

From Germany to the US - Climate change, sexual violence, abortion: far-right foregrounds brutal social reaction

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The brutal face of hard right and fascist reaction has been vividly on display on the issues of women's rights and the climate crisis in the past few weeks, writes Phil Hearse.

In Germany the AfD (Alliance for Germany) launched a vicious attack on inspirational teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg, picturing her as an extremist and suggesting she needed treatment for her 'psychosis' – a shabby reference to her autism.

Rejecting near-unanimous scientific opinion, the AfD said that the climate justice movement is scare-mongering about levels of CO₂ emissions, asserting that after all carbon dioxide is a beneficial plant nutrient. Climate change denial is an open position of Nigel Farage, who claims that the climate crisis is a scam forced on the world by 'globalists' as part of their plan to impose world government. De facto climate change denial is also a position of the right-wing National-Liberal coalition in Australia, which was returned to power on May 18 [1]. Italy's deputy premier, Matteo Salvini, is a climate change denier and on May 8 Italy refused to sign up to the Paris agreement objective of zero emissions by 2050. And Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement Nationale wants to pull France out of the Paris Climate Change treaty because it is a 'communist project'. Denial of the climate crisis is a standard hard-right and fascist position, more and more openly revealed.

The attack on abortion rights by Trump's supporters in the United States is reaching fever pitch, and now the hard right and Christian fundamentalists see the possibility of achieving their ultimate goal – a total ban on all abortion throughout the country. The May 14 decision by the Alabama legislature to outlaw nearly all abortions will now be reviewed in the Supreme Court, which in turn seems likely to uphold the ban, effectively overturning the 1973 Roe vs Wade judgement that legalised abortion.

Results in the May Spanish election gave the fascist Vox party 2.6 million votes and 23 seats in the Cortes (parliament). Amazingly, the Vox political breakthrough came on the back of its defence of five men charged with the gang rape at the Pamplona 'running of the bulls' festival in 2016. The men, who called themselves 'the wolf pack' and included two soldiers and a policeman, claimed the victim had consented, using video on their mobile phones showing the victim silent with her eyes closed as their 'evidence'.

The court decision to reject a rape charge and only convict them of assault caused outrage and huge demonstrations against the decision. But Vox realised that its target audience – the most reactionary sections of Spanish society – would sympathise with a narrative which demonised the victim and her supporters. Vox claims that much of the outrage about sexual violence is caused by 'radical feminists' who are 'extremists', and in any case ignores the real rapists who are mainly immigrants. Vox leader in Andalusia Francisco Serrano frequently tweets his contempt for 'feminazis'. But Spanish surveys show that some 65% of college-age women regard themselves as feminists.

According to Meaghan Beatley:

'Chief among Vox's anti-feminist measures, as provided in a 100-point program, is the repeal of a 2004 Gender Violence Law designed to better protect women from domestic violence and better prosecute offenders. The party also calls for the dissolution of federally funded feminist organizations; the creation of a Family Ministry in lieu of the current Gender Ministry; and removing sex change and abortion procedures from public health services [2].'

In the past decade it could have appeared that the new hard-right and fascist movements were soft-peddling rabid reactionary positions on women's rights, the environment and LGBT+ issues. For example, Marine Le Pen of the French Rassemblement National claimed she was gay and lesbian friendly and wanted 'to protect our gays and Jews' – from Muslims of course. At the same time, she opposes same sex marriage and defends 'family values'.

But the tendency of the far right to hide its reactionary positions on just about everything, while concentrating mainly on targeting migrants, is changing. As the far right gains more votes and feels more confident it brings to the fore its core reactionary social positions.

Since coming to power in 2016 Donald Trump has withdrawn America from the Paris climate treaty, but also purged the Environmental Protection Agency, whose new chief administrator Andrew Wheeler is a climate change denier. The agency has reversed a series of Obama-era restrictions, including on logging, oil and coal drilling restrictions, oil prospecting in the Arctic and vehicle emission standards [3]. When his own administration's two-year, 1,500-page study on climate change found that 'human activities...are the dominant cause' of global warming, and that annual losses in some sectors could reach 'hundreds of billions of dollars by the end of the century,' Trump responded, 'I don't believe it.' He also tried to bury the report by releasing it the day after Thanksgiving.

While the Trump administration's offensive against climate justice is ongoing, the reactionary offensive being foregrounded now is against abortion rights. Alabama has now followed Georgia and Mississippi in passing legislation that bans virtually all abortions. Jamelle Boule explains that Trump's own shift from being pro-choice to anti-abortion was about getting evangelical Christians on-board for the wider plan:

'The animating impulse of the Trump (election) campaign – the beating heart of "Make America Great Again" – was a defence of traditional hierarchies. Trump promised...to strengthen privileges of race, wealth and gender. His personal life was defined by its hedonism, His personal life was defined by its hedonism, excess and contempt for traditional moralities. But he pitched himself as a bulwark against demographic and cultural change, a symbol of white patriarchal manhood aligned against immigrants, feminists and racial minorities [4].'

In other words, the anti-abortion project is the crucial symbol of an alliance, including Christian fundamentalists, that harks back to a safer epoch of stable factory jobs and conservative Church values, an epoch unencumbered by economic crisis, declining industries, culture wars or gender and ethnic conflicts. This lost white working-class and middle-class paradise, a parody of the 1950s, never actually existed. It is an invention generated by numerous far right and conservative politicians as the useful myth around which to fight for 'traditional values'.

Now the Trump administration wants to deepen its international anti-abortion crusade. US organisations have long campaigned internationally against abortion [5]. And US governments since Ronald Reagan have restricted funding to organisations that fund abortions or reproductive health advice. Now, as Sarah Boseley explains:

'In March, the US extended the gag, stating that any organisation counselling women on abortion and using funds from elsewhere – even from its own government or a donor in another country – will no longer be eligible for any US funding. The diktat applies to all global health organisations. HIV and children's charities must sign up to the pledge, alongside those running sexual and reproductive health clinics' [6].

The issues of reproductive rights and sexual violence are of course closely linked – both are about maintaining patriarchal hierarchies. Sexual violence is a massive worldwide epidemic, particularly prevalent where governments or movements that aim at enforcing extreme gender, ethnic or class hierarchies are in power or strong.

The sexual violence crisis in India has worsened since the 2014 election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Hindu fundamentalist BJP. The rape and brutalisation of Muslim and other non-Hindu women by Hindu men, as well as communal violence in general, is defended by extreme-right trends in the BJP.

For example, in January 2018 an eight-year-old girl called Asifa was imprisoned in a Kashmir Hindu temple, repeatedly raped and eventually murdered; the men accused of her murder were defended by a new communalist-fascist group called Hindu Ekta Manch, or Forum for Hindu Unity, which organised rallies which officials of the BJP attended. Asifa (who appeared to have no other name) was a member of a nomadic ethnic group known as Bakarwals. In India the extreme misogyny of Hindu fundamentalists goes hand in hand with ethnic racism.

The gender violence epidemic is of course also driven by fundamentalist Islamist groups like Boko Haram and Daesh (Isis). An extremely high proportion of their women captives have been compulsorily 'married' and become pregnant [7]. Rape goes hand in hand with reproductive coercion, and reproductive coercion is a form of extreme violence against women, the ultimate aim of the far-right anti-abortionists.

In the United States, in Spain, in Germany and elsewhere the far right has reckoned that reactionary positions on gender violence, abortion and climate change can be positions that garner support from the most backward sections of the population. But as we have seen over abortion in the United States, the 'wolf pack' gang rape in Spain, and the school students' climate crisis strikes all over Europe, these issues cause a massive polarisation in society. As opinion polls have shown in the United States, a majority exists against reaction on these issues. The climate justice movement and movements for women's fundamental rights can and must be crucial parts of an international fightback against the fascists and hard-right bigots. The interests of the overwhelming majority of humanity are at stake.

Phil Hearse

Notes

[1] <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/coalition-win-makes-fightback-urgent>

[2] <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-12-11/andalusias-far-right-vox-party-espouses-anti-radical-feminist-platform>

[3] <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/03/how-trump-is-changing-science-environment/>

[4] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/20/opinion/anti-abortion-pro-trump.html>

[5] <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/12/health/mexico-abortion-us-org/index.html>

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/17/trump-takes-war-on-abortion-worldwide-as-policy-cuts-off-funds>

[7] <https://www.thedailybeast.com/boko-haram-brides-and-their-babies>

P.S.

- Left Unity, 22 May 2019:
<https://leftunity.org/climate-change-sexual-violence-abortion-far-right-foregrounds-brutal-social-reaction/>