considered suspect. During a panel on Title IX, hosted by WoLF with several coalition partners, a member recounted her experience as a coach for a girls’ volleyball team when she suspected a “biological male” was competing based on the competitor’s appearance.⁴² Often, these interrogations fall along racial, national, and class lines. Western sports institutions have routinely scrutinized women of color and those from the Global South according to hegemonic standards of White femininity, accusing them of being too masculine or inordinately good.⁴³ Notable examples in

recent years are the South African runner Caster Semenya and the Algerian boxer Imane Khelif.⁴⁴

Made up primarily of White, American cis women, the OBOS coalition relies on reductive, racialized understandings of sex that have been enforced within sports—to the detriment of the autonomy, privacy, and opportunity of trans, intersex, and some cis athletes. In fact, as scholar Elizabeth Sharrow concludes, sex-segregationist arguments scapegoat trans women for enduring structural inequalities in women’s sports,⁴⁵ including underfunding, insufficient leadership opportunities, and sexual harassment, which are exacerbated by intersecting forms of racial and socio-economic discrimination.⁴⁶

Caster Semenya in Paris in 2018 (Credit: Yann Caradee/Wikimedia Commons)



TOWARD A SPORTS FOR ALL

Though OBOS employs a scarcity approach to rights, there is a mighty resistance of athletes and advocates who are working toward a version of sports that benefits cis, trans, nonbinary, and gender-diverse people alike. As Auden Perino, Senior Counsel for Education and Workplace Justice at National Women’s Law Center (NWLC), writes, “Efforts to pit transgender women against cisgender women, falsely claiming there is a zero-sum struggle for rights and protections in sports or any other sphere, are a deliberate strategy... to divide our community and undermine collective work against discrimination.”⁴⁷ Legal organizations like NWLC, InterACT, and Advocates for Trans Equality have been active in the fight to enshrine gender inclusivity in Title IX, and organizations like Athlete Ally are supporting trans and queer student athletes.⁴⁸ While much remains unknown about how another Trump presidency will impact Title IX, blocking coalitions and campaigns like OBOS will require joining together with all those advancing a multiracial, transinclusive feminist democracy.

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BY CHANCIE CALLIHAM

Calling In

Author Q&A with Loretta Ross



Collage of protestors at racial justice protests (Credit: PRA)

In a time of heightened political polarization and violence, Loretta Ross offers a transformative framework for addressing conflict within and beyond social justice movements. In *Calling In: How to Start Making Change with Those You'd Rather Cancel* (Simon & Schuster, 2025) Ross introduces the concept of “calling in” as a compassionate alternative and response to callouts and cancel culture. She draws on five decades of movement work, opposition research, and lived experience to present the interpersonal struggles and hard-won lessons that have shaped her belief in a framework rooted in transformative justice. For Ross, calling in is not about avoiding accountability. It is a commitment to meaningful change that involves seeing people’s complexities so that we don’t reduce them to their worst actions. Calling in, as Ross describes it, is “a call out done with love.”¹

Calling In is a call to action and a reflection on how we can all navigate harm, foster solidarity, and embrace a deeper

commitment to joy and belonging. Ross’s insights challenge activists to move beyond the fleeting gratification of calling out—a tactic that, while emotionally satisfying in the short term, can ultimately destroy movements and interpersonal relationships. Instead, she advocates for building irresistible movements that embrace complexity, growth, and connection.

Ross sat down with PRA to reflect on her journey through a lifetime of activism, including her work to dismantle White supremacy, advocate for gender and reproductive justice, and fight for human rights for all. By reframing identity-based struggles as part of a broader human rights movement, Ross provides a vision for connecting and sustaining resistance in the face of authoritarianism and division.

PRA: Your book introduces the concept of “calling in” as part of a five-part continuum for addressing conflict: canceling, calling out, calling the conversation off, calling on, and calling in. For readers new to this framework,

can you explain what “calling in” means and how it works as a tool for creating meaningful change within ourselves and our communities?

Loretta Ross: Calling in, as a concept, was coined in 2013 by a then 18-year-old, Loan Tran. They attended a racial justice conference that was dominated by people calling each other out. Frustrated, they wrote a blog post critiquing callouts,² but the backlash was so intense they never revisited it. While researching my book, I found the blog and reached out to them. When I asked why they didn’t pursue it further, they said, “I didn’t feel like taking on the whole world by myself.”

Calling in is an accountability process to help others and ourselves grow by engaging in constructive versus destructive conversations. As I wrote in my book, the first person to call in is yourself, so that you don’t overreact or walk around looking for a fight because of past harm. As others have said: Don’t let your past sabotage your future.

Calling in is a callout, but instead of using anger, blaming, and shaming, you use love and respect because that reflects who you are inside and who you aspire to be. Calling in achieves what callouts don't: a chance to figure out how to work better together. Calling people out invites a fight, not collaboration. If you want people to be more effective together, calling in increases the likelihood you'll figure out how to get along.

When is calling in most effective for addressing harm? On the flip side, are there times when calling out is warranted?

Oh yeah! When people have had a chance to change and choose not to, continuing to abuse power, gaslight, troll, act like a nazi, calling out is appropriate. They're not interested in collaboration; they're only interested in humiliation, shame, and power over people. Calling out is a tactic of last resort, not first. You

The Right only has two things going for itself: lies and violence.

can try talking to people or finding messengers they might listen to before resorting to a callout.

Calling in is most effective when you've done your own mental preparation. If you're still wounded from unhealed trauma, whether you call in or out, the result will be the same: you'll bleed all over them. That's why calling yourself in is so important. One way I put it is, "Why are you handing the remote control to your emotions off to someone else? They may change it to a channel you don't want!"

You talk about your work with Leonard Zeskind and the late Reverend C.T. Vivian at the Center for Democratic Renewal "deprogramming White supremacists" like Floyd Cochran, the former Aryan Nation spokesperson and recruiter. What did your experience working to fight the Right (as an oppo researcher) teach you about calling in?

Until I started doing anti-fascist work, I was motivated by rage at injustices, which led me to have contempt for those who committed them. It didn't create space for seeing them as complex people. Then Reverend Vivian told me, "When you ask people to give up hate, you need to be there for them when they do."³ My first response was, "Oh, shit. I don't want to hear that." Of course, I said that under my breath because you can't say that to a preacher. But that's how I felt. But he wasn't saying to "turn the other cheek." He was saying I was approaching the work with anger and rage in my heart, which isn't the way to do the work or embrace nonviolence. Like Nelson Mandela reportedly said, "Hate is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die."

Eventually, I decided to do something else. Getting to know people like Ken Petersen and Floyd Cochran helped me humanize them. Once I saw their complexities, I couldn't hate them anymore.

In the book, you point out the Right's attempts to claim victimhood by talking about the destructive nature of cancel culture, saying that it's a hypocritical attempt to deflect accountability as they're actively threatening the rights of vulnerable populations. At the same time, you explore critiques of calling out and caution that calling out in movement spaces under the wrong circumstances airs our dirty laundry for opponents to use against us. How do you distinguish valid concerns about callouts from the Right's opportunistic critiques of cancel culture?

The way I see it, the Right only has two things going for itself: lies and violence. When they try to assume the mantle of being society's perpetual victims, I point out their lies and hypocrisy. That's necessary to deconstruct how they're manipulating people and their pains. They're good at giving the appearance of taking people's suffering seriously when they really don't.

I have no problem critiquing the Right's attempts to manipulate our good hearts, to make us feel sorry for them when they're doing all the damage they can. They talk about being canceled, but as the book says, they're the ones banning books, jobs, critical race theory, gender pronouns, and anything else they can label "woke." Anything they attach that label to, they want to ban. That hypocrisy can always be pointed out. At the same time, we shouldn't go around making the world crueler than it needs to be. We can't become what we're fighting.

PRA: You said in the book that we can't berate people into joining our side. Because why would they want to if that's how we handle conflict?

LR: People don't need help feeling worse about themselves. They can do that on their own. If we want them to join the struggle for justice and human rights, we've got to make them feel they belong to something significant—that we accept them and their imperfections. And we shouldn't criticize them for their learning curve when we're on our own. Toni Cade Bambara said, "We have to make the revolution irresistible." That's done through joy, fulfillment, and belonging, not by excoriating people for not knowing everything they should know at any moment. Calling out assumes you already know everything you need to know, which isn't true or desirable.

As you've said, calling out can be a powerful tool for oppressed people. But when we wield it against each other, the outcome isn't the same.

We're destroying our capacity to build power to make change and stop human rights violations, which is frustrating to me as a progressive activist. When I think about the recent election, pundit after pundit, almost always White, has been talking about what the Democrats did wrong. I'm like, wait a moment, haven't y'all figured out it's what the White supremacists did right? The only identity politics that matter to them are their White identities. It ain't about the economy, immigrants, or women. It's about

Whiteness, and they will offer every critique and excuse in the world instead of naming the White supremacy that's in the United States' DNA. Their failure to critique it is why they can't offer a sturdy or thorough analysis of Trumpism.

We're 30 years on from the coining of the term reproductive justice in 1994, during a very different social and political moment.⁴ In recent years, we've seen the fall of Roe, intensified political polarization and violence, and the rise of Donald Trump. How has this changed landscape shifted the reproductive justice movement's current priorities and strategies?

Since reproductive justice was created by Black women, we've always known we couldn't count on legislators or the courts for our liberation. That's why we took a human rights-based approach to articulate what we deserve and are fighting for. What's added to our burden is allies who thought they were protected by the legal

We don't all have to work on the same things with the same intensity, but we should do our work in ways that don't create contradictions for the same movement.

system. They felt most betrayed when [Roe] was reversed. The post-Dobbs landscape is different in many ways but in some ways it's same old, same old. It's still the most vulnerable who are harmed. We must focus on those who won't receive information about options like traveling to another state or taking abortion pills, as the first move will be to suppress information and instill fear. Even billionaires like Jeff Bezos think that appeasing fascists will protect them, echoing the mistakes of Nazi Germany's corporate leaders who thought they could control Hitler but ended up controlled by him.

Reproductive justice must move beyond the limits of the U.S. jurisprudence and constitutional system to international human rights norms, laws, and treaties. I've been advocating since the attack on DEI and CRT that we should reframe our work as human rights work. It reduces their ability to attack us through identity-based critiques. Calling it a hu-

man rights movement combines our issues and forces them to explain why they oppose human rights—which, by definition, includes everyone.

What strategies can the RJ movement develop to center collective goals and solidarity while navigating the diverse priorities and perspectives within our movement spaces?

The first thing we need to do is stop offering ideological litmus tests. "If you don't support this, then I can't work with you. "If you don't say this in this way, I can't work with you." To me, that's when your callout is more about [individual] power than purpose. You want the power to tell everybody else what they should do, believe, and think, but you'd hate for that power to be imposed on you.

My bottom line might be I care more about abortion, someone else cares more about climate change, and another person cares more about gun control. We don't all have to work on the same things

with the same intensity, but we should do our work in ways that don't create contradictions for the same movement. I can't work for trans rights in a misogynistic way, or Black rights in a homophobic way, without undermining my own movement. It's about how we do the work more than the issue we focus on.

You started each chapter with an epigraph, and the Epilogue's quote is from Howard Thurman: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it, because what the world needs is people who have come alive." What about calling in and your journey to this framework makes you come alive? And how can others find what makes them come alive in service to themselves and our movements for justice?

When I discovered the urgency of addressing callout culture, I felt I'd been

given a new mission toward the end of my life. I'd worked in violence against women, anti-apartheid movements, and many other issue-based movements. Over the years, I saw activists dealing with the same self-destructive tendencies that I saw while organizing in the 1970s. That gave me an opportunity to write what I call an intellectual biography, and say, "Wait, we've been through this before. I've been through this before. Let me show you what I've learned from it." It's given a new focus for my end-stage activism.

To paraphrase Alicia Garza, a Black Lives Matter movement co-founder, who says it best: I'm so ready for us to make new mistakes, not to keep making the same old ones.⁵ I want us to learn from our old mistakes, so that at least we give ourselves the opportunity to make new ones!

Chancie is a researcher with a focus on reproductive and sexual justice, employing a transdisciplinary and intersectional approach. Chancie understands the importance of bridging theoretical gaps to recognize and counteract attacks on marginalized communities. As a student of political science, Chancie is passionate about using knowledge of political systems to challenge and dismantle all systems of oppression.

Chancie comes to PRA with a wealth of knowledge and understanding of the attacks on reproductive and gender justice and the underlying political motives of such attacks. Chancie is also currently completing a doula program, aiming to become a birthworker and advocate for queer and trans people navigating the medical and reproductive health systems.

BY ANNIE WILKINSON AND MARY REYNOLDS

Authoritarianism, Criminalization, and Reproductive Injustice

A Roundtable Discussion



Collage of protestors at a pro-choice rally in Illinois, and protestors at the Moral Monday March in North Carolina (Credit: PRA)

Right-wing attempts to curtail and control our lives and bodies are not new. But now the U.S. authoritarian Right controls the White House and many state legislatures. Backed by billionaire oligarchs, Christian nationalists, and an energized MAGA base, they are consolidating and weaponizing state power and criminal law to attack bodily autonomy and self-determination. Their tightly orchestrated efforts combine with the Right's campaigns—against voting and civil rights, public education, and access to care, and more—in an ongoing, coordinated strategy to undermine democratic movements for gender, racial, and economic justice.

This challenging moment is also an opportunity for reflection grounded in the intersectional and structural analysis of the reproductive justice movement and transnational feminist solidarity networks.

In January 2025, when PRA and All* Above All co-organized the Imagina-

tion Lab, a strategic alignment convening for gender and reproductive justice advocates, the Gender & Authoritarianism Research Collective—a project of PRA and the Reflective Democracy Campaign—held a roundtable discussion to deepen our understanding of criminalization in this time of authoritarian consolidation. We invited seasoned practitioners who work on the front lines of healthcare, reproductive justice, and criminal law to share insights drawn from their experiences of navigating repression.

They discussed the history of criminalization in the U.S., what we can learn from past and present struggles against reproductive injustice, and the need for a cross-movement strategy that is responsive to people's material needs while building a united front to fight authoritarian attacks on our democratic rights. Their remarks have been edited for length and clarity.

Naomi Washington-Leapheart, Strategic Partnerships Director, PRA:

What changes in our analysis if we put authoritarianism and criminalization at the center of attacks on reproductive justice, rather than the anti-abortion movement and abortion bans?

Jamila Perritt, President and CEO of Physicians for Reproductive Health:

For me, the answer to that question is: everything. Who's at the center, who we're fighting for, what we're dreaming about, who we think deserves to live in this place, to have access to these resources. Everything must change, which means that we cannot, for example, advocate for the police in our abortion clinics as a solution that will protect us. We cannot call the police as our primary defense when folks are experiencing interpersonal violence. Everything about our politics and our policies in the reproductive justice movement has to be different. And

The backlash against abortion is intertwined with the backlash against efforts to end segregation.

as we think about what we're centering, if we put abortion bans and the anti-abortion movement at the center of our organizing, then we aren't dreaming of what we deserve.

Nourbese Flint, President of All* Above All and All* Above All Action Fund: There was a time when abortion was relatively available in this country. Doctors' associations were the first to oppose abortion—not out of concern for “human life,” but to take midwives out of the picture and “professionalize” access to reproductive care. Thinking about our opponents as only those who are anti-abortion is a limited view of the real game here. When we look at fascism in other countries, the first targets have been abortion access and LGBT folks. It was a strategy to commodify people's bodies, to say, *your body does not belong to you, it is now the government's body*. What you produce is not yours, it is something that you need to do on your country's behalf. The weaponization of abortion is a tactic of fascism and in most authoritarian governments.

To be serious about a long-term win, we must be rigorous and strategic about not just these segments—like abortion bans—that are causing a lot of harm, but to see them as part of a larger strategy. Until we do that, we're playing in a defensive posture, and we aren't going to achieve what we need.

Lourdes Rivera, President of Pregnancy Justice: This question has me thinking about a phrase that I've heard often outside the U.S. and that I'm hearing more often within it: “gender ideology,” meaning feminism and bodily autonomy, LGBT rights, women's rights. Authoritarians frame this as a bad thing that they need to protect our societies from because these things are dangerous to the state and the order of things. The notion of gender ideology was used to derail Colombia's peace process, initially, and it took a lot of work to put it back on track.

But this is not new, and criminalization has been a key part of this pattern. Midwifery and abortion were criminalized, partly out of a concern that White women were not having enough babies, and

that post-abolition, formerly enslaved Black people would have children who were no longer property. The backlash against abortion is intertwined with the backlash against efforts to end segregation. It was not cool to talk about segregation or admit to wanting it, so making it about opposing abortion was a way to bring together White evangelicals to push forward a very conservative agenda.

To return to your question: Abortion bans are criminal laws. We should think about them as criminal laws that threaten people with incarceration. But even during *Roe*, the infrastructure for surveilling and criminalizing pregnancy, pregnancy outcomes, and pregnant people, especially people from marginalized communities, was being built by granting embryos and fetuses the same rights as persons. So while we paid attention to abortion bans, the Right has been building this notion of fetal personhood into state criminal and civil law.¹ People were already being criminalized, and they are being criminalized after *Dobbs* in a more unleashed way. But they're not using the abortion ban laws yet; they're using criminal child abuse and neglect, abuse of corpse, or other criminal laws to make an embryo or fetus a “victim” harmed by the pregnant person.

That infrastructure was built initially through the War on Drugs under Nixon, who needed a tool to tamp down on the anti-war movement and the Civil Rights Movement by criminalizing and surveilling people who use drugs and targeting communities. The myth of the crack baby followed, resulting in Black and Brown women being surveilled and incarcerated at exponential rates. Ironically, the drug crisis looks different right now—it's in rural areas, in states like Alabama, where poor White women are being targeted, even as Black and Brown women are too. Because of this existing criminalization infrastructure, there's no need for prosecutors to overtly use abortion bans to accomplish the same goals.

Jamila Perritt: The enshrinement and codification of these personhood laws was only possible because doctors and scientists backed it up. When we're

thinking about our approaches and strategies, there cannot only be a legal strategy. There are accomplices in all of these systems. Medical providers, the police, and the carceral system are so deeply in bed with one another that the strategy must include providers.

Lisa Wayne, Executive Director, National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers: Given that complicity of scientists and doctors, being united makes a difference. I don't have a background in reproductive justice, but when you reached out with a vision of including criminal lawyers in this space to hear what is really happening in the courtroom, I remember feeling reticent and unsure about what we have to add. And what I have learned, especially here, is that if you know what we are doing in the courtroom and we listen to your on-the-ground expertise, it unites our approach, to be able to overcome criminal laws and their consequences.

Anybody who thinks the legal system isn't based on White supremacy doesn't know what the system is about—civil and criminal. I'm sitting here and listening to things like “gender ideology,” “feminism,” “bodily autonomy.” Most criminal lawyers in this country are going to say, *What are you talking about?* But now we can bring back what you're telling us and consider what needs to be part of representation to be more effective. You also need to be a part of what we're doing to make sure that the laws and the bills that we're lobbying to pass make sense. We need to ask: What's the history here? How's this really impacted you? What does this surveillance really mean to you? We cannot be reactive. We must be proactive.

Naomi Washington-Leapheart: I appreciate this reframe of the problem, grounded in history and its legacies. You all have referred to ways we need to expand the conversation, to think more strategically and expansively about who we need in the fight, who we need to move. We know more about the policies and ambitions of MAGA Republicans and Christian nationalists to end access to reproductive health in this country. This is clear in the successful overturn of *Roe* and the promotion of Project 2025.

Chaos is a strategy to exhaust us. It's important that we prioritize and trust each other.

Let's talk about what you're seeing on the ground. You told us about how our analysis, the way we tell the story, and who we need to involve all needs to shift. Given this moment of rising state-level authoritarianism and its consolidation at the federal level, how are the battlefields around reproductive justice changing on the ground?

Nourbese Flint: The conditions have changed dramatically. This reminds me of something Max Elbaum said recently: "Elections determine the battlefield in which we are playing. They are not the battle." We need to understand that there are many battles in the war. Elections are important because they give us a space to see if we can advance or not. When I think about what's on the ground and what's happening with the professional Left: There needs to be a lot more communication, strategy, and organizing.

We need to understand that folks are sad. It's debilitating when you don't think that something will be better for you. It's incredibly hard to organize for a better future. The opposition wants us to be sad and hopeless. It's our job to figure out how to inspire hope, which isn't the same as optimism. This is not *I hope everything will get better*. It is the ability for folks to believe there's something better and to work toward it.

Lourdes Rivera: One of the lessons we must carry forward is that chaos is a strategy to exhaust us. It's important that we prioritize and trust each other. We're going to be working in our lanes and communicating across them, so that we can be supportive and understand how it all fits together, but we can't all do everything all the time, because that is exhausting. We must also build in rest and hope and joy in between the hard work we need to do.

All these resources get put into elections and then they drop off. We have to figure out how to continue the conversations and build community. People need community, and those who do community engagement work should be resourced to do it.

People are not always connecting these dots. I'm thinking about Missouri—the abortion ballot initiative's passage was a

success, but then the rest of the vote outcome puts in place an administration that risks making that win worthless, along with everything else. So if in some ways, our movement has been successful, including in red states, we're also leaving a lot on the table. I'm reminded of when our side defeated the fetal personhood ballot initiative in Mississippi, but the anti-voting rights ballot initiative moved forward, and a few years later because we lost on voting, we lost on abortion too. So, we need to connect these things.

And finally, I keep reminding myself and my team that there are people around the world who have come out the other side. We need to learn from that too.

Jamila Perritt: We need to be deeply grounded in what is happening with folks who have real material needs and don't have the space, energy, capacity, or interest right now to talk about these things. Poverty makes you preoccupied with survival, so thinking about how those two things come together is a constant struggle and question. How do we get and keep folks engaged when we are not doing what needs to be done for people's survival? How do we give them space to think about something other than what is happening in this moment?

There is a distinct lack of understanding about what organizing is. Some believe that organizing begins and ends with disruption. That has a place, but there are also concrete skills that make organizing effective. What is the vision and the strategy—that is, how do you remember how to dream of something better than this? But also: How do you think about the steps to get there? The other thing is that people come, and they bring so much of what radicalized them in the work, which is often related to trauma, but the movement is not therapy. We need infrastructure and programs—and people need care. They need to heal to be able to move the work forward and effect change.

Lourdes Rivera: Who is actually addressing people's material needs? If it's not us, then we're in trouble. The Black Panthers' strategy included providing school lunches and free breakfast for

kids.² The Young Lords forced the city of New York to pick up people's garbage because that's what people were upset about and took over Lincoln Hospital because it was roach infested. It is because of the Young Lords that we have a Patient Bill of Rights.³ Do people know that? These examples show that we must address people's material needs in our movements so that people are turning to us and not the Right.

Jamila Perritt: We saw during COVID a big shift in addressing material needs. Prior to that, the federal government claimed that they could not give cash to people: *No, no, we can't do that; it's going to have catastrophic outcomes*. Well, look who did it. Before COVID, you had to have a prescription, you had to have preauthorization, you could only see your doctor for medication. Then COVID happens and you can walk to your local Safeway to get a vaccine if you want.

This idea of what's possible came out of something that was horrific and poorly managed. There are some lessons that I think can and should be used to force change on a larger level. Now you can no longer tell me you can't do that, because I saw you do it. What do we think about when we think about next steps and strategies? Both in looking at what happened in hindsight and saying *Yes, that worked; no, that didn't work*, or *No, this is not the right time for that*.

Naomi Washington-Leapheart: As advocates and practitioners, where do you see more opportunities to intervene to secure reproductive justice for everybody, both in the immediate, proximate sense, as you all have been talking about, and in the longer term?

Lourdes Rivera: I'm reminded here of Erica Chenoweth's scholarship. She's studied civil disobedience movements from 1900 to contemporary times and has empirically documented some common elements of successful ones.⁴ They tend to be led by people who are most impacted; are nonviolent and capable of soliciting broad and diverse support; have the ability to cause defections among elites, including military regimes' security forces; and employ broad tactics, from



Pro-Choice Rally in Dublin (Credit: Infomatique/Wikimedia Commons)

marches in the street to work stoppages. We too have to be nimble in the various tactics we use, including addressing people's material needs.

The debate about tactics is tired—legal versus non-legal, or community organizing versus this or that. The answer is yes! We have to make sure it's all resourced, even if we don't have the resources of the billionaires funding the Right.⁵ But the answer is YES.

Lisa Wayne: We have to recognize our opponents' strength because they clearly have gotten things right that we have not. We can recognize it and use it for good. Some of the techniques that they have used over the last 40 years that we have loathed have really made headway. We need to change that, integrate it, embrace it, and turn it around for good. And I'll tell you where we see it: surveillance. The Right hates to be surveilled, trust me. When you go and talk to people on the Right about surveillance and facial recognition and being tracked on the phone, they're freaked out about it. So, there are common threads that we can recognize in our opponent and use to our benefit. It's up to us to find that

common thread and get them all back to vote again. I really believe that we shouldn't give up at this point.

Jamila Perritt: This morning's conversation about opposition research got me thinking about the ways that understanding your opponent has always been a primary tool of survival for folks. It made me shift [from not wanting to talk about the opposition] and think more deeply and expansively about what it means to understand your enemy, the need to do opposition research in some capacity, the value that it has brought historically—and how we can think about doing the same thing moving forward.

Nourbese Flint: In California, I had the honor of building a cross-movement strategy with organizers from labor and the environmental space working on the maternal health bill. If you look at the birthing outcomes of people who live in urban heat areas—places where there aren't many trees, so the sun is bouncing off the concrete and making it hotter—they have a lot more pre-term babies. We were able to put some of that information into our preamble for a big omnibus policy bill and

got some environmental folks to come on board. Other folks came in and found a way to organize with us. We have to start thinking: How do we bring these pieces together to build a cross-movement strategy?

Lourdes Rivera: What can we do proactively at the state and local levels that is pro-family, pro-child, pro-community—like planting trees because it creates better maternal health outcomes? Where can we take the time to build those agendas at the state and local levels?

Then we can build up to a national agenda that we can push forward with a strong base.

Annie Wilkinson, Ph.D., researches transnational anti-gender movements, mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories, and authoritarianism as a Senior Research Analyst for Political Research Associates.

Mary Reynolds, co-founder of the Gender & Authoritarianism Research Collective, has a Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale. A labor organizer in higher education and hospitality for more than fifteen years, she currently consults for the Reflective Democracy Campaign.

BY PHILLIP AYOUB AND KRISTINA STOECKL

The Moral Conservatism Behind Global Resistance to LGBTI Rights



Collage of protestors and counterprotestors at a rally against SOGI 123 in Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada (Credit: PRA)

This article is based on excerpts from *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights* (NYU Press, 2024), 3–4, 12–15, 59–60, 99, 130, 173, 195–204 and is reprinted with permission from the publisher. The excerpts have been significantly edited for brevity and style.

In the last thirty years, the rights of people who are marginalized by their sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) have improved rapidly in many countries.

Yet such successes have not gone unchallenged. Global accomplishments in the field of SOGI rights... have been counterbalanced by a growing and, in recent years, increasingly globally connected resistance to such rights. In 2021, Hungary's parliament passed a ban on so-called gay propaganda following the Russian blueprint of the previous decade, and in Ghana, 21 people were arrested for attending a training on SOGI rights organized for paralegals, echoing simi-

lar arrests in Egypt following a Mashrou' Leila rock concert some years earlier. While resistance to SOGI rights is well documented¹, its global and networked dimensions are not yet fully understood. Especially in the last decade, this resistance rests predominantly in the hands of transnationally connected social movements—frequently with a conservative religious orientation—and conservative governments, actors that now also attempt to co-opt international human rights law.² These resistances employ many of the same transnational tools that have achieved widespread acceptance for LGBTIQ people. In other words, both those who seek the advancement of SOGI rights and those who oppose it use related strategies and instruments for mutually exclusive ends.

We define the varied and loose conglomeration of actors that compose the resistance to SOGI rights as *politicized moral conservatives*. The term applies when (a) the actors in question construct

their political program around moral concerns, and (b) their positions on these issues belong to the conservative normative *denkfigur*, or figure of thought. Such conservatism privileges nationalism over globalism, particularism over universalism, legal sovereignty over international law, patriarchy over equality, hierarchy over democracy, the collective over the individual, religion over the secular, and duties over liberties. Thus, these moral conservative actors are not conservative in the dictionary sense of the term, as people inclined to reject new ideas. They are, instead, open to new ideas and strategies, including incorporating a language of human rights, if it furthers the development of the moral conservative program. Conservative is also the term these actors most commonly use themselves to describe their own work and agenda.

The global resistances to SOGI rights bring together actors that, at first glance, have little in common: Russia, a series of Muslim states, as well as other states

from Central and Eastern Europe and the Global South; Evangelical and Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Protestants; pro-life civil society groups and anti-migration right-wing populist parties, neo-conservative media commentators, small businesses and homeowners, and entrepreneurs in the world of big business and economic consultancy.

Gender has not always been at the center of the mobilization of moral conservative actors, whose goals are almost always much larger than opposing women's and SOGI rights, even if they have a forceful effect on these dimensions. Scholars have described gender as a symbolic glue that holds various groups of political actors on the political right together today.³ However, politicized moral conservatism has a long and important history that predates the gendered focus.

The transnational moral conservative network's strategic goal is to diffuse and perpetuate its own structure and agenda of a conservative counterrevolution of sorts.

The resistance to SOGI rights is the most recent spearhead of a broad and long-standing front of politicized moral conservatism, which has allowed moral conservative actors to reach new audiences and communicate their conservative ideas in novel, successful ways. Perceiving the contours of this larger picture requires tracing the long road to today's resistances to SOGI rights, from the early origins of moral conservatism in the United States and in Europe in the 1970s to the hitherto largely national confrontations between conservatives and progressives globalized during the 1990s. Three factors help explain the transnational diffusion of moral conservative ideas during this time: the Vatican's role at the United Nations, the rise of transnational Christian Right advocacy using a language of human rights, and the end of the Cold War and a subsequent religious turn in formerly communist countries.

The transnational actors that emerged out of these dynamics include groups like the World Congress of Families, which connects thousands of actors across borders and at annual summits...[and] diffuses Christian Right ideas far and wide,

for example from the United States to Russia.⁴ It is a central node in an increasingly coordinated, moral conservative transnational actor network that concentrates on resisting SOGI rights and plays the central role of convener, providing a networking platform for moral conservative actors and organizations. It is thus a group node inside the larger moral conservative transnational actor network. It lays claim to the concept of the 'natural family', by which World Congress of Families founder Allan Carlson means a cis-gendered, heterosexual, married couple and their biological offspring.⁵ Carlson has based his agenda on a narrow reading of Article 16(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which defines the family as the "group unit" of society entitled to protection by the state. In 1999, with significant involvement by

Americans, the World Congress of Families organized a conference in Geneva. The meeting drew the attention of scholars because it was a moral conservative networking event in the backyard of the world's most expansive intergovernmental organizations. However, that congress was only one in a long string of events the World Congress of Families organized. Through their regular conventions and declarations, the activists remap the discursive space of international human rights law, locate their claims in relation to specific articles in human rights documents and treaties, and develop a relatively consistent strategy and terminology through which to present their claims against SOGI rights. They use human rights language and copy many of the strategies of transnational collaboration from progressive NGOs.

The moral conservative actors in the network are today held together by their resistance to the SOGI rights movement. It would be more accurate, however, to say that they are held together by their resistance to their own construction of the SOGI rights movement. Moral conservatives construct their adversary by willful-

ly misrepresenting the SOGI rights movement and transforming it into a symbol of everything else they reject: communism, global capitalism, liberalism, and international institutions. As moral conservatives link these disparate topics into one coherent narrative—coherent from their perspective—they come to identify as victims of the SOGI movement, but also as the privileged few who have special knowledge about the mechanisms that drive this movement and its role in global politics. The moral conservative narrative thus functions in a similar way to conspiracy theories, creating among its adherents an intense sense of identification with a shared cause.

In much of the literature on the Christian Right, moral conservatism is linked to neoliberalism. Melinda Cooper, for example, connects the birth of the neoconservative ethos—with its insistence on traditional gender roles and the unpaid care work attributed to women—to neoliberal cuts to state spending.⁶ Moral conservatives and their causes are also often funded by ultraneoliberal actors and groups. Our own findings confirm this picture yet also complicate it. The view that Western Europe and the EU are "quasi-socialist" states is relatively mainstream among American conservatives, but a sizable contingent of the moral conservative universe we studied, especially those coming from Europe, are actually in favor of the welfare state—as long as it clearly benefits "traditional families" and not single parents or other forms of households. What American and European conservatives share is a nostalgia for a "market town" or "main street" capitalism—a romanticized capitalism of the past where everyone has an ordered place, typically implying fixed gender roles.

In the complete moral conservative narrative that equates communism, global capitalism, liberalism, and international organizations, SOGI rights activists are assigned the role of the new revolutionaries. Moral conservatives depict SOGI activists as communist revolutionaries. They do so not just metaphorically, but quite literally, as in this quote from a Russian member of the World Congress of Families, where the red communist flag is likened to the rainbow flag: "The 1960s, '70s [were] the continuation of this revo-



Protestor in support of SOGI 123 in Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada, in 2023 (Credit: Mick Sweetman/Flickr.com)

lutionary trend that we experienced in Russia in a more straight forward violent, brutal, red form. And now it has this rainbow flag.”⁷ Thus, moral conservatives see international organizations that support SOGI rights as communist institutions. When moral conservative politicians in Central and Eastern Europe criticize Brussels for being like the Moscow of the Soviet Union, what they mean is that they see the European Union as a communist project. This is a wild stretch of the imagination for most, but amid the crowd at World Congress of Families gatherings, it becomes hard to separate this all-encompassing narrative from reality.

The transnational moral conservative network’s strategic goal is to diffuse and perpetuate its own structure and agenda of a conservative counterrevolution of sorts. This may sound tautological at first. Yet it is important to recognize that the moral conservative narrative presented here is not only new and baffling for researchers interested in the phenomenon; it is also new for many of the activists who

are drawn into transnational moral conservative networks. Most activists who attend World Congress of Families events listen to speeches by Allan Carlson and other regular attendees or pick up some translations from the book fairs and encounter this narrative for the first time.

The fact that the World Congress of Families perpetuates this narrative each time and in all locales where a summit takes place is significant. In the last [three] decades, moral conservatives have built up this narrative to identify and construct SOGI rights—and the institutions that support them—as the main focal point of twenty-first century ideological struggles. In conjuring a vision of a SOGI revolution, moral conservatives can become the counterrevolutionaries. All other strategic goals follow from this overarching narrative. The self-proclaimed counterrevolutionaries do have the strategic goal of blocking SOGI rights.

According to the moral conservative agenda, a win on the abortion front, the homeschooling front, or on religious

freedom is de facto a step toward blocking SOGI rights. For moral conservatives, all these claims hang together. It is important to recognize that in the global resistances against SOGI rights, the above arguments flow into each other smoothly. For the moral conservative audience, it makes up one global, coherent narrative.

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The Art of Activism: *Beyond Molotovs: A Visual Handbook of Anti-Authoritarian Strategies.*



Art by Boniswa Khumalo

At a time when authoritarian nationalism and anti-feminist, racist, and classist forces are growing worldwide, how can we turn feelings of indignation, grief, and hopelessness into collective action toward building a better world?

Artist Boniswa Khumalo reflects on doing this work in intersectional Black feminist struggles against gendered violence in contemporary South Africa. Her collage in “Naked Protesting: The Intersections of Gender in Counter-Movements” is one of several works of art featured in the 2024 open-access volume, *Beyond Molotovs: A Visual Handbook of Anti-Authoritarian Strategies*, edited by the International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies (IRGAC) and *collectiv orangotango*. The book collects more than 50 first-hand accounts of the “powerful and creative strategies” people are using around the world, “From the collective art and aesthetics of feminist movements in India, Iran, Mexico, and Poland, to sewing collectives, subversive internet art in Hong Kong, and even anti-authoritarian board games.”

Such acts go beyond resisting the Far Right with a defense of the status quo. As two of the book’s editors, Aurel Eschmann and Börries Nehe, write in the book’s introduction, “These strategies and struggles carry ideas, emotions, and practices that are the seeds of another world. Yes, it is true that imagining a fundamentally different world has become more difficult recently, and yet, it is possible. It is actually being lived out in anti-authoritarian strategies worldwide.”

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