

# FEMINISM AND POPULISM: STRANGE BEDFELLOWS OR A PERFECT MATCH?

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## ABSTRACT

This essay discusses Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cahadia's intervention concerning the relationship between populism and feminism, agreeing with the authors that the articulation of progressive populism and anti-essentialist feminism is necessary. The most pressing related issues, it argues, are i) the book's seeming understanding of feminism as *necessarily* being a 'smaller', perhaps even more particularistic, movement than populism; ii) its strong emphasis on the ontological necessity of one leader; a question which the essay argues is an ontic/empirical one, as well as one which might be one of the most serious obstacles for a successful articulation of the populism and feminism, and; iii) that the book's proposal of a 'ruptural institutionalism' offers a promising route for further political and theoretical investigation, which might help feminism to steer an alternative route between current hegemonic (neoliberal) feminist articulations on the one hand, and neoconservative opposition to 'gender' on the other.

## KEYWORDS

Populism, feminism, anti-genderism, neoliberalism

I have approached my reading of Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cahadia's thought-provoking and skillfully argued *Seven Essays on Populism* (2021) not as an opportunity to 'review', but as an invitation to think together. The discussions raised by Biglieri and Cahadia and their attempt to grasp what from their perspective can be universalisable (xxiii), speaks to many of our shared political commitments, and their contribution in this book far exceeds the issues I will be able to cover within the bounds of this brief text.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As the authors position themselves as women, academics, Latin Americans and "political militants traversed by the various antagonisms that, between populism and neoliberalism, have emerged and continue to exist in our region", it makes sense for me to 'position' myself too. Speaking from Scandinavia (Sweden, to be specific) committed to popular feminism, an economic equality which simply cannot be achieved in today's system of global capitalism, a democracy which does justice to its proud name, sexual, reproductive and intimate freedoms, anti-racism, a transformed relationship between humans and other species, as well as to the urgent need to restructure human co-existence for true climate sustainability means that the world that we live in is a daunting place. Adding to this

With this limitation in mind, this commentary shall focus specifically on what I see as a key question for political strategy of our times, namely that of articulating progressive inclusionary populism and feminism. Like the authors, I am convinced that an articulation of such populism and feminism constitutes the most promising route to build more equal, democratic and sustainable societies. Agreeing with Chantal Mouffe (2018), from the position where I stand (Europe, Sweden), I think it is blatantly clear that the ‘diagnosis’ that she has made of Western Europe is correct, and, that her analysis is valid also more globally. What had, at least not yet, become as clear when her book *For a Left Populism* was published was just how central issues of sex/gender, sexuality and reproduction would become for the ‘populist moment’ she there describes (see Gunnarsson Payne, 2019). Since its publication, however, an increasing number of, especially feminist, scholars have paid the issue more attention (e.g. Barros and Martínéz, 2020; Biglieri, 2020; Graff and Korolczuk, 2021), and I welcome Biglieri and Cahadia’s innovative intervention in this ongoing debate, which I hope will continue and develop even further in the years to come.

To this end, I shall here discuss a few related issues that concern the theorisation of populism and feminism; some of which I think have been overlooked within post-Marxist populism theory more generally and which I hope will make their way into the field, and others which are more specific to Biglieri and Cahadia’s approach, and which I think require some clarification.

I will begin with arguing for the necessity of feminism’s de-totalising impulse when it comes to both historical and contemporary attempts to constitute a people-as-one, as issues of sex/gender, sexuality and reproduction are at the very core of these. In short, I therefore believe that this de-totalising impulse is absolutely central for the construction of a people which is both multiple and (agonistically) divided. (This is not to say that *all* feminisms serve this function, but I shall return to this later.) Thereafter, I will discuss the extent to which contemporary feminism already follows a populist logic, first emphasising the articulatory logic of contemporary feminist mass-movements in Europe and Latin America, and second in relation to (part of) the movement’s long tradition of horizontal organisation, including its uneasy relation to the idea of the One Leader. Third, I will, based on experiences from hegemonic Swedish ‘state feminism’<sup>2</sup> and with inspiration from the authors’ proposal of *ruptural institutionalism* argue that this idea might be a way forward for beginning to re-think feminist institutionalism in the context of a welfare state. In doing

that, just by committing to these causes as an academic means that I pretty much tick all the boxes for the enemy picture being painted by what in common academic vernacular is referred to as rightwing populism, in a way that I only a few years ago could not have even imagined.

<sup>2</sup> Since the first version of this article was written, the hegemonic position of ‘Swedish state feminism’ has become increasingly challenged, also among people in governing positions. At the time that this article is published, the long-term consequences remain to be seen.

so, I shall pose a set of questions concerning the compatibility – or not – between feminism and the kind of populism that the authors propose.

### **REPRODUCING THE PEOPLE-AS-ONE: ANTI-GENDERISM, NEOLIBERALISM AND THE DOUBLE-BIND OF FEMINISM**

As both I and others have previously argued, a wide range of rightwing political parties, movements and leaders have come to formulate their exclusionary notion of ‘the people’ not just around ideas of the nation, but also increasingly around a heteronormative and essentialist understanding of ‘the traditional family’, considering it the very bedrock of Christian and/or Western civilisation. Indeed, this development has made many of us talk about ‘a happy marriage’ between rightwing populism (or what the authors simply call fascism) and anti-gender movements, a ‘marriage’ which manifests itself in the shape of concrete alliances between Christian ultraconservative organisations and exclusionary nationalist rightwing political parties, in the form of political proposals such as restrictive abortion legislation, the infamous ‘Don’t Say Gay bill’, the demonisation and defamation of Gender Studies, or the rhetoric that gender mainstreaming is nothing less than a worldwide conspiracy by a global elite (Gunnarsson Payne and Korolczuk, 2021).

As I have argued with Maria Brock (2023) ‘although there is no *intrinsic* compatibility between the two political projects, their formal similarities have eased their mutual articulation’. These formal similarities consist of the division of the social field into two antagonistic camps, and the construction of an underdog (a people) and an oppressive regime (an elite) – here conflating an exclusionary notion of a national people with an idea of ‘common people’ consisting of ‘traditional’ heterosexual families with their ‘own’ biological children. The political promise they offer is to restore national sovereignty and autonomy of ‘normal families’, as against a powerful and corrupt global elite, consisting of foreign influences, such as immigrants, ‘imported’ feminist and queer ideologies, supra-national organisations, and transnational corporations. Their internal logic can easily be recognised from other exclusionary movements, insofar as they are mobilising ‘their power by creating specific fantasies about threats to the nation and that they as a result have put themselves forward as the protectors of ‘what is in us more than ourselves’, that is, that which makes us part of a nation’ (Salecl, 1992: 52; see also Gunnarsson Payne, 2019). The ‘happy marriage’ between these exclusionary nationalist populist projects and anti-gender politics – their ‘opportunistic synergy’ to speak with Graff and Korolczuk (2021) – furthermore consists in the fact that the latter offers further ‘substance’ to the former’s construction of ‘the people’, and, importantly, offers an effective ‘psychic tool’ for the creation of a people-as-one.

Their mobilisation for ‘traditional family values’, I argue, is indeed a central component of it, as it “creates powerful fantasies about not only ‘the good citizen’ but

also about the *'potential enemy in every individual'* leaving every individual 'exposed to the pressures of the fantasmatic agency which 'sees and knows all'' (Salecl, 1992: 50). As I have argued elsewhere, these fantasies are especially effective for the creation of a totalising people-as-one, because they speak 'directly to commonly felt 'forbidden desires', making them 'particularly prone for triggering the politically potent feelings of fear (for the Other) and guilt and shame (for one's own forbidden desires and 'dirty deeds') in the individual' (Gunnarsson Payne, 2019; see also Gunnarsson Payne and Brock, 2023). This relates closely to Biglieri and Cahadia's formulation that in 'fascism, the 'self' can only exist, on the one hand, through its negation and rejection of the other, and, on the other hand as something previously given' (130). In this way, as I understand it, the 'work of the self' that they speak of, where 'what is opposed is the other to be destroyed' (130) serves the double function of destroying both (imagined) 'external' others, *and* the (imagined) 'internal' other (manifested in forbidden fantasies, desires and 'dirty deeds'). The relation of property of self and others that the authors write about, thereby, paradoxically leads to a destructive domination of not 'just' the 'other', but also of the parts of the 'self' which must be eliminated (but will only ever be repressed). The compatibility and psychic 'grip' of anti-gender politics and what the authors call fascism (and many others refer to as rightwing populism) are further enhanced by this 'under-the-skin-politics' in which the articulation of race, ethnicity, kinship, reproduction and sexuality function to create a very specific version of the-people-as-one.

How, then, has anti-genderism come to function so well rhetorically for the creation of an anti-establishment narrative? Would its repressive nature not be hard to convincingly combine with the rhetoric of the 'underdog'? The answer, I believe, lies in the fact that policies for gender equality and sexual diversity since the 1990s has become implemented through post-political measures and thereby become articulated in a neoliberal discourse. In a time when gender equality ideals and tolerance of sexual diversity is implemented via gender mainstreaming by (some) states and supra-national organisations such as the European Union and United Nations, and promoted by transnational corporations via advertisements and social corporate responsibility projects (Gunnarsson Payne and Tornhill, 2021; see also Tornhill, 2019), gender equality and sexual diversity have become easy targets for conservative forces that are using anti-establishment rhetoric and claiming to be the voice of 'the people' as against a global elite. Moreover, as gender equality and sexual diversity are implemented in a post-political way, they not only lose their truly emancipatory potential but they become part of neoliberalism's totalising logics where gender equality becomes reduced to productivity and availability to the job market and sexual diversity to pink-washed marketing strategies. As Tornhill and I (2021) have argued, this situation has placed contemporary progressive feminist and LGBTQ+-struggles in a double-bind, with conservative anti-gender politics looming

on one side, and washed out ‘lean in’ feminism and pink-washed economics on the other.

In this context, feminism and LGBTQ+-movements need to acknowledge the totalising logics of *both* anti-gender conservatism *and* neoliberal capitalism and function as a de-totalising counter-hegemonic alternative to both. Also here, it is easy to agree with the authors that a ‘feminism of the 99%’ is necessary to take on this task. In this context, I argue that the impressive feminist intersectional and transversal mobilisation which exploded with *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Less) in Argentina and *Czarne Protesty* (Black Protests) in Poland as well as similarly inclined mass-mobilisations such as *The Women’s March* and *Black Lives Matter* (emanating from the US) offer the most promising alternatives of our time. With the risk of simplifying these diverse movements, I still think it is safe to say that a mutual challenge for them and for progressive populism concerns how to keep their radical and de-totalising momentum, while finding strategies to build hegemony (see also Biglieri, 2020).<sup>3</sup>

#### ARTICULATORY FEMINISM = POPULIST FEMINISM?

Biglieri and Cahadia clearly state that an anti-essentialist understanding of the subject is a necessary pre-condition, and this too is easy to agree with. At a first glance, one might say the same about the statement that ‘feminism has to be part of something bigger, and even broader political project’ (Fraser, 2018: xii), but this statement also raises questions with which feminists of different political inclinations have struggled since the movement’s very inception. The first question relates to ‘whom’ should be included as the subject of feminism, and concerns both internal critique of the movement’s own exclusionary mechanisms, for instance for refusing to include or acknowledge specific demands from e.g. Black women, working class women, lesbians, and trans-people. These internal critiques and conflicts have historically been, and continue to be, central for the possibility of expanding the chain of equivalence with demands to be included under the name of Feminism (or other empty signifiers, such as Sisterhood<sup>4</sup>).

Considering the fact that large strands of the movement today have adopted an intersectional and transversal approach, and includes demands of not only these groups, but also articulate feminism with indigenous struggles, climate activism, demands for a secular state, and economic equality – then it is relevant to ask: How big would be big enough *not* to need to become part of something ‘even bigger’?

<sup>3</sup> As the emergence of this wave of mass-feminism is rather recent, there is still little scholarly work done on their potential influence over and entry into parliamentary politics. An ongoing PhD-project by Aleksandra Reczuch is, however, currently investigating this in the Polish context.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion on feminist articulatory practices and the empty signifier of Sisterhood, see Gunnarsson Payne, 2012.

To be clear: I agree that following Laclau (2005) we cannot *assume* that feminism is *the* privileged struggle, but it is of equal importance not to theorise its articulation with populism in a way that reduces it to a kind of particularistic movement which it not necessarily is. Indeed, in many ways, contemporary intersectional and transversal struggles already offer ‘something bigger’, and already to a large extent follow a populist logic (as previously mentioned, not all feminist practices follow this logic, but here I will focus on those doing so.)

The call for feminism to join forces with something ‘even bigger’ also, at worst, reminds us of previous similar debates, such as that discussed in Heidi Hartmann’s (1979) long-lived text ‘The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: Towards a more progressive union’, in which she described the relationship between Marxism and feminism as one ‘like the marriage of husband and wife depicted in English common law: marxism and feminism are one, and that one is marxism’. Criticising previous attempts to unite them for seeking to subsume feminism under the more privileged and ‘more important’ struggle against capital, she drew the conclusion that: ‘To continue our simile further, either we need a healthier marriage or we need a divorce’ (1979: 1). Knowing full well from Laclau that articulation does not equal subsumption, such historical examples might still serve as important fingers of warning that those making claims to represent the ‘something bigger’ will necessarily need to consider. In other words, the mutual articulation of struggles need to be just that – mutual – and in the current situation, it is necessary to self-critically ask: Is it really the case that populism automatically *is* this ‘something bigger’ – or may we not say that in some contexts the proportions may be reversed? I am aware that this question might be provocative, and it is deliberately so. To push this question a bit further, it may be helpful to look at a couple of empirical examples from the aforementioned feminist movements.

As I have discussed elsewhere, empirical examples from the Polish movement show that the demand for legal and safe abortion in the middle of the 2010s swiftly expanded from abortion to larger issues of democracy and against the oppressive regime, as the movement presented a list of postulates including, among other things, ‘free and available sexual education, restoration of democratic procedures and a secular state’. They described abortion as the mere ‘tip of an iceberg’ and announcing that ‘there is a lot to do in Poland in order to build a truly equal and democratic civil society’ (Gunnarsson Payne, 2020: 13). A very similar document of demands was created by the Argentinean movement in preparations for the 8 March International Women’s Strike in 2017, as cited by Malena Nijensohn (2020):

1. We strike because we are part of a collective and international history [...].
2. We strike because we make visible the map of labor in feminist terms [...].
3. We strike because we demand legal, safe, and free abortion [...].
4. We strike to defend our sexual and gender dissidences [...].
5. We strike to say enough violence [...].
6. We strike to pronounce that the State is responsible [...].
7. We strike because we demand

a secular state [...]. 8. We strike, and we construct the women's movement as a political subject [...]. (Ni Una Menos in: Nijensohn, 2022: 10).

Indeed, a number of Argentinean scholars, including Biglieri herself, has shown the same expansive tendency of not least Ni Una Menos and the subsequent 'green wave', but also of earlier feminist mobilisations in Latin America (Barros and Martín, 2020; Biglieri, 2020; Di Marco, 2020; Gago, 2020; López, 2020; Nijensohn, 2022). A particularly interesting aspect of the empirical work done on this is that it shows on an ontic level *how* articulations take place agonistically 'on the ground', offering us very clear examples of how articulatory processes are not necessarily smooth and easy, and how they may require both conflict and renegotiation.

In another telling example from Nijensohn's work, she discusses for instance how the National Encounter of Women between 2016 and 2018 renegotiated their approach to the issue of sex work, so as to include sex workers despite the presence of anti-prostitution activists in the movement, here quoted at length to capture the complexity of the negotiation:

One of the most heated debates in the assemblies for 8M 2017 concerned sex work. Sex workers had already participated in the assemblies for June 3 and October 19, 2016. On the first of these occasions, they suggested that the slogan "Ni Una Menos" should be extended to encompass other types of violence against women beyond femicide, such as violence against sex workers. During the strike, their participation had been very active, as they were the ones who introduced the discursivity of the alternative ways in which people could strike, posing the idea of the "sexual strike". In addition, in the National Encounter of Women 2016, the workshops discussing sex work were re-opened after ten years and were full, with more than 700 participants. It was in these circumstances, in which sex work was visibilized, that in assemblies for 8M 2017, there was a strong attack from anti-prostitution feminists. They did not acknowledge sex work as work and therefore did not want the demands of sex workers to be included in the document. At that moment, sex workers had two struggles: one for labor rights and another for institutional violence. Although they understood that the debate regarding sex work was not resolved, they demanded recognition as part of the feminist movement. After three meetings of intense debates and discussions centered only on the question of sex work, in the last assembly before the strike, the importance of including as many demands as possible to shape a diverse, plural, and broad movement was brought to the fore. This allowed the debate on sex work to be left aside and enabled sex workers' voices to be heard; both of their demands were included in the unique document. [...] On the conflict around participation of sex workers, for 8M 2018, a paragraph demanding justice for the femicides of sex workers was included in the document. Although some anti-prostitution campaigners were involved in some following assemblies, they stopped attacking sex workers and started focusing on the system of prostitution (Nijensohn, 2022: 142-143).

In an example from María Pia López's recent book *Not One Less - Mourning, Disobedience and Desire*, we learn how the slogan of the International Women's Strike in 2018 'We are all workers' encompassed *all* workers, thereby expanding and re-signifying the very meaning of work:

whether at the machine in the factory or sewing at home, in a neighborhood organization or in the family kitchen, in the classroom or behind the wheel of a truck, caring for other people or writing about them. To strike is a diverse, multiple interruption. Its modes are as diverse as the female workers. The key notion of socialist struggles, “equal pay for equal work,” is insufficient. Beyond equivalence, *we must demand the recognition of all productive and reproductive work.* (López, 2020: 49)

Though framed as a ‘women’s issue’, this formulation, at least when articulated with anti-essentialist understanding of ‘women’ and an intersectional expansive approach, already represents ‘something bigger’ than the name and some of its slogans at first thought might do justice. Hence, while I fully agree that feminist struggles have the most potential to achieve social and political change when articulated with a broad political project, its already thoroughgoing potential for radical transformation for the 99% ought not to be underestimated.

Feminist issues such as abortion, femicide, sexualised violence, rape culture or sexual harassment have acted as ‘starting shots’ for mass-mobilisation, neither because they are new problems nor because feminists have not previously protested against them. Rather, in addition to being defining and often life-threatening issues to which many can relate personally and others can easily sign up against, these movements (and others around the world) have managed to effectively ‘frame’, narrate, and symbolise experiences of frustration, and even despair, already present the lives of *many*, in a way which could not be captured within hegemonic discourses (see Laclau, 2005: 26).

## FEMINIST REJECTIONS OF THE IDEA OF THE LEADER

From what I have discussed so far, we can conclude that this kind of feminism to a great extent follows almost precisely the populist logic described by the authors, except for the final point – the necessary emergence of a leader. It is this final point that I believe is the biggest obstacle for a ‘happy marriage’ between current intersectional and transversal feminist mobilisation and the authors’ definition of populism – and one, which I, unlike the authors, consider to be empirical rather than ontological.

Following Laclau (2005), according to Biglieri and Cahadia populist mobilisation necessarily i) begins with an experience of a lack, which is shared by many; continues with ii) the inscription of this lack in terms of a demand (like in the case of Argentina ‘¡Ni Una Menos!’); iii) the primacy of the logic of equivalence over the logic of difference, and the creation of a collective political subjectivity (a feminist ‘people’); iv) the antagonistic division of the social space into two antagonistic camps (‘the feminist people’ against ‘capitalist heteropatriarchy’, and, finally; v) the emergence of a leader for that collectivity (2021: 16).



Even though feminism, neither historically nor in the present, has been devoid of leaders and leader figures, some strands of it are highly skeptical, or even outright critical, of the very idea of attaching their struggle to One Leader. While feminist movements have often both had *de facto* and symbolic leaders who have served as surfaces of inscription, autonomist traditions have indeed played a part in promoting, experimenting with, and not least *identifying with* 'leaderlessness'.

This can, of course, take more forms than is possible to discuss in this brief text, but a quote from the document entitled 'Rules and responsibility in a leaderless feminist revolutionary group' in 1969 serves as an example of how the very idea of a leader has often been associated with the very patriarchal structures which the movements has sought to dismantle, and have even been described as inherently exploitative: "Since there are no leaders or officers, *nor are these considered desirable as they involve exploitation*, it is necessary that all members develop equally and to the extent that leadership in other groups would require" (Kearon, 1969). The idea of leaderless and structureless groups have often been seen as an antidote to patriarchal modes of organisation (including within the left) but were also sometimes criticised for being not only ineffective but also for their propensity to obscure existing power structures within the movement (see e.g. Freeman, 1972: 152).

More recently, it has been said that leadership is no longer a 'dirty word' within feminism, not least since the so-called third wave of feminism, in which leadership has been reformulated as something which 'stems from women's real lives and recognises expertise as a product of experience', defining leadership as an activity which works in a similar manner to the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 70s 'except that all individuals who call themselves feminists become leaders, moving from leaderless activism to an activism where everyone can play a role in leadership' (Sowards and Renegar, 2006: 62).

And even though Biglieri and Cahadia explain (via Freud and Laclau) that populist leadership in their definition is quite different from the oppressive patriarchal type shunned by many feminists, it is unlikely to be easily articulated with many feminists' strong belief in either leaderlessness or more horizontal and multiple understandings of leadership. This, in turn, is also related to both the fact that feminism is not, and has never been 'just' one movement, but rather is constituted and continuously reinvigorated by differences and conflicts; and that in this very process new (often informal) leader figures are produced, representing different and sometimes opposing feminist strands. These strands tend to co-exist, often in conflict, and these very conflicts are often what drives the movement forward.

The libidinal bonds described by Biglieri and Cahadia via Freud and Laclau is theoretically compelling in its emphasis that the relation with the leader 'is not one of being in love or idealization, but also one of *identification*' and therefore 'the link with the leader is also endowed with the same type of libidinal bond that operates between *peers*, i.e. other group members' (85). Compelling as it may be, the

problem with this model is, as I see it, that its *ontological* status can be questioned; the question of whether the members of a group needs to be held together by the attachment to one embodied leader, or whether the libidinal tie can be formed around the shared attachment to an idea, or a cause, is, I believe rather of ontic-empirical nature. Consider, for instance, the affective investment on a horizontal level are *not* mobilised via a mutual and shared bond with a leader, but rather through a shared attachment to a movement which rejects the very idea of the One Leader: may then not such a shared attachment still have potential to hold a group together? May not this depend on towards ‘what’, rather than towards ‘whom’ libidinal bonds are formed? And if so, can representations of these demands not be made by more bodies than one?

### **BEYOND LOGIC-OF-DIFFERENCE-FEMINISM: RUPTURAL INSTITUTIONALISM AS AN ALTERNATIVE ROUTE**

Even if Biglieri and Cahadia do not explicitly link their argument on populism and institutions specifically to feminism, from the geopolitical position from which I write – Sweden, a country where it is possible to talk about ‘state feminism’ since many years – I found their ideas here highly relevant for potentially re-thinking what a populist feminism could look like in the context of a welfare state.

In a country such as Sweden, for example, gender equality reforms have mainly occurred through a significant number of feminist and, in recent years, LGBTQ+ demands being selectively met by the state. Importantly, many of these feminist reforms have focused on easing the possibilities for women to combine work and family, and to become financially independent from a partner or spouse – and thereby to become available as workforce, albeit in a strongly gender segregated job market (where typical women’s professions are paid less). The royal road to gender equality, in other words, has to a great extent been seen as wage labour (and provisions such as decent parental leave pay is tied to this). In a similar manner, lesbian, gay and transgendered citizens now have access to marriage equality and reproductive healthcare (including subsidised medically assisted reproduction) making it possible to create same-sex nuclear families, as long as they do not stray too far away from the couple-norm and bilinear kinship constellations.

There is no denying that these policies, which in brief have been gradually implemented through a logic of difference (through the absorption of individual feminist and LGBTQ+ demands), have led to many highly cherished real-life improvements for women and LGBTQ+ people, especially with regards to sexual and reproductive rights and family law. Yet these policies tend to disproportionately benefit the middle classes with stable employment and 9-5 jobs, not least as daycare in general more or less follows office hours, and parental leave and compensation to stay home with an ill child, is tied to previous or present income. Queer ways of living

together outside of the homonormative coupledness (with or without children) are not receiving the same protection as twosome 'respectable' marriage or cohabitation - and as some of these provisions depend on citizen and/or residency status, yet more people fall outside of the welfare safety net. Therefore, the current incorporation of some feminist and LGBTQ+ demands into the neoliberal welfare state, may effectively be an explanation for the absence of the same kind of broad popular feminist movements as we have seen in Argentina, Poland and elsewhere. Instead, when threatened by anti-gender mobilisation, the loyalty among its opponents to existing gender equality and sexual diversity policies is likely to remain or even be strengthened.

These provisions and this 'tolerance' have indeed already led to a widely spread loyalty to Swedish gender equality and 'LGBTQ+-friendly' policies, and they have become a central part of national identity, to the extent that they have become a component of the country's nation branding. Political leaders of parties to both the left and the right call themselves feminist, and state authorities (including the Army and the Police) are participating in the annual Stockholm Pride march. In a country in which the establishment, at least on paper, are committed to gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights for those who live up to certain norms of respectability and productivity, these issues are effectively 'de-politicised' - leaving the playing field open for 're-politicisation' by conservative and exclusionary political projects, for which demands for gender equality, reproductive rights and sexual diversity are being articulated with 'the elite', as against 'normal' and 'common people' (see also Gunnarsson Payne and Tornhill, 2021).

In this context, Biglieri and Cahadia's idea of *ruptural institutionalism* offers an interesting opening for re-thinking an alternative to neoliberal and post-political state feminism, which have tended to articulate gender equality and sexual diversity in ways which obscure the conflict between 'those on the top' and 'the underdogs'. The state has positioned itself as the homonationalist and femonationalist protector of 'respectable' same-sex couples with or without children, and middle-class working women - while the precariously employed, those whose work does not lead to self-realisation and secure pensions, those being denied citizenship and residency due to increasingly restrictive migration policy, sexual 'deviants', and immigrant women who are not defined as properly 'integrated' (read: assimilated) into Swedish society as their 'too many children' are seen as preventing them from entering the job market. As I hope that this list of examples has clarified, current hegemonic ideas of gender equality and sexual diversity, through granting welfare and legal protection to many women and non-heterosexual citizens, simultaneously serve a disciplining function, as they are being conditioned to a great extent to 'respectability' and 'productivity'. What we see here is a tendency that much resembles that of the authors (via Bertomeu and Doménech) insofar as the 'alleged universalizability of republican freedom [is] deceptive, since only those whose material conditions of

existence are guaranteed [are] able to enjoy it' (70). Absorbing feminist and LGBTQ+ demands differentially, in other words, has hitherto allowed the Swedish state to absorb them and put them to use for productivity and discipline while at the same time keeping the fantasy of Sweden as the epitome of gender equality and tolerance intact.

A populist feminism in this context, then, would need to dare challenging the exclusionary and disciplining mechanisms of current gender equality and LGBTQ+-friendly policy and legislation, and find ways to include and represent those excluded from it in institutional settings. Although the ontic question of the 'how' - what would such institutional structures and procedures look like? - remains, it opens up for beginning to think feminism in the context of a welfare state, beyond either loyalty or the oft-repeated Foucauldian critiques that (for good reasons) have been aimed at it.

### TOWARDS A 'HAPPY MARRIAGE' BETWEEN FEMINISM AND POPULISM?

Biglieri and Cahadia's book offers a brave and much welcome contribution to the theorisation of populism. The topic is highly timely, and considering current global and national problems of increasing exclusionary rightwing nationalism, geopolitical polarisation and a raging climate crisis which necessarily hits already vulnerable people the hardest, their contribution on how to radicalise politics is not likely to become obsolete anytime soon. For populism to be part of the solution, I am convinced that its thorough engagement with intersectional transversal feminism is essential, and I believe this to be the case both theoretically and politically. Biglieri and Cahadina's intervention in this regard is both thought-provoking and original, and I hope it will spur further discussion in both fields.

In many ways, the feminist mass-movements which we have seen emerging in both Latin America and Europe in recent years are testament to their compatibility with progressive populism. Feminism's expansive articulatory logic is not new: this is precisely how anti-essentialist, intersectional and transversal versions of it have developed over time (and I agree with the authors that Laclau's theory captures this more adequately than Gago's). The division of the social field into two antagonistic camps with a 'feminist underdog' against a 'heteropatriarchal elite' also has a long history within the movement, even if some feminists resist *naming* it an 'enemy'. And, even though its relationship to leaders and leadership is far more fraught than the one described in the author's definition of populism, the movement is neither devoid of *de facto* leaders nor of historical and living persons who have come to serve as surfaces of inscription for feminist struggles. At the same time, feminism is an unruly movement with internal agonistic and antagonistic conflicts which makes it highly unlikely that it will ever be possible to unite it under *one* leader. This, I

think, would be one of the greatest obstacles for the authors' proposed articulation between the two, and I am not convinced that this criterion is either essential or even necessarily desirable.

Moreover, I think that the attempt to articulate feminism and populism would need to be even more thoroughgoing – and perhaps more importantly, more open-ended – than the one proposed by Biglieri and Cahadia. The proposal to articulate care and antagonism is highly relevant, and indeed reflects much of what has been theorised and practiced by feminists for a long time, like for example in the Wages for housework campaign of the 1970s, and Social Reproduction Theory (see e.g. Bhattacharya, 2017). Without paying careful attention to these and other political actions and feminist theories, and recognizing the possibility that these contributions may actually reveal shortcomings of, and point out new directions for, populism, I believe that feminists may sooner or later end up echoing Hartmann (1979) and demand a healthier relationship or threaten with divorce (or never accept the proposal to marry in the first place). This is *not* to say that I do not appreciate the book's attempt to theoretically articulate the two, but rather, that I think that there are good reasons to further expand this theoretical discussion in the future, so as to include more thought from the vast body of feminist writing and open-endedly explore what this can bring to the table.

For as necessary as I think that progressive populism is to tackle the multiple crises of our time and offer a forceful alternative to exclusionary rightwing nationalism on the one hand, and neoliberal capitalism on the other, I think populism cannot afford *not* to learn from feminism's continuous de-totalising efforts. Indeed, what the authors call feminism's 'insistence that the reified distinction between men and women is the result of the totalizing logic of the masculine' (125) has had transformative effects, both historically and in the present, as it has redefined not only what it means to be a man or a woman (or neither) and who can be considered a citizen or a political subject, but in addition also challenged the very meaning of what it means to be human. Its expansive articulatory logic is a result of these continuous de-totalising efforts – and these, I believe, *are* absolutely necessary in order to create the multiple-and-divided-people that progressive populism requires.

Relatedly, I believe that Biglieri and Cahadia's intervention on *ruptural institutionalism* may be an important key to reinvigorate discussions of institutional feminism, in a way that would better honour precisely its de-totalising efforts, and keep re-activating them, also in context where they have made their way into power. Only so, it will be able to keep its emancipatory promise alive and offer a convincing alternative to the two contemporarily strongest totalising forces, rightwing conservative anti-genderism and neoliberal capitalism.

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