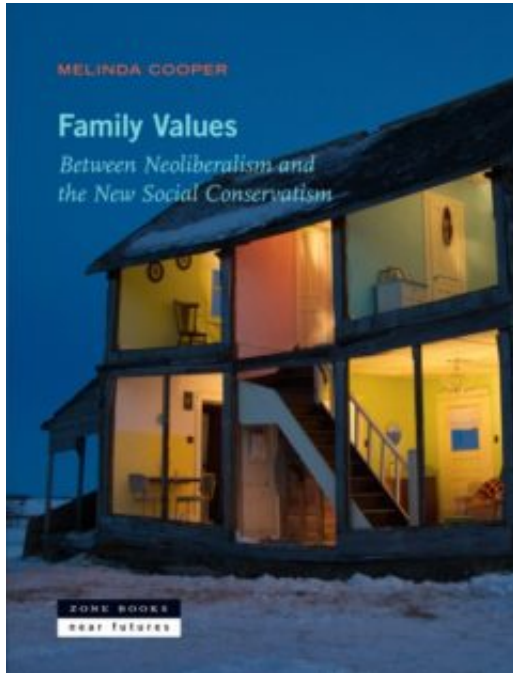


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Melinda Cooper's Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism

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By Ilana Gershon



[Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism](#)

[Melinda Cooper](#)

MIT Press, 2017, 416 pages.

Neoliberal policy in the United States sometimes seems internally contradictory. Why oppose the estate tax if you support a meritocracy based on how the market values individuals? Why oppose universal health coverage or public education if you want everyone to have an equal chance in the labor market? Melinda Cooper offers productive insights into these apparent contradictions by arguing that the normative nuclear family, not the individual, was the organizational social unit around which policy should be built for Milton Friedman, Gary Becker, Ronald Reagan and others. Taking into account U.S. neoliberals' emphasis on the nuclear family also goes a long way towards understanding how U.S. neoliberals, not known for espousing a particularly moral framework, could

be so persuasive to their most unlikely of bedfellows, social conservatives. U.S. neoliberals responded to the social unrest of the 1960s by making normative families into the cornerstone of their policy suggestions – the nuclear family became and remains the essential social unit through which wealth is supposed to be accumulated and distributed. Cooper's book is an exploration of the kinds of policies that become desirable when normative nuclear families become so essential to neoliberal thinkers, whose first principle is that markets produce the best spontaneous and efficient form of social order in modern society.

Cooper points out that the appeal of neoliberal perspectives emerged at a time when reasserting the importance of the family might have a particular traction for two disparate groups of people. Neoliberal logics became increasingly popular in the wake of inflation during the 1970's, an inflation that was experienced differently by the working class and those in the top 10%. The working and middle classes saw their debt diminish, the wealthy saw their assets lose value. Thus neoliberal theorists sought to appeal to the wealthy by insisting on the family as the locus of the private distribution of wealth, and thus privileging inheritance. In general, neoliberals found they were especially persuasive when they privileged wealth accumulated through assets, investments, and inheritance (all regulated though and by families), not wages.

At the same time, much of the innovation of the 1960's social movements revolved around revealing the unwelcome strictures and prejudices generated by placing the Fordist family and the Fordist family wage front and center. As those on the left pointed out the failures of the Fordist family to adequately address the needs of women, minorities, queers, and disabled people, those on the right sought to entrench the family as the source of economic security. Cooper explains that framing freedom in terms of economically secure nuclear families has a long tradition in the United States, starting from the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865 to help newly freed slaves adjust to wage labor. The Freedmen's Bureau was invested in teaching black men to be good monogamous providers for the nuclear families they now were allowed to have, perhaps as invested in this project as the Bureau was in teaching black men to be voting citizens and free laborers. “. . . the radical implementation of classical liberal principles of freedom went hand in hand with the brutal assertion of family and work obligations.” (81) Cooper views this early moment as establishing the template for what would occur under Reagan, and later Clinton through the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. In short, Americans have had considerable experience re-asserting financially constricting obligations towards a nuclear family as a solution for life's dilemmas in the face of liberation movements.

Somatosphere readers might be especially interested to see how this

focus on the family shapes healthcare policy in the wake of the AIDS crisis. Cooper argues that this vision of the responsible family member as the ideal market actor extended towards people living non-normative sexual lifestyles. She establishes early in the book that it is no accident that queer activists turned to marriage, and the attendant access to health insurance and inheritance, as the battleground for claiming social recognition and equal rights. Thus, by the time she turns to the AIDS crisis, she can effectively make the case that the queer lifestyle was only acceptable if those involved were monogamous. The privately insured family provides the “charmed circle” (193) under which everyone ideally resides. Risky behavior was understood to be an individual’s decision, and neoliberal policy makers found it relatively easy to argue that the public citizenry at large should not have to bear the brunt of these unwise decisions. Just as earlier social welfare approaches were transformed into moral judgements on whether the poor were deserving or undeserving based on the poor person’s familial relationships, so too were ill people seen as being either deserving or undeserving based on their previous lifestyles. Under this logic, having AIDS or having type 2 diabetes makes a person equally undeserving. Only people who take care of themselves are worthy of health insurance, unless they have access to private family insurance. Other chapters make equally compelling arguments about student debt, and the increasing role of religion in providing U.S. welfare services.

Family Values is a book that I have been recommending to many people, since so many of the people I talk to regularly are struggling to understand how neoliberalism, which for all its flaws, is not an inherently racist, sexist or inheritance-focused philosophy, ends up in practice perpetuating all these flaws *and* financial systems by which wealth is largely inherited. By explaining how neoliberal policy makers came to use the normative white family as the social unit for distributing wealth and credit, she is able to show how neoliberalism’s potential for a market-oriented meritocracy is eradicated. In addition, Cooper offers invaluable insights into how US neoliberals through their focus on the family created the potential for claims to morality that social conservatives of all ilks could find palatable. I plan to include this book on the syllabus the next time I teach a graduate course on neoliberalism, and hope that others, who may be befuddled or fascinated by the contradictions of neoliberalism when it is put into practice, will read this book.

[Ilana Gershon](#) is the Ruth N. Hall professor of anthropology at Indiana University, and is interested in neoliberalism, new media, and work. She has recently published a book on hiring in corporate America, [Down and Out in the New Economy: How People Find \(or Don't Find\) Work Today](#) (University of Chicago Press 2017).

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