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Feminism

The new radical right and anti-feminism

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Red pill, unicorn, incels (involuntary celibacy), AWALT (all women are like that - all women are equal) (Rational Wiki, 2019) are some of the neologisms that can be read in blogs, forums and websites of movements with a general misogynist and anti-feminist tendency; the so-called manosphere. Ironically they are inspired by films like Matrix to indicate that those who take the red pill are those who have managed to free themselves from the dominant feminist persuasions and choose to embrace the painful truth of the manosphere, as opposed to their pro-feminist detractors who take the blue pill (blue pillers). In the same logic they also use the terms alpha male and beta male.

In the English-speaking world, Red Pill Room, A Voice for Men, Return of Kings are some of the names of these websites. In the Spanish state, Forocoches is probably the first we would mention, but there is an extensive list of websites and blogs such as Stop Feminazis, Facebook groups on shared custody or against so-called false allegations and media such as Mediterráneo Digital o Caso Abierto that make up a sort of Hispanic manosphere with its own slang - feminazi, supremacist feminism, gender ideology - that promotes sexism, misogyny, anti-feminism and anti-gender.

A whole jargon - the glossary of the manosphere - that, thus described, seems to caricature a reactionary communicative guerrilla movement, but which is contributing to assembling an anti-feminist discourse that feeds the positions, organizations and parties of the extreme right. Although there are not necessarily organic links, this movement in the network has found in many cases a referent and a speaker in the far right parties.

This is the case in the Spanish state with Vox, which has turned these issues into central aspects of its discourse. The use of the concept of intrafamily violence and gender ideology in its discourse, its refusal to join the minutes of silence when a murder motivated by sexist violence is committed, the questioning, again, of the abortion law, its demands to access the names of women workers in the field of gender violence in Andalusia, the discourse of suppressing radical feminist organizations, have placed on the agenda issues that were previously taken for granted or that were not even raised and forced other parties such as PP and Cs to move their positions.

However, not all the radical rights seem to relate equally to feminism and anti-feminism. For example, neither Salvini nor Le Pen gets involved in issues such as abortion; on the other hand, Vox or the Polish right wing PiS party do. We also observe changes in the same party over time, as in the case with the Front National, which with Marine Le Pen has wanted to be more women and gay friendly, thus differentiating itself from the positions held by her father. Parties as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) have promoted women's groups (Frauen in der Alternativ) in order to increase the presence of women in the party structure and at the electoral level. Some of the AfD members have even gone so far as to fight for women's rights through the language of the Me Too movement.

The far-right parties seem to hold two positions in relation to feminism that may seem seemingly contradictory but, in many cases, are held at the same time – particularly on the European extreme right. One of them is defined as clearly anti-feminist, anti-gender, sexist and misogynist and is embodied, for example, by figures such as Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, who was sentenced to compensate a deputy for telling her that she would not rape her “because she does not deserve it”, and with a Minister for Women, Family and Human Rights, Damares Alves, who declares that feminists do not like men “because they are ugly” and “because no one has wanted to marry them.”

The other is characterized by the use of feminism to defend xenophobic and racist measures or policies with the excuse that they are necessary for the liberation of women. In a logic of what we could call purplewashing, using an

already extended term coined by feminist activist Brigitte Vasallo, or femonationalism, a more recent concept of Sara R. Farris. As an example, in autumn 2018, when Nicole Höchst, member of AfD, said in an interview with *Der Spiegel* that she was concerned about the future of Germany and the protection of women against radical Islamists and migrants. And she added: "I think we are the only party in Germany that really fights for women's rights, because we point out that we are in danger of losing the freedoms and rights of women we have fought for centuries" (Bonhome, 2019).

This article tries to analyse how the new rights relate to feminism, evaluating in greater detail these two positions that we have just mentioned. It also includes a section that argues that both approaches, despite appearing opposed, have important points of convergence that reinforce the general narrative. The text closes with a few brief conclusions about the challenges all this presents to feminism and how to articulate resistance and offensive strategies.

Crusade against feminism

The meaning of anti-feminism has varied across time and territory, but it has been and is deeply political. It is based on the denial of any of the following dimensions (or all of them): that there is patriarchy, that the sexual division of labour favours men or that collective actions must be promoted to correct these discriminations and inequalities. In other words, anti-feminism is a collective opposition to the emancipation of women (McRobbie, 2018).

Anti-feminism is probably as old as feminism. As the historian Christine Bard notes in the collective work "Anti-feminisms and masculinisms of yesterday and today", already in the 19th century and throughout the 20th and 21st centuries we have witnessed the emergence of neoconservative and reactionary political movements in response to feminist demands. From movements that opposed female suffrage, the entry of women into the labour force or their right to join a union, to current positions that speak of supremacist feminism or gender ideology to oppose feminism.

The current anti-feminism is not homogeneous, some of its expressions are gross attacks on women and clearly defend the sexual division of labour as something natural, inevitable, when not divine. They are sexist, misogynist, racist, colonialist. Clearly it is the case with the websites and blogs that we mentioned. However, there are expressions of contemporary anti-feminism that have refined his discourse. Faced with the tendency to fight against feminism that has achieved social, political and normative legitimacy (Rubio, 2013), they attack it in a way that seems more subtle, even assuming part of its discourse, but introducing the idea that the feminist movement has already achieved its objectives and now seeks a higher status for women than for men. They also argue that feminism, despite claiming that it defends equality, ignores the exclusive problems of men and denies them rights.

While it is true that the statements of the leaders should not be confused with the position of the party, the words of some of them are giving legitimacy to anti-feminism, normalizing it and making it more acceptable. Duterte in the Philippines boasts that he tried to rape a maid as a teenager. Trump attacks several female congressmen for their offspring. Bolsonaro mocks the age difference of Emmanuel Macron and his partner, Brigitte Macron, for her being older than him. These misogynist, sexist and racist statements can be selected from a long list and have made anti-feminism and authoritarianism their hallmarks of political action.

In anti-feminism different actors converge, from the conservative right and the religious powers to the parties of the extreme right and neoconservatives, the new and not so new. Their discourses are intertwined and are shaping the same reactionary wave that is fighting not only a cultural battle, but also an economic, social and democratic battle against feminism. The struggle is fierce and often they are winning it.

The anti-feminist agenda is articulated around the denial of male violence as structural, action against sexual and reproductive rights, in particular on the issue of abortion, the denial of gender as a social construction with the consequent homophobia and transphobia, sexism and the terminological struggle in the articulation of gender ideology as some of the highlights. There are other dimensions, such as labour segregation issues or wage gaps, that simply do not address or appeal to a response based on meritocratic logic.

Speaking of the concept of gender ideology, it was coined by the Catholic hierarchy in the last years of the reign of John Paul II in the Vatican. This is a discourse that seeks to combat gender as a concept (Alabao, 2018). The progressive Pope Francis also endorses this position who, in statements during the presentation of the book Pope Francis: This economy kills, makes the following reflection: "Let's think of the nuclear arms, of the possibility to annihilate in a few instants a very high number of human beings. Let's think also of genetic manipulation, of the manipulation of life, or of the gender theory, that does not recognize the order of creation. With this attitude, man commits a new sin, that against God the Creator. The true custody of creation does not have anything to do with the ideologies that consider man like an accident, like a problem to eliminate. God has placed man and woman and the summit of creation and has entrusted them with the earth. The design of the Creator is written in nature." (McElwee, 2015).

As Nuria Alabao (2018) explains: "The ultra-religious sectors that drive this new crusade - not all Catholics think alike - want to recuperate the idea of men and women as biologically differentiated and link that natural difference to the divine precepts of those who set the standard. These natural differences would, of course, be related to a certain image of women as caregivers and of the family as a traditional heterosexual family with division of functions between the sexes." It really means denying that gender is a sociocultural construction and assuming that it is a natural reality.

This notion configures a recipient that can be used for different purposes from abortion to supposed attacks on the family and/or same-sex marriage. In Spain, this crusade had not had much prominence until recently. Attacks against so-called gender ideology have existed for a long time, but they were in the minority and were reduced to sectors associated with the most conservative Catholicism. It is with Vox that they entered the political and media scene. The vice-secretary of mobilization for Vox, Alicia V. Rubio, has stood out as a strong advocate of the concept of gender ideology, defending it in the multiple gatherings where she participates, in which she propounds the main theses of her book "When we were forbidden to be women ... and they persecuted you for being men: understanding how 'gender ideology' affects us" (Urbán, 2019). Vox has, in turn, pushed the PP into incorporating it into its discourse. Pablo Casado, during the primaries, committed himself to "a great ideological rearmament convention", fundamentally focused on combating what they call gender ideology, with the 1985 law regarding abortion as one of its specific expressions.

Where the fight against gender ideology is very present is in the Americas. This crusade has been quickly taken up by evangelism, especially in its most powerful neo-Pentecostalist version, which had, for example, a relevant role in the election of Bolsonaro. In Colombia, the evangelist positions of the NO were a determining element in the referendum on the peace agreements. In the US, Vice President Mike Pence is himself an evangelist and is considered one of the main enemies of the feminist and LGBTBI movement (Urbán, 2019).

The use of so-called gender ideology has, therefore, a marked political character. The extreme right needs to create and signal enemies to gain cohesion and respond to structural problems by pointing to specific groups. Feminism promotes equality and this is unacceptable to neo-machismo and the more radical conservatism. The struggle of women becomes an enemy, as do migrants, with respect to which security discourse becomes the central axis and where feminist discourse becomes instrumentalized by many far-right formations.

Femonationalism and purplewashing in the face of diversity

Purplewashing, lilac washing or purple image washing, can be understood as the practice that basically consists in defending xenophobic and racist measures or policies with the excuse that they are necessary to the liberation of women. Another term used to denounce the sectarian use made of feminism to protect xenophobic discourse or policies and the promotion of Islamophobia, is that of femonationalism. This is a term originally proposed by Sara R. Farris to describe the processes by which certain powers align with some of the claims of the feminist movement in order to justify racist, xenophobic, aporophobic or Islamophobic positions by supporting them on the basis of prejudices that migrants must necessarily be sexist and that Western society is completely egalitarian. In this way, women and the rights they have obtained are used to hold positions against immigration as a scapegoat for a supposed socio-economic and cultural degradation (Pérez, 2019).

Purplewashing and femonationalism have become a resource used by the majority, if not all the far-right parties in Europe. It is also a narrative to which the conservative right and even social-liberalism are attracted. Without going any further, this is the logic of the proposal of the new president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, which places “the protection of our European lifestyle” as part of the six programmatic keys for the next term. One might think, in a good or naive way, that this refers to the will to reverse the effects of austerity, to reinforce the European Pillar of Social Rights and preserve social and economic rights, but the fact is that the discourse is accompanied by the idea of strong external borders as an internal policy dimension: “We need strong external borders. A fundamental part of this ambition is the reinforcement of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency”, with a security discourse as a dimension of internal policy: “Everyone who is in the Union has the right to feel safe on the street and in their own home. When it comes to protecting our citizens, no means can be dispensed with. We must improve our cross-border cooperation to address gaps in the fight against serious crime and terrorism in Europe” (Gil, 2019).

The concept of security - in a triple dimension - becomes the central axis of the neo-right covered with a purplewashing. Economic security, with the idea that migration makes use of and abuses the welfare state at a time when resources are scarcer due to austerity measures caused by the economic crisis. The security of values or culture, which is behind the concept of the European lifestyle and which fuels Islamophobia: veiled women who must be liberated because they are subjugated and put European values at risk. The physical security of indigenous women, which involves representing foreign men, especially Muslims, as a sexual threat.

We have many examples of this. From the Sweden Democrats (SD) – the third biggest electoral force with 17.6 percent of the votes in 2018 – who develop a discourse around pride in the Scandinavian/Nordic model, as well as gender equity and present immigration as a danger to the nation. Ebba Hermansson, 22, the youngest deputy in the Swedish Parliament, spokesperson for gender equality in this party, says that one of her biggest concerns is to keep women “safe from sexual violence. If you come from a country where women are not worth as much as men, or women have no right to live their lives as they want, when you come [to Sweden] there is a shock” (Chrisafis, Connolly, Giuffrida, 2019). The discourse is similar with the True Finns, the second biggest electoral force with 17.5 percent in 2019; the Danish Popular Party, with 21.5 percent and the second biggest force in 2015; Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), with 12.7 percent in 2017, or the Swiss People's Party (SVP), with 29.4 percent in 2018. Or in UKIP in the United Kingdom with 1.8 percent in 2017, although Boris Johnson should also be mentioned here, comparing Muslim women wearing burkas to letterboxes. Or the Northern League of Salvini, with 17.4 percent in 2018, as well as the Front National in France with 21.3 percent in 2017. Le Pen's response to the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean was: “I'm afraid the migration crisis means the beginning of the end of women's rights” (Chrisafis, Connolly, Giuffrida, 2019).

Vox has also joined in when, for example, Abascal in Congress declared: “When a disgusting collective rape is committed by Spaniards, we know all the details of the rapists and demonstrations are called. But in the dozens of

similar crimes when their authors are foreigners everything changes.” Or when Vox becomes the first party to refuse to attend a reception at the Tehran Embassy because it says it will not be present at an act “that demands a different treatment for women” because they cannot shake hands with Iranian representatives. It should also be remembered that in the Spanish state the first party that resorted to purplewashing was Platform per Catalunya (PxC), getting numerous municipalities of different political tendencies to support their proposals prohibiting the burqa in their localities (Urbán, 2019).

It seems that Eastern European parties, such as Law and Justice (PiS) with 37.6 percent in 2015, Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) with 19.1 percent in 2018, or also Golden Dawn in Greece with 7 percent in 2015, do not resort or resort less to purplewashing, at least no references are found in this regard. It could be analysed whether this is because the gender agenda is socially less widespread or if it is because in the face of open conflicts such as the issue of abortion in Poland, the PiS decides not to resort to that discourse so that it cannot be read as a weakness before the movement, without purchase in other sectors, or simply for other reasons.

It is observed, in any case, that these same parties that resort to purplewashing and femonationalism simultaneously launch messages by which feminism can pose a danger to the nation (Sager, Mulinari, 2018).

Riding the contradictions

The discourse of anti-feminism seems antithetical to that of purplewashing and yet we observe that many far-right parties resort to both, as many analyses point out. Is this a sign of their great elasticity in riding contradictions or are there really conceptual background elements that do not place them so far from each other?

Here are some reflections that build in this second direction, pointing out aspects that are shared by both approaches:

The masculine identity feels attacked

The statements of Carl Benjamin, UKIP candidate for the European Parliament in 2014, show this when, after a 22-year-old man murdered six people in California in response to being rejected sexually, he said: “Before your stupid social justice feminist bullshit, it didn’t happen on this scale. It’s crazy – this is a disease of the modern age. This is what feminism has wrought – a generation of men who do not know what to do, who are being demonised for what they are.” (Walker, 2019).

Joan Sanfèlix, a sociologist specializing in masculinities, also introduces an interesting material factor: “The cracking of traditional male identity is due to the great advance of women who have been occupying public space and unravelling classical family structures. Along with this, the economic crisis has put an end to the ideal of having stable and long-lasting career paths, a basic aspect in the construction of the male gender identity linked to its role as an economic provider” (Sen, 2019).

Add to the analysis the insecurity before precarity in work and life generated by neoliberal policies, although this should not blur the anti-feminist position that is caused by the refusal to change the privileged position in which men find themselves.

Faced with these insecurities, the extreme right projects guilty parties: migrants, poor people and the feminist movement itself. Thus, anti-feminism includes part of the insecurities and social, employment and economic discomforts of a certain type of men who see the axis of their problems at the question of classical masculinity. A malaise that is not only limited to a particular generation but is transversal.

Women's bodies as a battlefield

For anti-feminism, the issue of abortion and control of women's bodies is a recurring theme. The sexual and reproductive freedom of women is considered a threat to civilization itself. Women do not want to give birth to children, they do not want to stay at home caring. The essential role of women is to give life and guarantee the continuity of the homeland and they refuse to do so. In a demographic declining Europe this issue is decisive, even more within a logic of the alleged Muslim migrant invasion. Conspiracy theories such as the one Renaud Camus argues for in *The Great Replacement*, according to which the European Christian white population in general - and personalized for him in the French case - is being systematically replaced with non-European peoples, delving into this logic of the control of women's bodies, their role in society and how autochthonous women should live their sexuality.

In turn, in the purplewashing discourse we also see a will to control women's bodies, in this case immigrants. Under an alleged liberation of women who "are stereotyped as victims, as people without the capacity of agency" (Pérez, 2019), they are forbidden to wear the veil, they are told how they can or cannot dress in public. The so-called veil wars are transforming women's bodies into a battlefield.

Paternalism emerges

The renewed anti-feminist positions that have assumed part of the feminist discourse now emphasize that equality is a reality and that the problem is wanting to go further, because that would mean unbalancing the balance in favour of women. Or that in Europe women are no longer oppressed and that the problem is in other regions. A reading that does not cease to have a paternalistic key to indicate that the path travelled so far is authorized, but it is forbidden to go further. In the same key, in the purplewashing discourses, where feminism proposes emancipation, the extreme right speaks of liberating, thus maintaining the schema of man (white, western and Christian, if possible) liberating women, in this case the oppressed of the world and of society. It is also used to affirm the superiority of Western civilization and liberal values, paradoxically using the very patriarchal formula to defend our women. Thus, a racist and colonialist paternalism emerges.

An anti-establishment response?

The far-right parties have built their image and discourse based on provocation, on breaking with the politically correct, on presenting themselves as those who say what no one dares to say, even if it implies the delegitimization of fundamental democratic premises, such as equality, inclusion, human rights, protection of minorities, the fight against discrimination, and even against science.

They seem to play on an anti-establishment logic in the cultural and symbolic terrain, not the economic one. Against science, against the politically correct, against gender policies. We will have to continue analysing this.

By way of conclusion

The extreme right has found an electoral reef with anti-feminism because it plays an important role in the aggregating of identities. From anti-feminism, it manages to polarize the political debate by integrating broad social layers discontented with the system by granting them a sense of belonging, with a defined sexual and gender role, that neoliberalism steals from them.

However, the confrontation does not have only one electoral key; feminism is capable of offering alternative collective imaginaries with an anti-racist, decolonial, anti-capitalist, environmentalist, anti-sexist and social justice dimension that are identified by the extreme right as a dangerous ideology for their own positions and interests.

In the fight against the extreme right, it would not be fair to leave most of the responsibility to the feminist movement. It is too big a monster for that. Feminism has its share of the task, building an agenda and movement where anti-racism is a priority, where paternalism is not replaced by maternalism, where the struggle for emancipation from autonomy is supported, where multiple identities fit in a shared feeling of community.

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