Nothing is as it seems: 'discourse capture' and backlash politics

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ABSTRACT

In this article, in response to several calls for new theoretical and analytical tools to help us understand the nature of contemporary anti-feminist and anti-queer politics, I introduce the concept of 'discourse capture'. I argue that discourse capture is a key backlash mechanism, characterised by its intention, scale, and undercover nature. Discourse capture occurs where progressive discourse is co-opted and manipulated to serve right-wing agendas. I outline four forms of discourse capture in practice – resignifying, shifting, mimicking, and twisting. Finally, in the context of existing feminist counter backlash strategies, I explore what a counter discourse capture strategy might comprise.

Dans cet article, en réponse à plusieurs demandes de nouveaux outils théoriques et analytiques capables de nous aider à comprendre la nature de la politique actuelle anti-féministe et anti-altersexuelle, j'introduis le concept de « capture du discours ». Je soutiens que la capture du discours est un mécanisme clé de *backlash* (réaction hostile), qui se caractérise par son intention, son échelle et sa nature secrète. La capture du discours survient lorsque le discours progressiste est coopté et manipulé au service d'ordres du jour d'extrême droite. Je présente quatre formes de capture du discours dans la pratique – réinterprétation, modification, imitation et déformation. Enfin, dans le contexte des stratégies féministes existantes visant à contrer le *backlash*, je me penche sur ce que pourrait englober une stratégie contre-capture de discours.

Para dar respuesta a varias peticiones de contar con nuevas herramientas teóricas y analíticas que nos ayuden a comprender la naturaleza de las políticas antifeministas y *antiqueer* contemporáneas, en este artículo utilizo el concepto de "captura del discurso". En este sentido, sostengo que la captura del discurso es un mecanismo clave empleado por quienes externan una reacción adversa; este se caracteriza por su intención, su escala y su naturaleza encubierta. La captura tiene lugar cuando el discurso progresista es cooptado y manipulado para servir a los propósitos de la derecha. Al respecto, describo cuatro formas de captura del discurso en la práctica: resignificar, transformar, imitar y tergiversar. Por último, en el contexto de las estrategias feministas encaminadas a asestar contragolpes a las reacciones adversas, examino lo que podría ser una estrategia de contragolpe frente a la captura del discurso.

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Discourse is the power which is to be seized. (Young 1981, 53)

Introduction

Contemporary politics has been characterised by a well-documented systematic attack on feminism and democracy, often accompanied by not only elements of 'state capture', but also what I term 'discourse capture'. 'State capture' refers to the manipulation of state processes by private firms or individuals for their gain, whereas I conceive of 'discourse capture' as the co-option and manipulation of progressive discourse to serve right-wing agendas. I argue that 'discourse capture' is particularly evident in 'anti-gender' and anti-feminist politics, where the language of 'rights' and 'freedom' traditionally associated with a liberal agenda is being used by right-wing actors to undermine and roll back progressive legal statutes, such as abortion rights, or constitutional protections for LGBTQI people.

My own interest in the idea of discourse capture began a few years ago, with an outraged student in my office who was trying to make sense of a group of pro-life advocates in the United States describing themselves as 'feminist'. She was referring to the New Wave Feminists whose slogan is 'Badass. Prolife. Feminist'.[1] My student described them as 'an anti-abortion group disguising their signs in feminism'. At the time, the South African news was full of stories on 'state capture', and as I read more literature on gender backlash, it struck me that there were some significant resonances between what happened to political institutions during then-President Jacob Zuma's presidency, and what was happening to discourse both within and beyond the United States.[2]

This article explores several specific instances of discourse capture and argues that as cultural politics becomes increasingly significant in formal political processes, so too does our need to understand and recognise incidents of language appropriation and resignification. For feminist movements and alliances to mobilise effectively against conservative populist forces, they must learn to recognise, expose, and counter discourse capture in relation to gender backlash.

The phenomenon of state capture was first identified in a World Bank document in 2000 as an aberration in governance (Hellman *et al.* 2000) but was later taken up and developed in the South African context. State capture differs from corruption in both its *intention* and *scale*. Bhorat *et al.* (2017, 4) have referred to it as a 'silent coup'; as a *political project* that sets up to remove the controls associated with the rule of law. The intention and scale apparent in contemporary expressions of gender backlash have been commented on by several scholars (Correa *et al.* 2018; Goetz 2020a), and it is these characteristics, together with the idea of a 'silent coup', that help frame the notion of 'discourse capture'.

After first considering current understandings of backlash below, I lay out the case for a focus on discourse capture, contemplate its meaning, outline how it works, and situate

it as a key mechanism in backlash itself. After this, I turn to exploring discourse capture in practice, through four forms – resignifying, shifting, mimicking, and twisting – finally to conclude with some reflections on implications for feminist theory and movement organising.

Gender backlash

Although there have been significant gains in gender equality since the 1980s (Goetz 2020a), the transformative changes towards greater gender justice that feminists have long hoped for are now very clearly contested at an international level (Goetz 2020a; Hemmings 2020). Threatening to reverse feminist gains, contemporary anti-gender politics are apparent in numerous different locations, while they are also operating at a transnational level (Correa *et al.* 2018; Goetz 2020a; Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Korolczuk 2015; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017). Corredor (2019, 619) articulates these 'anti-gender counter-movements' as an epistemological response to 'feminist and queer attempts to insert new understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality into international policy'.

Such moves against gender justice have been characterised as 'backlash'. Backlash is a response to actual or perceived challenges to existing hierarchies of power, that Flood *et al.* (2018, 6) typify as resistance to gender equality with origins in the defence of privilege. 'A typical feature of backlash is the desire by some proponents to return to aspects of an idealised past in which structural inequality was normalised' (*ibid.*), and male entitlement was unquestioned (Kimmel 2013). This sense of 'restoration' has been central to the politics of the Right; as Graff *et al.* (2019, 541) emphasise, 'antagonism toward feminism is both a sentiment at the heart of the Right's value system and a political strategy, a platform for organizing and for recruiting massive support', through a politics concerned with the promotion of 'tradition' over 'equality' (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2015, 7).

Discourse capture

This article is a response to several calls for new theoretical and analytical tools to help us understand the nature of contemporary anti-feminist and anti-queer politics (Browne and Nash 2020; Piscopo and Walsh 2020; Verloo 2018). I introduce the concept of 'discourse capture', which I argue is one of the central mechanisms of contemporary gender backlash. Discourse capture involves the intentional resignification, shifting, mimicking, or twisting of existing concepts and terminologies, with the result that their dominant meaning and ideological underpinnings are altered, or replaced. The effect of this capture is that concepts such as 'feminism' become what Bean (2007, 176) calls 'discursive fair game'; a 'floating cultural marker … drained of specifically political meaning, perpetually susceptible to redefinition'. Social movement theorists call this 'frame variation', where opponents adopt aspects of a movement's discourse, while subverting its intent[3] (Burke and Bernstein 2014, 830), with the result that the political position of movement actors no longer coheres or has traction in its discursive field.

In exploring the various modes of discourse capture in different contexts and by diverse actors, I hope to contribute to the emerging body of work that seeks to understand gender backlash and work towards ways of countering it. Goetz (2020a, 9) has written that gender backlash concerns both the 'politics of preserving gender inequality' and the 'dismantling of systems to protect women's rights'. She is writing specifically about the dismantling or repurposing of formal institutions, such as ministries, equal rights commissions and gender advisory offices. The concept of 'discourse capture' is concerned with the dismantling of *discursive systems* established to protect women's rights. It draws from the work of thinkers like Jean Bethke Elshtain (1982), Michel Foucault (1991), and Stuart Hall (1992/2018) who recognise the importance of discourse as a political battle ground.

What is discourse and how does it work politically

Discourse is the way in which language is used socially, in specific contexts; 'a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning' (Adams 2017). Discourse constructs objects of knowledge and dictates not only how ideas are put into practice, but *which* ideas are in circulation. Through the creation of meaning systems, discourses create subjects, and determine what we perceive as 'truth' (Weedon 1987, 113) as 'political possibility' (Judge 2018, 5); they structure the relationship between language, social institutions, subjectivity, and power (Weedon 1987, 113). Forms of power are exercised in discursive practices through which knowledge is formed and (re)produced (Young 1981, 48). The way in which discourse fixes meaning, and appears as objective and stable, makes it central to the establishment, continuation, and dismantling of systems of power (Gill 1995; Judge 2018).

Discourse embeds meaning both through its reiteration, and its reproduction in different contexts – 'journalists', politicians', artists' and scholars' texts, in drawings or performances and occurs almost always in a digital form' (Martinsson 2020, 295). It constitutes 'practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972, 49). It does not just describe the world, but shapes it (Judge 2018, 5). As it merges with other similar discourses, it becomes naturalised, or normalised (Butler 2004; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Martinsson 2020). Through this iterative process of normalisation, discourse effects power, and becomes a technique of control and discipline (Adams 2017). It determines what is excluded and what is impossible to say, and in so doing is inseparable from a broader analysis of power (Hook 2001, 542). The ubiquity of social media and the internet has meant that the process of discourse normalisation can happen more quickly than was previously the case (Martinsson 2020).

The material effects of discourse capture

What is centrally important to understanding the politics of discourse capture is recognising its material effects. Defining the family as a narrow nuclear, heterosexual marriage, for example, circumscribes what is considered the normative arrangement of intimacy. If

the effect of discourses is 'to make it virtually impossible to think outside them' (Young 1981, 48), the universal, morally righteous family becomes understood in this narrow way (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548). As well as this understanding being entirely out of step with reality,[4] it has significant implications for law, for social policy, for social inclusion. It is because of these implications that Hook (2001) suggests both that we view discourse less as a language, and more as an active 'occurring', and that we ask what subject positions are made possible within particular texts. We might additionally ask who stands to gain from this 'occurring'? As Bean (2007, 185) writes:

> Language produces material consequences, arguments create political realities … whether people live or die, have access to power or not, are allowed to marry or not, live in safe neighbourhoods or not is very much determined by the language used for or against them, the manner in which they have been defined … there are no shelters for women without the term 'domestic violence', for example; no equity training without the phrase 'sexual harassment'.[5]

What is at stake then, is not merely a battle for discursive control.

In the following section, I situate discourse capture within gender backlash, and go on to sketch out four forms, or categories, of discourse capture.

Discourse capture as a backlash mechanism

Within the backlash literature there are numerous references to the co-option and resignification of language, to the re-conceptualisation of progressive notions, and to the appropriation, erosion, or purposeful dismantling of particular frames; what Grzebalska and Pető (2018, 168) call 'hijacking of the human rights language and infra-structure'. These are all arguably forms of discourse capture, but what the concept of discourse capture adds[6] is a lens that systematically links these different forms, makes audible, or calls our attention to an otherwise 'silent coup', and prompts an awareness of its intention and scale.

I developed discourse capture both from the notion of 'state capture' and in conversation with contemporary literature on gender backlash, in particular with Faludi et al.'s (2020) conception of backlash comprising a combination of what they call full-frontal assaults, and 'undercover myth-making'. Mapping Faludi et al.'s (2020) binary conception of backlash on to Michel Foucault's articulation of power as both *repressive* (full-frontal assaults) and *productive or normalising* (myth-making) allows us to situate discourse capture as an expression, and recognition, of normalising power, and potentially, to reclaim that which has been captured.

As with the 'silent coup' that characterises state capture, part of what discourse capture enables is a masking of intent; it appears as an indirect attack, in which power's 'success is proportional to is ability to hide its own mechanisms' (Foucault cited in Weedon 1987, 107). It is a *political project* that sets up to undermine and ultimately dismantle the discursive frameworks crucial to women's rights. McEwen (2020, 24) notes that the conservative 'pro-family' think-tanks of the anti-gender movement are actively 'developing and deploying discursive devices and knowledge that seeks

to undermine and delegitimize feminist and queer theory and advocacy'. Our definitional notions of 'freedom', 'feminism', 'gender', and 'family' are all active sites of political contestation.

Discourse capture in practice

In this section, I identify four different forms of discourse capture operating within gender backlash politics – resignifying, shifting, mimicking, and twisting. These are not hard and fast categories, and in some instances, they may occur together, or in sequence. The discursive shifting evident in the pro-life movement's repositioning of women as victims of the institutions that facilitate abortion, and of their foetuses as unborn women, for example, allows for a resignification of 'feminism', where anti-abortion activists claim to be feminist in protecting both the rights of women, and their unborn children.

Resignifying

Perhaps the most obvious and significant example of discourse capture is the purposeful resignifying of 'gender' as an ideology, rather than an analytical category; we now talk of 'anti-gender' politics. In 2017 an effigy of Judith Butler, as the alleged architect of gender ideology, was burned in protests coinciding with her arrival in Brazil for a book launch in 2017 (Jaschik 2017). Butler (2019) links the emergence of this particular backlash to 2004, and a letter from the Pontifical Council on the Family to the Bishops of the Catholic Church that signalled the threat posed by the concept of gender to the 'feminine values important to the Church'. That said, the origins of gender backlash can be traced further back, namely to the United Nations (UN) World Conferences in the early 1990s, at which feminist and LGBTQI movements made significant gains related to sexuality, reproductive rights, and gender mainstreaming (Buss 1998; Case 2019; Corredor 2019). The term 'gender ideology' emerged in these contexts as a rhetorical device created by the Vatican 'as a leading counterstrategy for thwarting feminist and queer attempts to insert new understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality into international policy' (Corredor 2019, 616–19). Scholars have identified the functioning of 'gender ideology' as a 'symbolic glue' for populism, nationalism, and religious fundamentalism in opposition to reproductive rights, rights of sexual minorities, gender studies, and gender mainstreaming (Grzebalska and Pető 2018, 165).

The patriarchal politics behind this term tries to reassert the organisation of social power on the basis of biological sex, as an effect of natural forces (Weedon 1987, 123), and one in which what constitutes 'normal' femininity and masculinity is fixed (Weedon 1987, 126). The idea both that masculine and feminine traits are socially constructed and therefore open to change, and that there are diverse expressions of gender identity, is one that undermines hierarchical distinctions between male and female (Butler 2019). The 'sexual essentialism' proffered by backlash actors within the Catholic Church is therefore invested in presenting sex as unchanging, transhistorical and without history, or social

determinants (Rubin 1997, 105) in a bid to 'preserve but also restore the heteropatriarchal status quo' (Piscopo and Walsh 2020, 268).

As Judith Butler argues in an interview with Bruno (2019):

> There is no ideology of gender, for that suggests that there is a core set of beliefs or a single theory. In reality, there is a complicated world of gender studies with many different methodological approaches and academic forms. It is a lively academic field, which means that people argue about its presuppositions, its aims, and its definitions … It does not deny material reality, but it does ask how material realities come to signify as they do. The term 'gender ideology' makes it seem that it is a monolithic theory and that its sole aim is to distort reality. But actually, it seeks to understand the reality of bodies, sexuality, family, kinship, reproduction, inequality, freedom, justice, masculinity, femininity, and all the ways of living gender that have not been adequately understood. If anything, it is an inquiry that seeks to offer real knowledge in the place of prejudice.

The portrayal of gender as an ideology is closely linked to the several attacks on gender studies programmes. Hungary's far-right Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, banned gender studies programmes at universities in 2018. His Deputy Prime Minister, Zsolt Semjen, argued that gender studies is 'an ideology, not a science' (Oppenheim 2018). Hemmings (2020) notes that there have been consistent attacks on Gender Studies as a field in recent years, including a legislative move to ban 'gender identity studies in schools and universities' in Romania and the attempted bombing at the National Secretariat for Gender Research at the University of Göteborg (Hemmings 2020).

The exact form of 'anti-gender' discourse plays out differently in various contexts. Martinsson (2020) notes that in Sweden, where secularism is very much a part of national identity, gender studies is discursively positioned as a religion. This is very different to the majority of contexts where anti-gender actors are linked to conservative religious organisations. Martinsson writes about the affective quality of anti-gender discourse globally and notes ways in which it operates on the creation of fear. She identifies two formulations of this in the Swedish context – the first that connects gender studies to ideology and positions it as 'dogmatic unscientific political rule', exemplified by an article by editorial writer Ivar Arpi 'The Brainwashing of Sweden Continues', and the second that constructs it as religious (Martinsson 2020, 295). Martinsson identifies both these articulations as threatening to the fundamental 'Swedish values of modernity, rationality and freedom' (*ibid.*). Thus, gender studies is positioned as threatening both rationality and freedom (Martinsson 2020, 296), and ultimately as anti-Swedish.

The resignification of gender theory as an ideology and the related attacks on gender studies exhibit the intention and scale of discourse capture. Scholars have commented on the success of the 'Unholy Alliance' (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020, 703), initiated by the Holy See to discredit feminist thinking, and now an organised group which includes multiple and diverse actors (Goetz 2020b, 165). The fact that they are operating through channels that are not directly perceived to be political suggests its characteristic nature of a 'silent coup'.

Shifting

The example of pro-life feminism in the introduction to this article exhibits a form of discourse capture that I characterise as 'shifting'. The discursive moves of that pro-life movement have been written about in several different contexts, notably in the United States and in Ireland. Halva-Neubauer and Zeigler (2010) provide a fascinating analysis of the way in which pro-life forces have transformed their framing of the abortion issue from one that positions foetal rights against maternal rights, to one that emphasises the bond between the woman and the 'child'; a rhetorical shift that attacks the central claim of mainstream pro-choice activists: that the foetus is not a person. This move also enables a pro-life protestor from the United States to label herself 'a true feminist' fighting for the rights of 'unborn women', a resignification of 'feminism' afforded by the discursive shift.

On a similar note, the 2018 abortion referendum 'Vote No' campaign appealed to the Irish public to 'love both', i.e. both the mother and the 'unborn child'. Kath Browne and Catherine Nash analyse this campaign as an example of what they term 'heteroactivism' – 'an analytical category (that) examines resistances to sexual and gender rights that seek to reiterate the place of the heteronormative family (both in terms of gender norms and heterosexuality)' (2020, 51). In their analysis they show how pro-life messaging has moved away from banning abortion towards restricting it; and, in response to the perceived failures of the previous overtly shaming and overtly religious rhetoric, adopted compassionate woman-centred discourses.

Mimicry/appropriation

A third formation of discourse capture is mimicry or appropriation. La Manif pour Tous (The Protest for Everyone), the French anti-gender movement created to oppose the bill on same-sex marriage in France (a bill passed in May 2013) that has since broadened its remit to the defence of the 'traditional family', is a clear example of mimicry. There are two immediately apparent manifestations of discourse capture in their name: La Manif pour Tous. *La manif* (manifestation) means protest, and is a phenomenon traditionally *strongly* associated with the left in France (Stille 2014). La Manif pour Tous, not only appropriated the term *manif* but the language of the same-sex marriage bill itself, which was called 'Le Mariage pour Tous' ('Marriage for Everyone') (*ibid.*).

In Uganda, the organisation responsible for leading the campaign for the Anti-Homosexuality Bill that became law in February 2014,[7] is named 'the Interfaith Rainbow Coalition against Homosexuality', a clear appropriation of the LGBTQI movement's rainbow symbolism. Examples of mimicry are also prevalent in the use of visual symbols, which contribute to discursive landscapes. La Marea Verde, or the Green Tide are a transnational pro-choice movement that formed in Argentina in 2018, to support a bill to decriminalise abortion. Their central symbol – the *pañuelo verde* (green scarf) – was appropriated by the counter movement La Ola Celeste or 'blue wave' who introduced the use of a light blue scarf to represent their movement.

Twisting/repurposing

A final form of discourse capture is the twisting or repurposing evident in some of anti-gender claims on rights. Pope Francis, for example, has on many occasions referred pejoratively to the promotion of gender equality policies by aid organisations as 'ideological colonisation' (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 797). In another example, a press image from an anti-gay protest in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2011 shows a protestor holding a sign which reads 'Respect our basic human rights as Muslims in this country' (Tejas 2015), a plea that flips the language of gay rights on its head and subverts it. These protestors are asserting that it is not gay rights that need protection, but Muslim rights that need protection from the threat of gay rights. This is what Kuhar and Paternotte (2017, 14) term 'victim–perpetrator reversal', where 'a social group moves from the status of victim (e.g. non-recognition of same-sex partnerships) to that of perpetrator (same-sex marriage will destroy the family)'.

This *twist* in relation to rights claims echoes what we see in pro-life campaigning post the *shifting* in discourse outlined previously in this article. First, having constructed foetuses as people, as 'moral and political subjects' (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2015, 169), campaigners then apply human rights to them, thus undermining the reproductive rights of living women (*ibid.*). Second, the 'love both' shift, documented both in the United States and in Ireland (Browne and Nash 2020; Halva-Neubauer and Zeigler 2010), positions women as victims of the legal and medical systems that allow abortion. This protectionist, allegedly pro-womanist framing is then articulated as feminist.

This twisting or repurposing of rights framings is part of a bigger battle for symbolic control of the human rights discourse, as simultaneous demonisation and capture of equality politics (Gzrebalska and Pető 2018). The manifesto of Europe's anti-choice movement – Agenda Europe – explicitly mentions a strategic intention to colonise human rights, by which they mean to reframe their conservative religious positions on sex and reproduction through human rights language, where they describe themselves as victims defending their faith against 'cultural revolutionaries' (Datta 2018, 15; Graff *et al.* 2019, 543).

Another twisting or repurposing is evident in the articulation of anti-gender advocates as anticolonial, which Korolczuk and Graff (2018, 800) identify as 'antigenderism's key discursive structure'. Anti-gender arguments position both 'gender' and homosexuality as neo-colonial impositions (Kaoma 2012). Corrêa (2017) comments on this as cynical at best, from a group of actors who otherwise show no interest in anti-racist or decolonial politics. This is a sentiment echoed by other scholars who point to the nuclear, heteronormative 'family' currently being rearticulated by the anti-gender movement as one of central mechanisms of colonial domination (McEwen 2020, 17).

What does this mean for feminists?

Work outlining counter backlash strategies is still emerging (AWID 2021; Davies and Sweetman 2018; Flood *et al.* 2018; Marler *et al.* 2018); and more needs to be done.

McEwen (2020, 10) suggests that our political and epistemic work to counter gender backlash prevents the reassertion of the gender binary as the norm, expands social imaginaries beyond the gender binary, and de-centres morality politics within understandings of sexuality and gender. Susan Faludi argues that the best way to survive a backlash era is 'to understand it – to challenge its deluge of half-baked claims and myths by holding a bright spotlight up to its propagators' threadbare logic and fallacious data' (Faludi *et al.* 2020, 341). Academics, journalists, and activists have heeded this call, and there is a rich (and growing) body of work documenting the backlash (which I have drawn on for this article), as well as its institutional and financial support structures (Datta 2021). However, there is still a need for ongoing contextualised and nuanced studies from diverse geographies that draw attention to gender backlash, and surface and debunk the myths and 'alternative facts' (Kuhar and Zolbec 2017, 44).

Given the intention and scale that I have argued underpins anti-gender discourse capture, we urgently need proactive and systematic feminist counter strategies. Feminist counter backlash strategies broadly fit into three approaches – discursive, practical, and legal. My main interest here is in the discursive, specifically what a counter discourse capture strategy might comprise. Because discourse capture is not confined to the discursive and has significant material effects, action to counter it is also not limited to the discursive. The following sections outline and exemplify some existing discursive, practical, and legal counter backlash strategies.

Discursive strategies

Michel Foucault is adamant that where there is power, there is resistance, and in relation to discourse specifically, he writes: 'discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it' (Foucault 1981, 101). His work identifies the various domains which contribute to the normalisation of discourse (Foucault 1981), and within each of these lies the possibility to reverse discourse, and 'recast normalcy' (Feder 2014, 64). What this means for feminists is that 'discourse capture' is not static, and can be reclaimed.

The term 'discourse capture' itself can be seen as a first move towards recognising and tackling discourse capture, and invites other feminists to contribute to the project of recognising, highlighting, and reversing instances of discourse capture, through a combination of documenting, framing, and creative resistance.

I have noted already the rich, and growing, body of work, documenting gender backlash.

An example of a feminist framing strategy is UN Women's *Progress of the World's Women's Report* 'Families in a Changing World'. Their report represents a deliberate attempt to push back against anti-gender actors, who frame 'family' as nuclear and heteronormative. In a direct response to this 'gender restrictive' worldview (Sentiido 2021, 14), the UN report recognises the diversity in family structures; 'there is no "standard" family form, nor has there ever been' (UN Women 2019, 16).

Creative resistance is a third discursive strategy. Creative actors can form an important part of counter backlash strategies that articulate and affirm a queer and feminist world-view. In 2016, the Nairobi-based artist group Art Attack launched the music video 'Same Love' in support of same-sex rights. Although it was banned by the Kenyan Film Classification Board, they were unable to extend this ban to YouTube (Marler *et al.* 2018). More recently, in Mexico, Catholics for the Right to Decide created the animation 'Catolicadas' to encourage reflection and debate amongst young people around difficult issues such as abortion and homosexuality (AWID 2021).

Practical strategies

Practical strategies such as protest, service provision, and coalition-building/cross-movement activism can all support discursive strategies in countering gender backlash. A significant example of protest is the women's strike in Poland[8] which pushed back against the ban on abortion. In Kenya, the hotline 'Aunty Jane'[9] provides women with safe sexual and reproductive health information. The national network of feminist scholars in Brazil (Núcleos de Estudos e Pesquisas em Mulheres, Gênero e Sexualidades[10]) provides a good example of coalition-building; or cross-movement activism, as does the work of the Other Foundation[11] in South Africa, in reclaiming LGBTI voices in the African Church landscape. A final example of cross-movement activism is the development in 2018 of the Nairobi Principles, which saw disability and abortion rights activist craft a shared agenda around sexual and reproductive health and rights (AWID 2021, 70).

Legal strategies

Legal strategies form a final feminist counter backlash category. Musawah's work with the CEDAW (UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) committee, supporting women and girls through Muslim Family Law reform, provides a good example of this type of approach (AWID 2021, 53).

Countering discourse capture

The discursive strategies of documenting, framing, and creative resistance are all pertinent to struggles to counter anti-gender discourse capture. Of the practical and legal strategies outlined, the most urgent is that of coalition-building, or cross-movement activism. This is something that queer and feminist scholars and activists have long argued for; the need to 'start our political work from the recognition that multiple systems of oppression are in operation' (Cohen 1997, 458), to build a 'multi-racial multi-gender vision of sexual and bodily rights … with feminism at its core' (Petchesky 2005, 315).[12] Its urgency in this context lies in the need for us to articulate clearly a shared and coherent worldview that has the capacity to push against the 'gender restrictive' framings of anti-gender actors (ECFG and GPP 2021). This is both a practical and a discursive strategy. As Case (2019, 660) argues, 'we should simultaneously both seek to emulate our opponents' newly unified front and, more profoundly, to be what they fear we are.

Only in this way can we complete the transformation that our individual rights movements have begun'. Just as anti-gender activists have forged solidarity, we need to find a way of recognising differences whilst resisting fragmentation; to think critically about our own role in advancing sexual and gender rights, and in particular where we might be inadvertently complicit in supporting backlash.

Conclusion

I argued at the beginning of this article that the concept of state capture helped me reflect on and identify the characteristics of discourse capture – its *intention* and *scale*, its potential to operate as a 'silent coup', and the threat it poses to the institutions of democracy. Ultimately, as Anne Marie Goetz (2020a, 13) points out, gender inequality is a choice, and the preservation of it an 'active project' (*ibid.*, 14). Anti-gender actors present this inequality as a 'fact of life rather than as a regime that systematically benefits men over women' (Hemmings 2020, 13), white over black, cisgender over trans, and heterosexual over queer. One of our central tasks as feminists is to recognise and reverse the discourse that normalises these inequalities. This article offers the concept of discourse capture as one potential tool with which to do so.

I have articulated discourse capture as a central mechanism of gender backlash, and outlined four forms of discourse capture – re-signifying, shifting, mimicking, and twisting. These forms may overlap and are sometimes evident working together, as in the case of pro-life mobilising. What discourse capture allows is a lens that systematically links these different forms, makes audible, or calls our attention to an otherwise 'silent coup', and prompts an awareness of its intention and scale.

Feminists are already resisting gender backlash through a number of discursive, practical, and legal strategies. I suggested here that as well as documenting, framing, and creative resistance, which I understand as key discursive counter strategies, the practical strategy that requires significant ongoing care and attention is that of coalition-building, or cross-movement activism, and with this, the shared crafting of a pro-gender worldview.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Emily O'Hara for starting my thoughts in this direction.
2. In South Africa, the concept of 'state capture' became a ubiquitous term in 2016, when the extent to which Zuma's government had been infiltrated and manipulated by the Gupta brothers became apparent (see Arun, 2019 for more detail).
3. Burke and Bernstein's (2014) study examines frame shifting within queer politics in Vermont and traces the way in which a radical discourse loses discursive traction over time.
4. According to UN Women (2019), only a third of all households comprise a couple and children.
5. Racialised language also has a specific consequence/impact on Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour in each of these areas mentioned in this quote.
6. With reference to the work of Bhorat *et al.* (2017, 4) on state capture.

7. On 1 August 2014, the Ugandan High Court ruled that the Bill had been passed through Parliament without the requisite quorum and was therefore invalid (van Klinken and Zebracki 2016).

8. BBC News (28 October 2020) 'Poland abortion ruling sparks "women's strike"', www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-54716780 (last checked 23 June 2021).

9. See Marler et al. (2018, 519).

10. Colleagues at NEIM, UFBA (Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies on Women at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil) hosted a national meeting of gender and sexualities research groups on 21 May 2021. They brought together more than 100 groups from all over Brazil, with the objective of finding ways and strategies to resist the backlash collectively. A national network was formed.

11. The Other Foundation (2019) 'stabanisation – a discussion paper about disrupting backlash by reclaiming LGBTI voices in the African church landscape', http://theotherfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Other-Foundation-Stabanisation-Paper-v4.pdf.

12. Many refer to a feminism that explicitly recognises overlapping forms of oppression as 'intersectional feminism'.

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