

## Reactionary Family Policies in the 21st Century: The Republican War on the Working Class in the United States

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### Abstract

*Although birth control and abortion are legal in the United States, the Republican Party promotes policies intended to curtail women's ability to control their reproductive lives. Despite of deepening income inequality and economic insecurity, when family planning is crucial for working class families' wellbeing and for individual women's economic survival, republicans insist on undermining reproductive rights. In this essay I argue that, given that capitalist and affluent women are not affected by these policies, their promotion and implementation entail a war on the working class quality of life and ability to form stable families.<sup>1</sup>*

Women have struggled long and hard to control their sexuality and reproductive capacity. State policies intended to foster the reproduction of the powerful, while curtailing the reproduction of subordinate class, and of racial and ethnic minorities and other socially disparaged groups, have shaped and continue to shape most women's reproductive options everywhere. Economic constraints have always played a key role in affecting the formation of stable unions and family size. Today, as income inequality deepens everywhere, there is an unfolding contradiction between economic hardship and uncertainty, which strengthens the motivation to limit family size, and state policies that limit or deny working class women's ability to control the timing and number of births. This contradiction is rendered more acute by technological changes that increase unemployment, underemployment and the precarious, temporary nature of employment for vast sectors of the working classes. At the same time, religious and other ideological claims contribute to rationalize and legitimize barriers to poor and working class women's ability to attain some modicum of control over reproduction. The possibility of family formation within the working class is thus at the crossroads of economic changes that undermine the possibility of stable unions, and state policies that, to the extent they are successful, can force women to bear more children than they, alone or with their partner, can afford.

While this issue of *Das Argument* is focused on the European situation, in this essay I will bring up the case of the United States, where the political and economic forces undermining family formation in the working class have made of marriage and nuclear family formation a luxury that mainly those with college education, stable employment and good incomes can

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally appeared as: Martha E. Gimenez. 2017. Reaktionäre Familienpolitiken im 21. Jahrhundert. Der Krieg der Republikaner gegen die Arbeiterklasse der USA. *Das Argument*, 324, 525-533.

afford. I will, in the end, argue that a purely feminist understanding of these phenomena is insufficient; the contradictions facing the working class family today should be understood in the context of the class struggle.

Within the United States, *Roe v. Wade*, a Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in 1973, energized the religious and political opposition. Three years later, in 1976, the Hyde amendment, introduced by Republican Representative Henry Hyde III and attached ever since to annual appropriations bills, bans the use of tax dollars to pay for abortions. Given that poor and low income women's health care is covered by Medicaid, a health care program funded primarily by the federal government, the effect of this provision was to deprive them from their constitutional right to abortion. Because racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in the poor and low income population, it is women of color who are most burdened by this restriction on their right to legal and safe abortions. Whether the ban was total or with some exceptions, varied; since 1994 there are three exceptions: incest, rape or danger to the pregnant woman's life.<sup>2</sup> Another restrictive policy, the Mexico City Policy, thus named because it was first announced at the International Population Conference held Mexico City (August 6-14, 1984), Mexico, was instituted by the Republican administration of President Reagan. According to this policy, also called "the global gag rule,"<sup>3</sup> foreign NGOs are required to certify that "they will not 'perform or actively promote abortion as a method of family planning' with non-U.S. funds as a condition for receiving U.S. global family planning assistance and, as of Jan. 23, 2017,<sup>4</sup> any other U.S. global health assistance, including U.S. global HIV (under PEPFAR<sup>5</sup>), maternal and child health, malaria, nutrition, and other program areas."<sup>6</sup> Like the Hyde amendment, this policy affects primarily the poor and low income populations, depriving them from access to family planning and other badly needed health programs.

During the decades since *Roe v. Wade*, political struggles around reproduction have persisted with such a degree of virulence that calls attention to the United States' uneven economic development and corresponding cultural and social contradictions. Sociologically, it could be argued that political and cultural differences and conflicts about reproduction and sexuality in the U.S. demonstrate that the struggle between traditional and modern, secular values and ways of life that started with the rise of capitalism continue unabated today. From a Marxist standpoint, however, the effectivity of ideologies, their resonance among some sectors of the population, denote the persistence of material conditions (e.g., poverty, unemployment and underemployment, downward mobility, lack of education and deepening inequality) conducive to people's receptivity to religious and other ideological manipulations. The class nature of many problems afflicting the working class, particularly economic insecurity and a declining standard

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/hyde-amendment> and <http://latinainstitute.org/sites/default/files/NLIRH-FactSheet-HydeAmendment.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/communities/planned-parenthood-global/end-global-gag-rule>

<sup>4</sup> Republican president Trump reinstated and expanded this policy (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/world/trump-ban-foreign-aid-abortions.html?mcubz=1>), which had not been in effect during the administration of democratic president Barack Obama (2009-2017). <http://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/mexico-city-policy-explainer/>

<sup>5</sup> This acronym refers to the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief, instituted in 2003. See <https://www.pepfar.gov/about/270968.htm>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/mexico-city-policy-explainer/>

of living is obfuscated through political discourses and legislation that foster gender, racial, ethnic and other divisions within the working classes, thus channeling their anger against the despised “others” (e.g., women, immigrants, non-whites), erroneously perceived as the cause of their economic plight. While it is mostly male politicians that put forth reactionary policies restricting women’s reproductive rights, it must be kept in mind that they are in power because of the vote of male and female supporters of those policies.

The term ‘war on women’ has been used to describe the relentless Republican legislative efforts to restrict women’s rights, particularly reproductive rights. Far from being a hyperbole, this “war” has been thoroughly documented. For example, “Proof of the GOP War on Women,” published online in *Politicus USA*,<sup>7</sup> lists numerous legislative proposals containing abortion restrictions and barriers to women’s access to contraception. Whether successful or not, these proposals illustrate the lengths to which Republican senators and representatives will go to curtail reproductive rights. Establishing waiting periods before an abortion can take place; arguing that abortion clinics should meet hospital standards of care or that abortions should be performed only in hospitals; forcing women to watch an ultrasound of the fetus or undergo “spiritual” counseling prior to the abortion; requiring doctors to lie to women, informing them that they are likely to develop breast cancer, thoughts of suicide, or mental problems if they undergo an abortion;<sup>8</sup> allowing pharmacists not to sell birth control if this is against their religious principles; making miscarriages illegal; limiting the rape exemption for abortion to “forcible rape;” criminalizing abortion and defunding Planned Parenthood, an organization whose primary function is to provide basic health care to low income women, are just a few among the many ways politicians seek to prevent women from making key decisions about their health, their future, and their families. In 2011, the U.S. House of Representatives passed an amendment “prohibiting teaching hospitals from receiving federal funding if they teach doctors how to perform abortions.”<sup>9</sup> In 2014, the Supreme Court, in the Hobby Lobby decision, ruled that “businesses have a right to their own religious beliefs, and could use them to flout otherwise generally applicable federal laws – in this particular, the Affordable Care Act’s mandate that business provide contraceptive coverages as part of their employee’s health insurance.”<sup>10</sup> This and other court decisions in support of business owners imposing their religious beliefs on their employees (as in the Hobby Lobby case), or catholic hospitals denying abortion services and dictating that doctors should not prescribe birth control or contraceptive services<sup>11</sup> indicate an increasing erosion of the separation between church and state in the U.S., as well as the use of religion as a rationale to legitimate the denial of women’s reproductive and health care rights. The more recent measures intended to curtail reproductive rights are the following: on 10/ 3/17, the House of Representatives passed a bill which, though making an exception for rape, incest or to save the mother’s life, banned abortions after 20 weeks. This bill was approved in the House

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.politicususa.com/proof-war-women-2>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx\\_factor/2017/05/10/most\\_u\\_s\\_women\\_live\\_in\\_states\\_with\\_abortion\\_laws\\_that\\_conflict\\_with\\_science.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2017/05/10/most_u_s_women_live_in_states_with_abortion_laws_that_conflict_with_science.html)

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.politicususa.com/proof-war-women-2>, p. 5 and <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/house-bans-funds-for-teaching-abortion-techniques/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/business/hiltzik/la-fi-hiltzik-hobby-child-20160819-snap-story.html>

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20160913/downtown/birth-control-ban-costs-catholic-hospitals-millions-tax-dollars-for-now>

but has yet to be debated in the Senate, where it may or may not pass.<sup>12</sup> And on 10/6/17, the Republican administration expanded the right of employers to deny female employees insurance coverage for contraception. Employers can now do so not only on religious grounds but also on the basis of moral objections. Women's access to contraception without co-payments is a key part of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). This benefitted over 55 million women. Because of these new rules, hundreds of thousands of women could lose access to free birth control.

As the assault on women's reproductive rights unfolded and gained steam after *Roe v. Wade*, the U.S. economy experienced fundamental changes. The rise of global capitalism brought outsourcing, downsizing, deindustrialization, automation, and the end of the relatively privileged nature of manufacturing jobs, which used to pay well, and gave blue collar workers and their families economic stability, health care benefits, home ownership, the possibility of sending children to college, and a pension. The development of information technologies intensified qualitative changes in the organization of production and consumption, and in the demand for labor. The productivity of labor increased at the same time that wages stagnated or declined; today the lower strata within the working class faces poverty and an uncertain future because temporary, poorly paid jobs have replaced the relatively stable and better paid jobs of the past. The economic prosperity that after WWII propelled blue collar workers, particularly white males, into the middle class, through the GI Bill that paid for the college education of war veterans and well paid manufacturing jobs, did not last: today's economy is characterized by the growth of precarious employment, deepening inequality and a polarized or "hollow" labor market, with employment opportunities for the highly and the poorly educated, with less opportunities for jobs in the middle. In post-WWII American society, men with a high school education could find well paid manufacturing jobs and attain a "middle class" standard of living. Today, without a college degree, men cannot find jobs that pay enough to marry and support a family. Working class women are likely to be more educated than working class men and, consequently, whether with a high school or a college degree, can earn more than poorly educated men. For a growing proportion of the working class, therefore, the economic foundation of marriage has been undermined. Men who are unable to support a family are, like women who earn more than the men they become involved with, less likely to marry. The result is a series of unstable unions, in which women and men might end up having children with different partners, i.e. the rise of "fragile families" characterized by "multi-parent fertility" and "family complexity." Marriage, under these conditions, is likely to be unstable; for all practical purposes, we are witnessing "the fall of the working class family in America." This pattern of unstable relationships and the formation of families headed by women became visible in the 1980s as "the feminization of poverty," a term depicting its prevalence in the poorer strata of the working class, particularly among racial and ethnic minorities. In recent years, this pattern has spread to the white working class; it is associated with lower incomes, and the disparity in education and income between working class men and women.<sup>13</sup>

In the U.S., the convergence of macro level economic effects of changes in capital accumulation - as the imperatives of global capitalism undermine hard won workers' rights - and the effects of right wing policies intended to curtail women's reproductive rights place working

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<sup>12</sup> <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/353709-house-passes-20-week-abortion-ban>

<sup>13</sup> For a thorough examination of this phenomenon see Cherlin, 2014; see also Carlson and England, 2011, Sawhill, 2014, and Gimenez, 2018 (forthcoming).

class women in a most difficult situation; the material conditions for stable family relations are undermined at the same time that access to contraception and abortion is under siege. These joint effects of capitalist material and ideological forces shed light upon the contradictory nature of the family: whether women and men find it a prison, “a haven in the heartless world,” a source of economic worries and emotional exhaustion, or a logical way to pool economic and social resources and climb the social ladder, depends on their class location, education, and the resources with which they start their adult lives. In this context, the brunt of economic change and reactionary policies falls among the disadvantaged strata of the working class, particularly among non-white and immigrant workers.

Are those policies the effect of misogyny? Do they reflect legislators’ fear or hatred of women? Are they the effect of religious and or philosophical beliefs in the sanctity of life? After all, those promoting measures to ban or restrict access to abortion and contraception call themselves “pro-life.” However, as it has often been observed, they are exceedingly concerned with life before birth while, at the same time, they have shown no compunction in cutting welfare provisions in the past, and planning future cuts today. Concern for the unborn is not matched with a similar concern for the welfare of the living. Furthermore, key to the current Republican administration is the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, which they intended to replace with programs that would have left anywhere between 15 and 28 million people without health insurance.

Rather than viewing sexism, misogyny, and religion, together or separately, as the main causes of this political obsession with limiting women’s ability to control their reproductive capacity and, necessarily, their sexuality, I argue that this matters have to be placed in the context of the class struggle. The women and families affected by these reactionary family policies tend to be at the bottom and near the bottom of the working class; i.e., they are mainly poor and low income individuals and households.

Pointing out that republicans are also opposed to equal pay for equal work, and are always seeking to cut funds for public education and programs assisting the poor, journalist Jabril Faraj argued that “a system is being set up in order to subjugate those who are struggling in our society;” although the “war on women” is “very real, it is only an aspect of a greater” war on the poor” that undermines the possibility of upward mobility by restricting access to high quality, affordable birth control, health care and other social services, and public education.”<sup>14</sup> According to this interpretation, when considered all together, the effects of these policies can indeed be viewed as an attack on the poor and low income people. This critique, however, ignores the class location of the poor and low income earners and is framed within the ideology of the “American Dream,” i.e., the idea that all Americans should have an equal opportunity to experience upward mobility and do better, economically, than their parents. Such goal, however, depends on the functioning of the economy and it can be argued that the wellbeing and upward mobility that characterized the post-WWII American economy was the exception, rather than the rule. The current deepening of economic inequality is the way untrammelled capitalism works; dismantling the meager U.S. welfare state is the goal of the GOP. So, are these reactionary policies a manifestation of a “War against the Poor,” rather than a “War against Women”? Neither concept is adequate fully to capture the nature of the phenomenon in question. These

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<sup>14</sup> “The Republican War on Women: A Red Herring,” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jabril-faraj/the-republican-war-on-wom\\_b\\_3772589.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jabril-faraj/the-republican-war-on-wom_b_3772589.html)

policies entail not only a war against women and against the poor but also, and more accurately, a war against the working class, particularly its most vulnerable sectors, those affected by the heritage of years of economic exclusion and incarceration; i.e., the poor and near poor, particularly those of racial and ethnic minorities,<sup>15</sup> single mothers and their families, unemployed, underemployed and downwardly mobile male and female workers, those affected by de-industrialization and globalization, and the growing proportion of white collar workers whose economic stability is becoming increasingly precarious.

A purely feminist understanding of reactionary policies, stressing the effects of these policies upon women, would overlook their differential impact according to class. Capitalist women - *regardless of race, ethnicity and other differences* - and women with insurance and financial resources that allow them to pay for contraception and abortion are not affected by the growing number of restrictions. Even when abortion and contraception were illegal, they were always available to those who could pay. To argue, then, that there is a “war on working class women,” however, should not lead one to overlook that even in households where the cost of health care and reproduction is not an issue, there may be women, particularly young women, who might be affected by policies which, for example, deny teenagers access to birth control, or require parental consent for abortions. Furthermore, abortion and reproduction are not exclusively women’s issues; most women do not live alone because they share their lives with partners, children, and family members. Reactionary family policies, pay inequality, lack of education, unaffordable health care, inadequate housing and so on affect all working people, regardless of gender, and other differences. A primary or only focus on the disproportionately affected (e.g., women, rather than men; non-whites, rather than whites; immigrants, rather than citizens) is the ideological effect of the fragmented, though concerted, right wing efforts to dismantle the already weak U.S. safety net while undermining the potential solidarity of the working class by stressing identity divisions and fueling conflicts among them. I am proposing, therefore, that at this time of increasing class inequality, when the power of the working class in the U.S. is at its lowest point, because of its low level of unionization<sup>16</sup> and the effects of global capitalism, it is important to transcend the limitations of identity politics in order to attain a dialectical understanding of the relationship between the problems afflicting members of gender, racial and other groups, and their class location. This theoretical and political position does not entail class reductionism and to argue so is to unwittingly support the dominant political discourses and policies that pit different sectors of the working classes against each other, male against female, whites against blacks, citizens against immigrants and so on. For example, to the extent that politicians convince workers that working class unemployment, underemployment and a declining standard of living, particularly among white males, is due to the influx of immigrants, non-whites and/or women (who should be home minding the children) into the labor force, they will have the voting “base” that will support racism, xenophobic immigration policies and reactionary policies denying working class women their right to a legal and safe abortion, the contraceptives of their choice, and access to basic health care. This is why I argue that reactionary family policies in the U.S., i.e. policies affecting women’s ability to control their reproductive capacity and their sexuality, their family size, their future and the future of their families ought to be understood as a crucial element in the ongoing “war against the working

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<sup>15</sup> See Wacquant, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> In 2016, only 10.6 percent of wage and salary workers were members of unions. In 1983, the percentage was 20.1 percent. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>

class” because they have a disproportionate effect on the health and wellbeing of working class women, working class men, and their families. But, why would the capitalist political elites promote policies which, if successful, would simply increase the size of the reserve army of labor, thus increasing the proportion of the population likely to need welfare subsidies, or engage in illegal activities?<sup>17</sup> I would argue that the motivation behind such policies, regardless of the “pro-family” and “pro-life” ideologies put forth in their support, and regardless of their potential economic and social effects, is simply politicians’ greed for power and the access to self-enrichment that comes with power. Those policies cater to their voters’ racial and class prejudices which they have been nurturing for decades. They can virtuously decry the use of tax dollars to pay for abortion while they have no qualms to use those tax dollars to pay for sterilization, a method of family planning chosen primarily by non-white and poorly educated women.<sup>18</sup>

As the call for papers for this issue of *Das Argument* reminds us, the family is a “contradictory resource,” and its contradictions are heightened at this time, when the right wing under the guise of protecting the family, motherhood and women’s health promotes policies that, to the extent they are successfully implemented, do the opposite. This is why it is important to place feminist concerns within the context of class relations. It is important to remember that, decades ago, when feminists in the U.S. criticized the nuclear family, black feminists stated that many black women would like to be in a nuclear family; racism in this society destroyed black men’s opportunities for education and employment, thus leaving women to be in charge. Today, the white male sole or main “breadwinner” is a historical relic and increasing numbers of white women find themselves in the same place their black sisters described years ago. Outside the realm of the “two-career” stable and affluent families, most families are difficult spaces where women, their partners and children struggle to build a life for themselves, albeit under conditions not of their own choosing. Understanding those conditions solely in gender terms, placing blame on feckless partners or on patriarchal capitalists would be unhelpful, to say the least. A class analysis of the reactionary family policies and of the changing material conditions affecting the balance of economic and social power between the sexes would be a more fruitful approach. A culture of solidarity cannot emerge from perspective that place the blame on men but from understanding the forces that place men and women, and same sex partners, in contradictory, interdependent, and loving relationships.

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<sup>17</sup> The development of Artificial Intelligence would increase the reserve army of labor to a level that would require substantial economic, social and political changes, outside the boundaries of the status quo. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/opinion/sunday/artificial-intelligence-economic-inequality.html?mcubz=1> It might be argued that, given that the presence of a substantial reserve army of labor lowers wages, politicians are interested in depressing the overall level of wages. However, that would assume that they base their pronouncements and policies on research rather than short term political gains.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/fact-sheet/sterilization-as-a-family-planning-method/>

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