

Petromasculinity, progressive neoliberalism, and right-wing protests in Canada

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Janet Conway is a Professor of Sociology at Brock University, Canada. Her research focuses on global justice, transnational feminisms and indigenous activisms. From May to July 2022 she was a research fellow at the Freie Universität Berlin. With Heike Mauer she talked about progressive neoliberalism and right-wing protests as current challenges to politics of solidarity and justice.

To begin with, could you introduce the readers to the Canadian context?

Canada is a country of mass-immigration and for the last 50 years, it has – unlike Germany, for example – officially endorsed a policy of multiculturalism. Canada has a liberal government, explicitly pro-feminist. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was elected in 2015, the same year Trump won the presidency in the U.S. Thus, Canada appeared as a liberal outlier within the rise of right-wing regimes elsewhere. Trudeau's government hasn't broken with free market liberalism, while being – within this framework – explicitly pro-feminist and anti-racist. For example, it inaugurated a national childcare program, and it is strongly committed to reconciliation with Canada's First Nations, rhetorically at least...

This sounds like a form of progressive neoliberalism, like [Nancy Fraser](#) would use the term?

Yes, and in some cases, as I would argue, substantively so: the Trudeau government endorses a progressive kind of neoliberalism. However, to frame Canada first and foremost as intrinsically progressive ignores the prior government of Stephen Harper of the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), who formed a right-wing, neoliberal government from 2005–2015. The Harper government opposed abortion and reproductive health (and integrated this position into development policies) and advanced a conservative family politics. At the same time, the Conservatives are not openly homophobic nor explicitly anti-feminist. In general, the more socially conservative elements are kept under wraps, because they have been proven to be electorally problematic or detrimental to Conservative ambitions. So anti-abortion politics, anti-immigrant politics, homophobic politics: the mainstream parties, including the Conservatives have to distance themselves from these. And while the Conservative party was defeated in 2015 by the Liberal Trudeau, Canada experiences nonetheless a proliferation of extreme right-wing groups.

Could you describe these groups and their politics a little bit more in detail?

Since the election of Trump, and in the context of the pandemic, Canada experienced a proliferation of right-wing, masculinized politics online. The most visible, public manifestation of right-wing activism, signalling a transition from online politics to offline mass-movement organizing, happened in 2022. Late in the pandemic, ostensibly in

defense of “freedom” and in opposition to public health restrictions, there was the mobilization in Ottawa, [a convoy of trucks](#) from across the country, occupying the city for three weeks. It was an alarming manifestation of white-nationalism and masculinity, evident on the streets, cumulating in the harassment of racialized and LGBTIQ persons in the streets of Ottawa. To many, this was a kind of watershed moment, signalling a significant shift in the Canadian context. A number of Conservative Party politicians, including current Members of Parliament, publicly aligned themselves with that movement, which is an alarming development.

Could you expand a bit more about the character of the convoy protests. Are they comparable to the attack on the United States Capitol on January 6th 2021?

I think the organizers were actually inspired by the Capitol insurrection. The protestors came to Ottawa with a manifesto, basically demanding that the government resign. The key figures and leaders of the convoy protests belong to far-right groups, with alignments with western separatism in Canada, endorsing pro-oil and -gas politics over environmentalism and the rights of Indigenous people. The movement articulates a kind of frontier attitude, encompassing a white-settler mentality as well as a form of [petro-masculinity](#). The key organizers have pre-histories in trying to agitate, initially running with the kind of momentum created by the Yellow Vests in France, who were initially protesting an increased taxation of fossil fuels. Over the course of the pandemic, their protests shifted to challenging the power of the Canadian federal government and especially its policies around vaccination and mask mandates – their new rallying cry being freedom. And while previous efforts to rally a convoy had little traction, in January 2022, suddenly hundreds of big trucks did converge. They gathered in Ottawa, capable of transporting large volumes of fuel and equipment to construct and sustain an urban occupation over weeks or months, in winter.

How did the authorities react to the protests?

Some protestors were actually threatening politicians and the Canadian intelligence services deemed these threats to be real. However, the Ottawa police did not pay attention to these warnings, which allowed the convoy protesters to get entrenched, to create a gridlock in the city, and to harass and intimidate the local residents, for example, through sounding air horns non-stop day and night, refusing to observe masking by-laws in shops and restaurants, and confronting those who did. As the police tolerated this kind of occupation of the city, it became evident that the protest must have been supported by at least some elements in the police and in the military. The national police, the RCMP, is also currently subject to massive criticism for their violence against Indigenous people and gendered violence. So a growing critique of policing practices, institutions and budgets at every level is part of the context in which the convoy protests were allowed to get entrenched, with the police cooperating or in collusion with these protests on one hand, while on the other hand, civil authorities and citizens needing to invoke the police to deal with the threat that the convoy represented.

So, the convoy protests were a very dramatic moment, signalling a new level of threat – not because these elements haven’t been there previously, but because they were able to create at least temporarily a culture of intimidation coupled with a capacity of mass organizing and connecting to mainstream political parties like the Conservatives. In October 2022, the [Public Order Emergency Commission](#) started an inquiry into the government’s invoking the Emergency Act, including the role of the Ottawa police in the escalation of the crisis.

How were these protests perceived in Canada by the general public?

The vast majority of the Canadian public did not and does not support the convoy protests but was rather in shock about it. Progressive activists and movements were caught off-guard. The fact that this event occurred and the authorities were grappling how to respond to it has had an effect on political culture, which is still playing out.

It is exactly this shifting of extreme authoritarian and violent online activism towards the offline, articulating itself in mainstream political discourses and public practices that in my opinion constitutes the newness of the situation in the Canadian context: Social conservatism, politicised religious activism, neo-liberalism are not new phenomena. What is new is, that these militant and more violent elements find resonance in political parties, shifting the Overton-window of what is acceptable to do or to say in public.

Nancy Fraser articulated a critique of the left's turn towards progressive neoliberalism and she especially accused certain types of feminism and multiculturalism of abandoning the working class or "den kleinen Mann" (the simple man). In Germany, this was widely discussed. Were there similar discussions in Canada?

Ideologically, the convoy protests were not animated by a critique of neoliberalism and its exclusions, but by a right-wing and free market libertarian critique of government. The protests were anti-state and anti-government – picking up on the resentments around vaccine mandates and in mobilizing liberal discourses of [freedom](#) for illiberal ends – like deposing a democratically-elected government. In Canada, the base of the convoy is not the poor and unemployed white man. It's actually a middle stratum, a group of self-employed truckers who own their own rigs, who are small entrepreneurs. The vast majority of truckers, and the truckers' associations, distanced themselves from the convoy. I think it's important to do that demographic and class analysis of the protest, but at the same time to avoid a kind of economic reductionism in explaining the forces that led to the convoy's converging when and how it did. Thus, explaining the protests as a class-based critique of neoliberalism, albeit misguided, or as a response to the left's alleged abandonment of class in favour of "identity politics", as Fraser was insinuating in her critique of "progressive neoliberalism," is not accurate in this context.

Because it's not feminism that is actually dismantling the welfare state?

Exactly. Or black activists. It's an oversimplification to say that poor people turn to Trump or to extreme-right politics because of disillusionment, since black people or Indigenous people, who are on the bottom of every social and economic indicator are not doing so. But again, the convoy protests were not opposing cuts to the welfare state; they were, in fact, opposing welfare state bureaucracies (i.e., public health regulations). They attributed economic dislocation and hardship on government over-reach, on pandemic regulations impeding their employment or their entrepreneurial activity.

It is not simply or narrowly economic dislocation at the root of these kinds of protests; we are experiencing a crisis of liberal democratic and social democratic projects worldwide. And the pandemic has created a massive sense of fear and uncertainty that's also real and the operations of the modern, neoliberal state is not really up to dealing with this. So, there is a vacuum and an opening for this kind of right-wing politics, but it's not simply a working-class revolt.

Would you say it is a crisis or a conflict of representation? In the sense that some people articulate a form of [aggrieved entitlement](#) because formerly excluded groups raise their voices publicly and demand for social and political change?

The convoy protestors didn't have mass support. There is a small number that have very loud voices and articulate very radical views. Progressive movements and the neo/liberal institutions don't really know how to deal with it; conservative parties are flirting with it and the police are condoning it. So even without mass support, it's critical to take it seriously because the convergence of these developments can still be very dangerous.

Objectively, we are experiencing multiple crises, including a crisis of the doctrines of modernization, growth and progress. Intellectually and politically, the challenge is to find ways to resist this right-wing resurgence, without simply reinscribing a form of liberalism that can make symbolic progress on trans*, gender and race issues, but is materially still creating massive deprivation and misery, certainly on a global level, but also within liberal democratic societies. So, we have to think very critically about liberalism, not just neoliberalism, as we analyse and resist the new right.

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