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The Weaponization Of “Groomer”

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CW: This essay includes discussion of child sexual abuse and rape.

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I grew up in a right-wing household in a rural, predominantly right-wing, community. I was groomed and eventually sexually assaulted by my right-wing Christian father who was highly regarded by everyone in the community who knew him. I was taken to purity balls every year starting at five years old, in which young girls danced with our fathers and ritualistically promised ownership of our sexuality to them until the day that they would “give” us to our future husbands. I was raised to know exactly what was expected of me as a “good” daughter, and viciously punished and suppressed whenever I dared to question or appeared to act outside of my assigned role. What was good for me, for my sense of self or autonomy, was never part of anyone’s consideration in how I was raised. Foremost in adults’ minds was how I could best be molded and shaped into the exact person they thought I should be, regardless of how much pain that process caused. When I eventually broke their mold (and as a transgender butch anarchist, break it I most certainly did), those same adults immediately blamed “out-

side agitators” like liberal teachers and the mere existence of other queer people for my apparent “change.” My experience of this was not especially unique from the experience of my peers in other right-wing households. In fact, it was, and remains, the norm.

There is a myth that the right-wing has been pushing many fronts, from the criminalization of abortion, censorship of discussions of sexuality, race, and settler colonialism in schools, attacks on gender affirming care for youth, and the frequent use of the terms “groomer” and “predator” to refer to trans and queer adults: the supposed centrality of their concern for children. The predominance of their use of “groomer” seems to be intended to show a deep concern with child sexual abuse (CSA), and many liberals and leftists seem to take them on their word for this, and respond as if right-wingers’ concern for children’s safety is real and simply misdirected. This has resulted in a variety of discourses that each compound harm to varying degrees, and cede vitally important ground to the right-wing to the extreme detriment of vulnerable youth.

While more benign expressions of leftists’ misunderstanding of right-wing ideology in regards to youth and CSA (ex: responding to a reactionary’s use of “groomer” by pointing out the actual grooming that right-wingers regularly enact on children) are largely unhelpful, there is a much more concerning response taking hold on the left that needs to be challenged in-depth and in every instance that it can be seen. Namely, there is a growing pattern among leftists to be suspicious and even outright dismissive of anti-rape and anti-CSA politics in general. The apparent logic behind it, or at least the logic that is presented, seems to be along these lines: reactionaries call queer and trans people groomers and predators, which means that if we position ourselves against *actual* groomers and predators we will give right-wingers more ammunition against queer and trans people, so we must be suspicious of and even suppress any attempts at articulating militant anti-rape and anti-CSA politics on the left. There are more things wrong with this line of thinking than I intend to cover in this essay (not the least of which

is that several actual sexual predators have been found to be pushing this logic to give themselves cover to prey on more vulnerable people) but the central underlying assumption is something in desperate need of unpacking: the idea that the right-wing actually cares about youth or sexual assault.

In reality, the right wing is pro-rape and pro-CSA to their core, and any serious look at their rhetoric and practices bears this out. Many of their biggest celebrities actively and publicly talk about the sexual desirability of young girls, and the lion's share of the sexual assault that happens in their communities is enacted by people they know and approve of. This is because, in practice (and this aspect is not unique to reactionary communities) sexual assault is a tool of patriarchy, and works to reinforce existing power structures. If the right-wing took grooming and CSA seriously, they would be eating each other alive, they would trust youth when they came forward about predatory adults in their community, and they would be affirming youth autonomy. They do not, and will not, do any of these things, because actual sexual assault has never been something they have been concerned about. What actually concerns them, and what they are intending to express when they throw around terms like "groomer" and "predator," is the maintenance of their property relation to youth.

The manner in which reactionaries are preoccupied with sexual assault or victimization of children is not about care for the person victimized, nor even that they see it as bad in all cases (as we can see, they do not). They see it has a defending their own property relation to that person. The right-wing in general feels an extreme entitlement to shaping the youth under their power as they see fit without the interference of outside influences that reveal to youth that there are other possibilities for them besides the singular narrative the adults in their life offer them. They may cloak their rhetoric in a faux concern for children's wellbeing, but in practice it is fairly obvious to any attentive observer that what they want is to be the singular authority in children's lives. Chil-

dren, in their eyes (and the eyes of the State) are private property, and their ideology dictates that any and all private property can be controlled utterly by those who hold “ownership” over it. Sexual assault then, as long as it happens among those “approved” to interact with their “property” (family members, pastors, friends, etc.), is generally acceptable to them even as they deny that it ever happens. Sexual assault is a rhetorical placeholder for them, it signifies their outrage at outside influence on vulnerable people they see as their property, and it has always been so.

The reality is that the right-wing has a deep hatred for children and youth, and it is regularly expressed in their politics and how the youth among them are treated. Youth are one of the most oppressed social groups in our society, being at almost the total mercy of the adults they are reduced to the “property” of, and reactionaries have a very long history of vicious abuse of anyone they see as their property. They generally hate children because, despite the impact of their careful informational isolation and control, youth continue to be full human beings rather than inert lumps of clay ready to be shaped by their will, and that is not something that right-wingers easily forgive. To understand children’s determination towards self-actualization and autonomy, which does not fit with reactionaries’ view of children-as-property-objects, they blame external “deviants” for “corrupting” them. They cannot stand the idea that their control is not sufficient to acquire total submission, so they must apply the “outside agitators” myth to explain away any moment that a child expresses their own personal agency. The idea that children have minds of their own and can accurately report their own internal experiences as well as act on them independently is intolerable to their worldview. The blame instead gets put on liberal teachers, the existence of trans and queer people, and the accessibility of outside ideas.

When we cede ground to the right by accepting that their politics, even in a twisted or misdirected way, are anti-rape, anti-CSA, we ultimately help them be successful in obscuring their real con-

cerns: the defense and reification of their property relation over children and youth. Importantly, we abandon actual victims of rape and CSA to heightened isolation and control because we are too distracted by responding to surface-level rhetoric to challenge the very real politics that make youth so vulnerable. Capitulating to right-wing demands will never get us to the end of them, and if they find a certain rhetoric is successful in allowing them to gain valuable territory they will only continue to escalate it. Children in their care will continue to be human beings with their own agency and reactionaries will continue to blame it on outside “corruption” regardless of how many of their demands we submit to. The important fight is here, and there are countless youth who need us to fight it on our own terms, not on the terms their oppressors set before us.