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France

Family-friendly France?

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On 16 January Emmanuel Macron made an address to the nation in which he insisted on the need for rearmament: civic, academic, scientific, technological, industrial agricultural rearmament, and demographic rearmament!

What brought on this warlike pronouncement on the question of population? In 2023, only 678,000 babies were born in France, a drop of 6.6% compared with 2022.

France has long been a country reputed for its pro-natalist policies and its high birth rate - the highest in the European Union. At the same time, it is a perpetual subject of concern. In 1990 *Le Monde* wrote "Nowhere else in the world would the subject make the front page of a popular daily newspaper than in France (or China, in a very different political and social context). Yet in most Western European countries, fertility rates are lower than in France." In 2006 the *Washington Post* reported "This summer, the government – concerned that French women still were not producing enough children to guarantee a full replacement generation – very publicly urged French women to have even more babies."

“Family-friendly France”

Before and following the Second World War different concerns - the lack of young men ready to fight, and better conditions for workers - combined to introduce pro-family policies in a “Family Code”. This code and its subsequent modifications cover:

- Generous maternity grants and maternity leave, increasing for the third child.
- Provision of subsidized creches, day nurseries, childminders, school from two-and-a-half.
- Nursing mothers are encouraged to work part-time or take a weekly day off work.
- Benefits for family with three or more children in family allowances, subsidised transport, the allocation of housing.
- Full tax benefits to parents until the youngest child reaches 18.
- Subsidising holidays through municipal holiday camps for children, “holiday cheques” for waged workers.

There is one significant difference. The original family code banned the sale of contraception - this was repealed in 1967 - and introduced harsher laws against abortion - finally legalized in 1975. Today the introduction of abortion into the constitution is being discussed, promoted even by Macron, although as a “guaranteed freedom” rather than the fundamental right that the feminist movement campaigns for. [\[1\]](#)

The pro-natalist policies of that time were not driven, as we would argue is the case today, by a racist anti-migrant stance, they reflected the rightwing notion that a country has to be strong and produce children so that it can defend itself, thus giving women as the producers of children a special role. Pétain, the French collaborator president of France under Nazi occupation, stepped up the importance of Mother’s Day. This had been officialised in France in 1926, aiming to repopulate a country decimated by the First World War by promoting the birth rate, which had been relatively low in France since the end of the 19th century. The Vichy regime brought children into it, asking schools to prepare Mother’s Day with their pupils with posters, speeches, mobilisation of the press.

Militarization

There is today in France a new air of militarization with the introduction of “Universal National Service”, even if it is not in the military, and the proposal to introduce uniforms in schools.

Isabelle Cambourakis, editorial director of the feminist “Sorcières” collection told *Reporterre*:

Women’s bodies are not weapons of war. Associating this martial terminology with natalist policy makes my blood run cold. It gives the impression that the government wants to produce cannon fodder. It’s not just a pro-natalist rhetoric like so many others in history. Added to this is the unbearable connotation of war, at a time when conflicts are multiplying around the world. One wonders what the government is actually aiming for. What kind of policy will demographic rearmament lead to?

[This militaristic rhetoric come from] authoritarian and conservative countries. It’s exactly the same rhetoric as that of Orbán’s government in Hungary. It’s a fascist fantasy that defends the family, the homeland and the heteropatriarchal model. The worst thing is that this rhetoric isn’t even effective. It has no influence on procreation practices. It’s not because Macron calls for demographic rearmament that people will suddenly decide to have children! These speeches have no effect, they’re simply an address to the conservatives.

Which French families?

At the same time Macron is playing on another rightwing theme - on which he has recently made an open alliance with the far right in the French parliament to get a new restrictive law on immigration passed: distrust and rejection of migrants who would both boost the young working age population in France and probably increase the birth rate.

If the real concern was the birth rate the government should be relying on migration and integrating lesbians, gay couples, trans people and others outside the heterosexual model into the “effort”, allowing medically-assisted procreation and adoption for them all. The government is in fact primarily defending an identity-based approach. Its plan is for white women to have children.

This resonates with the fears provoked by the “Great Replacement” theory - that ethnic French and white European populations are being demographically and culturally replaced by non-white peoples—especially from Muslim-majority countries—through mass migration, demographic growth and a drop in the birth rate of white Europeans. This rearmament is thus against the internal enemy, the immigrants, young people from working-class neighbourhoods, Muslims. But where will it end - what about those who refuse to take the fertility tests at age 25 (to boost the birth rate, a proposal to make gynaecological examinations for women and spermograms for men compulsory!) or who refuse to have children?

At the same time in Mayotte - an “overseas department” of France in the Indian Ocean with the highest birth rate in France, the government is planning to propose sterilisation to all young mothers, and to eliminate the automatic right to French nationality to children born on that portion of French soil. An idea rapidly taken up by the right and the extreme right for the rest of France - for those born of “non-French” parents of course.

A feminist response

Refusal to be conscripted into a militarized mindset is longstanding in the feminist movement. Its history runs from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom born in the throes of the First World War through movements of mothers for peace, joint initiatives of women from the two sides in a conflict - including today in Palestine-Israel, women's peace camps against nuclear weapons of the 1980s. The denunciation of the porous relationship of the military-industrial complex and the male political world was summed up in the famous slogan "take the toys from the boys".

That women's ability to have children should be abused in this way, making it a tool at the service of "nation", and in such militaristic terms may make our blood run cold - but it should also fire us up with anger.

Smash the family?

The women's movement of the 1970s - at least in countries where they were not still fighting for basic rights such as divorce or married women's right to own property - did put forward the slogan "smash the family". Among other things we in the socialist feminist current had read Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed* and its chapter "Thermidor in the Family" and recognised to what extent the family was a training ground for the authoritarian, patriarchal, capitalist society children were born into. We also learnt as feminists dealing with the difficult questions of sexual violence that the family is the main site of violence for women and children.

At the same time, we were and are in solidarity with migrants and displaced workers fighting for the right to a family life, for the right to state support and services so that mothers and parents can bring up their children with a decent standard of living.

We could adapt Marx's words on religion "the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions" to what the family represents for many today, despite its capitalist patriarchal, heterosexist character.

The challenge for the new world socialists strive to build is to how ensure that everybody the social, intergenerational, emotional, sexual, relationships they wish for to be happy and emancipated without restricting anybody else's right to enjoy the same.

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[1] This was confirmed by a vote of the two French parliamentary assemblies together on 4 March. Headlines misleadingly referred to a "right", BBC 4 March 2024 "[France makes abortion a constitutional right](#)".