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The crisis of democracy and the backlash against gender

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Democracy and gender have been intertwined in many ways during the period in which liberal democracies increased in number and consolidated as electoral regimes, from the end of the 1980s until the first decade of the 2000s. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action contributed to frame gender as a political issue for democracies in this period, constituting the patterns of the disputes from then on.

This does not mean, as we know, that the increase in the number of democracies in the world and the strengthening of its conceptual definition as an institutional alternative capable of guaranteeing both pluralism and fundamental civil rights was enough to engender democracies. However, there was an opportunity to set challenges to existing democracies and transition politics, encouraging national actors to commit to institutions and policy referenced by gender equality and sexual diversity defined as *democratic values*.

There is a difference between the understanding that patriarchal societies could be democratic in the liberal electoral sense and keep anchored in the sexual division of labor, the control over women's bodies and its necessary counterpart, the masculine control of the political agenda, law and policy, and our current comprehension that there is more going on than the accommodation between electoral democracy and gender inequalities. We are now facing changes in the normative dimension of democracy as well as in the patterns assumed by gender conflicts.

The weakening of democracy is connected to a crisis in its capacity and legitimacy, the erosion of constitutional guarantees and rights, and the hollowing out of democratic values. My hypothesis is that gender backlash finds an opportunity in this crisis as well as contributes to the erosion of rights and the hollowing out of democratic values. The campaigns against gender also raise support for authoritarian leaders and legitimacy for anti-democratic politics.

Democratic backsliding

In 2019, the annual report by the Freedom House, "Freedom in the World", was entitled "Democracy in retreat" and expressed concern for the fact that its score aggregating indicators of democratic procedures, political rights and civil liberties recorded the 13th consecutive year of global decline. The "Democracy Index" by *The Economist*, implemented in 2006, has since shown a decay in civil liberties, as well as in the "functioning of government", a variable including the confidence in governments and political parties. It is worth noting that in 2018 its global score for electoral process and pluralism remained unchanged, as the deterioration of democracy continued to be evident, indicating a possible disconnection between liberties, the functionality and legitimacy of democratic institutions, and electoral processes.

Since the beginning of the years 2000, the idea that democratization gave place to de-democratization (Tilly, 2003) and deconsolidation (Mounk, 2018) has been receiving more attention from authors. Democracies could be restricted from within with no need for classical *coup d'états* (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

The fact that politics could not be insulated from inequalities was stressed by the most critical approaches during the golden decades of liberal democracy (Phillips, 1991), anticipating criticism of the depoliticization of public life (Young, 1990). The more recent debates address the new inequalities related to financial capital, information, and scientific-technical knowledge (Tilly, 2003, p. 42), as well as corporate power (Crouch, 2004, p. 39) and its effects on the legitimacy and the capacity of the national government

(Fraser, 2015, pp. 175-6). They would erode democracy as inequalities increase and the public dimension of life diminishes.

The undermining of the public dimension of politics can be traced back at least to the 1980s, when neoliberalism became an economic and political guideline and expanded as a rationality and a “a new evidence regime” (Dardot and Laval, 2009) in which inequalities are increasingly *the normal and the normative* (Brown, 2015, p. 38).

The Global South brings evidences of a pendular movement towards democracy and authoritarianism throughout the 20th century (Avritzer, 2018), affected by the action of local elites against the institutionalization of democratic procedures and rights, as well as by post-colonial inequalities (Ballestrin, 2018). These fragile democracies are most vulnerable to economic variations and corporate interests in the era of financialized capitalism (Duménil and Lévy, 2011). Popular delusion with corruption and the increasing levels of inequality and insecurity may be turned against democracy. De-democratization weakens the institutions built to contain human rights violations, opens the path for militarization and for discontinuing policy to promote equality and empowerment for women, black, and indigenous groups, enhancing their vulnerability.

An engendered backsliding

It is easier to detect concomitance than explaining why the backlash against gender became a part of the democratic backsliding.

A historical perspective elucidates that current conservatism is not original in its opposition to equal rights and social opportunities for men and women or to the legal recognition of sexual diversity. However, its capacity to mobilize the citizens in protests against rights in different parts of the world is new, especially as it becomes a renewed potential resource to raise support for authoritarian leaders and politics. *Neoconservatism* is not defined by its content, but by the transnational organization of its actors, their capacity to mobilize the citizens based in the supposed corruption of the natural sexual order and the reinforcement of an anti-pluralist rationality in formal democratic contexts, adding to authoritarian tendencies.

The literature briefly discussed above connects the democratic backsliding to neoliberalism, establishing a framework that goes beyond constitutional rights.

Neoliberalism and conservatism converge in the definition of family values from a privatizing and conventional perspective (Cooper, 2019), as well as “in producing the contemporary landscape of political intelligibility and possibility” (Brown, 2006, p. 693) in which the public is displaced as the space where alternatives could be built. Because they contribute to hollow out the collective and the public, they also converge in the production of an “undemocratic citizen”, who “is not distressed by exorbitant concentrations of political and economic power, routine abrogations of the rule of law” (Brown, 2015, p. 692) and the restriction of the rights of those characterized as frightening and undeserving.

The family is a key to the economic and the moral dimensions connecting the erosion of the public, the backlash against gender and democracy. The dismantling of public infrastructure and the restriction of economic and labor rights make the protection and support by and within the family a practical necessity and an antidote to uncertainties and precarity (Biroli, 2019a, 2019c; Lorey, 2015). At the same time, the

preservation of “the family” can legitimate setbacks in individual rights, censorship and violence against minorities.

Financial globalization and neoliberal guidelines gradually restricted political alternatives concerning public budget and policy. In this context, the “social-reproductive contradictions of financial capitalism” develop as a care crisis (Fraser, 2016). The patterns assumed by care work are directly connected to the share of public and private responsibilities and to the gendered division of labor (Biroli, 2017 and 2019a; Tronto, 2013). The redefinitions of the role of the state by financial capitalism and the changes in gender relations both produce new standards for care – but they are conflicting (Fraser, 2016). In unequal societies, the care that is no longer public does not automatically become a commodity, but falls on families and, in them, given the sexual division of labor, on women.

The backlash against gender adds to neoliberalism’s privatizing sociopolitical response to the present crisis of care. The practical requirements produced by the restriction of public provision and social rights come along with gendered and racialized definitions of what and who threatens the social order. If there is indeed some kind of politically functional “panic”, it would help to understand the social environment in which it is activated. Current insecurities and uncertainties are being moralized, serving as fertile ground for anti-rights and anti-democratic movements and leaders self-presented as family advocates.

The campaign against gender

The notion of “gender ideology” was built as a strategy against the incorporation of gender as a normative concept in the context of the UN Conferences in the 1990s (Bracke e Paternotte, 2018; Corrêa, 2018; Faúndes, 2019; Machado, 2018). Its genealogy takes us to the theological position assumed by the Catholic Church in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, published in 1995 under the papacy of John Paul II, in which the “culture of death” was defined as a threat to the family, to matrimonial sex and to the complementarity between man and women (Vaggione, 2017). In 1998, it was included for the first time in a Catholic Church document, a report by the Episcopal Conference of Peru published under the title “Gender Ideology, its threats and its reach”.

It was in the 2000s, however, that this notion became *a visible and effective strategy* by conservative groups to curb debate, research, legislation and public policy challenging gender inequalities and violence or promoting LGBTQ rights. Conservatives would mobilize three framings to define the threat, the actors and alternative paths:

- (1) the family is threatened by the action of feminist and LGBTQ lobbyists, who are introducing changes in laws and public policy against *the values of the majority*;
- (2) global economic elites, international organizations such as the UN, and globalized national elites in collusion with them promote a new kind of colonization through gender, against *national values and traditions*;
- (3) families, that is, *parents need to resume their authority and guidance in children's education* reducing the interference by the state, as children are the main targets of feminist and LGBTQ groups.

The third framing is particularly significant in Latin America, where the main slogans of the anti-gender campaign are *Con mis hijos no te metas* (Don’t mess with my children) and *A mis hijos los educo yo* (I am the one educating my children).

In Europe, the cycle of conservative demonstrations recurring to the notion of “gender ideology” as a strategy for popular mobilization and pressure against governments started in 2012, when the campaign “La Manif por Touts” was created in France and the first of successive protests against gender took place in Poland.

In Latin America, the cycle of popular mobilization and street protests against “gender ideology” would begin in 2016, in similar terms. They took thousands of people to the streets in different countries and cities in the region to protest against *sex education* and the inclusion of a *gendered perspective in educational content*, laws and court decisions legalizing *same-sex marriage* and *adoption by same-sex couples*.

I mentioned that the notion of “gender ideology” was built as a strategy against the incorporation of gender as a normative concept in the context of the UN Conferences in the 1990s and the BPfA. Almost two decades later, it figures as a reaction to its developments. In Latin America, they coincided with center-left governments which nevertheless had a conflictive relation to gender rights and were allies of religious conservative groups (Friedman y Tabbush, 2019). This would not impede conservative actors to hold the left responsible for advancements in gender politics, defining antagonism in moral terms.

For a brief panorama of these advancements, in 2004, the Brazilian government launched the program “Brazil Without Homophobia”, in 2006 the Law 26150 created the National Program for Comprehensive Sex Education in Argentina and, since then, these and other countries in the region have proposed or at least debated the inclusion of educational content promoting sex education and values aligned to the agenda of gender equality, debating prejudices, discrimination and violence against women and LGBTQ people. In the 2000s, several countries in the region have recognized same-sex civil unions and/or marriage through specific laws (Argentina, 2009; Uruguay, 2013), or by decisions of their constitutional courts (Mexico, 2010¹; Brazil, 2011; Colombia, 2016; Costa Rica, 2018²; Ecuador, 2019), with a variety of decisions concerning adoption by same-sex couples. In response to a petition submitted by the then Costa Rican president Luis Guillermo Solís in 2016, in January 9th, 2018 the Inter-American Human Rights Court ruled that the American Convention on Human Rights mandates the legalization of same-sex marriage.

The campaigns against gender were built as a reaction.

On August 10th, 2016, thousands of people marched in at least five Colombian cities against governmental policies for sex education. The “Marcha de la Familia” was at least in part motivated by fake images of the education content produced by the Ministry of Education and connected to the reaction against the ruling by the Colombian Supreme Court in favor of same-sex unions in April (Velez and Castro, 2018).

On September 10th, 2016, a march organized by the “Frente Nacional por la Familia” against equal marriage in Mexico happened simultaneously in various cities of the country, followed by the “Marcha Nacional por el Matrimonio, los Niños y la Familia”, in Mexico City, on September 24th, when the project of a “Latin American Front for the Right to Life and Family” was announced. They aimed a decision by the

¹ In Mexico, the proceedings for same sex-marriages fall under the legislation of each state, but decisions by the Supreme Court have defined that marriages performed in the country should be recognized by each of the 31 states (2010) and bans are unconstitutional (2015).

² In August 10th, 2018, the Supreme Court of Justice of Costa Rica confirmed the unconstitutionality of the law that prohibits equal civil marriage in the country, giving the country’s legislators 18 months to change.

Supreme Court from 2015 considering unconstitutional the bans to the recognition of same-sex marriage in any part of the country, itself a decision from 2010.

In Peru, in November 2016, the campaign “Con mis hijos no te metas” would be launched against the official guidelines for sex education. A few months later, in March 2017, it would take about 25,000 people to downtown Lima to protest, while smaller but significant protests took place in other cities across the country. From that on, “Con mis hijos no te metas” would expand its presence in the region.

These campaigns have been able to unite conservative Catholics and evangelicals (Machado, 2017 e 2018; Vaggione, 2016; Velez and Castro, 2018). However, they seem to play different roles. The street protests are clearly headed by evangelicals, while Catholic priests and even bishops declare their support. Regionally, the political expression of a growing sector of conservative Pentecostal churches and leaders (Perez Guadalupe, 2017; Perez Guadalupe and Grundberger, 2018) is inescapable if we want to comprehend the patterns of mobilization and the centrality of the opposition to sexual diversity in popular protests. However, the Catholic Church and catholic organizations have an important role in its transnational identity.

Again, 2016 gives us a key to how “gender ideology” became a popular concept among conservative Pentecostal and Catholic. The inaugural year for the cycle of protests in Latin American was also the one in which Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Pope Francis, debating with Polish bishops during the World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, said that “genuine forms of ideological colonization” are taking place everywhere, highlighting “gender” and the fact that “children – children! – are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this? Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money” (Dialogo, 2016)³.

A variety of actors has contributed to the idea that there is such a thing as a “gender ideology” and that it is a threat to children. Some of them are not clerical or openly connected to a church or religion and do not resort to religious arguments, contributing to spread religious views in secular language. This is the case of the Argentine lawyer Nicolás Márquez and the political scientist and also lawyer Agustín Laje, who published the first edition of *El Libro Negro de la nueva izquierda: ideología de género y subversión cultural* in 2016, by Unión Editorial, a Spanish publishing company founded in 1972, which stands as a defender of economic liberalism and freedom of individual initiative.

The book is an elaborated account of the connections between feminism and “cultural Marxism”. Feminism would have abandoned “women’s cause” as it left nature behind and became an ideology embodied by powerful international organizations aimed at weakening families and thereby undermining human freedom and national values. Since the book’s release in 2016, Márquez and Laje have been active in the networks of neoconservative activism in different countries, including Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay, where they gave conferences and were interviewed by the local media. It is also significant for giving prominence to a fourth framing

(4) the emphasis on the ideological condition of “radical feminist” theoretical approaches.

³<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/08/02/0568/01265.html>

Transnational and regional networks were also supported by international organizations such as *CitizenGo*, which initially funded the “Bus de la libertad” that circulated in Mexico City and Santiago, among other cities in the Americas and Europe in 2017. At least in Chile, it showed the expression “Con mis hijos no te metas”, along with the slogan “Nicolás tiene derecho a tener una mamá y un papá”. *CitizenGo* is also related to the protests organized against Judith Butler’s in Brazil, in November 2017.

A brief conclusion: gender conflicts were and continue to be about democracy

The backlash has already impacted state policy, public debate and electoral disputes in the region. The prohibition of the “diffusion and use of digitally printed materials referring to the theory and/or ideology of gender, in educational institutions” by the Paraguayan Ministry of Education and Science, through the Resolution 29.664 of October 5th, 2017 is one effect on public policy. Censorship of educational content and the attempt to remove books from schools and festivals by Brazilian authorities and Peruvian collectives of parents led to legal disputes and decisions in Brazil and Peru, in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The Colombian Plebiscite on the peace agreement between the government and the FARC and the *impeachment* of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil are examples of how “gender ideology” is mobilized as a political strategy beyond the scope of specific law or policy, aiming to delegitimize political actors and alternatives. It was also brought up as an argument against quota laws to increase women’s political participation in Paraguay and Peru in 2019. “Gender ideology” was part of the Presidential campaigns in Costa Rica and Brazil in 2018 and its combat was mentioned as a priority by the far-right Brazilian president elected, becoming a public agenda for three Ministries, those focused on Women (and family), Education, and Foreign Affairs (Biroli, 2019b).

My point however is that the campaign against gender goes beyond specific decisions, policy and electoral processes. It reaches the core of democracy and contribute to the current democratic backsliding.

First, the meaning of democracy is being disputed and restrictive conceptions are being asserted. The reframing of state secularism as a disrespect to the values of a Christian majority, as well as the “majority takes all” logic for rights potentially restricts human rights and guarantees for minorities.

Second, democratic criticism to hierarchies and inequalities such as the male dominance in politics, is now being stated as ideological. A nationalist, traditionalist and “scientific” approach would lead to the acceptance of “natural differences” and complementarities. Political minorities vindicating their rights are being defined as hegemonic elites opposing the interests of “the people”.

Third, the campaign against gender encourages and justifies the criminalization of collective actors and the censorship of critical and unconventional knowledge and thinking. Actors representing egalitarian alternatives and utopias (left-wing organizations, human rights activists, black movements, feminist movements, LGBT movements, every group under the umbrella of communist politics) and the production of knowledge that denaturalizes the world as such (scientific research, academic debate) are being pushed off the frontiers of legitimacy and turned into political enemies.

Fourth, individual rights are displaced in the name of the rights of nuclear families defined by their heterosexual character and the purpose of reproduction. These families must be “functional”. The contradictions between neoconservatism and neoliberalism are “resolved” by enlarging the responsibility of the nuclear families and those of the women within these families.

It is not only liberal democracy that is being disputed, but *a conception of the public* expressed by the shared responsibility for human vulnerability. Moral panics could be thus understood as part of a broader context of increasing privatization of the alternatives to insecurity, uncertainty and precariousness. The moralization of insecurities opens a path to mobilize popular support for discriminatory, authoritarian solutions.

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