

United States: The alt-right anti-trans crusades. Gender essentialism, social reproduction, and the tasks of the Left

Tuesday 11 October 2022, by [MARONEY Eric](#) (Date first published: 5 October 2022).

Tempest member Eric Maroney explains how far-right attacks on transgender people stem from profound social anxiety over the crises posed by neoliberal capitalism and how socialists should take up trans liberation as part and parcel of the struggle for socialism.

2020 marked an enormous shift in the movement for trans liberation, as the chant “Black Trans Lives Matter” became a feature of the multi-racial, multi-gender rebellions that swept the United States that summer. The popularization of the chant not only expressed the emancipatory desires of the most marginalized section of the trans community but also signaled the emergence of trans liberation politics within the broader Left. And yet, much like the politics of Black liberation, the growth of trans liberation politics--the passing of what *Time* Magazine termed the “transgender tipping point”--has also coincided with a backlash of political reaction.

Why are we sliding backward now? In this article, I first provide a brief survey of that political reaction--both legislative and cultural--and then make an argument for what is animating that reaction. Finally, I suggest ways that the Left might seriously engage the politics of trans liberation.

2022 has been a landmark year for anti-trans legislation. Across the country, [238 anti-LGBTQ bills](#) were introduced, about half of which specifically target transgender people. To put this regressive trend into perspective, 2017 saw the introduction of just 41 anti-LGBTQ bills. The 2022 wave of reactionary legislation primarily targets trans youth, but as advocates have warned, this has proved to be just the beginning. To situate us in the present political context, what follows is a brief sample of the recent anti-trans legislation.

In February, Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued an [executive order](#) banning youth access to gender-affirming care. Strikingly, Abbott did so by reinterpreting an existing state statute to designate gender-affirming healthcare as child abuse. He then instructed the Department of Family and Protective Services to begin investigating the parents of transgender children. This year, Texas also passed a law preventing trans athletes from participating in scholastic sports.

Then, in March, with much fanfare, Florida governor and 2024 presidential hopeful Ron DeSantis signed what has become known as the Don't Say Gay bill into law--a law that makes it a crime to even acknowledge non-cisgender people or non-heterosexual families and relations in public schools. The law effectively forces queer teachers and students back into the closet. In August, local lawmakers reversed course and instituted a ban on Medicare coverage for gender-affirming care for both youth and adults. Florida now joins 10 other states who have enacted similar bans, some of which have already been successfully challenged in court. If you are unfamiliar, gender-affirming surgeries cost tens of thousands of dollars. (In fact, 16 years ago, I used a student loan to pay for my own gender-affirming procedures--a loan that I was only able to pay off last year thanks to Public

Service Student Loan Forgiveness). Importantly, the Florida law targets poor trans people who already struggle to obtain adequate medical care and will force the [9,000 transgender Floridians](#) receiving Medicare to effectively detransition.

Finally, in July, South Carolina joined Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, Ohio, and Illinois in allowing medical providers to refuse care when it would violate their religious beliefs—a thinly veiled move that will allow for medical discrimination against trans and queer people as well as cis women seeking reproductive care.

The anti-trans political reaction has also entered the cultural field, as local GOP legislators, supported by right-wing think tanks, have turned to banning books depicting queer characters or tackling issues of race and diversity. In its annual report on book censorship, the [American Library Association](#) found that there were 729 attempts to remove school, university, and library materials in 2021, resulting in 1,597 book challenges or removals. Not to be outshone, Texas Rep. Matt Krause sent a [list of over 850 titles](#) to the state's Department of Education for removal. Over 60 percent of the books listed address LGBTQ people or issues.

The banning of books has also spilled outside the public-school walls as the GOP, their political talking heads, and their alt-right audience have set their sights on LGBTQ family events and Drag Queen story hours. In June, a group of five Proud Boys members [disrupted](#) a story hour event in San Lorenzo, California where they shouted homophobic slurs and generally intimidated patrons. There are countless other examples and stories we can point to, but I think this will suffice to illustrate the harrowing political moment in which we find ourselves. Without a doubt, the attacks against transgender and gender-nonconforming people are a calculated political play aimed at motivating conservative voters ahead of the midterms. However, there is more at work here than simple political cunning. Unpacking the logic of this political reaction will better prepare us to defeat it.

In his book [The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump](#), Corey Robin argues that conservative thought is preoccupied with fixed hierarchies and perceived loss. Robin writes, "Conservatism is a meditation on and theoretical rendition of the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back" (p. 4). Emerging in a period of extreme political polarization, multiple and intersecting crises (economic, climate, housing, policing, imperialist—you name it), the present movement of political reaction represents just that. It is a movement born out of a rejection of both neoliberal multiculturalism and neoliberal conservatism, and it is a response to the relative social and political advances made by women, LGBTQ people, and people of color over the last several decades.

Seemingly in contradiction, a [study from Data for Progress](#) shows that a slim majority of voters actually support protections for transgender people, and according to a [Pew Research Study](#), LGBTQ and transgender issues are not top concerns of voters ahead of the midterms. So if this is the case, what is motivating the wave of legislative attacks?

Despite its relative marginality, the alt-right maintains an outsized influence on American politics, and this influence is reflected in popular and political discourse, the waves of reactionary legislation, and even street violence. The alt-right is a formation that is profoundly animated by anti-feminism and a perverse adherence to biological essentialism. And, the anti-trans politics of the alt-right serve as a window into a broader political worldview in which reactionary attitudes toward race and gender are evidence of socio-economic anxieties in connection with a perceived loss in status.

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Who are the alt-right?

In her book [Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate](#), Alexandra Minna Stern describes the alt-right as an array of political actors: “disaffected libertarians, paleoconservatives, racialists of varying stripes (white separatists, supremacists, nationalists, and ethnonationalists), men’s rights activists and misogynists (like MGTOW—Men Going Their Own Way), neo-reactionaries, anti-Semites, and xenophobes with conspicuous animus against Latina/os and Muslims” (p. 17). The Anti-trans reaction is present throughout this reactionary constellation and is perhaps most profoundly expressed by the Proud Boys.

Founded in 2016 and often described as the alt-lite gateway to the alt-right, the Proud Boys describe themselves (in an [interview](#) with NPR producer Zoe Chace) as a “male fraternity” of “western chauvinists.”

What distinguishes the Proud Boys from other alt-right formations is its outward rejection of race-based essentialism. Although the group’s collaboration with explicit white nationalists and internal communications exposes an organization rife with racism and racial hostility, outwardly the Proud Boys have claimed opposition to white supremacy and have even touted several high-ranking members of color. In fact, when former leader Gavin McInnis first announced the name of the organization during a May 2016 episode of his podcast, he did so while also proclaiming that the

“Proud Boys are over race....We are sort of like the alt-right without the racism.” As disingenuous as this statement is, it clears the way for a different foundational perspective—one that centers on anxieties about men’s diminished social standing and the threats of feminism. In the same podcast, McInnis proclaims that the Proud Boys are “pro-dude,” and that the organization believes that “most women would be happier at home.”

Elsewhere, Proud Boys members have expressed concerns that women are taking over men’s roles, earning more university degrees, and that men—especially white Christian men—are becoming marginalized. In the interview with Zoe Chace, one Proud Boys member insists that “We [men and women] are biologically different. We’re biologically a binary.” Anxieties directed at the gender-based binary are commonly expressed within the organization, and this adherence to gender-based biological essentialism reveals a core tenet of the group’s animating beliefs.

To members of the Proud Boys, the erosion of gender roles is a primary cause for the degeneration of Western society. As Stern [explains](#),

“The alt-solution for gender disorder is to put women back in their ‘natural’ place—to re-establish the biological binary through the formation of hypermasculinized tribes, patriarchal control of hypergamous women, and pronatalist incentives, as well as dating apps for white women to mate and propagate the race.” (p. 201)

Biological essentialism and the alt-right

The alt-right’s antifeminism undergirds its preoccupation with transgender politics. This preoccupation evinces a violent reactionary logic that casts trans people as degenerate threats to the natural order. Looking at the cultural and ideological production of the alt-right underscores this point, and although examining reactionary words and thought is troubling and potentially triggering, considering the rhetoric the alt-right uses illustrates its fluid migration into the political mainstream. What follows are two examples of cultural artifacts that underscore this point.

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In a 2014 blog post called “[Transphobia is Perfectly Natural](#),” Gavin McInnis describes trans people as mentally ill and defines the process of transition as one of self-mutilation. The post, originally published on *Thought Catalog*, is representative of alt-right thought broadly. Despite its sophomoric tone, the document remains an important artifact that expresses unmistakable distress about the very existence of trans people. McInnis’s insistence on violent imagery to describe the act of transition betrays considerable anxiety with what is often an intimately private medical decision. McInnis explains, “The only thing more normal than castrating yourself and taking a ton of hormones to grow tits is chopping them off.” He describes transmasculine individuals who medically transition as having “their cunts turned inside out” to be replaced with a “weird cheese blintz looking thing.” In this way, the blog presents a profound attentiveness to the body. Trans people are not only characterized as disfigured and grotesque, but also as a threat to biological harmony and common sense.

Notably, transmasculine people, who are often absent from popular representations of trans identity, are uniquely targeted by the document. In fact, some of the most grotesque language is reserved for what McInnis casts as vaginal mutilation. This is notable because it expresses the very core of alt-right anti-feminism. In particular, McInnis’s rendering of transmasculine transition echoes the same anxieties that arose during Zoe Chace’s interviews. What is most alarming to the alt-right mind here is that “women are trying to become men,” and men—especially white Christian men—are becoming marginalized.

McInnis’s blog post exemplifies a common alt-right urgency to protect the supremacy and boundaries of cisgender maleness. McInnis suggests that women have a “primal urge” to experience vaginal sex and this inescapable, biologically-determined truth renders any attempt at female to male transition illegitimate: “You are not a man.” McInnis makes his position clear, but in so doing, he also asserts the superiority of maleness. Men are “awesome,” he writes. They “invent shit” and know how practical things work. For McInnis, maleness correlates with an intelligence and expertise

that women are unable to acquire or replicate. Relatedly, reaction to transfeminine identities takes on an element of in-group policing. Members of the alt-right, a primarily cismale formation, demonstrate an intense preoccupation with defining individual masculinity in opposition to feminine markers.

The preoccupation with trans politics exemplified by McInnis's blog post is characteristic of the alt-right movement generally. A collection of alt-right [Discord chats leaked](#) by *Unicorn Riot* following the fatal 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville expose overwhelming anxieties about transgender identities and reveal patterns of in-group gender policing. A query of the Discord database returns 10,000 posts containing the word "tranny," another 10,000 containing the term "gender ideology," and still another 7,224 containing the word "transgender." Discussion threads reveal significant apprehension about feminine characteristics in men alongside reader confessions of body dysphoria. In one thread, participants express alarm over "soy boys," a term that designates an effeminate man. Users in the same thread raise concerns over estrogen-linked soy products and share warnings about feminine secondary sex characteristics activated by soy consumption.

Similarly, the centrality of masculine hierarchy is also evidenced within the Discord leaks. The terms "incel," "beta," "alpha," "Chad," and "cuck" make repeated appearances among the threads and expose a culture eminently concerned with masculine rank and pedigree. The attention to male hierarchy and the in-group policing of gender are paralleled by fanatical levels of misogyny and transphobia.

Merging with the political mainstream

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In June 2021, an unsubstantiated tweet claiming that a "man" had exposed "himself" to a group of women and girls at the Wi Spa in Los Angeles went viral. [News of the tweet](#) spread through far-right forums and news sites, even appearing on *Fox News* where six segments of the story aired in a single week. Media pundit Tucker Carlson "repeated, without evidence, that a 'man' was naked in the 'female kid's section' of the spa. Another host warned that what happened at Wi Spa will occur 'all across the land.'" In this instance, the diffusion of hysterical, alt-right propaganda into conventional conservative media channels sparked violence. Following the spread of the tweet into the mainstream, the spa, known to be LGBTQ inclusive, became the target of anti-trans rallies on two separate weekends that month.

Writing for the *Guardian Newspaper*, Sam Levin and Lois Beckett describe a [melee of violence](#)

resulting in at least one stabbing and note the presence of the far-right Proud Boys (Levin & Beckett, 2021). Carlson, often considered a gateway to the alt-right, regularly reproduces extremist talking points on his prime-time series, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*. In 2017, the media personality came under fire for echoing the [“great replacement”](#) myth—a fantasy that animates much of the racial and xenophobic reaction of the [white identarian groups](#) who were responsible for the fatal “Unite the Right” rally later that year.

Carlson has long parroted alt-right rhetoric concerning transgender people. Writing for the [Advocate](#), Trudy Ring details Carlson’s anti-trans record. “Carlson has a long history of attacking transgender people.... In 2018, in one episode he belittled gender-neutral pronouns and said there’s no such thing as a trans community, and in another he hosted a trans-exclusionary radical feminist. Last year he said trans equality is a ‘boutique issue ... for rich people’ and doesn’t concern ‘any normal person’” (Ring, 2020). Since then, Carlson has become one of the leading voices in the reactionary crusade against transgender people, and he regularly addresses the topic of transition. In April, Carlson appeared on his show equating gender-affirming care to “castration,” describing trans people as “ghoulish and dangerous and horrifying.”

Political reaction to transgender people is virtually hegemonic among the alt-right and conventional conservatives alike. In particular, transphobia finds effortless expression among right-wing populists. From Donald Trump enthusiast and freshman congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene’s reactionary tweets and vocal opposition to the Equality Act to the former President’s expulsion of transgender service members from the military, anti-trans discourse is professed from the highest offices of power. Notably, the statements emanating from both conservative media personalities and the Trumpian wing of the Republican Party are not so far from McInnis’s assertion that transgender individuals are, “mentally ill people [who] mutilate themselves” (McInnis, 2014).

Origins of the political reaction

Political reaction to transgender people is often described as a backlash to both increased visibility and relative social and political advances. Writing for the *Southern Poverty Law Center*, [Cassie Miller](#) remarks, “Transphobia has long been an animating force within the white nationalist movement, but the tenor of that hatred has changed ... at the same time the transgender rights movement is more active than ever.” The politics of the transgender movement have certainly become more commonplace, both among the radical Left and within the architecture of neoliberal multiculturalism.

However, the concentrated right-wing response moves beyond that of mere backlash. The alt-right’s attempts to regiment gender stem from broader socio-economic anxieties. To the alt-right, Western society is experiencing an avoidable economic and cultural decline. According to [Stern](#), “The main culprits of this desolation are feminism and leftism, which, according to the Proud Boys [and other Alt-Right formations], spur women to assume ill-fitting male roles based on the specious logic of gender equity. The cure for this malaise is the full restitution of the male/female ‘biological binary’” (p. 164).

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Several scholars [have argued](#) the present political reaction to gender is bound up in a broader response to declining living standards accelerated by neoliberal policies beginning in the late 1970s. Neoliberal capitalism has upended social bonds and economic stability. Economist and geographer [David Harvey](#) defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practice that proposes human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). In practice, this has meant deregulation of markets and industry, privatization of public goods and services, and disinvestment in the social welfare state. According to Harvey, “Redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have been a feature of neoliberalization” (p. 16). Citing a study by Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy, Harvey emphasizes that “from the very beginning” neoliberalism was “a project to achieve the restoration of [ruling] class power” (p. 16).

Indeed, the practice has led to overwhelming class inequality. In 1970, the ratio of CEO to median worker compensation was 30 to 1; today that ratio stands at 351 to 1, where [CEO pay has risen](#) 1,322 percent since 1978. This sharp increase in inequality paralleled by disinvestment in social welfare has left working families in peril. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that 38.3 million households were food insecure. Likewise, housing insecurity has increased over the past four years. According to the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#), on an average night in 2020, 580 thousand U.S. residents experienced homelessness. Moreover, a significant rise in drug addiction and mental health crises are destroying American families. In 2019, over [seventy thousand Americans died](#) resulting from drug overdose, and [1.4 million people attempted suicide](#).

Taken as a whole, these statistics present a grim picture of American life, leading the alt-right to conclude that the family unit is under attack. The alt-right believes that the erosion of kinship ties, community relations, and the emphasis on individualism are the results of feminism, the sexual revolution, and multiculturalism. As such, the alt-right positions itself as protector of the family against this onslaught. The terms “trad wife” and “trad husband,” both appearing in the leaked alt-right Discord chats 10,000 times, suggest that heteronormative gender roles are integral to the movement’s antidote for neoliberal despair.

In this way, the alt-right blames feminism and “gender ideology” for the social crisis. The term “gender ideology”, widely appearing in a European and Latin American context, has begun to present in the rhetoric of the U.S. Right broadly. In June of 2021, The Heritage Foundation, a significant U.S. right-wing think tank, published a report called “How the Equality Act’s Gender Ideology Would Harm Children.” [Sonia Correa](#), a research associate at the Brazilian Interdisciplinary Association for AIDS, discusses the use of the term:

“The semantic frame “gender ideology” reveals itself as an empty and adaptable signifier, encompassing a broad range of demands such as the right to abortion, sexual orientation and gender identity, to diverse families, education in gender and sexuality, HIV prevention and sex work, a basic basket that can be easily adjusted to the conditions of each context. Its discourses construct unusual analogies between feminism, queer theory and communism.”

Armed with this frame, the alt-right associates challenges to biological essentialism and a perceived decline in male status with multicultural elites who have little concern for the material reality of

American families.

Neoliberalism and the family

Writing about the Anti-Gender movement in Europe, a campaign similar in composition to the U.S. alt-right, [Graff and Korolczuk](#) argue that the current moment is one of political realignment. While the political Left identifies the source of familial precarity as an intentional set of socioeconomic policies, the Right identifies the source as a lapse in values (p. 167). As conspiratorial as it may seem, there is a kind of logic to these claims. According to Graff and Korolczuk, as the deregulation of capitalism displaced workers and eliminated many of the social provisions of the Keynesian era, transnational corporations flourished. Because neoliberalism insists on the open flow of capital, Western corporations experience nearly unlimited mobility. As a result, individual family units weather the devastating effects of regressive economic restructuring; simultaneously, a new set of values are projected through Western enterprise.

In this sense, the multicultural public relations of Amazon and Google present themselves as both an ideological and material threat. Not only has the nature and wages of work changed, but that change has also coincided with a corporate identity politics which can be interpreted as undermining the family and traditional sex roles. Neoliberalism is defined as both a set of market policies and a cultural project that disrupts social patterns. Traditional gender roles then become the political right's antidote to the alienation and individualism of neoliberalism. Graff and Korolczuk emphasize that the anti-gender movement is not a simple backlash to the relative advances achieved by LGBTQ people and cisgender women; it is also bound up in rejection to the neoliberal order wherein "western liberal elites are equated with global economic elites" (p. 164).

Capitalism in general and neoliberalism in particular rely on the privatized family to reproduce its workforce—what Marxist-feminists define as social reproduction. Tithi Bhattacharya [defines](#) social reproduction as the labor necessary for ensuring the maintenance of the workforce. This labor includes the feeding, clothing, and educating of the working population, the physical and psychological care of children and the elderly, and the biological reproduction of future workers (Bhattacharya, 2017). And, although Bhattacharya notes that this socially reproductive labor is increasingly fulfilled by both or all genders, she acknowledges that it is most often supplied by women. Bhattacharya insists that employers have a substantial interest in how social reproduction is carried out.

Generally, the ruling class opposes the kind of Keynesian interventions that would allow for a socialized provisioning of social reproduction; nevertheless, it has a keen interest in ensuring that families produce the kinds of workers who have the correct aptitudes and attitudes for employment. Further, a weakened welfare state that individualizes the provisioning of social reproduction results in more pliant workers. As a result of domestic precarity, both men and women become more "vulnerable in the workplace and [thus] less able to resist."

In the preface to the second edition of [The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Marxism at the Intersection](#), Holly Lewis writes:

Capitalism's requirements on those it raises to be women have never been anything but a contradiction bordering on impossibility. Women are required to be the reproducers of the working class...as well as sellers of their own labor power.... And where cis heterosexual women are unavailable to fulfill the duties as the angels of social reproduction, the unemployed, children, and queer people (especially queer people without their own children) are next in line to do this unpaid work. (pp. xix-xx)

As Lewis persuasively argues, gender discipline cannot be untangled from the work of social reproduction. In this sense, the wave of anti-trans legislation shores up the borders of womanhood, while also relegating trans and gender nonconforming people to an underclass that can be drawn upon as a reserve army of care laborers. The reversal of *Roe v. Wade* and the proliferation of state-level abortion bans performs a similar function. Regulating and surveilling childbearing bodies leads to greater precarity, and precarious bodies are more vulnerable to both productive and reproductive exploitation.

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The ruling class recognizes there is a crisis in both productive and reproductive labor. To address the former (i.e., easing the tight labor market by throwing people out of work), the Central Bank is raising interest rates, which many economists argue will guarantee recession; however, the latter crisis is not so easily tackled. The neoliberal evisceration of state provisions has strained the family leading to a crisis of care. According to a report by the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP), “10,000 Americans turn 65 each day, and the number of older adults will double over the next several decades to top 88 million.” With eldercare priced out of reach for most, families are responsible for providing care in the home and, again, this is highly gendered work. Termed the Great Resignation, in 2021, 4.53 million U.S. workers left jobs under the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some left in search of better pay and safer working conditions, many dropped out of the formal economy to perform care work in the home. Where families can afford to purchase private care, the work of care, especially eldercare, is often left to underpaid Black and Brown women who must also provide this (uncompensated) labor to their own family units. According to the AARP, the strain on the formal and informal care industry will lead to a shortfall in care workers of 151 thousand by 2030 and 355 thousand by 2040.

The ruling class and its ideologues do not agree on how to maintain profitability while also addressing the crisis of care. Biden’s failed Build Back Better legislation, which sought to extend an expanded child tax credit, provide universal pre-K instruction, and invest in eldercare, acknowledged the unsustainable cost of care for working-class families. The paltry Inflation Reduction Act, which passed in its place, does not. Segments of the ruling class have embraced the Trumpian wing of the Republican party’s political reaction, while other segments have reaffirmed commitment to neoliberal multiculturalism. [248 corporations](#) including Amazon and Boston Consulting Group (who are both infamous union busters) signed on to a petition opposing the wave of anti-LGBTQ legislation. Other signatories include Dow, Shell, Google, and Pfizer. Although these companies might have rainbow logos on their social media accounts, they are no friends to queers. Instead, they believe that LGBTQ workers have assimilated into capital and can be conscripted to

provide the same social reproductive labor that cis/hetero families do.

What can the Left do?

First, it is essential to understand that the attacks on transgender and gender nonconforming people are part of the ruling-class offensive against social provisioning. Trans rights are not a fringe issue or a cultural battle, and the Left must take them seriously. The right understands this and believes that any welfare intervention must go to the “right” kinds of families—white middle-class families, who comprise the bulk of the Right’s base.

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Second, because the attack on trans people centers on the categorizing, ordering, and regimenting of bodies, it cannot be decoupled from the return to carceral law-and-order politics, which has historically been used as a tool to categorize and discipline the bodies of Black, Brown, and queer people.

Finally, the Left must go beyond reactive demands. Queer liberation is not just about rolling back the most recent legislative attacks, but also about progressive tax reform, state-funded healthcare, state-funded childcare, and elder care. All these material preconditions are required for the bodily sovereignty of all working people, trans-bodied and cis-bodied people alike. Importantly, the Left must do this in a non-reductive way that acknowledges and affirms the unique exploitative conditions that trans people face. Equally important, settling for a politics of representation that situates trans identities in the context of corporate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion campaigns not only fails to meet the material needs of trans people, but also provides further credibility to the alt-claim that trans and queer liberation are the conjuring of a wealthy elite.

The far-right attacks on transgender people stem from profound social anxiety over the crises posed by neoliberal capitalism, which ruthlessly privatizes care and imperils ordinary people’s lives. Scapegoating transgender and gender nonconforming people for transgressing essentialist definitions of gendered family values is thus part and parcel of the privatization of social reproduction necessary for neoliberal capitalism to sustain itself. Every fight against exploitation and oppression is thus a fight for trans liberation, and revolutionary socialists should forefront trans liberation struggles as fundamental to our anti-capitalist politics.

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P.S.

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<https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/10/the-alt-right-anti-trans-crusades/>