

Anti-gender Campaigns, Populism, and Neoliberalism in Europe and Latin America

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In 2012, massive protests erupted in France against the bill opening marriage (and therefore adoption rights) to same-sex couples. They recalled and amplified the mobilizations in the late 1990s against PaCS (the first version of civil partnerships open to all couples). But the context had changed dramatically: in the meantime, public opinion had shifted toward equal rights. As a result, social-democratic politicians and intellectuals who had opposed the PaCS now supported “marriage for all”; only conservatives stood their ground—with even greater determination. There were other major differences between the two mobilizations. In particular, in the 2010s, the French Catholic Church came out of its secular closet. Until then, contrary to the United States, religious references had been absent from political debates (even on homosexuality). Now, priests and their flocks paraded the streets of Paris: in this new political era celebrating national identity, the invocation of “*laïcité*” (secularism) as a founding principle of the French Republic only applied to Islam.

This opened the way for the rhetoric against the so-called “gender ideology.” The French formulation, “*théorie du genre*,” underlines another difference that appears in the years after 2010: while conservatives and reactionaries have long fought against the rights of women and sexual minorities, the novelty of the latest decade is the specific focus on the concept of gender. This means that the defense of the traditional sexual order is now conflated with an attack on the field of gender studies. The target is not just reproductive rights or the legal recognition of same-sex couples; it is also its ideological foundation, related to theoretical premises in feminist and queer academic work:

hence the extraordinary attention paid to what seemed until then like a technical concept of interest to medical circles, then feminist research, and finally international institutions.

In France, one slogan summed up the equation: “marriage for all = theory of gender for all.” On the one hand, this implies that sex is defined once and for all in biological terms; another sign read: “No eggs in testicles!” However, on the other hand, this sexual order very much needs to be maintained by the (oxymoronic) “natural institution” of heterosexual marriage. Hence the reclaiming of gendered color codes (pink for girls, blue for boys): “Don’t you touch our gender stereotypes!” In 2011, Catholic and right-wing attacks against biology textbooks accused of teaching “gender feminism” to high school students had served as a dress rehearsal for the powerful religious and political campaign against “gender theory” that started against “gay marriage” in 2012 and continued beyond the 2013 Taubira law.

The lofty theological attacks against the concept of gender led by the Vatican—from the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing followed by *The Gender Agenda*, a 1997 polemical essay by Catholic journalist Dale O’Leary, to the 2004 “Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World” and the 2005 French version of its *Lexicon for Ambiguous and Controversial Terms on the Family, Life and Ethical Questions*—had eventually descended into the streets of secular France. They even reverberated in the National Assembly and the Senate. This paradoxical combination of secular Catholicism (or Catholic secularism) often gave

the impression that France stood as an exception. Had not gay marriage been voted into law before 2013 in Catholic countries, such as Spain in 2005 or Argentina in 2010, without such major mobilizations—and also without the rhetoric against gender?

In fact, there is nothing exceptionally French about anti-gender mobilizations (save for the term *théorie*). On the contrary: while there had been warning signs in several European countries, starting in the mid-2000s with Spain, then in Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia, the campaigns were in full bloom by 2013, with the creation of the social media platform CitizenGO, also in Spain, and in the European Parliament the defeat of the Estrela Report “on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.” In Latin America, to take but one example, Rafael Correa, then president of Ecuador, lambasted “gender ideology” on television as a threat against families. In many countries, on both continents, the fight to restore a traditional sexual order now coincided with campaigns against the allegedly nefarious “ideology of gender.”

While the contagion also hits the United States and several African countries, Europe and Latin America are most affected. Attacks against gender have reinforced traditional campaigns against reproductive rights that have literally traveled across the continent (by bus, from Mexico to Chile); they even undermined the peace process in Colombia. This genderphobic turn has been particularly visible in Brazil, from the burning of Judith Butler in effigy in 2017 in São Paulo, to the fake news of a “gay kit” in schools that was used in the presidential campaign against the Workers’ Party candidate Fernando Haddad in 2018. Anti-gender politics have even entered official policy: in January 2019, when the new minister of Women, the Family and Human Right, pastor Damares Silva, was sworn in, to illustrate her claim that “a new era has started in Brazil,” she picked up the gender stereotypes of the French anti-gender campaign: “boys wear blue and girls wear pink.”

It has thus become clear that anti-gender mobilizations are not just French, and they are not just about Frenchness. The campaigns spread from Catholic cultures, of course (including

Poland and Hungary, Colombia and Argentina), to Evangelical (like Brazil and the United States) or Orthodox ones (such as Russia)—not to forget secular ones (not only France, but also Uruguay). Indeed, religion may not be so much the ultimate cause of anti-gender politics as one of its favorite vehicles: in each country, the crucial element is the convergence of various conservative or reactionary logics, whether religious or not. This is what makes this international circulation possible. As always, culturalist interpretations turn out to be misleading.

But these campaigns raise a question: why should this epidemic happen in the 2010s, and why not earlier? After all, the Catholic reaction had been under way at least since the previous decade. But it was not the only logic that gender studies were confronted with: the first decade of the new millennium was also that of new sexual nationalisms. In Europe in particular, old nationalist ideologies, in the first half of the twentieth century, combined racism and xenophobia with sexism and homophobia. This was exacerbated in fascist countries, where the nation relied on a traditional manhood whose virility relied on the simultaneous exclusion of homosexuals and Jews. On the contrary, new nationalist rhetorics that emerged in the 2000s, again, in particular in Europe, invoked the rights of women and sexual minorities to draw boundaries between “us” (supposedly feminist and gay-friendly) and “them” (migrants and Muslims, all presumed to be sexist and homophobic).

This meant that at the beginning of the century, there were two competing, contradictory conservative discourses about what I propose to call “sexual democracy”—that is, the extension to the sexual order of a democratic logic claiming that societies define their own norms and laws, instead of relying on transcendent principles such as God, Nature, Tradition, or even Science. On the one hand, for the Vatican, the immanence of sexual democracy threatens the “natural” foundations of the sexual order. On the other hand, for the new sexual nationalisms, sexual democracy takes on a positive meaning as it ostensibly defines “our” national identities in opposition to “their” cultures. For the former, the primary concern is gender; for the latter, it is race. The tension was clear in France during the battle against “marriage for all.”

Should anti-gender Catholics strike alliances with conservative Muslims, or on the contrary were they to be excluded in the name of national identity?

But this apparent contradiction was soon to be resolved with the rise of so-called populist politics throughout the world, with a special emphasis in Europe and Latin America. From Donald Trump in the United States to Viktor Orbán in Hungary, racism and xenophobia, far from being incompatible with sexism and homophobia, coexist or even complement one another. This is a return to the old sexual nationalisms; it thus seems appropriate to call such right-wing populisms neo-fascist. Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro has now become the vanguard of this international movement. This explains why the 2018 assassination of Marielle Franco—an activist for the rights of the poor, a black woman from the favelas, a feminist and a lesbian—immediately became a potent symbol of this neo-fascist perverse intersectionality.

Why populism? Anti-intellectualism is the key. Populist discourses rely on the antagonism (or agonism, to quote philosopher Chantal Mouffe in her plea for a “left-wing populism”) between “the people” and “the elites.” But right-wing versions focus on cultural rather than economic dimensions of elitism. Of course, this has long been a weapon of conservative rhetoric, in particular in the United States, and then with the international spread of satires against “bobos.” These are defined by their cultural capital, thus reversing Marxist definitions of class based on economic capital. The attack on cultural practices deemed elitist (from foreign films to foreign cheese and foreign coffee) is presented as a defense of the silent or moral majority against their arrogance.

It is easy to understand how this political rhetoric fits anti-gender campaigns so well: the “ideology of gender” is attributed to highbrow intellectuals under foreign influence (e.g., allegedly French postmodern “theory” in the United States, or supposedly American identity politics in France, to take two mirroring examples). These academics are accused of using arrogant, obscuring language to obfuscate the reality of sexual difference. This is obviously true for the concept of gender—hence the insistence on the word “theory”: like Darwinism for

creationists, gender is but a theory, and therefore not scientific (as if science were not based on theories!). But this anti-intellectualism extends to a whole “lexicon” of “controversial terms” (to borrow the Vatican’s title), such as intersectionality, which articulates gender with race and class.

The name of a French group mobilizing against “marriage for all” presented as a “popular” reaction sums it all up: “Common Sense.” For conservatives, invoking nature only seems ... natural! It makes it possible to conflate the two distinct meanings of biology—on the one hand, living bodies, and on the other, the science that studies them. This is how science can be presented as a mere confirmation of common knowledge; it only repeats, in tautological fashion, what everyone knows (men are men, and women are women; and it takes a man and woman to make a child). Of course, there are national and regional variations, as well as political ones; rhetorics may differ. The Vatican understands this all too well as it plays on various vocabularies—from “human ecology” to “ideological colonization”—thus blurring the boundaries between conservative and progressive discourses (ecological or anti-imperialist).

How are we to interpret the international spread of anti-gender campaigns at the same time as populist politics? The hypothesis here is that this twin phenomenon has to do with the global context of neoliberalism in the 2010s. After 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, in Europe, the triumph of economic neoliberalism was generally presented as the final victory of political liberalism, as if markets and democracy were inseparable. This sheds light on the support for sexual democracy, which was now considered as a litmus test by Western democracies—and later, in the 2000s, co-opted as an instrument in immigration policies to preserve “Fortress Europe.”

But in the last decade, as the resistance to neoliberal policies has grown in various countries, there has been a clear shift to illiberalism. This is not limited to leaders such as Viktor Orbán who openly defend “illiberal democracy”; an authoritarian turn has also taken place in regimes that ostensibly claim to defend liberal democracy, such as Macron’s France. Of course, this does

not come as a surprise in Latin America, where neoliberalism was first introduced forcibly with General Pinochet's coup in 1973. On this continent, confusing neoliberalism with political liberalism was not an option.

Just as Chile was a neoliberal laboratory for the 1970s, in the 2010s, after the double coup against Dilma and then Lula, Brazil may have become an updated, intersectional laboratory of neoliberalism: anti-gender rhetorics, and more generally anti-intellectual ideologies, only deflect anger against economic elites and transform them into resentment against cultural ones—as if feminist, queer, and race theorists were the real source of oppression of the “people.” In this context, it should thus not come as a surprise that Europe and Latin America converge today in a common logic of illiberal neoliberalism, with echoes of anti-gender campaigns on both continents.

A question remains: How can neoliberal and neoconservative logics converge in what is often perceived as an unholy alliance? After all, we are used to thinking that markets and morals are incompatible. At best, we think of neoliberals and neoconservatives as strange bedfellows—overlooking the traditional role of Protestants, and more specifically Evangelicals today, in the promotion of capitalism. More broadly, we tend to separate economic from so-called cultural issues (in terms of identity, not cultural capital). As a consequence, the distinction between class and gender, or class and race, can lead to an opposition between “redistribution” and “recognition.” But the current context calls for a revision of these binary divisions.

First, neoliberalism is also about family values. Far from being amoral, the program of neoliberals has always included a moral dimension. The reason is simple: if the welfare state is meant to disappear, then families have to take over. What is often described as an individualistic logic is best understood as a form of privatization, that is, a shift from state to family responsibility. This is why morals matter in the economic logic of capitalism: it makes families accountable for individual failures. Of course, this does not mean that neoliberal and neoconservative politics are one and the same:

otherwise, how could we understand the neoliberal moment of sexual democracy that preceded the anti-gender moment? But this convergence is one option that should not be apprehended as a contradiction.

Second, this realization has consequences on the politics of resistance against anti-gender mobilizations. More than twenty years ago, an important intellectual controversy erupted between Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser: while the latter insisted on the distinction (and complementarity) between redistribution and recognition, the former worried that this might turn into a prioritization of class over minority politics. She insisted on the fact that queer politics is never “merely cultural,” that is never purely symbolic. And indeed, gay marriage also includes material aspects. In today's neoliberal moment, it is worth pointing out that the reverse is equally true: class struggles are never “merely economic.” In France, the “yellow vests” have mobilized both for redistribution and for recognition—as their fluorescent attire suggests, visibility is also part of their demands for better living conditions.

This means that in this moment of illiberal neoliberalism, we cannot keep thinking about politics in the terms of yesterday. Somewhat counterintuitively, anti-gender mobilizations can thus be understood as an intellectual, and therefore a political, opportunity. On the one hand, the similarities between the situations in both continents could help de-provincializing Europe. We Europeans have to pay more attention to what is happening in Latin America. But of course, the parallel will prove illuminating on both sides. On the other hand, we need to move beyond past alternatives: the opposition, even the distinction between “economic” and “cultural” may have come irrelevant in this neoliberal moment of capitalism that invests in and speculates on human capital as a whole. This is the final lesson to be learned from the co-optation of religious attacks against “the ideology of gender” by anti-intellectualist populist politics in a context of intersectional illiberal neoliberalism.

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