
Melinda COOPER, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York NY, Zone Books, 2017)

Puzzlement over the deep contradictions embedded in the right-wing coalition is something of a commonplace in contemporary political discourse. Put simply, the basic problem is how the right manages to smooth over seemingly intractable divisions between the libertarian impulses of Chicago-style neoliberals and the moral engineering required by committed social conservatives. In her dazzling tour of contemporary right-wing politics, *Family Values*, Melinda Cooper offers a surprising answer to this puzzle in finding not simply that neoliberals and social conservatives have reached an accommodation but actually share a *single* project in remaking the family in the years since Fordism faltered. This is not to say neoliberals and social conservatives orient to this project in the same way—specifying their differences is part of what Cooper’s expansive narrative achieves—but simply that each is indispensable to what the other aspires to accomplish: on the one side, the displacement of the social state by privatized provision within the family, and on the other the shoring up of a disciplining mechanism that constitutes individuals according to a normative vision organized around entrenched hierarchies of age, gender, race, and sexuality.

Of course, the basic insight here Cooper owes to the political theorist, Wendy Brown, who observed in a pair of influential essays both the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism and the centrality of the family to the liberal (and by extension, neoliberal) project.¹ Cooper’s advance here is to weave these two critically important observations together, arriving at a somewhat different understanding of neoliberalism and social conservatism as deeply intertwined, if not identical, political projects. Brown’s own account suggests that neoconservatism required neoliberalism to “prepare the ground” so that its authoritarian tendencies could take root.² Cooper inverts this formulation, suggesting that it is neoliberalism that

¹ See Wendy Brown, 2006, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization,” *Political Theory*, 34 (6): 690–714; Wendy Brown, 1996, “Liberalism’s Family Values,” in W.

Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 135–165).

² W. Brown, 2006. *op. cit.*: 702.

requires the coercive orientation of social conservatives to support its remaking of the family. Notably, Brown and Cooper are not offering incompatible accounts here, but taking up different sides of a symbiotic relationship.

In this exhaustively researched book, we learn of the early emergence of this shared neoliberal-social conservative project in the firmament of the inflation crisis of the 1970s, its maturation on the fraught terrain of welfare state politics, the further evolution of the right's re-engineering of the family in the shadow of the AIDS crisis, and finally the innovation of new techniques of familial discipline with the proliferation of student debt and the spread of faith-based welfare. Across this varied landscape, several key themes emerge. The first is the importance of writing gender, race, and sexuality into the core tenets of political economy. Social difference is not here merely a context in which market processes operate, but constitutive to their very functioning. Indeed, Cooper convincingly reorients the narrative of the political economy of welfare capitalism around the crisis of the Fordist family, opening up familiar problems to a fresh angle of vision. We are accustomed to thinking of generous state spending as allowing a partial decommodification of labor, potentially giving workers greater leverage in struggles with their employers by enabling their survival outside of wage work. Cooper's analysis makes it clear that the manner in which progressive state policies allowed individuals to break free of the confining bonds of family was equally consequential, whether in the form of delinking welfare and social insurance from the promotion of normative heterosexuality or enabling young people to pursue educational opportunities unencumbered by familial obligations. In the same manner that the right endorsed the withdrawal of state support as a mechanism for disciplining labor, so it also sought to discipline errant family members, who had momentarily liberated themselves from oppressive patriarchal norms in their sexual and familial relationships.

Indeed, herein lies the secret of the neoliberal-social conservative fusion, which was grounded in a shared reaction to the challenge to sexual normativity posed by liberation movements beginning in the 1960s. Notably, Cooper's argument unsettles the commonly held view that neoliberals take the individual, and not the family, as the basic "unit" of society. One might reasonably expect that neoliberalism's rampant individualism untethered from any broader system of ethics would render neoliberals unsuitable political partners for social conservatives. But while it is the case that neoliberals were willing

to make significant concessions to the anti-normative impulses of the New Left, this is not because neoliberalism lacks an ethics grounded in traditional familial structures. Instead, Cooper argues that the family is as important to the neoliberal project as the individual, but the assumption is that the family, much like the market itself, is a spontaneous site of social ordering. Remove the heavy-handed intervention of the state, neoliberals believe, and the family, with its immanent ethics, will flourish. Social conservatives, by contrast, see the family as existing in a more fragile state, a sphere outside of and potentially contaminated by the corrosive effects of market exchange. In the social conservative view, the necessity of coercive state action to protect the family is self-evident. These starkly opposed social ontologies of the family have actually melded in practice, however, as neoliberals cede to the necessity of state interventions to buffer the family from various pressures that would otherwise erode its central role in society.

Cooper's surprising discovery here—this is the second key theme—is that neoliberals are at bottom Durkheimians, strongly oriented to the noncontractual basis of contractual relations. This is surprising not only because it provides a sociological underlay to the neoliberal position, but also because the union between neoliberals and social conservatives would not seem to require Durkheim. A more pragmatic impetus for this collaboration, also present in Cooper's narrative, is a kind of political accommodation between neoliberals insistent on enforcing the economic obligations of kinship, and social conservatives intent on rekindling the family as the key moral institution in society. But, in fact, the union of neoliberals and social conservatives is more than merely political; it reflects a shared, if sometimes disavowed, understanding that the market does not supply its own pre-requisites but requires the family as a necessary support. Gary Becker's account of familial altruism is only the most familiar statement of a view that underpins the neoliberal worldview writ large: "unfree" noncontractual obligations are the necessary foundation of a society organized around "free" market exchange.

The third key theme of the book is the role of credit markets as a critical mechanism both in reasserting the economic primacy of the family and in suppressing the revolt against its entrenched forms of authority. Notably, Cooper here revises a growing literature in sociology that has emphasized the manner in which a dramatic expansion of credit beginning in the 1980s allowed American and European polities to escape—at least for a time—the putative

discipline of the market by deferring economic obligations far into the future.³ While this analysis may hold at the level of the political economy, when viewed from within the family, Cooper's account suggests that the expansion of credit reinforced rather than relaxed disciplines. The pathways here are varied, and full of paradoxes. Cooper first observes the manner in which liberalized credit markets stimulated the performative sexuality of Queer Nation before "domesticating" gay politics as the resulting asset-appreciation threatened to deprive same-sex couples denied marriage of an inheritance. "The expansion of consumer credit did indeed cater to lifestyles and risk markets beyond the norm," Cooper writes, "but the process of asset accumulation with which it was necessarily allied and the forms of collateral that it inevitably demanded, exerted an equally powerful stimulation to discipline oneself within the legal framework of inheritance" [161]. A second pathway by which the expansion of credit cemented new mechanisms of discipline and control is reflected in the massive growth of student debt over recent decades. The displacement of grants by loans as the primary form of student aid, Cooper argues, both relieved the state of a substantial fiscal burden and reinserted young adults into a system of familial obligations enforced by debt. Fiscal probity and the disciplinary authority of the family bore down on young adults who had broken free of the constraints of both.

In highlighting these themes, Cooper's account offers a brilliant analysis of "family values" as the fulcrum of right-wing politics. Of course, the account is not without flaws, and my reading suggests two in particular that bear addressing here. The first is an overly totalizing view of the neoliberal-social conservative fusion, which allows little to fall outside of its reach, co-opting all resistance among those who would push against the stifling embrace of the heteronormative family. Cooper's analysis of the campaign for same-sex marriage is a case in point. Cooper, of course, is not alone in detecting a certain conservatism in the pivot towards marriage as the central issue in the struggle for gay rights—a conservatism underscored by the foregrounding of property and inheritance in the marriage campaign. But Cooper's suggestion that queers who fought for same-sex marriage traded

³ For variations on this theme, see Colin Crouch, 2011, "Privatized Keynesianism: Debt in Place of Discipline," in C. Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge UK, Polity Press: 97-124); Greta R. Krippner, 2011, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of*

Finance (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press); Wolfgang Streeck, 2012, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (New York, Verso Press); Sarah L. Quinn, 2019, *American Bonds: How Credit Markets Shaped a Nation* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

a liberatory sexual politics for domestic conformity within the Fordist family is too stark. What Cooper fails to consider here is the very real possibility that, rather than simply reproducing the confining sexual normativity of the Fordist family, the inclusion of gays in marriage might transform this institution. Similarly, Cooper's treatment of campus politics in the era of "micro-aggressions" as simply conforming to the individualistic logic of neoliberalism gives too much power to that logic to bend all political expression to its shape. Indeed, one hesitates upon reading Cooper's outright dismissal of the politics of "campus outrage" when struggles over Title IX and the #MeToo movement make it clear that individual experiences of discomfort can potentially cumulate into durable institutional change. The old feminist adage that "the personal is political" is not particularly neoliberal, not least because the "personal" becomes "political" precisely through a process of collective understanding and meaning-making.

An arguably even more serious problem is reflected in Cooper's overly totalizing view of the family itself. To be fair, Cooper is not concerned in this book with providing a sociology of the family, merely an analysis of the family as refracted through neoliberal and social conservative lenses. Nevertheless, Cooper holds up that image—monolithic, conformist, authoritarian—as the reality of the family itself. In doing so, she is explicit about countering a naïve sociology that sees the family primarily as a site of social protection offering shelter from the market. Cooper argues against this "leftwing nostalgia" by reminding us that the family is a site of a hierarchy and domination.⁴ While the point is a necessary one, Cooper overcorrects in making it. In fact, as Nancy Fraser (herself the target of Cooper's criticism) has recently argued, both of these observations are true: the family is a site of social solidarity and protection, but it is also an institution where entrenched social hierarchies are enacted and reproduced.⁵ But these elements can be separated, and it is the task

⁴ Cooper actually goes further than this, suggesting that insofar as these left critics identify the neoliberal erosion of the family wage as the problem, *their implicit remedy is the restoration of the Fordist family*. But Cooper's logic here is faulty: it is possible to be critical of neoliberalism's destabilization of the family (and even to note the paradoxical contributions of feminism to this outcome) without necessarily wishing to return to an era in which the "price" of social

protection from the market was women's subordination within the family.

⁵ Fraser's argument is actually broader than this suggests, as she is concerned with the "social" writ large (including, of course, the family). See Nancy Fraser, 2013, "Between Marketization and Social Protection: Resolving the Feminist Ambivalence," in N. Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (New York, Verso Press: 227-241).

of critical theory to do so. In this regard, the notion that the Fordist family might be reconstructed on more egalitarian lines is not, as Cooper suggests, an unwitting paean to neoliberals and social conservatives but a necessary aspiration for feminist politics. Indeed, there is a kind of irony in Cooper's pessimism about the family: while she allows the right considerable agency in taking apart the Fordist family and reassembling its elements to serve its political ends, she denies the same agency to the left. If there is one lesson of this important analysis, it is that there are wide crevices in the institution of the family that should allow for creative political reconfigurations on the left as well as the right.⁶

G R E T A R . K R I P P N E R

⁶ My thinking here owes a significant debt to James Ferguson's writings on neoliberalism. See especially James Ferguson, 2009,

"The Uses of Neoliberalism," *Antipode*, 41 (S1): 166-184.