

Anti-feminist Meeting Points in Latin America

Religious Neoconservatism, Authoritarian Neoliberalism, and Beyond

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The rise of the political Right and the neo-conservative religious expansion feed the current creation and consolidation of anti-feminist discourses and policies. Both processes are deeply related. From a Latin American standpoint, this article will explore how contemporary neoconservative and right-wing politics are assembled into powerful discursive and political devices. At the same time, the article argues the need to politicize and analyse the alliances between religious neoconservatism and the political Left.

Current right-wing forces carry out and/or deepen de-democratizing agendas: they block policies of equality and justice, and they reproduce or authorize the reproduction of policies that are colonial, racist, sexist, and xenophobic, and are devastating to nature.¹ These groups include a myriad of actors and platforms worldwide, not just parties or institutional actors, including religious-based neo-conservatives.²

The expansion of religious neoconservatism since the 1980s has been due, among other reasons, to the growth of Evangelical actors, alliances forged between Catholics and Evangelicals, the growing activation of “religious citizenships” (Vaggione 2012), and the increasing precariousness of life for large swathes of society who have been abandoned by the state, the traditional Left, and even by social movements. These religious actors have served as material and/or spiritual buffers for the growing precariousness of large social groups and gained ground from a grassroots level. They carry out in unison an advocacy policy ‘from above’

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- 1 As analysed within the right-wing populisms, the new right, the radical right, the alt-right, the authoritarian right, 21st century fascism, authoritarian neoliberalism, authoritarian neo-developmentalism, and far-right civilizationism. Each approach has its own categories, emphases, bibliographies, and agents of politicization.
 - 2 Sometimes they are either one or the other: religious leaders who venture into the electoral arena or join parliaments, or representatives of important economic forces, confessional parties that gain strength in the political arena.

toward states, international organizations, and the media, and create transnational coordination and lobbying platforms (Torres 2020) that reach all political forces, including those on the Left. Likewise, in the face of the greater recognition of the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people since the second half of the 20th century, and especially since the 1990s, neo-conservative religious expansion is a kind of “reactive politicization” (Vaggione 2009).

Feminist and LGBTIQ+ politics have become increasingly important. Feminism has gained in influence and international coordination, added to its agenda, and expanded its protest repertoires. Therefore, today there are more debates than ever about gender inequality, manifested in policies on sexual and reproductive rights, work and labour markets, public and domestic debts, violence, impoverishment, racial and ethnic exclusions, extractivism, and land defence. Gender has become a kind of “symbolic glue” (Grzebalska, Kováts, and Pető 2017; Kováts and Póim 2015) that holds together disputes about democracy.

All of the above configures a complex and multi-conditional scenario, some angles of which I will examine. I first refer to the arc of contemporary right(s) and current Latin American complexity. Then, I argue that there is a connection between the political right and religious neoconservatives in producing an anti-feminist and general agenda of de-democratization; my intention is to identify the discursive and political meeting points through which the neoconservative religious neoliberal pact is generated. Finally, I question the relevance of examining the anti-feminist agenda solely in relation to the political Right and highlight the ties between religious neo-conservatives and the Left.

The Right, Neoliberalism, and Authoritarianism in the Latin American Present

Since approximately 2015, Latin America has been centre stage for analyses of contemporary right-wing processes. The previous cycle was defined by the pre-eminence of governments considered progressive—diverse among themselves in terms of agendas and leadership—that shaped what was known as the ‘pink tide’. During that period, the lingua franca in Latin America was the amplification of an egalitarian discourse, social inclusion via social platforms and increased consumption, the implementation of heterodox social policies, the promotion of regional integration, and the criticism of neoliberalism (Svampa 2020). These progressivisms also persisted in, and sometimes amplified, the politics of agribusiness and extractive sectors (*ibid.*).

The pink tide was broken by Mauricio Macri’s electoral victory in Argentina, in 2015. Macri represented the rise of a type of anti-progressive, anti-populist project that coagulated in a general policy of neoliberal updating (Stefanoni 2021).

In Brazil, in 2018, Jair Messias Bolsonaro's victory installed in the region the radically undemocratic so-called alternative Right.

The shift to the right, including countries where there was a continuity of right-wing administrations, took place through different means: electoral, in Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, El Salvador, Chile, Uruguay, Ecuador; legislative, the 'No' to the Peace Accords in the referendum in Colombia; coups d'état or parliamentary coups, in Honduras, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay; and transitions within the same pink tide field, with Lenin Moreno and Ecuador.

Later, this scenario became more complex. In 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), the left-wing candidate in the Mexican elections, assumed the presidency.³ In Bolivia, after the interim leadership of the neoconservative Jeanine Áñez, the Movement for Socialism (MAS) has returned with the current administration led by Luis Arce. In Argentina, Alberto Fernández won at the polls. In Peru, leftist candidate Pedro Castillo triumphed in 2021, although later, the impossibility of consolidating institutional power was verified. In Chile, the Left won with Gabriel Boric in 2021, and in Colombia, the presidential election of 2022 produced hopeful results for Left politics with the consolidation of an alliance between Gustavo Petro and Francia Márquez. The region has undergone a process of greater heterogenization.

However, there is no longer any indication of a new progressive majority, some examples are the 2021 victory of the Right in the most recent legislative elections in Argentina, the presence of the far-right candidate José Antonio Kast in the second electoral round in Chile in 2021, the radicalization of anti-rights politics in Guatemala, the triumph of neoliberal Guillermo Lasso in Ecuador, the persistence of the Colombian Right as a strong political force, and the deployment of the right-wing government in Uruguay. Simultaneously, right-wing politics is also rising from below, in the actions of social actors working at a grassroots level. The question of where and in what ways the Right is reproduced continues to be important.

A part of these contemporary right-wing forces presents themselves as standard bearers for representational democracy, and respectful, to a certain extent, of institutional frameworks while at the same time promoting heavy-handed policies that promise to restore order (Giordano 2014). Their authoritarian bent, which is not new, is aggravated and reproduced in different ways and on different scales, in despotic, paramilitary, and corrupt state forms that have established a sort of "preventive discipline" (Burak 2017).⁴

3 The traditional "leftist" classifier needs to be revised, as well as the expeditious association of progressive pink tide governments with the left. See Svampa 2017, 2018, and 2020, and Hoetmer 2020.

4 It is important to address authoritarian drift and/or repressive shifts—qualitatively and quantitatively different—in countries with long-standing self-defined left-wing govern-

There is also neoliberal transversality⁵ in the contemporary right-politics that imply, as Wendy Brown suggests:

the valorization of unregulated markets for everything and everyone, the conception of human beings as human capital, the disregard for social justice and the common good as totalitarian practices, the privatization of former public goods and the dispossession of welfare states, the reduction of states to instruments of economic growth, etc. (Brown 2020)

Along this line, and although a closer examination of the regional Right reveals differences among them,⁶ the Latin American political Right shares other qualities: a “new type of anti-progressivism” (Stefanoni 2021a); a predilection for conspiracy theories; constant colonization of lifeworlds, molecular control, and economization of bodies and nature (Nehe 2020); increased states of emergency, militarization, and securitization, including the promotion of joint manoeuvres or US military bases in the region (Svampa and Terán Mantovani 2019); combination of notions of change with notions of restoration and order, promising ways to return to imagined secure pasts based on family, faith, and national order (Hoetmer 2020); the centrality of the fight against corruption exclusively entrusted to previous progressivisms;⁷ the undoing of regional coordination institutions created by progressives and the creation of new ones; the geopolitical oscillation in the relationship with the United States and increased investment and trade commitments with China, and also with Russia and the Pacific; more commodity frontiers; and reconstruction, toward their interests, of an internal enemy in line with the National Security Doctrine (Svampa 2020).⁸

The actors that cement the Right also verify a clear national-conservative path. Their strong conservative imagination updates and expands undemocratic ‘traditional values’ around the family and sexual morality, combined with the notions of patriotism and an expressed anti-globalism. This imagination is combined with the one displayed by religious neoconservatism. Today, there is a worldwide tsunami

ments (Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba), which will not be analysed here but are part of the regional panorama.

- 5 Demirović (2018) and Peck and Tickell (2002) have periodized phases of neoliberalism. The latter warn that the first neoliberal moment promoted a moral-spiritual and neoconservative turn directed against the global social and sexual revolution of 1968.
- 6 Svampa (2020) details differences between a neoliberal right and a radical right.
- 7 Anti-corruption struggles have also been used in left-wing political campaigns. See Stefanoni 2021.
- 8 At the same time, it continues the assassinations of social leaders, especially those tied to human rights and land defense (Svampa 2020). Latin America continues to have the most “prominent” place in this area, both in countries with left-leaning governments such as Mexico and overall, see Global Witness (2021).

of cults, communities of faith, churches, and citizenry—especially the Evangelicals—that participates in the imagination and politics of the Right. Religious leaders and institutions increasingly influence institutional, legislative, and political structures and trajectories; they configure, traverse, and mutually comprise them.

Is the connection between the authoritarian neoliberal right-wing and the religious neoconservatism configured as mere similarity or is it a related phenomenon? I will reflect on this question from a Latin American standpoint. The examples of countries mentioned below serve only as a sample of larger processes, embedded in different scales—local and community, intranational, national, regional, and global. Each fact mentioned has its own path, plot, and conditions of possibility; here they serve to show a general scale, from above, of the assemblages that connect neoconservatism and the neoliberal Right.

The Neoliberal Right and Neoconservatism: Anti-feminist Crossovers

The assemblages connecting religious neoconservatism and the political Right have been growing since the global crisis of 2008 (Gago and Malo 2020) and strengthened since 2013 (Corrêa 2018 and Torres 2020a). These encounters occur in different ways. The analysis of these pathways shows how and in what ways sexual and gender politics articulate broader political processes, and helps us understand the place that anti-feminism occupies within contemporary politics.

Assemblage 1: Anti-progressivism and Anti-communism

Authoritarian neoliberals and religious neoconservatives both produce a strongly anti-progressive narrative and defend it in different ways. For neoconservatives, especially Evangelicals, Latin American progressivism defended a gender agenda (Semán 2021) which is incompatible with the religious values that should regulate the social collective.⁹ Indeed, Latin American progressivism advanced in the institutionalization of gender rights, and their guarantees, related to labour, women's political participation, and gender-based violence. However, several progressive governments defended conservative positions on sexual morality, abortion, and gender identity, maintaining a very inconsistent or contradictory stance regarding sexual and gender policies.

9 The tension between Evangelism and progressivism articulated around gender is more contingent than historical. Semán argues that in Argentina and other countries, Evangelicals were ahead of Catholicism in terms of women's equality and even in matters related to sexual diversity. Nowadays, they radically changed their position on those topics, see Semán 2021.

The political Right—beyond their diversity—ties their anti-progressivism with anti-communist rhetoric and closes ranks against their predecessors, progressivism, the Left, and centre-left (Giordano 2014). The most radical right groups express an explicit “right-wing pride” (Stefanoni 2021a). Pink tide governments are described as communist and propagators of “cultural Marxism”,¹⁰ and it is argued that they share politics with feminist and LGBTIQ+ groups. For example, the 2018 Brazilian electoral campaign that ended with Bolsonaro’s victory combined an anti-Workers Party agenda¹¹ with a conservative, markedly anti-feminist moralization and anti-corruption platform (Bringel 2020). Another example can be seen in Colombia, where the political Right and religious neoconservatives linked a discourse of opposition to ‘cultural Marxism’ and the ‘homosexualization’ of the country during the referendum for the 2016 Peace Accords. In 2019, the HazteOir organization awarded its annual award to one of the most prominent anti-rights neoconservatives at a global level, the Argentine Agustín Laje, for “denouncing gender ideology, radical feminism and cultural Marxism” (ACI 2019) in its well-known publication *The Black Book of the New Left* (Márquez and Laje 2019). So far, anti-progressive/anti-communist politics intersect with potent anti-rights sexual and gender politics with an anti-feminist core. As Paulo Ravecca argues (Ravecca et al. 2022), sometimes Marxism and feminism are described as natural allies—which implies thinking of them as separate entities—and other times as a single force with different manifestations and moments (Ravecca et al. 2022).

The Madrid Charter, an initiative created in 2020 by VOX, the ultra-conservative Spanish political force known for its radical anti-feminist stance, is a recent joint effort between religious and political neoconservatives. The initiative warns against ‘the advance of communism’ and the ‘serious threat to prosperity’ that feminism represents. The document mentions Cuba, the São Paulo Forum, and the Puebla Group, among others, as examples of aspirations to unite against the leftist totalitarianism that infiltrates centres of power to impose their agenda. It has been signed by the well-known religious neoconservative Amparo Medina, general coordinator of *Red Vida y Familia* in Ecuador, as well as by deputies, mayors, former presidents, and political figures from more than a dozen countries, the majority from Latin America.

10 The political right traces the antecedent of this cultural Marxism to the theorizations of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s and, in particular, to its dissemination in the uprisings in the 1960s with radical movements, see Gago 2019.

11 Referring to the onslaught of the political right against the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores).

Assemblage 2: 'Reverse Anti-colonialism' and 'Anti-neoliberalism'

We can also observe the convergence between authoritarian neoliberal rights and religious neoconservatism in “reverse anti-colonialist” rhetoric (Roth 2020), where gender issues are central. This narrative argues that the gender agenda is anachronistic with respect to national values and that it responds to foreign powers' attempts to re-colonize (Gil 2011).

Again, in Colombia during the referendum for the Peace Accords in 2016, the deputy Ángela Hernández alleged that the national Ministry of Education was attempting a “homosexual colonization” by wanting to impose the criteria of a minority community on the country (El Tiempo 2016). Dale O'Leary, a conservative Catholic journalist and an active lobbyist at the Vatican, consistently argues that gender is “a neo-colonial tool of an international feminist conspiracy” (Gago 2019). Meanwhile, in Costa Rica, the ultra-conservative candidacy of evangelical pastor Fabrizio Alvarado in the 2018 presidential elections polarized the campaign with his rejection of same-sex marriage, while denouncing the country's subjection to international organizations and norms (El País 2018). In Chile, and especially after the social outbreak in 2019, the Republican Party also sustained this sovereigntist, anti-globalist rhetoric, which shields national politics from international organizations and denounces their intervention in ‘moral issues’ or migratory matters (Campos 2021).

A recent platform of explicit convergence in this regard is the well-known Geneva Consensus, launched in October 2021, that has thirty-six signatory countries, including Brazil and Guatemala. This Consensus, signed by ministers and senior government representatives, claims to protect “the right to life” and denies that there is “an international right to abortion” and that states have “an international obligation to finance or facilitate abortions” (Geneva Consensus 2021). Its ideological line also affirms the sovereignty of nations, not exclusively to Latin America. The tie between ‘traditional values’, anti-rights sexual and gender politics, and the sovereigntist narrative that curdles in a kind of neo-patriotism (Sanahuja and López 2020) are central in the geopolitical field. The current Russian intervention in Ukraine is partly explained by this type of dynamic (Edenborg 2022).

A similar split is observed with respect to neoliberalism. Despite the neoliberal transversality of the Latin American Right, they perform a rhetorical operation according to which social movements that defend human rights, especially feminists and LGBTIQ+ militants, are neoliberal because they are unconcerned about the problems of most people. Correspondingly, an anti-neoliberal struggle must also be anti-feminist. Neoconservative religious forces also defend the idea that “anti-neoliberalism can only come hand in hand with the preservation of ‘family values’ and the discipline of work to which they are intimately associated” (ibid).

Verónica Gago, for example, recalls that in Argentina “a well-known *villero* priest had insisted that abortion is not a popular demand” and argued, trying to appeal to those who discredited neoliberals, that “the IMF [International Monetary Fund] is abortion” (Gago 2019).

In the same vein, the narrative about the people *versus* the elites is appropriated by both the new political rights and neo-conservativisms. Anti-elite discourse is useful for garnering popular support. But here the elites are identified with progressives—to whom a kind of “constitutive hypocrisy” is ascribed (Bergel 2021)—and with feminisms and LGBTIQ+ militants, who they perceive as unconcerned about the people’s hunger. For them, the “new left” is the project of intellectuals and privileged minorities, related to this is the line of so-called protection of communities and neighbourhoods via policies to combat insecurity. Through a “post-ideological” framework, governments maintain that “the problems of the people” are central (Giordano 2014) rather than the politics that (re)produce violence and profit from police corruption, narco-states,¹² and racist and misogynistic state violence. The reinforcement of the perception of insecurity is key to generating collective fear as a moral economy (Serrano 2019): it creates the need for private security offered by those who themselves instil fear.

Assemblage 3: (In)security, Violence, and War

The promise of combating insecurity authorizes the use of state violence to produce social control over civil disobedience and, at the same time, serves to garner popular votes, especially from women, who are victims of insecurity. Securitization policies, as well as those that have to do with social reproduction—money transfers, food stamps, etc.—are fundamental to ensuring the support and votes of women, who are primarily responsible for sustaining life. Securitization also justifies xenophobic policies, of which women are often at the centre: Lenin Moreno blamed migrants in Ecuador for violence, and specifically, gender violence (BBC 2019), as did the Macri government in Argentina (Collazo and Pulleiro 2021). Meanwhile, state and parastatal violence, violence against social leaders, and patriarchal pacts between the state, men, and communities that tolerate gender violence, are made invisible.

Religious neoconservatives do politics in a convergent way, coupling the concept of freedom with the concept of security (Brown 2020a) and fuelling moral panic through different themes, such as security and order, immigration, and sexual liberalization (Demirović 2018). The moral panic against ‘the other’ and the

12 Narco-state refers to a persistent association, institutionally verified and reproduced by different actors, between state political institutions and the illegal economies of drug trafficking. In short, to the organization of criminal businesses around the state.

moral economy of fear enable authoritarian neoliberalism and religious neoconservatism to use bellicose language.

In Brazil, for example, Bolsonaro employs the notion of “war” when referring to cultural hegemony in view of the diversification of family models and gender identities (Roth 2020). Applying the rhetorical device of war to talk about these issues is historically present in authoritarian regimes in general. However, as Raphael Hoetmer (2020) argues, the current particularity is that the discourse of war unfolds from democratic institutions and is “naturally” associated with common meanings. In fact, the language of war is central to neo-conservative militances, which display a broad activism against the “cultural warfare” of feminism and progressivism, and a “spiritual war” against feminists, “cultural Marxism”, the homosexualization of the world, and “gender” (Hoetmer 2020). The politicization of religion is a conservative key that ensures as Cristina Vega (2019) argues, in the Ecuadorian case, a fiction of security, order, and private solidarity.

The doctrine of “spiritual warfare” is relatively recent, dating from the 1980s. This framework establishes a narrative about the “forces of good and evil”, exacerbates their confrontation and from there extrapolates everything that occurs in social, economic, and natural life (Vega, Castellanos, and Salazar 2021). The ‘forces of evil’ are consolidated in a very explicit, systematic, and definitive way in gender ideology.

This ‘culture war’ is also a global assemblage. The Right’s use of combat-related words such as “weapon,” “battle,” “fight”, and “threat,” in Europe has been flagged and analysed by Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2022).

Assemblage 4: Gender Ideology

Gender ideology is probably the broadest and most powerful device linking the contemporary political Right and religious neoconservatives. In Latin America it has had an unprecedented increase in usage.

In his inauguration speech, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro mentioned the fight against “gender ideology” as part of his administration’s agenda; “the alleged existence of a ‘gay kit’ that Haddad would distribute among children in schools was one of the most effective fake news of his campaign” (Stefanoni 2021). When Bolsonaro visited former President Donald Trump in 2019, he emphasized his goal of fighting against the scourge of “political correctness”, “fake news”, and “gender ideology” (Roth 2020). Gender ideology was central in the No campaign during the Colombian Peace Accords, and thereafter the religious neoconservatives joined forces with Uribe right-wingers (Gil 2020): if the Yes won, the mantle of gender ideology would fall over the country. Nayib Bukele also won the presidency of El Salvador, waving the flag against gender ideology (Gago 2019) at the same time as the coalition that assured the Lacalle Pou triumph in Uruguay in 2019 (Abracinskas,

Álvarez, and Puyol 2022). The anti-gender ideology platform has been vital for the elections in large parts of Latin America, used in the discourses of the political Right. Thus, the fight against gender ideology has served not only to reconfigure gender and sexuality policies but also to obtain political power that arises, is nurtured, and is part of gender and sexuality policies (Serrano 2019).

Conversely, in the field of religious neo-conservatism, gender ideology has served to build alliances between Evangelicals and Catholics, to ‘embody’ the common internal enemy, create a morality panic, secularize their discourse, and gain universality for their agendas by alluding to non-religious categories. Gender ideology has ended up being an umbrella under which many things fall. Still, a common axis appeals to atavistic and deep fears about the destruction of essential ties and the family, affirming a notion of ‘obligation’ to gender-sex confusion, homosexuality, contraception, and abortion (Vega 2017).

Ravecca et al. (2022) demonstrate how denouncing gender ideology has been a critical piece of neoconservative action and ensures a sort of right intersectionality (Moragas 2022). In politics around gender ideology, diverse actors articulate programs about different social, economic, and cultural issues. The idea that gender ideology in schools is institutional violence against children and adolescents has been developed by religious neoconservatives and the political Right. Political deployment in this sense takes place inside and outside national borders, for instance, Organization of American States’ meetings are one of the most systematic international forums in this regard. A recent analysis reports that neoconservative discourses are characterized by robust semantics against gender ideology and even the ‘gender ideology industry’ (Moragas 2022).

For all of the above, gender ideology is a political strategy, a discursive and rhetorical device at its core, from which neoconservatism resists the expansion and guarantee of rights. Although gender ideology occupies the foreground of the political discourses of authoritarian neoliberals and religious neoconservatives, other more specific fields of politicization articulate alliances, platforms, and actions, such as family, education, and freedom. The next few pages address those topics.

Assemblage 5: Family and Education

For those on the authoritarian neoliberal right, to defend the family and traditional values is to defend the national community (Hoetmer 2020). However, it is not a conservatism that operates only in the realm of morals. It has economic and political implications: the defence of the traditional family is a main factor of their criticism against the state as guarantor, where there has been, be it in the form of welfare states or, in the case of Latin America, fragile state social policies.

Wendy Brown (2020) underscores that the morality rooted in the heteropatriarchal family, as a vital part of good order and as an essential economic unit, the

traditional family that functions as a stabilizer and social controller. Although not necessarily subject to specific disciplinary sexual customs, the neoliberal conception of families allows that unit to “absorb” the withdrawal of the state from its social protection functions and cushion the structural crisis of social reproduction (Alabao 2020; Gago 2019).

Melinda Cooper (2017) studied this phenomenon in the United States and there is evidence of this in Latin America. In Bolsonaro’s Brazil, for example, the ministries of the Economy and of Women, Family, and Human Rights are the most important to the institutional fabric and are run by an ultra-neoliberal and a religious neoconservative, respectively (Kalil 2020). The centrality of the traditional family cuts across the different—more or less radical—Right, which converges in their insistence on family-focused policies (Alabao 2020a) and makes a moralizing use of the family institution for their political programs (Gago 2019).

The retraditionalization of the family unit collides with the disruption of the domestic sphere made by feminists and LGBTIQ+ militants. Faced with this, the political Right is committed to the pacification of domestic areas, either by moral means or financial indebtedness (Gago 2019). And that is perfectly met by the neo-conservative bent that ensures doctrinal affirmation of tradition and popular bases, since churches are today privileged channels for the redistribution of resources, which is a mechanism by which to foster obedience (*ibid.*).

The defence of the traditional family is totally related to policies on education, especially comprehensive sexual education. For the neoliberal ethic “education is training for work” (Brown 2020a), a way of developing human capital, not a space for social, political, and human formation. As a primary political tenet, religious neoconservatives put the brakes on sexual education in schools, which they argue endangers the family and children due to the indoctrination of ‘gender ideology’. That is why one of their fundamental campaigns throughout Latin America is “Don’t mess with my children”, an interdenominational platform for Evangelicals and neoconservative Catholics aimed at halting all inclusion of issues related to gender equality and sex education.

Assemblage 6: Freedom

Finally, a key assemblage between religious neoconservatives and authoritarian neoliberals is based on the politicization and instrumentation of notions of freedom. This dispute is about the definition of what freedom is. Religious neoconservatives defend their public voice based on freedom of expression, worship, and individual freedoms, and use the latter to oppose the action of the state—described as totalitarian or communist—and feminist and LGBTIQ+ agendas, posited as a danger to order and tradition.

The freedom the Right defends is specifically individual and negative, as propagated by doctrinal liberalism and authoritarian neoliberalism. That means freedom boils down to “non-interference”: no one should be able to interfere in private life which includes not only the family and the domestic, but also property. Meanwhile, exploitation in the world of work, subordination within the family, or dispossession of life resources have nothing to do with freedom. As a result, people are free to “choose”, which means free to be exploited or subordinated.

However, whereas religious neoconservatives reject state action because it threatens freedom, they push to gain presence and participate in the state. They do the opposite of what they say, as they recognize the state as a vital territory of social control and therefore, they want to occupy it. Neoliberalism does the same. It discursively promulgates the downsizing of the state while it actually only changes its character, transforming state apparatuses into business ones. Both routes ensure the social engineering model of de-democratization, eliminating the social function of the state, limiting its retributive possibilities of power and resources.

Based on eight analyses of Latin American cases, Sonia Corrêa and Magaly Pazello (2022) warned of a firm and novel activation of the syntagm “freedom”. This “freedom” appeal reveals the link between anti-gender agendas and neoliberal rationality, it becomes a political trope of a sort of selective autonomy which is ultra-individualistic and has no consequences for the real structures of subordination and exploitation.

Final Words and the Question about Neoconservatism beyond the Political Right

The six political assemblages analysed in this paper present both a map of places where the politics of de-democratization is played out and its authoritarian drifts. The articulation, sometimes contingent and other times persistent, between the political Right and religious neoconservatives, is vital to understanding the contemporary panorama and sharpening our gaze integrally toward the places where common sense is disputed, along with the organization of reproduction, and the development of political meanings. In these arenas, themes of gender and sexual diversities are central and interconnected with the organization of life, the economy, the state, and moral matters.

Although “the epistemological scene around gender” constitutes an (open) “battlefield” in the discussion on right-win politics (Roth 2020), the analysis can and must go further. Neoconservative religious politics has expanded along the spectrum of the political Left and that is mandatory to consider. The relationship between religious neoconservatives and the new Right(s), authoritarians, populists,

and neoliberals, is increasingly analysed (Kalil 2020). However, it is not the same when talking about the pink tide or in contexts with governments self-defined as leftist or progressive.¹³ The paucity of analysis in this regard makes it seem that neoconservatism only operate or feed on the described bridges with the political Right, but this is not the case.

The pink tide became an action platform for the advancement of social and political rights. Feminist sectors, women, and sexual dissidents considered those political processes a window of political opportunity to advance sexual and gender justice, although their participation in them has been described as scarce or conflictive (Rossi and Tabbush 2020). During that period, Latin American women escaped poverty to a greater extent than in previous years because the proportion of women without their own income decreased and they were beneficiaries of social policies (ONU-Mujeres 2017). Participation in parliamentary bodies in state apparatuses increased considerably, especially in countries including Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. That increase had already been taking place across the region since the 1990s but accelerated during the first decade of the 2000s (ONU-Mujeres 2021).

However, the national pathways of progressivism were and are deeply brittle and discontinuous. During some periods and with respect to certain issues, advances could be made that were later halted at other junctures. For example, while the general poverty index decreased, the feminization of poverty increased during that period. In other words, there was a general decrease in poverty but women benefited less than men from the policies that ensured that fact (ONU-Mujeres 2017). But above all, it was the policies that question traditional norms of family and sexuality—such as abortion, same-sex marriage, recognition of gender identity and, in some cases, gender-based violence—that were most hampered by the leaders' conservatism and/or directly by alliances between the politicians in power and expanding religious neoconservatism. The evidence in this sense overturns the assumption that, by definition, left-wing politics questions conservative beliefs and hierarchies, with an implicit or explicit religious base.

For example, at the beginning of his administration, the former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa (2007–2017) supported an explicit decolonial agenda of LGBTIQ+ rights, whereas later Correa ignored women's rights and did not hide his misogyny (Lind 2020). Likewise, in Ecuador gender ideology was installed in political discourse, when Correa himself mentioned it in 2013.¹⁴ Likewise, the deepening of neo-extractivism profoundly affected women—particularly indigenous and peasant women—in places that fell prey to plunder.

13 For a discussion about Venezuela and Cuba see works included in the References section by Carosio (2020), Morales (2020), and Torres (2020).

14 Correa said some politicians were trying to impose “gender ideology” on school systems, denying natural laws.

Women played a key role during the presidencies of Evo Morales in Bolivia, and they promoted an agenda of depatriarchalization of society and the state. However, there were also clear processes of consolidation of the patriarchal pact and the unquestionable persistence of macho rhetoric was activated on successive occasions, where different political figures forged alliances with religious neoconservative sectors. In Venezuela, considerable progress was made in the recognition of rights and institutional reforms, which, however, have been stagnant and offer few rights. Other types of issues, such as equal marriage or the right to voluntary abortions, were held back or rejected by Chávez's Catholic discourse (Hernández 2021). In fact, the Catholic Church ensured that the 1999 Constitution would mark the defence of life from conception, as a way to block the right to voluntary abortions.

More recently, in Mexico, the AMLO government has rearranged its discourse and policies around gender. On the one hand, advocating for democratizing policies and, on the other, establishing alliances with conservative forces. At the same time, the National Anti-AMLO Front (FRENAAA), a neoconservative right-wing movement, is constituted as openly "pro-life", anti-feminist, and a defender of religion. The recently elected president of Peru, who represents a celebrated disruption of the regional right turn with a democratization program across many levels, has been against abortion and sexual and reproductive rights. In fact, he came to the presidency with a certain Evangelical element: "His wife and daughter are from the Church of the Nazarene and he often joins in praying" (Semán 2021).

During the pink tide, some progressives achieved important alliances with feminist movements, for example in Uruguay and Argentina, and this implied significant institutional changes. But other governments, including Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, maligned feminist organizations and on different fronts allied themselves with actors and/or values closer to neoconservatism (Hernández 2021).

Therefore, although the turn to the right has implied a kind of backlash¹⁵ for policies in favour of the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people, we cannot disregard that the political leftists in power maintained a conflictive relationship and certain restrictive issues, drawing from feminist agendas. Concurrently, religious neoconservatism is present today in all political regimes.

Now, although the relationship between the left and sexual and gender justice is uncertain and urgently needs to be politicized,¹⁶ there is an organic and institutional link between religious neoconservatives and the neoliberal Right, which is

15 The backlash approach should be critically considered because neoconservative actions are not only reactive, they have a proactive and even preventive dimension regarding certain issues.

16 For an excellent comparative analysis of gender and sexuality issues during the pink tide, see Rossi and Tabbush, *Género, sexualidad e izquierdas latinoamericanas. El reclamo de derechos durante la marea rosa*.

more or less authoritarian. That does not disregard the fact that there have been advances in rights under right-wing governments. In fact, there are counterintuitive studies that show that neoliberal, right-wing, and even anti-democratic governments have promoted some policies that positively impact sexual and gender justice (Htun 2003). However, in the current phase of neoliberalism and for all the aforementioned reasons, it is expected that the neoconservative pathway will gain traction, especially although not exclusively under governments on the Right.

All this complexity requires difficult and accurate analyses of what we now see as a course of de-democratization (Corrêa and Kalil 2020). In addition to its authoritarian implications, this process implies a gradual erosion of the democratic structure of politics that potentially transforms or voids the institutional architecture. The analysis of religious neoconservatives and their back-and-forth ties with myriad political forces plays a central role in the construction of a democratic sexual and gender policy. Criticism from the popular camps must be anti-neoliberal but also, and very firmly, anti-neoconservative.

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