

Anti-Feminist Backlash: Gender, Shifting Coalitions, and the Right-Wing Package

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Abstract

The global backlash against feminism is not a secondary cultural phenomenon but a central mechanism through which right-wing coalitions partly based on affinities of gender, class, race, and citizenship are responding to threatened reductions in economic privilege. Building on international feminist perspectives that consider overlapping inequalities among women, this essay outlines long-run economic changes in the U.S. that have enabled anti-feminist ideology to condense anxieties about masculine status, economic inequality, demographic change, and loss of national hegemony into a coherent political push-back that simultaneously disciplines women, offloads care costs onto privatized households, reconstitutes racialized citizenship boundaries, and disrupts solidaristic class politics. Analysis of Project 2025, a conservative blueprint for the policies of the Trump administration, illustrates these points and leads to the conclusion that feminist counter-politics should prioritize efforts to build new political coalitions.

Feminist scholars have long challenged the notion that backlash against feminism can be reduced to cultural reaction, a residue of patriarchal traditionalism, or a series of episodic moral panics around abortion, LGBTQ rights, or "wokeness" (Faludi 1991; Edström et al. 2023). Research on the changing discourse of masculinity also challenges purely cultural explanations (Kimmel 2017). Most efforts to construct a structural account of backlash refer to a variety of economic stresses and strains. However, a full account calls for an explicitly intersectional and post-colonial political economy that emphasizes the evolution of overlapping and shifting coalitions based on gender, class, race and citizenship (in no particular order of importance) and brings collective conflict over the distribution of the costs of social reproduction into the picture (Folbre 2021).

The very notion of a socially-constructed concept such as gender threatens the purportedly natural (and therefore biologically determined) obligation of women to provide care

for others. Hence, the anti-feminist backlash has taken a larger “anti-gender” turn. The feminist political economy of social reproduction reveals that what is often cast as a struggle over "values" is also a struggle over who takes on care responsibilities, who subsidizes economic insecurity through unpaid labor, who counts as a legitimate member of the nation, and whose reproduction is encouraged, tolerated, disciplined, or suppressed. In this sense, anti-feminist politics does not simply oppose women's rights. It reasserts the family as a privatized welfare institution, reallocates risk downward, and fuses gender hierarchy with racialized and nationalist boundary-making.

This framework helps explain why anti-feminist backlash is so often entangled with xenophobia, anti-immigrant politics, anti-Black politics, hostility to welfare recipients, transphobia, and attacks on public education and universities. The same discourse that condemns "career women" and "gender ideology" also vilifies migrants, criminalizes the poor, and reasserts the distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" families. The result is a politics in which gender, race, class, and citizenship are not separate axes that merely intersect in a descriptive sense. Rather, they are actively co-produced through projects of national and social reproduction; they are not additive variables but mutually constitutive dimensions of a single hegemonic project.

This approach updates and extends Susan Faludi's classic 1991 account of backlash, which documented a reactive counter-mobilization against second-wave feminist gains, showing how media, popular culture, and policy discourse worked to roll back advances in women's employment, reproductive rights, and public life. That account remains indispensable. Yet the current moment requires further theoretical consideration. What we are seeing today is not merely reaction but recomposition: not the resentful defense of a pre-existing patriarchal order,

but the active construction of a new political settlement in which gender hierarchy is articulated with economic authoritarianism, welfare retrenchment, and racial nativism in a coherent, if internally unstable, formation (Graff and Korolczuk 2021).

Feminist political economy that looks beyond differences based on gender alone can help explain this onslaught by exploring economic trends in the U.S. that have ignited collective realignments. A brief review of global debates among feminist theorists provides the context for attention to the gendered implications of growing economic inequalities and flaring racist and nationalist tensions. Conservatives largely animated by a desire to increase profitability and reduce public social spending have capitalized on differences among voters by concerted efforts to redefine the meaning of the “working class” in ways that explicitly appeal to the interests of White native-born men. A close look at Project 2025, the policy blueprint of the conservative Heritage Foundation that has guided recent Republican policies in the U.S., provides a case study of coalitional promises to reinforce traditional privileges of gender, race, and citizenship while also delivering significant benefits to the very rich through deregulation and tax cuts. A counter-coalition can be strengthened by emphasizing the need to prioritize social well-being over wealth accumulation and supporting concrete proposals that can move the U.S. in this direction.

Feminisms and Inequalities

Feminist theory has taken many different forms, emerging in different variants and evolving over time. The label “liberal,” applied to feminism, has often signified an exclusive focus on inequality between women and men. Much like traditional Marxian perspectives that presume unified collective interests based on class, liberal feminist perspectives presume unified interests based on gender. Such perspectives have met with many criticisms for their failure to

consider the more complex hierarchical systems highlighted by research on intersectionality, decoloniality/post-colonial discourse, and rejection of the oft-asserted binary between “cultural identity” and “economic interests.”

Liberal feminist perspectives seldom explicitly question the existence of significant inequalities based on class, race, or citizenship; they simply avoid mention of them. Within the economics profession, this perspective is well-represented by the work of Nobel prizewinner Claudia Goldin (2021), who focuses on the pressures facing college-educated career women, in particular (See also Bertrand et al. 2010). Relying heavily on the traditional human capital paradigm, this approach assumes that earnings are largely determined by a combination of educational credentials and personal preferences, though discrimination against women has played a significant role in the past. While Goldin effectively documents tensions between paid employment and commitments to family care, she devotes little attention to inequalities among women, whether based on race or class (Folbre 2024).

By contrast, many feminist economists refuse to give any single dimension of social division explanatory primacy (Folbre 2021). Within the Marxian tradition, Angela Davis (2011) is a touchstone, noting that in the U.S., capitalists, men and Whites became codependent beneficiaries of the exploitation of disempowered groups. The explicitly intersectional frameworks of Kimberlé Crenshaw (2013) and Patricia Hill Collins (2020) develop this logic further, and William Darity's articulation of stratification economics (2022) gives it a formal economic foundation: social groups are "animated by their collective self-interest to attain or maintain relative group position in a social hierarchy," competing and sometimes collaborating. The result is a political economy that takes seriously what the Marxian tradition had always gestured at but never fully integrated: that a worker is simultaneously a member of a class, a

race, a gender, a nation, a generation, and a sexual category, and that her position in the hierarchies organized along each of these dimensions shapes her interests, her available alliances, and her political possibilities in ways that cannot be read off from any single axis alone. Understanding this complexity is not an obstacle to effective political action — it is its precondition.

Hierarchical systems derive much of their stability from the complexity of the divisions they create. Overlapping and intersecting structures of collective power — based on gender, race, class, nation, age, and sexuality and other dimensions of group membership — create a complex strategic environment with varying incentives for acquiescence and resistance. Potential coalitions of the disempowered are fragmented, and the divide-and-conquer strategies available to those at the top of the hierarchy are amplified. If one axis of hierarchy is weakened, others can compensate. The weakening of patriarchal institutions can expand opportunities for some women far more than others, leaving many women in vulnerable positions colored by differences based on race/ethnicity, citizenship, and class—increasing inequalities among women in ways that undermine feminist solidarity.

This theme is reinforced by post-colonial and decolonial feminisms. Both frameworks emerged as critiques of Eurocentrism — the tendency of Western intellectual traditions to treat European history, philosophy, and social organization as the universal standard against which all others are measured. Both take seriously the intellectual and political legacies of colonialism and both insist that the perspectives of colonized peoples must be centered rather than marginalized in scholarship and politics. Drawing heavily on Foucault, postcolonial theory analyzes how knowledge production itself is entangled with colonial power (See, for instance, Spivak 1988).

From a decolonial perspective, Anibal Quijano (2000) shows that European colonialism in Latin America did not just extract resources — it installed a global hierarchy of races that continues to organize labor, governance, and social life. María Lugones writes of a decolonial feminism that explores “what is hidden from our understandings of both race and gender and the relations of each to normative heterosexuality” (2010:742). Rita Segato (2016) argues that feminicide and sexual violence in contexts like Ciudad Juárez are not aberrations but expressions of a patriarchal "mandate" that colonialism intensified rather than introduced. Her concept of the *pedagogía de la crueldad* holds that spectacular violence against women's bodies functions to discipline entire communities and demonstrate sovereign power. Julieta Paredes and Adriana Guzmán (2014) argue that patriarchy is not solely a colonial import — it has pre-colonial Indigenous roots that must be honestly confronted within Indigenous communities themselves, not romanticized away.

European feminists facing the rise of right-wing anti-immigrant populism describe how anti-feminism has been elevated from reactive resentment to programmatic ideology and has been institutionalized within major political parties, state apparatuses, and transnational advocacy networks. scholars such as Agnieszka Graff, Elżbieta Korolczuk, Roman Kuhar, and David Paternotte argue that "gender" itself has become a symbolic enemy—what they call an empty signifier onto which diverse and otherwise incompatible anxieties are projected. "Gender ideology" functions as a flexible umbrella term that can encompass feminism, reproductive rights, LGBTQ claims, comprehensive sex education, academic expertise, cosmopolitan elites, the European Union, and secular liberalism. Its power lies precisely in its elasticity: it allows right-wing actors to build coalitions among religious conservatives, nationalists, neoliberal elites,

disaffected men, and even segments of women who perceive feminist transformation as threatening to family stability or national continuity.

Graff and Korolczuk's *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (2021) is especially useful for tracing the structural logic of this formation. They argue that anti-gender mobilizations are not simply top-down manipulations by cynical elites, nor simple expressions of pre-existing cultural attitudes. Rather, they are political articulations that bring together heterogeneous material and symbolic grievances under a unifying narrative of threatened tradition. They note that these mobilizations tend to intensify not when feminist gains are merely symbolic but when they begin to carry material consequences: when reproductive rights expand access to abortion, when anti-discrimination law begins to reshape labor markets, when LGBTQ rights challenge inheritance and adoption regimes, when care policy redistributes domestic labor. In other words, feminist politics has real distributional stakes.

Kuhar and Paternotte's edited volume on anti-gender campaigns in Europe further documents the organizational and transnational dimensions of this politics (2017). They show that what might appear to be local or national moral panics—about same-sex marriage in France, gender studies in Romania, sex education in Slovakia—are connected through transnational networks of Catholic and evangelical advocacy organizations, conservative think tanks, and right-wing political parties that share discursive frames, tactical resources, and organizational models. This challenges any reading of anti-gender politics as merely the spontaneous expression of popular values. It is an organized hegemonic project with international infrastructure.

A newer wave of scholarship also emphasizes intersectional dynamics. Julia Goetz (2025) argues that antifeminism is best understood not as a single-axis reaction but as an ideological formation that structurally links sexism with racism, nationalism, and exclusionary

politics—including the selective instrumentalization of feminist language against racialized others.⁶ Antifeminism, on this account, is not simply the negation of feminist claims. It also actively organizes those claims, appropriating some (the protection of "our women" from dangerous Others) and repudiating others (women's autonomy, reproductive freedom, freedom from domestic violence). In other words, the right opposes feminism while simultaneously weaponizing selective feminist rhetoric against migrants or Muslims.

Marxian scholars like Erik Olin Wright (2000) have often treated inequalities based on gender and race as "cultural," reserving the term "exploitation" for differences based on class. As Nancy Fraser eloquently argues, however culture and political economy are always imbricated with one another; virtually every struggle against injustice implies demands for both redistribution and recognition (Fraser 1995). Cultural norms are key to the development of group solidarities that motivate collective efforts to advance group interests based on many dimensions of socially assigned membership (Folbre 2021). Any sharp line between the cultural and the economic tends to naturalize economic explanations for class while delegitimizing economic explanations for other inequalities and marginalizing the concerns of those who suffer at multiple intersections of exploitation.

Inequalities and Coalitional Shifts in the U.S.

A simple backlash model based on gender inequalities alone posits that increases in women's economic position, political power, and cultural voice put many men on the defensive. While obviously relevant, this model remains incomplete, because it does not consider other changes over the last two decades that have driven political realignments. These include: 1) increased earnings inequality among women, which have reduced feminist solidarity 2) increased earnings inequality among men and threats to the potential for upward mobility, which

have reduced solidarity among wage earners 3) The declining demographic dominance of Whites combined with the rapid entry of racially and ethnically diverse migrants, which threaten traditional privilege based on race and 4) The enhanced political, economic, and cultural influence of a wealthy elite. The simple backlash model provides a useful starting point for brief consideration of these trends, because it illustrates the shifting complexities of collective alignments.

Women's Relative Gains

By some measures, women have not gained much relative to men in the U.S. in recent decades. Many sociologists declared the end or at least the stalling of the “gender revolution” in the early twenty-first century (England 2010; England et al. 2020). Women’s employment plateaued around 2000 and had shown no net increase by 2018, and a slowed reduction of the gender pay gap is visible not just at the median but across the earnings distribution, top and bottom (England et al. 2020). Indeed, among full-time, year-round workers, the female-to-male earnings ratio in 2023 fell to 82.7% from 84% in 2022—the first statistically significant annual decrease in this ratio since 2003.¹

This aggregate ratio, however, is influenced by the dramatic increase in earnings at the very top of the men’s distribution, an intersectional dynamic that has dampened the effect of women’s entry into higher-level occupations (Beller and Hout 2022). Married women have made significant gains: an April 2023 Pew Research Center report based on 2022 Census data shows that about 45% of wives in dual-earner households earn as much or more than their husband, a finding with significant implications for their bargaining power in the home.² Also, the gender gap in wages is considerably smaller than average for women and men who are unmarried and childless (Cha and Weeden 2023), with implications for the “dating market.”

Women remain politically underrepresented but have nonetheless gained a louder voice—Kamala Harris won about 48.3% of the popular vote in the 2024 presidential election, compared to Trump’s 49.8%.³ In 2024, a record number of women were elected to federal and state office.⁴ The Me Too movement led to successful prosecutions of several high-profile sexual harassers and shifted norms in ways that magnified accountability, yet clearly elicited a backlash from men in many workplaces (Johnson and Keplinger 2019).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs that grew out of earlier anti-discrimination and affirmative action efforts lay at the intersection of employment, politics, law, and culture. Structural accountability in the form of specific hiring goals increased White women’s access to management positions (Dobbin and Kalev 2022). These successes fueled fears among men that they faced unfair discrimination, an explicit rationale for the virtually complete rollback of DEI in public employment under the current Trump administration. Major corporations such as Walmart, Target, Ford and Meta responded almost immediately with reductions or eliminations of their DEI programs. These public and private actions exemplify an intersectional backlash against women and under-represented minorities regardless of gender. The question remains: why did this backlash gain so much momentum so quickly?

Earnings Inequality Among Women

Despite their commonalities, women have always been divided along lines of race, class, citizenship, and other collective affinities. Feminist successes have the potential to strengthen solidarity among women, but when distributed unevenly, can have the opposite effect. In the U.S., increased access to well-paying jobs has been heavily conditioned by access to educational credentials that are costly to acquire. As a result, White women from relatively affluent backgrounds have made the most conspicuous economic gains.

Overall earnings inequality in the U.S. has been increasing for some time, driven by particularly high managerial and professional earnings in some industries (Piketty et al. 2018; Haltiwanger et al. 2022). Barbara and John Ehrenreich popularized the term “professional-managerial class” in 1979, and sociologist Erik Olin Wright reflected at length on its implications for class analysis (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979; Wright 1985). More recently, Nancy Fraser has eloquently argued that second-wave feminist critiques of male privilege were partially co-opted by the expansion of opportunities that disproportionately benefited many elite women (Fraser 2009).

The trend toward heightened inequality among women earners is less extreme than that among men, but nonetheless notable. While increased educational credentials haven’t done much to reduce the gender wage gap, they have paid off more richly for women college graduates (compared to their less-educated counterparts) than for men (Ashworth and Ransom 2019). Between 1991 and 2017, the earnings premium for women with a bachelor's degree relative to others increased by 48%, compared to 30% for men (Urban Institute 2019). Earnings inequality between Black and White women also increased over much of this period (Wilson and Rodgers 2016).

The effect of women’s higher earnings on their family income is magnified by their tendency to marry higher-earning men. Most women employed full-time face difficulties accommodating family care needs and remain subject to a “care penalty” in lifetime earnings (Glauber 2019). Still, those in high-level managerial and professional jobs have greater access to paid leave and other benefits than others. Workers with occupations in the highest average wage quartile are 3.5 times more likely to have access to paid leave through their jobs than workers in the lowest average wage quartile, and 33% of management and professional workers had access

to paid family leave compared to only 12% of service workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024).

High-earning women are also in better position to purchase domestic services and other substitutes for unpaid care in the home, especially when such substitutes are relatively inexpensive. Empirical research on the effect of living in a city with a relatively large number of low-wage immigrants shows that it has a positive effect on both the employment and the family size of college-educated women (Cortés 2008; Furtado 2016). To understand the intersectional implications of this trend, look no further than the headline of a recent *Wall Street Journal* headline: “Equality of sexes widens the class divide” (McGillis 2026).

Earnings Inequality Among Men

Traditional approaches to the “class divide” dwelt on differences between those owning capital and those selling their labor. However, as the now-ubiquitous term “human capital” testifies, access to the acquisition of remunerative skills can be interpreted as ownership of a valuable asset (Folbre 2012). The very term “class divide” is somewhat misleading, because it obscures the ways in which perceptions of class identity and solidarity tend to fracture and realign in response to changing economic conditions.

The college education premium for men in the U.S. rose steeply in the U.S. from the late 1970s to the 1990s, then flattened around 2015 (Autor et al. 2020). Though partly reflecting increased demand for professional and managerial workers, it was boosted by the harsh impact of changes in trade policy on less-educated workers who had previously gained access to relatively well-paying unionized jobs in manufacturing (Autor et al. 2013). Automation also lowered the earnings of predominantly male blue-collar workers (Acemoglu and Restrepo 2022). In short, wage gains for college-educated men had less impact on the college premium than

reversals for men with lower educational credentials, whose real wages have significantly declined over time. Furthermore, most of women's relative economic gains in recent decades have been achieved through accumulation of "human capital."

At first glance, it might seem implausible that frustration with differences in earnings opportunities for men could overshadow frustration with differences in wealth ownership, which have also polarized in recent decades and are arguably far more extreme and consequential (Piketty et al. 2018). However, research indicates that most people misperceive forms of inequality that they don't come into direct contact with and are heavily influenced by their immediate social networks (Norton and Ariely 2011). Most workplaces are managed by upper-level, college-educated employees rather than "capitalists," giving valence to the concept of a professional/ managerial class in which women are increasingly visible.

On the other hand, this "class" itself is profoundly divided. The same blinders that reduce awareness of wealth inequality reduce awareness of earnings inequality among college-educated workers. In recent decades, a dizzying increase of earnings for (top managers and professionals in financial services (primarily male) became increasingly apparent (Philippon and Reshef 2012). Executives, managers, supervisors, and financial professionals are prominent members of the top 1% of all income earners in the U.S. (Bivens and Mishel 2013). Their economic success is less related to their educational assets per se than their selection into lucrative jobs. Women professionals and managers are highly concentrated in health, education, and social services, industries that are far less profitable *and* remunerative than business services (Folbre et al. 2023).

As early as 2013, economists noted that the variance of returns to college education in the U.S. was increasing, with the level of rewards very dependent on the types of jobs attained (Oreopoulos and Petronijevic 2013). This trend has continued, with many college graduates

entering jobs that did not necessarily utilize their skills. (Andrews et al. 2024). The advent of cheap AI poses a particular threat to newly-minted college graduates entering the labor market and constricts one of the few avenues for upward mobility available to working-class families in the U.S. One long-run possibility is a “proletarianization” of professional/managerial workers that will enhance working class solidarity (a recent *New York Times* article described the “Zohran Mamdani coalition as uniting downwardly mobile yuppies with working-class strivers.”⁵) The short-run effect is immediately apparent: disempowerment and scapegoating of educators and other professionals outside the top earnings tier.

Threats to Privileges of Race and Citizenship

Economists have long observed that we all tend to feel losses more acutely than absence of gains, and it seems likely that we are cognizant of the threats of future, as well as current losses (Tversky and Kahneman 1991). As the relative size of the non-White population in the U.S. has increased alongside an upsurge in the number of immigrants seeking asylum or crossing illegally, the perceived benefits of White citizenship have become more salient to both women and men. Some of the panic over below-replacement fertility rates in the U.S. reflects anxieties about demographic “replacement” of native-born Whites.

Fears that this White population (or that conceptually “pure White”) will lose majority status by the 2040s have a paranoid feel, but remain, nonetheless politically influential (Alba 2018). This is not without reason. Racial wealth disparities in the U.S. reflect the cumulative effects of policies and institutions that have conferred substantial economic advantages on white households (Mason 2023). Citizenship in any affluent country operates like a form of inherited property that confers unequal life chances based on place of birth (Shachar 2009). The election of Barack Obama and the increased visibility of elected representatives from Muslim

backgrounds, such as Zohran Mamdani in New York City, has excited backlash from Christian nationalists in particular. Open discussion of reparations for the descendants of slaves has put an explicit price on demands for racial justice (Darity and Mullen 2022).

Despite considerable evidence that immigrant workers have not imposed significant costs on other workers, the apparent loss of control over U.S. borders has contributed to economic anxieties (Caiumi and Peri 2024). After all, why would so many people endure so much pain and risk to seek entry to the U.S. if they didn't hope to reap enormous gains? And even if they boost growth in the short term, might not they and their children compete with U.S. born workers for future jobs? Welfare chauvinism has long been advocated by populist movements in Europe, promoting nativism as the main organizing principle of social policy (Careja and Harris 2022). In the U.S. it is manifest in explicit efforts to restrict immigrants' rights to social benefits. The so-called Big Beautiful Bill that passed into law in the summer of 2025 stripped many lawfully present immigrants from access to health insurance and nutrition aid and deprived millions of children of an immigrant parent the anti-poverty benefits of the Child Tax Credit.⁶

The Conservative Project

The economic tensions outlined above set the stage for explicit efforts to reconfigure a conservative coalition in the U.S. Knowledge of collective interests is never transparent, and always prone to strategic uncertainties. As a result this "knowledge" is socially constructed, and malleable (as post-colonial feminists have argued) by political, economic, and cultural power. The phrase "divide and conquer" has a long history in the West, central to the conquests of the Roman Empire and the later political theorizing of Niccolò Machiavelli. In recent years it has gained new visibility as the central dynamic of dystopian fiction played out on screen. Both

Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* series and Hwang Dong-hyuk's *Squid Game* feature subordinate groups forcefully manipulated into lethal competition with one another.

The Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025*, formally titled *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, hasn't made it to video, but it has become the underlying narrative of the U.S. Republican party.⁷ It represents an explicit effort to redefine the "working class" as a group of White male wage earners facing unfair competition and interference from women, Blacks, Hispanics, and non-white immigrants. This project is often described as one that links "cultural conservatism" (regarding gender, race, and nation) with "economic conservatism" (taxation, regulation, labor) (Schneider 2024). This description, while accurate, is incomplete, because Project 2025 also capitalizes on the economic tensions described above.

The Heritage Foundation beckons White native-born men to its project of reducing taxes on the rich, cutting social spending, and deregulating private enterprise with its promise that they will be rewarded not only by economic growth but also by a restoration of God-given privilege. This is supply-side economics married with divide-and-conquer. The conspicuous flaws of supply-side confidence in tax cuts have been detailed elsewhere (Saez and Zucman 2019). Here, a textual analysis of Project 2025 serves to illustrate the explicit effort to invoke solidarities based on gender, race, and citizenship in an effort to further advance the concentration of wealth and power in the U.S.

Several feminist critiques of Project 2025 unpack its misogyny. Writing in a series of *Ms. Magazine* articles, Smith College faculty member Carrie Baker details its promotion of "biblically based marriages," its stigmatization of single parenthood and same-sex couples, and its proposals to cut programs supporting single mothers and explains its attack on women's educational opportunities and earning power through its proposals on workplace sex

discrimination. A report from the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) (2024) opens with the explicit framing that "Project 2025 seeks to impose a hierarchical, gendered, patriarchal vision of society" that "relies on fixed and narrowly defined gender roles" and undermines "protections that enable women and LGBTQI+ people to thrive outside of a male-dominated, heterosexual family" and adds that "it also seeks to reinforce racial hierarchies through a variety of mechanisms."

On reproductive rights, Project 2025 is unambiguous. It celebrates the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* as the greatest "pro-family win in a generation" and calls for the next president to use "existing federal powers" to restrict abortion nationally, regardless of state law. The HHS chapter calls for the elimination of federal funding for any organization that provides or refers for abortion, including Planned Parenthood, and for using the Comstock Act — an 1873 law against mailing obscene materials — to ban the shipment of abortion medications through the mail.

The document's treatment of transgender identity is equally revealing. It describes "gender ideology" as a form of "child abuse," calls for banning gender-affirming medical care for minors, and frames transgender visibility in public schools as part of the same threat as pornography a moral pollution of childhood. The practical effect of these proposals would be to restore a legal and cultural regime in which gender non-conformity is stigmatized and punished.

The foreword instructs the next president to delete from every federal rule, regulation, contract, and grant the terms "diversity, equity, and inclusion," "gender," "gender equality," "abortion," "reproductive health," and "reproductive rights." This is not merely a housekeeping exercise; it is a systematic erasure of the vocabulary through which claims of discrimination are recognized and remedied. The Department of Labor chapter, authored by Jonathan Berry, calls for rolling back Obama-era rules requiring federal contractors to maintain affirmative action

programs and for eliminating diversity-focused components of workplace regulations. The Office of Personnel Management section calls for purging career civil servants deemed sympathetic to progressive values and replacing them with ideologically vetted conservatives — a project explicitly described as reversing what the document calls the "long march of cultural Marxism through our institutions."

These ideological thrusts have direct economic implications, promising to enhance the bargaining power of heterosexual men in the home and White heterosexual men in the competitive labor market. Neither misogyny nor racism is likely to directly increase profitability—indeed, both are likely to reduce overall efficiency in the allocation of effort and skills. They can, however, redistribute a portion of the gains from the economic growth that Project 2025 confidently claims it can deliver—prizes for political allegiance. This shell game is designed to divert attention from class issues such as the concentration of wealth, burgeoning profits relative to wages, and the low level of taxation of income from capital.

The “classed” subtext of Project 2025 is worth unpacking carefully because it represents a significant departure from both the traditional conservative vocabulary and the left's ownership of that concept. The document essentially strips "working class" of its historical association with wage labor, unions, collective bargaining, and class conflict — and replaces it with cultural and demographic content. The working class in Project 2025 is defined not by its relationship to capital or by income level, but by a cluster of cultural markers: it works with its hands or in manufacturing, is patriotic and religiously observant, lives in small towns or suburbs rather than coastal cities, and (importantly) is implicitly male, White, Christian, and native-born.

Unionized workers are out of sight. The Labor Department chapter proposes rolling back union organizing rights, weakening the National Labor Relations Board, and making it harder for

workers to form unions. The document treats unions not as working-class institutions but as appendages of the Democratic Party and the administrative state — corrupt intermediaries between workers and their employers. This is a long-standing conservative move, but Project 2025 is unusually explicit about it.

Professional and managerial workers with college and higher-level educational degrees are characterized as antagonists of the working class rather than members of it or allies to it. The true working class (living in “fly-over country”) “showers after work instead of before.” This is not a casual metaphor. It encodes a specific vision that excludes people whose labor leaves no physical mark and therefore represent a parasitic or inauthentic form of work—especially if they work for the government or non-profit organizations.

Employed women in professional and managerial positions are heavily concentrated in industries such as health, education, and social services with large public and non-profit components (Folbre et al. 2023). Thus, Project 2025 effectively excludes them from the working class on multiple counts. Since many corporate employers also employ women in professional and managerial positions, one might assume that they have an economic interest in treating them with respect. On the other hand, the economic payoffs to Republican control of government—including tax cuts and deregulation—loom large. It also seems likely that women in professional and managerial positions will be particularly vulnerable to future layoffs. As *New York Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg (2026) points out, Alex Karp, the chief executive of Palantir celebrates the possibility that A.I. will disrupt the power of “highly educated, often female voters, who vote mostly Democrat.”

The document cuts the working class off at the bottom as well as at the top. Low-wage service workers— the people who staff fast food restaurants, clean buildings, care for children

and the elderly, drive delivery vehicles — are invisibilized. These workers are disproportionately women, people of color, and immigrants and their concerns — including minimum wages, overtime protections, workplace safety, and paid leave — are directly targeted by the Labor chapter for rollback, not protection. Indeed, the document's working-class rhetoric is deployed in part to justify the immigration agenda: illegal immigrants, we are told, suppress wages for American workers, and open-borders policies serve elite interests (cheap domestic labor) at the expense of the real working class. This framing — which has deep roots in nativist labor politics — allows the document to present mass deportation as a pro-worker policy while simultaneously proposing to weaken the labor market protections that actually affect working-class wages and conditions.

In sum, the document performs a remarkable political inversion: the enemies of the working class are not employers who suppress wages or extract surplus value, but an Other consisting of non-workers who are non-men, non-White, and non-native. Any grievances that the Democratic Party might pursue are redirected from their structural causes in wealth and income inequality toward groups that might compete for jobs that offer decent and secure wages.

Political Implications

If anti-feminism can appear both as overt patriarchal retrenchment and an effort to redefine the working class, then we are not simply dealing with men angry at women's advancement. This essay interprets conservative backlash as an effort to actively reorganize political coalitions by capitalizing on the very social divisions that it has created. Resisting this backlash requires a framework that confronts the impact of many dimensions of increased inequality and economic insecurity—not just those based on gender.

Resistance also requires efforts to build a counter-coalition by proposing and effectively campaigning for policies that prioritize individual and social well-being over the accumulation of wealth. Emerging paradigms of care provision, social reproduction, and ecological sustainability point in this direction (Folbre 2026). We need a manifesto that advocates for universal social provision, support for family and community care, and an anti-racist account of whose reproduction matters. We also need to explain how these goals can be financed and put into place in ways that guarantee truly democratic accountability for their results.

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Notes

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⁷ The full text of Project 2025 is available online at https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf