



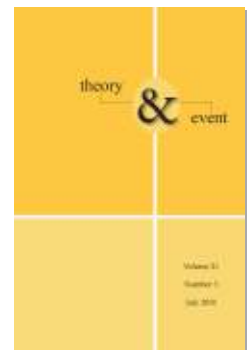
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Behind Every Successful Entrepreneur of Himself is His Wife:
Cooper's *Family Values*

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Theory & Event, Volume 21, Number 3, July 2018, pp. 761-765 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Finlayson says we create the genre of “tragedy” because life is “tragic” and good art imitates life, but maybe we perceive life as tragic because tragedies teach us to, whereas other genres make “life” a different object to apprehend, by rendering so-called tragic aspects in viscerally different ways or by foregrounding aspects of life and registers of experience devalued or foreclosed by tragedy. Despite my own attachment to tragedy as a genre, the claim that it is ontologically privileged, or uniquely necessary, denies how much life imitates art, and so the extent to which our ontology is an effect of our practice, not its ground.

What if our premise is that our sense of reality is inescapably mediated by genres? We can still deploy a genre of tragedy to trouble a nationalism framed by the genre of romance. Granting how tragedy troubles and not only supports the mortalist humanism Stow defends, we could also frame our politics -our investments, acts, and conflicts- by other genres, prophecy, say, or the comical irreverence of Groucho Marxism, Arendt’s romance of natality, Wittgenstein’s realism, or Wolin’s allegory of fugitive contest with the iron law of oligarchy. What if we begin not with ontology or ethics, but instead by asking: what genres do we live, what aspects of reality do they make in/visible, and by what (mixing of) genres might we apprehend reality and live otherwise? To ask these questions is not to leave Stow’s book but to suggest the range and urgency of the thinking it provokes about loss and genre, ethics and politics.

**Behind Every Successful Entrepreneur of Himself is His Wife:
Cooper’s *Family Values***

Leigh Claire La Berge

Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. Zone Books, 2017 (hc) \$29.95, 416 pp. February 2017 ISBN: 9781935408840

After a decade of critical-theory oriented books that approached neoliberalism broadly as a historical period (see David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*) or as a dominant ideology (see Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*), scholars are now raising more discrete and exacting questions: what did self-proclaimed neoliberals do and how did they do it? Nancy MacLean’s, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (2017), examines the work of neoliberal James M. Buchanan in the context of racial desegregation in Virginia after the Brown v. Board of Education decision. Quinn Slobodian’s *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (2018) traces the rise of the neoliberals in the context of decolonization and growing interstate economic cooperation. Policy

might be one word for this kind of inquiry, but it's not one expansive enough. Somewhere between intellectual history and genealogy, these books promise to tighten our conceptual grasp of neoliberalism as well as help us to decide whether the term should continue to be endowed with the capacious meaning it now has. In some academic circles, over-arching narratives of neoliberal insistence on privatization, individualism and anti-regulation have achieved the status of common sense. Now, some of these narratives have started to be, and will continue to be, both refined if not ultimately rejected.

Enter Melinda Cooper's new book, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, which reorients the unit of social analysis of the neoliberal critique from *homo oeconomicus* to *familia oeconomica*, from man to the family, that bastion of liberal progress and possibility that constituted and sustained man all along. Cooper's book will change our conversation. It provides such a detailed and comprehensive argument, one so astutely staged on multiple levels of mediation from policy to theory to possibilities and limitations of commodification itself, that it will certainly become a conceptual index for those interested in understanding the American school of neoliberalism.

And perhaps the book will free both neoliberals and contemporary readers from the long shadow of Foucault. Cooper's work turns away from the path Foucault charted through the logic, language, assumptions of neoliberal epistemology.¹ Indeed, one wonders if critics following his lead have attended too closely to the coherences and contradictions of neoliberals' texts. Here is the problem: neoliberal economic philosophy follows in the long neoclassical economic tradition of tautology and casuistry, on the one hand, and an indifference to its own internal structure, on the other. To go ever deeper is to risk not an unveiling, but rather a mirroring. This is why it has come to seem less interesting to ask what the neoliberals thought and more interesting to follow what they did.

A refusal of the pleasures of hermeneutics, on the one hand, and a refusal of a moralizing dirge, on the other, is what makes Cooper's book so unique. This book may be, in fact, the first critical cultural history of neoliberalism. Instead of seeking out ever-deeper levels of contradiction within their arguments, Cooper resituates the neoliberals as they are forced to respond to the social demands of 1960s-1980s including feminism, African American civil rights, the rise of the gay rights movement but also of the AIDS crisis, and, of course, the dramatic changes in global and national economic structure ushered by the Federal Reserve and the Carter administration in the late 1970s. We may never know the precise causes for that decade's inflation, but, as Cooper suggests, it is more productive to trace its ramifications into the socio-cultural field where inflation was nothing less than a "moral crisis" that demanded the undoing of all sorts of welfare-state provisions.

Under pressure of social agitating and organization, there was a real constituency of Republicans and Democrats who were ready, at the end of the 1960s, to expand the social wage; to let single women, single mothers, and African-Americans participate in its benefits. This is the crucial and dramatic setting of Cooper's book. There was, she insists, some real and radical success here, from public employees organizing to the benefits of affirmative action. Hers is, I think a quite generous reading of the social possibilities of Fordism. But then the Keynesian curtain draws to a close. Henceforth, both the left and

the right will have to respond to what that economic organization made possible, what should be conserved from it, and what must be abandoned. Progressive social change was halted, of course, and so were rising wages.

Through a series of remarkable case studies, Cooper shows how nimble and adaptive, but also how deeply reactionary the neoliberals ultimately came to be. What Cooper finds is that neoliberalism intercalates reactionary forms of all ages, starting with the Feudal poor laws which insist that the family, not the state, is the support of last resort, and enjoins them to certain cites of liberal social progress. That enjoining both halts interrupts liberal progress, but also reconfigures what progress may be taken to be. At the center of neoliberal logics, from questions of how one should behave in a gay bathhouse to questions of how the Federal Reserve should manage the money supply, Cooper discovers the trope of the white, heterosexual family. Her most forceful argument, found on almost every page of this book, is that perhaps our most promiscuously used phrase of neoliberal ideology – “man is an entrepreneur of himself” – is not only deeply inadequate but in fact an impediment to an understanding of neoliberal forms of social critique.

Throughout the book a tension emerges between state management of sexual and gender normativity and state management of asset prices and money supply, and it becomes a site of fertile, ideological cross over. Cooper provides a wonderful example here. She notes that while Foucault was likely in bathhouses, a time during which he was beginning his own theorizing of the potential anti-normative possibility of neoliberal discourse, the neoliberals were theorizing about how neoliberal precepts might intercede into the developing AIDS crisis. As now-judge Richard Posner wrote: “people do not leave off acting rationally when they leave the market place and go home or, for that matter, to a singles bar, a homosexual bathhouse or a heroin shooting gallery.” Rather the bathhouses themselves could be subject to the logic of neoliberal theories of pricing. So, if one chooses to engage in bathhouse sex, then one must have concluded that the risk of HIV transmission was the price to be paid for the sexual encounter.

But if the neoliberals were willing to let gay sex be somewhat freed from moral regulation through their optic of pricing, up to and including gay marriage, then other prices, namely the price of money, became subject to moral concerns. As the effects of the post-gold standard inflation of the US dollar began to be felt throughout the American stock and bond-holding classes by the late 1970s, both neoliberals and new conservatives began to re-conceive of inflation as an attack on the American family. It’s worth noting, as Cooper and many economists do, that inflation contributed to some wealth redistribution throughout the 1970s. While the majority of Americans benefitted from inflation, its transposition into a moral panic in which, to quote conservative writer George Gilder, “wealth holders would be forced to watch their grandsons grow their hair down to their shoulders, drop out of expensive schools financed by disappearing family wealth, and dabble in careers in art and carpentry, interspersed with unemployment checks,” would soon eclipse those benefits. As narratives about the social leniency of inflation began to circulate, the federal government “was able to consistently promote asset growth over wage growth.”² But this too ultimately redounded to the normative family in the form of inheritance, what Milton Freidman called not really an economic issue, but rather “an accident of birth.”

Some readers might find a kind of gallows humor in the neoliberals' vision of bathhouse sex-pricing schemes. And perhaps the neoliberals got that one wrong. But at other junctures they were prescient. In another case study, Cooper turns to neoliberal funding prescriptions for college, which arose from the concern that free and low-cost education was enabling 60s and 70s student radicalism. First, we have to note that, incredibly, Friedman's ideas for loan repayment and forgiveness are *more liberal* than those offered by the Democratic Party today. Neoliberal economists couldn't have imagined, notes Cooper, "how closely [today's] student loan market [now] approximates their policy prescriptions."³ Such success has a dual effect, of course, as the fiscal and the social run together. Increasing indebtedness sends young adults back into the arms of their parents. For queer students, pregnant students, single parents, those even with a different vision of a life world, student loans create a "debt-based temporal bind that radically affirms the economic function of the private family," one reminiscent of the pre-Keynesian, even, at times, pre-Modern era.⁴

Cooper's is an exhaustive and exacting history of right-angled socio-political critique and its implementation at the end of the long twentieth century in the United States, but in it I do see two missing conversations.

First: immigration. In 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act radically overhauled immigration law, ending its almost exclusively Western European allowances and opening up forms of family reunification to denizens of the global south. This change, which dramatically reoriented conceptions of race, gender, ethnicity in the United States, is not reflected in Cooper's story. Particularly in terms of social labor composition and the rise of the service economy—which emerged as wages ceased their rise—this seems like an important history. We see some glimpse of its importance in Laura Briggs's recent *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics* (2017), which contains an intriguing discussion of the "nanny gate" scandal. Remember Bill Clinton's attorney general nominee, Zoe Baird, and the undocumented workers she hired so that she might become a "working mother," a managerial decision that would ultimately derail her nomination? What Briggs suggests, and this seems a crucial part of Cooper's story, is that by the mid-90s, under steady dissolution of state services at the neoliberals' behest, the undocumented immigrant of color was joining the white, heteronormative neoliberal family to provide all sorts of care work.

Second: prison. Cooper at one point calls the neoliberals' vision of "asset-based welfare" a kind of "punitive welfare." But, of course, the other form of punitive capture in the era she covers is the expansion of the prison industry itself. The same people of color who were routinely left out of the Fordist wage, who Cooper turns to again and again to show both its deficiencies and possibilities, are the ones who have now come to populate our ever-expanding prisons. Jordan T. Camp has written of this relationship incisively in his recent *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State* (2016). Cooper does discuss so-called faith-based reform efforts in prison, but her book would have benefited from greater attention to this particular post-Fordist area of state-economic growth and management.

Of course, no one book can do it all. And yet Cooper's book does come close. Perhaps the next chapter in our growing attempts to historicize neoliber-

alism will be to explore how and why the term has become the *point de capiton* of much leftist critique in the past 15 years and, to borrow a neoliberal idiom, at what price?

Notes

1. Such an approach is seen, for example, in Philip Mirowski's *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (New York: Verso, 2013).
2. Cooper, *Family Values*, p. 136.
3. Cooper, *Family Values*, p. 219.
4. Cooper, *Family Values*, p. 217.

Critical Material Practices with Contemporary Art: Mondloch's *A Capsule Aesthetic*

Nathaniel Stern

Kate Mondloch, *A Capsule Aesthetic: Feminist Materialisms in New Media Art*. University of Minnesota Press. ISBN: 978-1517900496. \$27.00

Kate Mondloch's *A Capsule Aesthetic: Feminist Materialisms in New Media Art* is an in-depth and lush investigation of three artists' works, showing how each exemplifies the influence of feminism from the 1960s through today, while also pushing us to think and feel and move forward *with* feminism. Mondloch's approach couples aesthetics and ethics through activist prose that is unafraid to embrace populism or pleasure, or to revisit theoretical and historical misreadings of the past (and present). This book does not attempt to *explain* anything. Rather, it *practices*, and invites us to practice, conceptual-material engagements with art, and thus sensation, perception, and action. Such practice, the author convincingly argues over the entirety of her manuscript, is intrinsically feminist.

Mondloch's first book, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, similarly proffered a framework and case studies for thinking with specific kinds of what she calls screen-reliant art; and while in my 2010 review,¹ I recommended that manuscript with enthusiasm, the author's second monograph is more political, more refined, more poetic, and more impactful, across a number of fields and disciplines, precisely because it deepens thinkings and feelings with the artworks described, and art more generally. Her book addresses both the materials and bodies of that art's making and experience, and matter and embodiment more generally, encompassing the theories, histories, categories, action, and potential futures of feminism writ large.