

Openings and Retrospectives

REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS IN THE AGE OF TRUMP AND BREXIT

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For feminists and feminist scholars who have been active in reproductive rights since the 1980s, Donald Trump's policies concerning national autonomy, religious freedom, increased police and military spending, racial profiling, and border control rearticulate a tragically familiar grammar grounded in a distinctly American legacy of white Christian nationalism and its highly racialized reproductive politics. Above all, this grammar feels familiar from decades of American conflict over the practice of abortion, a political struggle in which, as Faye Ginsburg (1998) documented in her pathbreaking study of the abortion debate in Fargo, North Dakota in the 1980s, issues of race, class, gender, generation, religion, sexuality, and reproduction emerge as the fault lines of mainstream political division and struggle—far more than party politics. In the name of promoting and celebrating a “culture of life,” U.S. right-to-life groups have for more than three decades maintained a campaigning strategy that powerfully links traditional gender roles

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and family values, opposition to gay marriage, the right to gun ownership, and opposition to abortion within an overarching white settler narrative of lost American greatness. This is the same grammar articulated by Randall Terry, the evangelical Protestant founder of Operation Rescue, which from the late 1980s onward advocated increasingly extreme and violent forms of antiabortion activism to putatively save the nation. For Terry and his followers, prolife politics linked fetal salvation to rescuing America's future. Making America great again, white again, and right again became a culture war in which militarization was not only an idiom but an explicit code of practice. "Justifiable homicide" was Operation Rescue's answer to six fatal shootings of abortion clinic staff between 1988 and 1994.

Of equal concern is the impact of that violence—or the threat of it—on the availability of abortion for women in the United States, beginning with the steady decline of training available for medical students. Some 55 percent of medical schools report that they offer no clinical exposure to abortion for their medical students. A lack of medical personnel, as well as variations in state legislation, have translated into a steady decrease in the number of abortion clinics in the United States; five states are down to a single abortion clinic. And in January 2018, for the first time in American history, a U.S. president officially addressed the annual March for Life. In addition to the moral support Trump offered the newly energized crowd of antiabortion activists, he announced two new policies: an effort to exclude Planned Parenthood facilities from Medicaid programs and a proposed regulation that would allow health-care providers to refuse to perform services that conflict with their "religious or moral beliefs." The strategy of undermining women's access to abortion from the bottom up is accelerating.

The ways in which the politics of race, gender, and nation are bound together in this foundational American reproductive model arguably explain as much or more about the rise of alt-right populism today as conventional theories of economic decline. In the nativist reproductive imaginary of Operation Rescue and its descendant political movements, the signs and threats of evil and degeneracy are evident everywhere, from the Universal Product Code to the rainbow flag. These distinctly coded signifiers, like Hillary Clinton or L. L. Bean (see [Anderson 2017](#)), structure an overarching grammar of national belonging defined by the preservation of whiteness, biological men and women, heterosexual marriage, and the right to carry one's weapon of choice.

But while the reproductive grammar fueling Trump's populist "build a wall" nativism is in many ways distinctively American, it shares features with other contexts of populism, including resurgent nostalgic nativist discourses in Europe

and the anti-immigration narratives of Britain's Brexiters, common ground that Trump has eagerly pointed out. In Europe, the racialized and demonized figure of the immigrant family is frequently accompanied by a discourse of local communities "flooded" or "swamped" by waves of needy and resource-less incoming foreigners. In Germany, recent Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party posters juxtaposed images of domestic and cultural reproduction—think folk costumes and pork sausages—and those of biological reproduction to assert a new *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (children, kitchen, church) agenda in defense of white national sovereignty, traditional family values, and conventional gender roles.



Figure 1. “New Germans? We can make them ourselves.” In this advertisement from the populist-nationalist party Alternative für Deutschland, an image of a woman’s pregnant body symbolizes both national renewal and traditional gender roles. Casually dressed in jeans, relaxed and smiling, the white woman is pointedly juxtaposed with the specter of foreign migrants entering the country.

The Leave campaign in Britain foregrounded a discourse of taking back control: over borders, banks, laws, taxes, and public services. In their advertising campaigns, proponents repeatedly emphasized the financial cost to Britain not only of European Union subsidies but also of the uncontrolled immigration that had supposedly brought Britain to a “breaking point.”

These seemingly economic arguments were tied to depictions of immigrants as threats to national values and to “our way of life,” even going so far as to pink-wash the Leave campaign with references to “Islamist extremism” and the imminent risk of “an Orlando-style atrocity” in England.

As in the case of the U.S. grammar linking guns, abortion, gender roles, and family values to an established syntax of national belonging under threat, so too



Figure 2. By fabricating visual evidence of a migrant caravan extending off to a distant vanishing point, this Leave campaign poster urges voters to “take back control of our borders,” thus reinforcing one of the chief economic myths propounded by Brexiteers, namely, that immigration is “breaking” Britain.



Figure 3. In this poster from the Leave campaign, gay rights symbolize the freedoms that British people allegedly stand to lose as a result of increased immigration, with a decontextualized photo of armed jihadis warning voters to protect the values they hold dear before it is too late.

in Britain and Europe do we see reproduction at the core of newly powerful and emboldened populist movements that openly articulate an explicitly racist, sexist, and fascist agenda. The gloves have come off in the “war to save the West,” as Trump so plainly put it in his 2017 visit to Poland.

Drawing on the legacy of feminist anthropology to parse these new right-wing movements, to which the politics of race and reproduction are fundamental, thus makes for a crucial task. At the 2017 annual meeting of the American An-

thropological Association, a panel titled “The Reproductive Politics of Trump and Brexit” that the two of us organized examined not only the prolife foundations of Trumpist populist discourse but also similar forms of populist rhetoric internationally—especially in relation to a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment in Britain and Europe. Focusing on specific case studies, we investigated the overlapping reproductive logics at work in today’s populist and nativist political movements, and we are pleased to present this work as an Openings and Retrospectives collection in *Cultural Anthropology*.

In her insightful analysis of walls and uterus, inspired by a woman holding a protest sign that proclaimed “I’m building a wall around my uterus and making the GOP pay,” [Elise Andaya \(2019\)](#) exposes the internal coherence in the rhetoric of (non)belonging, insularity, and danger that underlies Trump effects from reproductive politics to immigration, from state militarization to the strengthening of Stand Your Ground laws. [Risa Cromer \(2019\)](#) continues to trace the paradoxical alignment of U.S. antiabortion and anti-immigration politics condensed in white Christian nationalism through a close reading of the 2017 Jane Doe case, in which a seventeen-year-old awaiting immigration hearings had to sue the U.S. government to attain the abortion she was determined to have and that was legally her due.

In doing so, Cromer demonstrates what feminist scholars of reproduction do well, which is to make explicit the centrality of reproduction within all politics, including (in this case) a U.S. politics of immigration and white Christian nationalism. Following the historian and literary scholar Saïdiya Hartman, [Dána-Ain Davis \(2019\)](#) analyzes reproductive politics under Trump as yet another iteration of the afterlife of slavery. Contemporary antiabortion rhetoric, Davis argues, echoes worries about displacement and wealth preservation that white planters expressed in the context of increasing opposition to slavery just before the American Civil War. In both instances, discourses of white vulnerability/privilege and nation-building desires are linked through a politics of forced reproduction that depends on the maternal citizenship of particular women (and not others). Peering behind a different set of walls—those of the prison—[Carolyn Sufrin \(2019\)](#) reveals that although carceral institutions are constitutionally mandated to provide health care to their charges and incarcerated women retain their legal right to abortion, these women’s access to abortion in fact depends on the whims of administrators and misguided rules made possible by inattention to what happens behind prison walls. Thousands of pregnant women, disproportionately women of color, must carry unwanted pregnancies as part of their sentence.

In the final essay, Sarah Franklin (2019) draws on her personal experience in a small English village to comment on the familiar grammars of Britain's Brexit vote in June 2016. Like the election of Donald Trump in the United States, Brexit offered an important lesson in reproductive politics: whereas common media accounts of Brexit rely on narratives of economically marginal communities "left out" of the benefits of globalization, Franklin points to a much older and more familiar phenomenon, namely, the reproduction of white ethnic nationalism. The most dangerous identity politics in Europe and America today, she argues, are those directed at the rescue of a threatened way of life primarily defined by its racial origins. Franklin introduces the concept of *reproductive sacrifice* to illustrate the value of comparative anthropological research on contemporary reproductive politics.

Together, these five short essays offer a set of powerful resonances around walls, nationalist narratives, discourses of salvation and sacrifice, and the ongoing significance of prolife politics and anti-immigrant sentiment to the mainstream political agenda. In the spirit of a retrospective, the essays also look back to the long history of feminist anthropological concerns with the politics of reproduction in all its senses. Today, books such as Laura Briggs's (2017) recent *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics* are asking why basic questions of social reproduction have been neglected for so long, especially given their critical importance to the successive waves of neoliberal, value-for-money cutbacks to the welfare state. These tactics have been accompanied by wars on race and gender that have been used to legitimate them. Thus our long feminist history of analyzing reproduction as politics, culture, and economics is back where it should be: front and center. We hope you enjoy these contributions to *Cultural Anthropology*, and we hope that they inspire many similarly concerned contributions in issues to come.

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