Fertile Ground: The Biopolitics of Natalist Populism

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Abstract

Fears of immigration and demographic change have fueled nativist, pro-natalist movements that support the reproductive, heteronormative family as a vital *political* project shaping their rhetoric and politics. This paper argues that right-wing populist movements can be situated within heteroactivsm, as reactionary movements positioning themselves against challenges to the heteronormative family. I suggest that understanding the populist character of these movements can help theorize why so many right-wing populists echo specific claims about gender and race. By situating their political claims in biological claims about sex, gender and race, these movements contrast themselves with abstract ideals of universal human rights, neoliberal rationality, and cosmopolitan globalism, embracing the traditional family, gender norms, and heterosexual reproduction. They encourage normative family promoted through state policy of rewarding proper families and punishing improper social reproduction—whether literal reproduction or the cultural reproduction of values. Tracing the broad outlines of a political project anchored in the reproductive bodies of women, I argue for greater attention to the ways the heteroactivist project is central to right-wing populism and its multi-scalar manifestations.

Keywords

Populism, gender, nationalism, sexuality, heteroactivism

Introduction

On the 20th of March 2019, the Embassy of Hungary hosted a conference in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. entitled "Make Families Great Again," hosting attendees from both countries (Cha 2019). The conference title draws from President Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again," implying a commonality of purpose between countries and political movements. The title also implies a temporal linkage from a once great past to a once again great future through the family. The desire to be at home in the homeland is a theme across a variety of right-wing populist movements that situate themselves against a globalized world of flows of capital, ideas, and bodies they see as representing a transnational elite threatening traditional sources of order and meaning, especially the family, gender norms, and children.

The centering of a nostalgic version of the family invests heavily in the importance of reproduction to ensure the survival of the nation as a coherent unit across time, giving rise to a politics of gender and sexuality that draw on what Browne and Nash (2017) have called heteroactivism, a "coordinated ideological response to sexual and gendered equalities rooted in an unwavering belief in the centrality of heteronormativity (the confluence of gendered, classed, and racialized norms within man/woman divides that come together in normative heterosexual relationships) as foundational to a healthy and sustainable society." (645). The political rationality of right-wing populist heteroactivism, however, cannot be understood without contextualizing the political imaginaries in which the heteronormative family is central to national identity and noting that these components "are not secondary to challenges to liberal democracy, but integral to them." (Nash et al. 2021, 995). The nostalgic vision of right-wing populism views the reproductive function of the family as a linkage as that which can guarantee passage of national and racial identity through generations and provide a source of order and stability in opposition to those forces—linked with liberal democracy—that are seen as destabilizing. Across different global contexts, right-wing populists describe the family as under siege by hegemonic neoliberalism, and include it in their political project utilizing the state to secure the family through political, cultural and economic support (Cooper 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Erel 2018).

This piece theorizes about the specific uses of heteroactivism by right-wing populists to examine the ways it is central to their arguments not only as an end goal of their political activity—the desire to recenter the heteronormative family in social and political life—but also as a resistance to liberalism's hegemony which, in turn, has shaped right-wing populisms in ways that have commonalities as well as geographic specificity. I draw heavily from Ernesto Laclau's understanding of populism as "not a fixed constellation but a series of discursive resources which can be put to very different uses" (2018, 176). In this account the ideological content of populism is not determined in advance, instead it is a way of making a political argument that must be understood within a particular context in which it is deployed. Understanding the discursive nature of populist reason—which pits "the people" against an "elite"—as a political action of constituting a people can elucidate some elements of right-

wing populism that have taken heteroactivist positions and, I argue, can connect these positions to the often-racialized articulations of "the people" in nativist politics.

My argument begins with a brief discussion of populist reason to consider the ways heteroactivism is part of the constitution of "the people" in right-wing movements emergent in different locations. My claim is not that there is a *necessary* connection between right wing politics, populism, and heteroactivism, but that political movements generated in opposition to specific political forces share a common rhetoric celebrating the heteronormative family. This is what Anderson (2000) calls theoretical bridgework: identifying common strands across a set of practices suggesting a shared discursive space that invites further examination of specific manifestations. I explore this through what I call nativist natalism, a belief in the natural, traditional family with biological ties as the embodiment of "the people" in opposition to an elite who seeks to impose a new, egalitarian gender and sexual order. My analysis looks specifically at the rhetoric of demographic crisis within right-wing populism, linking together an essence of "the people" to a particular national space in ways that view social and literal reproduction as a matter of urgent public, political concern, a move that allows heteroactivist movements to position themselves as under siege even when they have captured state power. Response to this perceived crisis of demography has connected far-right populists with opposition to "gender ideology" by both asserting the value of traditional gender norms and by critiquing feminist, queer, and trans politics. These linkages reproduce biological notions of identity tied to historical ideas of race, sex and national identity. I argue that the *populist* element of right-wing populism positions it as an oppositional movement to the failures of liberalism by providing what they see as a more secure anchor for the social order.

At Home with Populism

To understand the specific manifestation of right-wing populism that centers the defense of the heteronormative family I argue Laclau's understanding of populism as an *activity* rather than as a set of political propositions or set of values is useful in drawing our attention to the ways political movements generate political identity. Laclau (2018) approaches the logic of populism by resisting the tendency to view populism as an intellectually deficient mode of political analysis that relies on empty appeals to identity, particularly a shared national or class-based unity. Instead, he suggests the ideological content of populism is not determined in advance; populism is a way of making a political argument that must be understood within a particular context in which it is deployed. Further, and perhaps most usefully, he describes populism as performative. It does not reflect a fusion of pre-constituted or pre-political identities or interests; it does not represent a 'people' that pre-exists the populist claim or generated by institutions. Instead, populist politics—like all politics, according to Laclau—creates the political subjectivity it claims to represent, bringing a "people"—as an object of identification—into being.

What makes populism unique is the form the struggle takes. Political identification is always a double act of articulation, one of creating chains of equivalence (forging a sense of identity) and difference (differentiating from one another or what is to be resisted). In populism,

the chain of equivalence is the articulation of a "people" or public that represents itself as universal and united. At the same time this "public" must differentiate itself in an antagonistic manner from that which it resists. Populist politics tend to emerge in situations or moments of crisis in which a segment of the population does not feel represented by existing institutions, feels it has unmet political demands, and is skeptical of the ability of the existing systems to meet those demands (Urbinati 1998; Panizza 2005, 6; Moffitt and Tormey 2014, 387). Populism frames itself in opposition to the status quo (Panizza 2005, 24). While this disaffection from existing political structures may emerge in a variety of contexts, many recent theorists have linked the upsurge in populism—particularly right-wing populism—to the particularly de-politicizing effects of neoliberalism and a turn to technocratic bureaucracy and market solutions for political problems (Mouffe 2005; Brown 2015)[1], as well as the moralizing of politics through human rights discourse that places particular claims beyond contestation (Kováts 2018, 534).[2] Thus populism in some contexts can be understood as a rejection of liberal democracy with its emphasis on institutions and representation, and a reinvigoration of popular sovereignty in the face of forces of individualism, social anomie, and political stagnation (Urbinati 2014).

What often unifies these democratic demands is not an equivalence or sameness in the demands themselves, but a commonality in a perception of the opposition—that is, a common enemy—understood to be an elite imposing itself on. Populism is always, therefore, a politics of identity in a process of identifying "the people," not on the basis of a prior identity or set of interests but through the political articulation of a shared grievance, drawing strength from "its deliberate vagueness, for it enables it to blur the contours of 'the people' sufficiently to encompass anyone with a grievance structured around a perceived exclusion from a domain of interaction and decision hegemonized by economic, political, or cultural elites" (Arditi 2005, 82).

This understanding of populism is useful in understanding it as a politics of antagonism without specific political content, explaining why populist movements have emerged from different sites on the political spectrum at different times and in different places according to the specific antagonisms of a given moment and how they are mobilized politically. Observing heteroactivism as part of what Laclau (2018) calls a logic of equivalences within right-wing populism encourages us to examine the similarities generated by shared antagonism, in this

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[1] This claim should not be read to imply that populism is always at odds with neoliberalism. As Kaltwasser (2012) Weyland (2003), and others have noted, populist regimes have been used to institute neoliberal economic policies.

[2] Müller (2016) discusses one element of populism as the moralization of politics by creating an oppositional field of the "good" people versus the "bad" elite. This moralization is not unique to populism, however. Right-wing populists often appeal to individuals or groups based on perceived injuries generated by moral condemnation. As Kováts (2018) notes, moralizing language such as labeling Trump supporters as "deplorable" or accusations of homophobia, transphobia, or racism often reinforces the aggrievement felt by segments of the population.

case to neoliberalism, and differences created by the ways in which those grievances are articulated within specific places.

The framework of heteroactivism encompasses a range of different political movements resisting recent gains made around gender and sexual equalities that include a range of "ideological response to sexual and gendered equalities rooted in an unwavering belief in the centrality of heteronormativity (the confluence of gendered, classed, and racialized norms within man/woman divides that come together in normative heterosexual relationships) as foundational to a healthy and sustainable society (Browne and Nash 2017, 645). Seeking to re-center the heteronormative family, these movements have overlapping concerns with, for example, the Christian Right in the United States, or the "anti-gender ideology" movements sometimes connected with Catholicism[3], but they are not reducible to these movements. Instead, these movements frame their resistance to these changes as a defense of the traditional family that can have religious justifications, but quite often frame their concerns in the secular language of the defense of society and the public good (Browne and Nash 2020a; 2020b). The justifications mobilized in heteroactivism include a variety of different and sometimes conflicting values, including freedom of speech, parental rights, religious freedom, traditional values, anti-neoliberal/anti-colonial/anti-pluralist claims in a reassertion of moral sovereignty (Wilkinson 2014, 368; Browne and Nash 2014; Nash et al. 2021). Thus, heteroactivist claims share a grounding in a belief about the heterosexual family as the natural source of social order but significant differences emerge in what specific political and social changes they are framed as resisting and how. As Nash and Browne (2021, 74) argue

> Oppositional ideologies can no longer be understood through the labels of 'anti-gay,' 'homophobic' or 'transphobic', and these oppositions go beyond anti-gender such that the term heteroactivism names the activisms and ideologies that seek to reassert the superiority of monogamous, binary cis-gendered, coupled marriages as best for children and society. These ideologies are inherently geographical, drawing both on local and individual circumstances, but also transcending national boundaries.

Heteroactivist arguments circulate transnationally through influential leaders, political organizations, and online. Where the arguments are made makes a significant difference in terms of the political articulation of the grievance and the alliances made by specific political actors participating in networks of political activity within and beyond national boundaries. These alliances are diverse, inclusive of anti-gay organizations often positioning themselves within a framework that is not explicitly homophobic but that, instead, asserts values such as moral sovereignty, free speech, or local control, even contrasting themselves with what they consider to be "real anti-gay" beliefs, often located in Islam, allowing a simultaneous assertion

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[3] As discussed below, opposition to "gender ideology" in many places has roots in the Catholic Church's critique of the language of gender in family planning programs globally. Critics of "gender ideology," however, are diverse and include some self-identified feminists and others who base their opposition in other concerns.

of national values against immigration and "other" cultures in ways that often allies with more left-leaning movements. Some right-wing movements have sought to build a bridge between what is seen as a reasonable accommodation of LGBTQ+ issues in opposition to homophobia, seen as originating in foreign populations, while also arguing that LGBTQ advocates have gone "too far" in displacing the heteronormative family (Spierings et al. 2017; Spierings 2021). Literature on homonationalism, a term coined by Jasbir Puar (2018), indicates the ways that nationalist projects often position themselves as pro-gay as a way of positing their moral superiority to other cultures. Like femonationalism (Farris 2017)—movements utilizing feminist claims against immigration-- homonationalist movements utilize the recognition of gay rights in their context to condemn foreign and immigrant populations and to elevate themselves as the ideal. Many authors have noted, for example, that homonormativities often lend themselves to participation in right-wing populist movements in resistance to what is seen as the "real" threat represented by religious, racial or ethnic others, leading to coalitions around anti-migration policies (Dahl 2017; Sörberg 2017; Nash and Browne 2021). Some right-wing leaders deploy heteroactivism on behalf of "Western culture", as a reassertion of traditional, often Christian values. On the other hand, heteroactivism has also been used as a critique of "the decadent West" as an imperial or colonial power (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Both assert the need to vigorously defend "the family" from disruptive external forces.

The heteroactivist framing is useful in understanding why so many right-wing populisms center the heteronormative within their political claims. Their political arguments focus less on moral evaluations of sexuality or gender identity to argue that changes to prevailing gender and sexual norms require political action on behalf of the family. Instead, this defense is necessitated by an elite imposition of an unnatural, cosmopolitan egalitarian order that threatens the political and biological sovereignty of "the people" by disrupting the social reproduction of the nation. While focused on national identity, the defensive nature of these movements creates a transnational political community resisting social and political change reflecting how "[V]arious right wing and conservative individuals and groups have both historically and in the contemporary period, claimed victimhood or oppression in the face of so-called leftist or progressive activism around equalities or civil rights" (Nash et al. 2021, 982). Variants of heteroactivism build upon a shared premise of the popular desire for the preservation of the heteronormative family and rely upon a sense of it being threatened. In some places this may take the form of resistance to national or local governments seen to be captured by elites, in other cases the "elites" may be defined as a part of an intellectual or economic ruling group operating at the global scale, or may be linked to NGOs or foreign governments operating externally (Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Graff et al. 2019). As I discuss in the next section, this threat is articulated in right-wing terms through the idea of a demographic crisis, couching the need for public support for the family in terms of not just a crisis of economic need but of national identity.

Demography As Destiny

Right-wing populism draws on nostalgia, centering on narratives of perceived loss of status or an existential threat to a sense of self locating the threat in global elites, demographic change, and eroding national sovereignty (Miller-Idriss 2020). The heightened anxiety about the threat of demographic change is often channeled into championing heteronormativity and traditional gender norms to encourage reproduction (Gökarıksel et al. 2019). Foucault (1978) outlined the centrality of the idea of demography to the modern nation-state as a project deeply invested in the health and productivity of the body politic including in issues of birth and death rates, and immigration and emigration[4]. The focus of concern on demographic trends is part of a national imaginary with a particular temporal dimension, one that sees population as an object of investment that must be grown to guarantee continued growth and productivity across economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Demographic crisis is generated by an imbalance of reproductive interests that threatens the survival of the nation. The demographic crisis is therefore simultaneously forward looking in managing the looming threat of extinction while being anchored in the past in a desire to preserve tradition to pass on to those future generations.

Managing the population in this future-oriented manner requires that we "instrumentalize women, men, and children as useful biological-demographic tools for state needs" (Rivkin-Fish 2010, 722). *Nativist* natalism, however, is less focused on the overall economic concerns with a declining population than with the character of that population, placing emphasis on the changing demographics of the population, culturally, racially, and nationally. The future of the nation must be perpetuated through a lineage that links to past generations in both literal kinship and in figurative traditional values, linking this project to nativism, "an ideology which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the "nation") and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the nation- state" (Mudde 2017). This version of natalism therefore is not only concerned with the quantitative nature of demographic terms but what they would consider the quality and identity of that population, concerned with preserving the nation with native stock. In the words of Steve Bannon, former editor of conservative online outlet *Breitbart* and former campaign manager and advisor to President Trump "a country is more than an economy. We're a civic society" (Bump 2017). Bannon, who describes himself as an opponent of globalism, sets up the nativist perspective against a more calculating world view of citizenship premised on economic exchange. This perspective takes seriously the attachment to national identity and fears of demographic collapse, whether in the literal decline of population from declining birthrates or emigration or in its transformation into forms that may not be recognizable to the existent population (Krastev and Holmes 2019).

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[4] For a detailed discussion of the role of the idea of gender as a part of demographic governance see Repo (2016). Repo argues the idea of gender as a category separate from biological sex is emergent in the mid-20th century as a medical discourse seeking to normalize intersex and transgender subjects and which later becomes a technology of governance that makes gender a malleable category of social intervention.

The rejection of an economistic world view shapes right-wing antagonism to neoliberalism, including its twin manifestations in what Nancy Fraser (2016; 2019) calls neoliberalism's progressive and reactionary modes. Progressive neoliberalism, embracing identity politics that is perfectly compatible with capitalist exploitation, offers little in terms of addressing material crises of distribution and shrinking the welfare state even as it extends symbolic recognition to various marginalized groups. Reactionary neoliberalism, on the other hand, privatizes the political by displacing responsibility onto individual families, embracing a rhetoric of family values that is wholly compatible with the deregulated market and economic inequality, a coalition between economic liberalism and social conservatism (see also Brown 2006; Cooper 2017).

Right-wing populism offers an alternative in a natalist politics that views the welfare of families as a vital social and political concern, supporting popular programs to ease the economic burdens of childrearing, including programs like tax breaks, health care provisions, subsidized childcare, flexible parental (especially maternal) leave policies, and even free vehicles (Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Cha 2019; Ellyat 2019; Kingsley 2019; Walker 2019; Cabezas 2022). The justification for these public investments draws from arguments about the social and personal benefits of the family extending beyond material well-being or economic concerns and into participation in a nation-building exercise through reproduction. In Russia, for example, concerns about demographic decline have united religious and political leaders behind a project of encouraging reproduction since the early 2000s. White papers issued by the Russian government argued that "population growth and the well-being of the nation are explicitly linked to fertility and family values" (Stella and Nartova 2015, 22). Policies endorsed by the government to pursue these goals have included abortion restrictions, promotion of marriage, a "maternity capital" program (later branded "family capital") and opposition to "non-traditional families", meaning same-sex relationships. This set of policies "emphasizes the biological and symbolic continuity between kin and nation and advocates a return to spiritual and family values grounded in Russia's prerevolutionary past" (Stella and Nartova 2015, 21). These visions demonstrate the idea of the preservation of the national identity anchored in reproduction by "native" citizens who, in participating in traditional family forms, also embody the values and ideals of the nation. Notably this project places the burden of national survival on families with an emphasis on cultural values rather than economic or political power.

This emphasis on national identity has also meant that pro-natalist campaigns have often been accompanied by similarly popular restrictions on immigration, requiring the response to the demographic crisis to be not just a quantitative increase in population but a specific increase in the size of the *native* population. This view is often expressed in natalist rhetoric that defends specific policy prescriptions as a resistance to liberal cosmopolitanism and through the collective embrace of the national family.

In 2017 at a speech before the World Congress of Families, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared:

In Europe today we are witnessing the fiercest struggle between competing visions of the future. The starting point of this debate is that while there are more and more people surrounding us, in Europe our population is on the decline. The time for straight talking has come. Europe, our common homeland, is losing out in the population competition between great civilisations. Fewer and fewer marriages are producing fewer and fewer children, and the population is therefore ageing and declining. In Europe today there are two distinct views on this. One of these is held by those who want to address Europe's demographic problems through immigration. And there is another view, held by Central Europe – and, within it, Hungary. Our view is that we must solve our demographic problems by relying on our own resources and mobilising our own reserves, and – let us acknowledge it – by renewing ourselves spiritually. (Orbán 2017)

While invoking a "population competition" between civilizations, Orbán presents the real antagonism as a conflict of ideas between "those who want" to encourage immigration and those who would prefer to increase the national stock whom he describes as part of a shared people endorsing "our view," "our own resources" and "our own reserves". The populist language here generates a collective "people" united against not just migrants, but elites within Europe who would encourage immigration at the expense of the well-being of native populations (Kešić and Duyvendak 2019). As Orbán argued in another speech, the demographic crisis is one of quality, not quantity:

There are fewer and fewer children born in Europe. For the West, the answer (to that challenge) is immigration. For every missing child there should be one coming in and then the numbers will be fine. But we do not need numbers. We need Hungarian children. (Ellyat 2019)

The demographic crisis must be solved by us through a renewal of the family, a project that entails personal responsibility and public policy to achieve the collective good of a nation defined in part in racialized terms. The transmission of national identity occurs not only in the cultural reproduction of specific values but in the literal passage of genetic identity through biological reproduction.

Gender as Other: National and Transnational Movement

The reproduction of the nation will require *our* children which will involve not only the public investment of resources but a symbolic investment in the heteronormative family and specific ideas about sex and gender that tie this project to heteroactivism. The project of nationalist natalism is tied specifically to opposition to what they call "gender ideology" or "genderism" in ways that define these ideas with the populist frame as an external imposition onto the people as constituted against the elite. A significant literature has documented the history of the terminology and associated activism. Scholars trace its lineage primarily to the Vatican and Catholic resistance to transnational feminist organizing, particularly around issues

of family planning, reproductive justice, and sexual autonomy, and later in broader coalition of religious and non-religious conservatives expressing opposition to LGBTQ rights (e.g., Graff 2014; Case 2016; 2019; Kaoma 2016; Kováts 2017; 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Correa et al. 2018; Corredor 2019). This resistance manifested in transnational and national level forms of activism, including networks of non-governmental organizations, conferences, online publications, workshops, activist groups, and so on, that have been organizing at least since the 1994 U.N. Conference in Cairo. These efforts escalated after the 1995 conference in Beijing when activists sought to expand the U.N.'s framing of the issue of gender inequality to encompass a broader slate of issues that came to be identified as "gender ideology" by its critics. These critics focused specifically on attempts to utilize the language of "gender" and a broad platform connecting and protecting the rights of women and gender and sexual minorities.

Many anti-gender activists focused their critiques on family planning programs that emphasized women's sexual autonomy in shaping when and how to form families and empowerment programs encouraging women's economic independence, thereby disrupting traditional families and gender norms. Their arguments focused on both the material disruption of local practices and the foreign values espoused through "gender ideology." These critiques highlight associations between the language of gender, programs of gender mainstreaming, and the use of gender equality as an instrument of governance arising from academic and professional discourse and from institutions like the EU and the U.N. as well as development NGOs.[5] "Gender," therefore, becomes a signifier of a neoliberal order claiming to empower individual women to manage their own material and reproductive well-being in ways that benefit the general social good. "Gender" can also, therefore, be a point of resistance to the dominant order from the right seeking to reassert a natural sexual hierarchy, allowing right-wing populists to claim the heteronormative family and traditional gender norms as the radical alternatives to both the imposition of liberal values and a source of social value even as these politics often support the status quo of economic and political power.

This argument is evident in, for example, the following statement of László Kövér, a member of the FIDESZ party in Hungary:

> We don't want the gender craziness. We don't want to make Hungary a futureless society of man-hating women, and feminine men living in dread of women, and considering families and children only as barriers to self-fulfillment … And we would like if our daughters would consider, as the highest quality of self-fulfillment, the possibility of giving birth to our grandchildren. (quoted in Zsubori 2018)

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[5] For a discussion of gender as an instrument of neoliberal governance, specifically in the context of the EU, see Repo (2016).

Kövér blames the subversion of gender norms (feminine men) for the looming demographic crisis (the futureless society). He adds that the genuine will of the people—as he repeatedly claims to speak for the "we" of Hungary—is a reproductive future secured when women embrace their roles as defined by family relationships (daughters and mothers).

These arguments targeted not only problematic policies but suggested the underpinning ideas were the root of the problem, with one Polish Bishop claiming "the ideology of gender presents a threat worse than Nazism and Communism combined" (quoted in Sierakowski 2014). "Gender ideology" is often associated with intellectual elitism, leading to critiques of Gender Studies scholarship as frivolous and unproductive (Harsin 2018; Zsubori 2018; Evans 2019; Nash and Browne 2021). For example, Jair Bolsonaro's 2019 inaugural address included a pledge to resist the teaching of these values and to "fight the 'ideology of gender' teaching in schools", "respect our Judeo-Christian tradition" and "prepare children for the job market, not political militancy" (quoted in Evans 2019). Bolsonaro's rhetoric reflected the success of anti-gender activists in linking sexual politics to intellectual elitism as a grave threat to national order. In 2017 after a petition was circulating opposing her appearance at a University in Brazil. Judith Butler, the author of *Gender Trouble*, was heckled at a lecture where she was told to "leave our children in peace" and was later confronted by protestors at the airport who accused her of being a pedophile[6] (Miskolci and Pereira 2018).

A persistent theme across these movements is a location of the ideology as originating elsewhere. For many Eastern European gender ideology activists, for example, "European values" promoted by the EU are a common reference (Stella and Nartova 2015, 30). Another frame, seen in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa, is a view of gender ideology as a new form of colonial or imperial imposition that some activists have gone as far as to call "Ebola from Brussels" (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Depicting gender ideology as a contagion positions it as a potential threat to national security and identity (Kováts 2017; Corredor 2019; Miller-Idriss 2019, 28). Some of this language emerges from the original source of criticism of gender ideology including the Catholic Church itself, with Pope Francis describing the idea as "ideological colonization" (Case 2019, 649). Other claims originate from activists that include conservative religious figures (not limited to the Catholic Church or even Christianity) and right-wing populists who utilize the claims to argue for greater cultural and national self-determination while simultaneously fostering transnational networks of organizing (Hennig 2018; Korolczuk and Graff 2022).[7]

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[6] Significantly, Butler's work is not uncontroversial among feminists, many of whom have critiqued her argument in *Gender Trouble* that dismantles not only gender norms but the sex binary. After the protest, a group of scholars organized a conference to discuss not only Butler's ideas but broader organizing in the feminist and queer community in Brazil (see Miskolci and Pereira 2018). Neither "gender ideology" nor its opponents are a homogenous or unified bloc.

[7] Importantly critics of gender ideology are not always at odds with either feminist or gay rights organizations. They also position themselves against what they perceive as real gender inequality originating elsewhere, usually in foreign and immigrant communities. Sara Farris's work on femonationalism (2017) has noted the ways that

Rejecting "gender ideology" is therefore not just about the specific ideas about gender and sexuality or policies geared toward gender and sexual equality, it is also opposition to the liberal hegemony represented by the institutions, governments, and agents associated with these ideas. Kövér's argument against the "gender craziness" is a criticism of a form of feminism that draws from neoliberal ideology, finding empowerment in entrepreneurial self-fulfillment and individual self-expression, a concern that many feminists share (Fraser 2016). These critiques of "genderism" can be articulated with other populist claims about threats to traditional values coming from elite ideas, institutions, and power. Within right-wing populism, heteroactivism expresses more than a reassertion of the primacy of heterosexual reproduction and the nuclear family, and a repudiation of those movements that challenge this primacy; reproduction of, and through, the heteronormative order becomes *the* battleground on behalf of national sovereignty and self-determination.

Body Politics: Sex, Race, and Security

The critique of gender ideology, however, includes an additional component that articulates not only with a critique of the neoliberal order, but that also has an affinity with racialized national identity. This argument is not that criticism of gender ideology is inherently or always racist but that right-wing populist movements often bring together sex and race through the articulation of a need to reproduce the nation in both biological and cultural senses. Criticisms of gender ideology specifically argue the "made up" concept of "gender"— or a socially constructed and contingent set of norms and expectations—, unconnected from the "reality" of biological sex, has eroded the social order. A statement from the Vatican exemplifies these claims that gender ideology

> denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family…leads to educational programs and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time. (quoted in Kaoma 2016, 286)

The claims here that the denial of biological sex is a form of personal choice in which the individual is "not constrained by norms, nature and biological sex" echo critiques of

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many feminists have positioned themselves as rescuing some women from patriarchal cultures (often Muslim), while then utilizing their low-cost labor to do familial or service labor, often employing them at home under the banner of integrationalist campaigns. Many far-right groups have adopted the language of protecting women from foreign men as a part of their nationalist agenda co-opting the language of feminism on behalf of anti-immigrant campaigns while also critiquing native feminists for not recognizing the "real" enemy (see also Erel 2018). Similar alliances are often made in opposition to immigrant groups on behalf of gay rights. The contingency of these alliances demonstrates the political nature of articulation, identities formed *through*, rather than prior to, politics.

neoliberal individualism, and one shared by some feminists (Kováts 2018, 533). Invoked in a nationalist register, the reference to a determinate biological identity fixed prior to political articulation is commonly invoked as a foundation for a social order rooted in natural stability or a "common sense" in which there can be no indeterminacy (Scott 2019, 29). Drawing from a "romantic and gendered" ideal of the sovereign and homogenous homeland, nationalism roots itself in an emotional appeal to "ontological security", one often drawing from the idea of a purity or homogeneity of national identity passed through the family unit (Agius et al. 2020, 440). The tendency to co-opt metaphors of the family to describe nationhood—the homeland—is not coincidental. The nationalist imaginary shares with heteroactivists the invocation of the family as both the timeless, universal order of humankind, and as a fragile institution that, if undermined, could threaten our survival.

McClintock (1993, 63) describes the anchoring of national identity through the analogy to the familial in which both become naturalized:

> nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space. The term 'nation' derives from 'natio': to be born. We speak of nations as 'motherlands' and 'fatherlands'. Foreigners adopt countries that are not their native homes and are 'naturalized' into the national family…yet at the same time…the family itself has been figured as the antithesis of history...the family offers a 'natural' figure for sanctioning social hierarchy within a putative unity of interests. Second, it offers a 'natural' trope for figuring historical time.

The reproduction of the nation through women has been a way of securing the purity of the nation, but in ways that require the regulation of women's bodies to ensure the proper identity of the nation across time, placing women at the heart of the project of reproducing the nation—literally as biological containers, symbolically as the nation's property, and socially as those responsible for enculturating children. Women are expected to serve not just as the vessels for material reproduction but to manage every day social reproduction in the care and cultivation of children (Collins 1998; Erel 2018). However, these processes are not only gendered but racialized through the idea of national belonging, descent, and kinship as relationships contained within blood passed from body to body (Baldwin 2012). Natalists instrumentalize reproduction as a means of resistance to challenges to heteronormativity *and* as a means of securing national identity because of a presumption that national identity is carried in and passed through kinship and blood, linking both a desire to encourage reproduction in *our* population and discourage *their* immigration.

These processes are familiar historically as all projects of national and social reproduction have been entangled with the management of reproduction to ensure the passage of identity through generations (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997; Erel 2018). Women's bodies, as the vessels of reproductive futurity, are necessary to maintain national purity and continuity. Consequently, a variety of political movements advocating for national sovereignty from white nationalism to anti-colonial struggles have laid claim to women's bodies as a means of preserving the national order, viewing the idea of the nation

itself reliant on "regulating material and reproductive labor" including the "violent occupation of women's bodies and reproduction" within nation-building projects (Fixmer-Oraiz 2019, 7-8) More recently, this is reflected in state policies, like family separation at the United States border, driven by a desire, in particular, to deter families from crossing, or disallowing pregnant migrants from entering the United States where they might potentially give birth, bestowing birthright citizenship on their children.[8] As Emel (2017) argues, migrant families pose a particular threat as the presence of children implies a new future generated by demographic change, a fear visible in imagery utilized by nationalist movements depicting migrants as parts of teeming hoards streaming across borders. The presence of families implies immigrants have found a new *home* rather than a temporary respite or as migrant labor, thus transforming the natural, national "home" of the native population.

The utilization of reproduction as a means of organizing national identity has made the management of the heteronormative family (and the exclusion of others) a part of the project of the racialization of national identity. The survival of the nation materially and temporally is bound up in the reproduction of heteronormativity, allowing the passage of blood and property through generations, preserving it in the national family:

> reproduction has been associated all but exclusively with women's bodies and the domestic realm—with private issues of fertility, childbearing, and motherhood, rather than with politically charged issues of racism, nation building, and imperial expansion…interconnected ideologies of racism, nationalism, and imperialism rest on the notion that race can be reproduced, and on attendant beliefs in the reproducibility of racial formations (including nations) and of social systems hierarchically organized according to notions of inherent racial superiority, inferiority, and degeneration. (Weinbaum 2004, 3-4)

As Weinbaum argues, race as a concept implies a biological difference carried in and passed through the body making it inextricable from the processes of reproduction. In natalist rhetoric the racial dimensions of reproduction are evident in the desire to preserve the "healthy national body" against imagery of "invading caravans," "infestations" "degeneracy" or other sexualized imagery of immigrants and refugees such as "Mexican rapists" or "Muslim savages" (Miller-Idriss 2019). This imagery of the "racially pure, homogenously 'natural' cultures and nations" is contrasted with "globalist," "neoliberal" or "multiculturalist" imagery of "open borders," suggesting a flow of goods, bodies, and blood that threatens the purity of national communities (Miller-Idriss 2019, 28).

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[8] An account of the development of these policies under the direction of special adviser to President Trump, Stephen Miller, makes clear that the targeting of children and families is deliberate: "Miller made clear to us that, if you start to treat children badly enough, you'll be able to convince other parents to stop trying to come with theirs" (Blitzer 2020).

The dynamics of naturalizing and privileging particular families have drawn on existing hierarchies of gender and race that make clear distinctions between what are perceived of as "desirable and undesirable mothers", or those who are seen as able to reproduce the biological and ideological matter of the nation in appropriate ways. Thus, while some (white) women are encouraged to reproduce, the fertility of racialized women is seen as threatening. These debates unfold within the particular historical and geographical contexts that generate understanding of who is capable of proper motherhood. In the European context, racialized women that include Roma and Muslim women are seen as threatening in their fertility and in being "unfit" mothers who cannot reproduce national values, generating pronatalist policies for some women and increased surveillance and governance for others (Boulila 2019). In the United States racialized motherhood draws on the persistent stigmatization of Black mothers understood to be threatening in their fertility and presumed rejection of the nuclear family in favor of women-centered households. Added to this rhetoric is the fear of foreign fertility, embodied in particular in immigrants from Latin America seeking citizenship in the United States via so-called "anchor babies" and "birth tourism".[9]

Neither the heteroactivism nor the anti-immigration politics that characterize pro-natalist projects are exclusive to the contemporary right. What sets it apart is the linkage of the "biological and ecological concepts, linking a sense of belonging to the body…ecological ideas like roots and soil or to ideas of kinship and home" (Miller-Idriss 2020, 34). The demographic concerns with national identity and reproduction enable an articulation with ideas about racial difference anchored in different national spaces tied to versions of ethnonationalism built on the "reemergence of natural human hierarchies predicated on inherent differences among racial groups and communal connections to place and ancestry" (Stern 2019, 58). These connections make sense of how heteroactivism and opposition to gender ideology are often part of building connections between more mainstream political figures and more fringe, far-right activism as well as among different national and transnational actors (Hennig 2018). If liberal ideology is associated with specific forms of racial egalitarianism and individualism,[10] the adoption of racialized forms of national identity as resistance to the neoliberal order is open for political articulation (Fraser 2019). Just as feminist and queer challenges to traditional gender norms are rhetorically positioned as the imposition of liberal elite values on a traditional populace, anti-racist and immigrant movements are redescribed not as the assertion of claims by traditionally disempowered groups, but as the liberal elite's imposition of a cosmopolitan order on a disempowered majority.

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[9] The repeal of birthright citizenship was pushed particularly hard by the right-wing think tank "Center for Immigration Studies", citing concerns about the costs of "birth tourism" and worries about so-called "attenuated citizenship," or citizens with minimal cultural or political allegiance to the United States. See https://cis.org/Report/Birthright-Citizenship-Overview [last accessed 20 January 2023].

[10] As with gender equality, the nature and achievement of racial equality within liberal democracy is a point of heated contention.

These connections are illustrated by the white supremacists marching in Charlottesville, Virginia who led chants of "You Will Not Replace Us" that turned into "Jews Will Not Replace Us". The phrase, popularized online, was a reference to the book by Renaud Camus (2018) titled *The Great Replacement*, claiming that global elites were seeking to suppress national birth rates in European countries while elites (mostly Jewish) sought to replace these populations with (non-white) foreigners (Penny 2019).[11] Renaud's arguments echo white supremacist claims from the past about a cabal of elites, that includes Jews as well as feminists, academics, and race traitors, seeking to eradicate native born populations through practices like abortion, immigration, interracial marriage, and voluntary childlessness (Belew 2018). The sense of being under siege from conspiratorial forces transforming culture, institutions, and even bodies (bloodlines), echoes the heteroactivist and anti-gender ideology claims of victimhood discussed in previous section, blaming a loss of status on elites who have subverted the natural order.

The contemporary circulation of replacement theory links a set of political claims that are simultaneously racist and anti-imperialist, anti-egalitarian and anti-capitalist, arguing that a false cosmopolitan universalism seeks to erase natural differences and hierarchies: "globalized Communism and globalized capitalism are equally suspect and a citizen of the world is an agent of imperialism" (McAuley 2019). These pronatalist projects position themselves as guarantors of a national identity in a world of global flows. National identity provides a point of security in a world of rapid change and flux, a property in the body that can serve as a stable sense of self across time and generations, an ideal emphasizing the importance of racialized reproduction in which only *our* children can secure *our* future.

These pronatalist projects rest on the depiction of the experience of what Stern (2019, 75) calls "vertiginous time", or a seeming instability of the current order experienced in a very real loss of material wellbeing, status, and a sense of order. Contrasted with this disorienting experience is an anchor in what Weinbaum (2004, 28) calls a "biological notion of time and…the nation as a reproducible organic entity," a being that may become immortal through the futurity offered by children but if—and only if—their propagation is managed.

If reproduction provides a societal anchor in time and place, biological reproduction also provides a sense of ontological certainty to a sense of self. In pro-natalist/anti-immigration accounts the unseen but understood passage of identity through blood ties and kinship provides a way to distinguish between real and fake not by reference to the same "truth" of science propagated by elites, but by felt certainty. Though scientific racism remains a popular discourse in many circles (Saini 2019), much of the natalist discourse rests on a sense of felt belonging that is less about rational confirmation than so-called "common sense" or natural community. Rejecting appeals to abstract individualism that justify egalitarian or universalist

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[11] Renaud's Great Replacement theory was cited in mass shootings in New Zealand and El Paso, TX in 2019 as well as at mass murders at synagogues in the United States in 2018 and 2019. See Charlton 2019; Penny 2019.

human rights claims, the natalist position instead argues for a felt sense of community derived from emotional attachment and rooted in the biological body of reproduction.

Arguing against immigration on the grounds that populations are not substitutable—one group cannot merely be replaced by another without fundamentally changing the nature of that community—Camus (2018) makes what McAuley (2019) calls an aesthetic claim—an appeal not to whether it is true or good--but whether it is beautiful. In his characterization of the difference between stocking of the national stable with "native-born" children versus immigrants, Camus mourns the changing face of the nation as a consequence of immigration as a counterfeit or poor copy of the original: "The fake is at the heart of the global replacement…It is a world where everything is fake, where everything is the imitation of what things should be" (quoted in McAuley 2019). This idea of an anchoring of reality in the brute fact of reproduction comes through in a comment made by Brazilian President Jair Bolsanaro at a press conference with U.S. President Donald Trump, stringing together a set of terms that make sense through right-wing populist articulation: "Brazil and the United States stand side by side in their efforts to ensure liberties and respect to traditional family lifestyles, respect to God our creator, and stand against gender ideologies and politically incorrect attitudes and against fake news" (Kirby 2019).

Conclusion

A vast amount of scholarship has addressed the recent surge in populist politics in its left and right-leaning variants including the linkages to gender and race. My contribution is an understanding of the ways the political rationality of populism has shaped specific right-wing populisms that link heteroactivism to racial logics through the fear of a demographic crisis. These movements link the racial politics of nativism to the sexual politics of heteroactivism, shifting the focus of perceived grievances about a loss of economic and political status to a dominant liberal democratic order seen as empowering elites and eroding national sovereignty. These arguments circulate in transnational global movements, at times deliberately through activist networks and in other cases in an uncoordinated way through virtual communities sharing ideas online. Whether instantiated in party politics and governmental policies or circulating as ideas in texts and imagery, right-wing populism draws from the ideal of the family at the heart of democracy as self-governance. Grounding themselves in the fertile soil of reproduction, these projects stake a claim to being "true", based in the reality of biological essentialism against both the politics of gender and sexual equality and the rights of migrants. While grounding themselves in nature and common sense, these movements articulate a sense of grievance against the perceived success of feminist and LGBTQ+ movements viewed as originating from elites or foreigners.

With appeals to moral sovereignty and traditional values heteroactivist arguments can be utilized in far-right populism that claims to represent the real interests of the people grounded in national soil and the reproduction of the national body. These arguments appropriate critiques of (some) neoliberal rationality and universal human rights that far-right populists associate with global elites who violate their own professed democratic values by

imposing their foreign values (and invasions of foreign bodies). In this reaction against gender and sexual rights, these movements concentrate their politics on the reproduction of the nation and thus the reproductive bodies of women in a way that makes heteronormativity an imperative. These movements, therefore, have attacked neoliberalism on cultural terms focusing on demographic concerns about birth rates and immigration as well as critiquing both the egalitarian and individualist elements of liberalism as eroding traditional families and gender and sexual norms.

While I have explored many of the interconnected themes emergent across different geographic contexts, I believe this political project unfolds differently across locations, reacting to similar global forces but in particular ways that call for more careful analysis of specific struggles over national identity that center the reproductive family and, particularly in the case of these right-wing movements, justify the state playing an active role in the promotion and enforcement of these values. This analysis echoes "a pressing need for more nuanced, complex, and spatially sensitive engagements with the relationships between far right/conservative groups/populism and sexual and gender politics both within and outside of heteroactivism" (Browne and Nash 2020b, 78). Central to this analysis must be a continued attention to the ways the oft-noted gendered and racial components of right-wing populist arguments are part of a larger politics over the meaning and consequence of liberal democracy, an insight that may inform further theorizing about populist and far-right rationalities and empirical study of far-right populism in action.

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