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Patriarchal (Dis)orders: Backlash as Crisis Management

A quarter of a century from the International Women's Conference in Beijing, we are confronted with a tide of misogyny, homo/transphobia, attacks on sexual and reproductive rights, and more. The term "patriarchal backlash" has increased in use to describe such trends in different settings, but the concept remains contested, variably conceived of as reactive or proactive projects of patriarchal restoration (e.g., Mansbridge and Shames 2008), forms of systemically embedded preemptive resistance (e.g., Rowley 2020), or modes through which broader populist reactionary politics converge and play out (Patternote and Kuhar 2017). Moreover, much recent academic work from the global North has centered on Europe and the Americas, despite the global reach of backlash and despite the existence of research on resistance to new norms, initiatives, and policies for gender equality

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from diverse settings in the global South.¹ Interconnecting such conversations, this article thus examines more global dynamics of backlash, exploring the question of why and how it has emerged with greater intensity in recent years, and how we can better understand it.

We preface our analysis with a brief review of recent conceptual debates on backlash against feminism and human rights, characterized here as patriarchal backlash. We then broaden and deepen this conversation in terms of geography and history before examining the contemporary context of systemic crisis within which, we argue, patriarchal backlash must be addressed. In this view, backlash is better understood as a set of material mechanisms and discursive strategies for maintaining or asserting hierarchies, which are at once gendered, classed, and racialized, in a context of interlinked crises—political, economic, climate, and pandemic—that threaten such hierarchies. In laying out our conceptualization of backlash as crisis management, we contend that forms of patriarchal backlash are deployed to manage such crises through a series of spatial fixes, centered on the individualized space of the sexed body, the privatized space of the traditional family, and the ordered and bordered space of the ethnic nation. We conclude with discussion of the implications of this proposed (re)reading of backlash for ongoing efforts to confront and resist it.

Current framings and their limitations

Recent academic literature variously understands antifeminist or patriarchal backlash in terms of resistance, restoration, or broader reactionary politics. Cognizant of diverse uses of the term since Susan Faludi's (1991) definition of backlash—as referring to episodic acute opposition to women's rights—we heed calls to further theorize it (Jordan 2016; Sen, Vallejo, and Walsh 2017; Piscopo and Walsh 2020). This is important, both to better account for its regional diversity (Corrêa, Paternotte, and Kuhar 2018; Flood, Dragiewicz, and Pease 2018; Sardenberg, Kubík Mano, and Sacchet 2020) and to untangle its range of functions, distinct kinds of protagonists, and the links and tensions between differing political agendas. We unpack here what various framings of the concept—as patriarchal restoration, preemptive resistance, or broader reactionary politics—proffer, and some of their limitations.

Jennifer M. Piscopo and Denise M. Walsh (2020) argue that women's rights perspectives often see backlash as “a reaction to progressive change,” whether “a momentary retaliation” or a multitude of reactions coming together

¹ See Eastin and Prakash (2013), Jewkes et al. (2015), Nyabola (2016), and Ghosh and Günter (2018).

“into a longer-term countermovement.” Therefore, backlash is largely seen as reactive and “different from politics-as-usual” (266). Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames (2008), for example, define backlash as a reaction “directed against change agents or change leaders” through “the use of coercive power to regain lost power as capacity” (625). As patriarchal restoration, they claim, backlash must “be a reaction . . . involve coercive power . . . [and] involve trying to reinstate part or all of one’s former power in the most general meaning of capacity” (627). Similarly, Conny Roggeband and Andrea Krizán (2020) use “backsliding” to describe “states going back on previous commitments to gender equality” (29). While less reflected in recent debates on backlash in the global North, the field of gender and development has long addressed questions of male resistance, pushback, or backlash at individual, household, and community levels, be it in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence, women’s economic empowerment, or—more recently—political participation. More recent critical debates about resistance to transnational processes and frameworks for the dissemination of gender equality norms (with aid conditioned on gender monitoring), including co-optation and depoliticization, provide other variants of preemptive or diversionary backlash.

The diverse phenomena characterized as patriarchal backlash, however, cannot simply be understood in relation to a narrative of pushback against social progress on women’s rights. It is clear that in many parts of the world such progress has been limited at best, yet still there are signs that antifeminism and its constitutive violence (whether through state policy, institutional practice, cultural expression, or interpersonal behavior) is on the rise. Moreover, backlash can be preemptive as well as reactive, can also involve non-coercive forms of power, and is not always aimed at reinstating actual lost power, nor indeed a past order. In exploring the evolution of gender backlash since Zimbabwe’s independence, Sita Ranchod-Nilsson (2008) notes that Mansbridge and Shames’ concept “implies that changes that threaten . . . those in power have [already] occurred” (643), whereas backlash in Zimbabwe was evident in the ways “the government acceded to the international agreement [on gender equality reforms] but did little to follow up” (649).

Reading backlash as a protective mechanism for the longer-term survival of oppressive and intersecting systems of power, Michelle V. Rowley (2020) also challenges its framing as merely a reactionary response to perceived gains. Rather, she theorizes it “as a condition of modernity,” whereby backlash is an “inherent systemic feature that compels us to reimagine the very system that is itself dependent on backlash for its survival and proper functioning” (278). In Erica Townsend-Bell’s (2020) conceptualization, meanwhile, “misogyny and backlash operate on a continuum” whereby both are “structured

through hierarchy” stretching from naturalized misogyny to “an explicit ‘do-not-cross’ boundary enforcing the existing hierarchy” (287). When this boundary is reached, Townsend-Bell argues, backlash is triggered and exposed as “the moment of revelation.” Rather than being reactive to fundamental shifts, backlash is thus “concerned with impeding the exchange of power [away] from those who ‘should’ [naturally] have it” (287). Townsend-Bell also suggests “an intermediate node on the continuum . . . [where] . . . preemptive backlash works precisely to prevent changes to the status quo” (288). While still rooted in privileged groups’ resistance to change, this conceptualization of anticipative and preventive backlash provides more for continuity than an episodic reversal of otherwise linear progress.

Backlash against gender equality can also be mobilized and exploited for other visions for radical change, which may not focus primarily on gender but which are still patriarchal. Within broader revolutionary agendas, some religious fundamentalist movements clearly lash back at ideas of gender equality by presenting these as corrupting and/or Western. Similarly, ethnonationalist, far right, or neofascist movements and parties actively promote antifeminist agendas, if driven more fundamentally by racialized concerns and ambitions for ethnic cleansing. Actors of the latter kind now also often draw on religious conservatism to promote racialized patriarchal “traditional” family values (Fekete 2019) blended with masculinized authoritarian and antidemocratic ones (Beinart 2019). Zein Murib (2020) sees Townsend-Bell’s notion of “a moment of revelation” as a violent “reminder that . . . [certain groups’] civic membership is always potentially revocable,” adding that “backlash emanates from enduring exclusions . . . that are anti-intersectional” (296–97). We can thus characterize a third form or reading of backlash as proactive—as opposed to reactive—and seeking to build even more explicitly misogynistic and supremacist social orders—rather than systemic continuity—even if it mobilizes a sense of aggrieved entitlement. Often justified with reference to some mythologized patriarchal paradise lost, or spiritually or ethnically cleansed future, such backlash may not ostensibly be about gender, but it rests on patriarchal ideologies (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019), intersectional exclusions, and gendered othering.

If there are often connections between fundamentalist or conservative religious groups and far-right movements and politicians, such alliances go broader still in what is increasingly recognized as countermovements against “gender ideology”—across Europe and Latin America (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Datta 2018; Kováts 2018)—or “anti-gender” movements across the globe (Carothers and O’Donohue 2019; Denkovski, Bernarding, and Lunz 2021). David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar (2017, 13) argue that within such confluences and diffuse groupings, “gender functions as ‘symbolic glue,’

allowing actors with diverging goals and strategies to work against a common enemy.” They go as far as to suggest that “gender ideology” has become “an empty signifier, functioning for coalition making across a variety of actors precisely because of its ‘populist emptiness’” (15).

This claim of emptiness jars with reality; the reactionary, authoritarian politics of our time is replete with gendered signification and entangled with patriarchal logics that are both racialized and classed. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue argue that “the process of polarization,” across different regions, “simplifies the normal complexity of social relations, aligning with otherwise unrelated divisions [and] emasculating cross-cutting cleavages.” Gendered and racialized notions of “us” and “them,” they maintain, fuse “elite and mass polarization” and have “a strong affective dimension . . . structured around a binary division . . . [of] . . . clashing social identities” (Carothers and O’Donohue 2019, 7; citing Somer and McCoy 2018). While diffuse and complex, these broader constellations of forces suggest that backlash cannot be fully understood without investigating such diverse and divisive dynamics.

Backlash and crisis management

The deep structures of patriarchal backlash

As Paternotte and Kuhar (2017) note, backlash dynamics are not solely about gender. We too make this claim, analyzing the broader (albeit gendered) dimensions of heteronormative, exclusionary, and supremacist politics exacerbated at times of perceived crisis, during which the specter of disorder threatens social hierarchies and the structures of oppression in which they are anchored. Underlying this analysis, then, is the notion that gender is inseparable from other divisive and reactionary politics, intersecting as it does with hierarchies of race, class, nationality, disability, sexuality, and coloniality (Crenshaw 1991; Nash 2008). Through this lens, patriarchy therefore is also not only about gender but about the maintenance and management of a multidimensional hierarchical status quo. As we know, patriarchal power dynamics affect and shape the most intimate geographies of the self and body (Beauvoir 1949; Butler 2011) as well as interrelated macro-structures of violence, inclusive of global processes of imperialism, capitalism, and militarism shaped over histories of colonial extraction, militarized oppression, economic exploitation, and capitalist formation (Enloe 2000; Mohanty 2003; Fraser 2009). Far beyond the heteropatriarchal binaries of “men” and “women,” patriarchy is thus rendered intersectionally complex, revealing its dynamic entanglement with complex coadapting social systems and broader social

(dis)orders. Patriarchy therefore operates representationally, materially, ideologically, and epistemologically (Edström 2014); to truly resist it requires a “radical transformation of the deep structures of the social totality” (Fraser 2009, 104).

From this standpoint, heeding Nancy Fraser’s (2009, 103) call to better understand the “deep structures” and “androcentric form of state-organized capitalist society” is one starting point for conceiving backlash as manifest contemporaneously. In part, this is a call for historical depth, to facilitate deeper understanding of the structural and historical contexts from which backlash against a radical transformation of society emerges. A brief dip into the entangled histories of gender, race, and class illustrates that the “woman question” has always been posed at times of crisis and volatility in established orders. The primitive accumulation that marked the transition from feudal to early capitalist relations in Europe involved an intensified anxiety about and control over women’s labor and their reproductive function, as Silvia Federici’s (2004) analysis of the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries makes clear. By the same token, revolutionary challenges to regimes of power have often centered and racialized the woman question (Cornell 2018), appealing to naturalized gender differences and hierarchies within their imagined national communities (McClintock 1995; Stoler 2010). For instance, charting the evolving gender discourses within Indian anticolonial movements, Sanjay Seth (2013, 281–82) notes that “one constant was that women continued to be seen as the guardians, icons, and markers of a space that was variously designated as ‘home,’ ‘personal,’ or familial/conjugal.”

European colonial conquests have always involved the imposition of gender and sexual orders on the colonized, with recent archaeology suggesting “just how central the policing of sexuality and bodies was to the imperial project” (Patel and Moore 2017, 115). As Raj Patel and Jason Moore make clear, even “though there’s little explicitly about women in Columbus’s diaries, they contain a great deal about gender—about how a differentiation by sex mattered in the order of things, about how workers might be managed, about how women might be owned” (113). The very category of woman was racialized in the course of the European colonial conquest of the “new” world and in the ensuing mass enslavement of non-European peoples and extermination of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and beyond. Françoise Vergès (2022, 92) notes that “colonial slavery was the matrix of the binarism that founds domination between genders and within genders.” As she continues, in “white supremacy’s view, the gender of non-white people is both fixed and fluid, as gender binarism is an attribute of whiteness. Racialized women are not completely ‘women’ and racialized men are not completely ‘men,’ according to the norms inherited from slavery and colonialism” (93). As such,

“an idealized white femininity became paradigmatic of ‘woman’ through the abjection of the perceived African ‘female’” (Jackson 2020, 8).

This racialized construction of white womanhood distinguished from African femaleness was linked to the economic logic of mass enslavement, namely the extraction of labor. Central to this distinction was the notion that “African females did not feel pain or anxiety in the way white women do” (Jackson 2020, 186). In turn this sanctioned the exploitation of nonwhite women’s productive and reproductive labor, as “African womanhood as a discursive formation materialized in the context of England’s need for productivity; in response to this need, utilitarian feeding and mechanistic child-birth would ultimately become located in the English economy” (186). More generally, the enclosure and extraction of women’s “free” labor, as decades of feminist activism and scholarship has illustrated, was central to early capitalist development. Indeed, in Patel and Moore’s (2017, 31) pithy summation, “patriarchy isn’t a mere by-product of capitalism’s ecology—it’s fundamental to it.” For instance, in her discussion of the rise of feminist militancy in recent years, particularly in Argentina, Verónica Gago (2020, 69) draws on the foundational work of Maria Mies (1999) and others on patriarchy and the primitive accumulation of capital in the early modern period, asserting that the “subjugation of women, nature, and the colonies, with ‘civilization’ as the watchword, inaugurates capitalist accumulation with the sexual and colonial division of labor as its foundation.”

Patriarchy is entangled, therefore, with not only gendered social hierarchies but also with capitalist and (neo)colonial processes of dispossession and exploitation. Any rumbling of transformation in the deeper waters of “social totality” (Fraser 2009, 103)—as opposed to superficial nods toward the promise of equality, which is impossible within entrenched systemic injustice—appears to elicit backlash, not necessarily as a reactive or overt response but through complex processes of co-optation and appropriation. Indeed, the emergence of the gender and development discourse itself from the 1990s onward—and its associated state machineries and donor and philanthropic funding for gender mainstreaming—can be read as a form of crisis management at a time of neoliberal structural adjustment of postcolonial states’ welfarist and redistributive social policy.

The first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975 called for an international decade for women and development while, as Susan Watkins (2018, 43) writes, concerted efforts by transnational corporations and countries in the global North delegitimized and marginalized radical feminist demands, instead installing antidiscrimination and a legalist approach to “women’s rights” as the hegemonic framing of feminist progress. By the time of the 1995 Beijing conference, “once the verbiage was peeled away, the operative

clauses of the Platform for Action followed a familiar anti-discrimination logic: women's integration into the existing global-capitalist order, underpinned by coercion" (Watkins 2018, 43). The framing of gender inequalities as a problem of women's lack of an implicitly individualized "empowerment" thus became a discursive attempt to suppress feminist militancy in the global South demanding redistribution, from North to South, from elite to poor, and from men to women (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2004; Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007). Similarly, Watkins tracks the rise of the anti-discrimination paradigm in US feminism amid the economic volatility and social ferment of the 1970s, and the subsequent neocolonization, via philanthropic funding, of what she terms "global feminism." As she notes, "while women's liberationists insisted on the overthrow of existing structures, the anti-discrimination approach sought to induct women into them" (2018, 12). "Devised to neutralize a rebellious national minority," Watkins asserts, this legalist strategy drew on the US state's attempts to contain and pacify the insurgent energies of the civil rights movement and its demands for racial justice (19).

Through complex means and methods, therefore—which are sometimes overt, sometimes less so, or even disguised in the language of "empowerment" and "equality"—gender remains a significant terrain of struggle for elite attempts to manage the reproduction of power and contain challenges to established authority. Perceived crises or challenges to this hierarchical status quo appear to engender a sense of anxiety and uncertainty over how we understand the world, our place in it, and our future or, in Anthony Giddens's (1991, 35) terms, our "ontological security." Such anxious states generate a strong affective force for identification with backlash politics, as the latter proffers supporters a supposedly more deserved and secure self-image and future, set in contradistinction to various demonized others. As such, it appears that recent expressions of patriarchal backlash function by managing and exploiting crisis and a looming sense of disorder in an otherwise ordered and bordered world.

Contemporary backlash and crisis management

Just as gender ideologies and anxieties have long accompanied dynamics of capital, empire, and nation, current crises of transnational neoliberal economics, neocolonial geopolitics, and contested national sovereignties are expressed and exploited as gender crises. The current concurrence of backlash dynamics should therefore be read in relation to a generalized temporality of crisis: foreclosed futures, idealized pasts, and a volatile present tense. The ways in which antifeminist action and sentiment are aroused and deployed in efforts to manage contemporary crises of political legitimacy, economic

prosperity, and ecological sustainability call for closer examination. Melinda Cooper (2017, 17) cites Peter Osborne's (2010) analysis of "the peculiar temporality of modern capitalism" as being "defined by the oscillation of tendencies that are alternatively self-revolutionising and restorative, speculative and radically nostalgic." Yet this temporality is itself in crisis, with an increasing loss of any speculative horizon. As Cara Daggett (2018) suggests, climate breakdown is also the breakdown of fossil rule, and the patriarchal orders fueled by such rule. With her concept of "petro-masculinity (28), she highlights "the relationship . . . between fossil fuels and white patriarchal orders," seeing the present as hazardous "when challenges to fossil-fuelled systems, and . . . lifestyles, become interpreted as challenges to . . . an increasingly fragile Western hypermasculinity" (29).

With this history in mind, we argue that the current conjuncture is emblematic of Antonio Gramsci's (2005) notion of organic crises, which, in Milan Babic's (2020, 772) terms, "challenge the very fundamentals on which social orders are built." This organic crisis is deeply imbricated with the crisis management failures of successive gender regimes. For Gramsci, organic crises become apparent through their symptoms, which are "morbid because they show that the existing order suffers from existential problems . . . unlikely to be solved within the limits of the old framework" (Babic 2020, 773). This sense of morbidity is also palpable in Wendy Brown's (2020, 56) diagnosis of the contemporary resurgence in misogyny and racism as a form of nihilism, wherein "futurity itself is in doubt, its form shaped by the waning of a type of social dominance or the waning social dominance of a historical type." With implicit reference to the rise of the far Right in Euro-America, she warns that "if white men cannot own democracy, there will be no democracy. If white men cannot rule the planet, there will be no planet" (56). There is also a sense of morbidity in the obverse of this nihilism: the desire to restore a mythologized patriarchal past of imagined civilizational greatness (be it Ottoman, Hindu, or Slavic) to secure the futures of the Erdoğan, Modi, and Putin regimes. In whichever register, nihilistic or/and nostalgic, recourse to a reactionary gender politics has featured throughout history in response to crises and ontological insecurity.

David Harvey (2001) characterizes capital's crisis management efforts in terms of the "spatial fix," invoking both the sense of fixing "in place" and fixing "a problem" (25). In his own words, Harvey "first deployed the term 'spatial fix' to describe capitalism's insatiable drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical expansion and geographical restructuring" (24), a restructuring that is itself linked to "the idea that something (a thing, a problem, a craving) can be pinned down and secured" (25). As a useful heuristic for understanding backlash in relation to the felt sense of contemporary systemic

crisis, we deploy this concept of the spatial fix to examine the ways in which backlash operates as a mode of crisis management. Below, we argue that patriarchal nihilism and nostalgia are themselves organized by a set of interrelated organic tropes surrounding binary sexed bodies, living in heteronormative traditional families, within ordered borders of imagined nations, or communities (Anderson 2006) with shared homogenous cultures. The spatial fix of patriarchal backlash seeks to fix the volatility threatening elite rule by fixing, as in resecuring, gendered boundaries and hierarchies at the sites of body, family, and nation.

Sites of crisis management

Body politics

The body is a fundamental site of backlash politics administered by a diversity of actors—from men’s rights movements to gender-critical feminists, from religious conservatives to ethnonationalist neofascists, the alt Right, populists, right-wing media, and think tanks. This diversity cannot be fully covered here, and so we specifically explore the body politics of the “manosphere,” the related harnessing of aggrieved masculinity in contemporary strongman politics, the policing of sexed bodies through the vilification of so-called gender ideology, the racialized nature of reproductive body politics, and the harnessing of “other” bodies as sites and sources of racialized, gendered labor power.

Online communities across the digital manosphere explicitly comingle misogynist, masculinist, and racist body politics amid a deep sense of existential anxiety. While factions and movements in this space are far from monolithic (including “pick-up artists,” “incels,” “men going their own way,” “men’s rights activists,” etc.), the binding of antifeminism, an embodied reclamation of masculinized power, and ethnonationalist or racist sentiments appears pervasive.² Linking the rise of the alt Right with crises induced by neoliberal economic precarities, Daniel Shaw (2018, 186–87) analyzes the notion of “sexual economics” espoused by online antifeminist communities, arguing that “anxieties arising from the neoliberal economic system [are projected] onto women and sexual minorities in a way which mirrors the commodifying tendencies of this economic system itself.”³ Ostensibly disenfranchised within the “sexual

² See Blodgett and Salter (2018), Shaw (2018), Ging (2019), Greene (2019), and Strick (2019).

³ With the “language and the logic of neoliberalism applied directly to the sexual sphere” (Shaw 2018, 186), the key supposition of sexual economics is that society is largely based around sexual competition, with embodied drivers and consequences.

market,” aggrieved men across the manosphere share ways and means of regaining power in what they perceive to be a female-dominated society, sharing “‘sexual self-realization’ strategies for becoming more successful in precisely that commodified market of sexualities” (Strick 2019, 170). Techniques for self-improvement are thus promoted for the masculinization of the body, as are strict rules of conduct in heterosexual relationships and collective consciousness-raising surrounding male oppression and female domination (Shaw 2018; Ging 2019; Strick 2019).

Pornography—and challenges to abstain from it—are also frequently centered within the discussion forums of the manosphere, in which, in some quarters, pornography is understood as a tool of male exploitation. Indeed, in the predominant view of the alt Right, the primary function of pornography is to render cuckoldry—axiomatic of “beta (lesser) masculinity”—socially acceptable (Strick 2019, 173). This emphasis on cuck porn layers masculinist anxieties with racist worldviews; not only are men seen as humiliated by women through cucking,” but white supremacists find “in cuckoldry an allegory for white genocide” (Lokke 2019, 218), a sexual threat presented as “dark-skinned men raping white women, with white men as the observing bystanders” (Strick 2019, 175). This is coupled with antisemitic conspiracy theories alleging that Jews disseminate pornography to undermine white virility (Kerl 2020). Becoming “uncucked,” then, means anything from abstaining from pornography or masturbation to becoming entirely abstinent from sexual activity to regain both white and male power (Lokke 2019; Strick 2019; Kerl 2020); as one writer on the neo-Nazi website the *Daily Stormer* states, “If you are watching pornography, you are destroying your life. . . . We need strong young men. We do not need wankers” (cited in Strick 2019, 174).

Rather than an isolated subgroup of extremists, such ideas and online spaces made a significant mark in political discourse surrounding Donald Trump’s election to the US presidency in 2016. Indeed, his chief strategist, Steve Bannon, was known for regularly referring to his opponents as cucks—invoking both emasculation and a loss of white power. This is not, however, the only context in which aggrieved masculinity—and the embodied economic and political anxieties undergirding it—have been successfully harnessed for populist ends through strongman politics and posturing. Populist demagogues the world over—Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, Andrzej Duda, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Narendra Modi, Yoweri Museveni, Viktor Orbán, Vladimir Putin—appeal directly to masculinist and ethnonationalist anxieties. Such politics hence proffers an antidote to emasculation in the male body and body politic—from threats as diverse as migrants, “social justice warriors,” “woke” agendas, feminism, antiracism, and LGBTQ+ rights. Appeals to a restoration of masculinized strength, with invocations of embodied power

and virility, litter the political discourse of the demagogues of the day—from Modi’s “56-inch chest” to Bolsonaro’s proclamations of his own weakness when he fathered a daughter after four sons.⁴

Alongside these moves to (re)masculinize the body, heteronormative anxieties surrounding the destabilization of “natural” gender binaries abound through the notion of “gender ideology.” Here, it is not only deviant bodies that pose a threat but even ideas pertaining to gender as a changeable social construct. Coined by the Vatican in the 1990s, “gender ideology” was conceived as a threat in response to women’s movement mobilizations at the Cairo and Beijing conferences, which had built on longer-term struggles for women’s sexual and reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. As these connected with other sexual minority and rights movements, this presented a deeper challenge to heteropatriarchy, triggering a more fervent opposition from constellations of aspiring theocrats and conservatives—many already organized against women’s right to abortion. The framing of gender ideology thus mobilized a diverse cast of actors against an alleged nihilistic agenda by feminists, queer theorists, and activists to endanger humankind (Corrêa 2017; Corrêa, Paternotte, and Kuhar 2018). Through a plethora of strategies, gender ideology was depicted as a form of ideological colonization, providing a common yet malleable ground for a transnational movement against “genderism” (Corrêa 2017; Corrêa, Paternotte, and Kuhar 2018; Corredor 2019).

Reproductive politics are also racialized, perhaps most evident in contexts of a so-called demographic war. The settler colonial Zionist project—whose fundamental aim is to “cleanse” the land of Indigenous Palestinians to make way for an exclusively Jewish state—has long harnessed an enduring sense of existential crisis around demography and reproductive politics; during the *Nakba* (Catastrophe) of 1948, the violent extraction of unborn Palestinian babies was reported, particularly in Deir Yassin, the site of a brutal massacre carried out by Zionist militias (Sayigh 1984; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Ihmoud, and Dahir-Nashif 2014), while (Ashkenazi) Jewish women’s fertility became a national priority in the nascent Israeli state (Sharoni 1994). More recently, the Depo-Provera affair—in which Israeli doctors administered contraceptives to Ethiopian Jewish women without their consent—is a patent instance of gendered anti-Black violence, in which the coercive “management” of Black bodies deemed outside the body politic reveals the “situating of Black bodies as antithetical to the state of Israel” and the ensuing “racial and reproductive

⁴ See, e.g., Pascoe (2017), Curato and Ong (2018), Govil and Baishya (2018), Diaz (2019), Gökarkınel, Neubert, and Smith (2019), Telles (2019), and Ashwin and Utrata (2020).

violence [deployed] to become part of the superior, European West” (Abus-neineh 2021, 96).

Gendered and racialized violence through coercive reproductive health projects has a long history elsewhere, observes Watkins (2018, 20–21), who analyzes eugenicist reproductive health work alongside emerging neoliberal feminism from the 1970s onward in the United States. She writes that, arising from the “imperialist-modernization projects of the 1900s” and informing the work of early birth-control campaigns, state feminism was eugenicist—“improve the woman, improve the race” (20). Operating in parallel with neoliberalism, “population control was complementary to anti-discrimination feminism—the one treating women as breeders, the other as employees—and would remain an important front for US overseas policy” (20–21), “funded by a billion dollars of USAID” and administered through “pharmaceutical conglomerates and the Rockefeller-backed proselytizers of the International Planned Parenthood Federation” (20).

In these ways, mainstream reproductive politics link directly to overtly fascist anxieties surrounding the so-called Great Replacement. As Sophie Lewis (2019, 11) notes, “unabashed Euro-American neofascists might be the only ones willing to frame the declining ‘domestic’ birth rate in rich nations in terms of ‘white genocide’ explicitly, but close cousins of their xenophobic anxieties pop up often in mainstream discussions of the sacrifices (of liberalism) that might have to be made in order to curtail the crowding of the earth.” Moreover, narratives and imaginaries of the Great Replacement not only harness the demographic threat of Black, Brown, and otherwise unwanted bodies in view of their reproductive capacities, they also assert notions that European civilization is at risk of being “subsumed by mass migration” (Bergmann 2021, 37). Racist tropes surrounding the so-called migrant crisis thus underscore racialized and gendered anti-migrant and backlash policies across Europe, the United States, and beyond, depicting migrants as polluting bodies against which the “true” body politic must be defended, as we explore in greater depth below.

As we discuss above, it is not only the reproductive labor but also the productive labor of different bodies that is variably exploited according to relations of gender, race, and class. In this respect, the body politics of patriarchal backlash can also be understood in terms of the disciplining of labor. The growing entry of women into the waged workforce has long provoked elite anxiety at the potential threat posed to settled hierarchies of gender and class, often explicitly racialized. The individualizing narrative of women’s economic empowerment and self-improvement, so central to the post-Beijing neoliberal feminism discussed by Watkins (2018), was developed in part as a way to manage the threat of labor militancy and collective action by an increasingly

feminized workforce in many societies. Dina Siddiqi's (2000, 2009) accounts of evolving narratives of women's empowerment in the rapidly growing garment industry in Bangladesh highlight this dynamic.

But the economic volatility that has followed from the 2008 financial crisis, further amplified by the global COVID-19 pandemic, has evacuated women's economic empowerment narratives of all legitimacy. As Harsha Walia (2021, 144) notes, the "feminization of poverty, the feminization of labor, and the feminization of migration, therefore, intersect and are sustained by a matrix of racial, imperial, and class power." To keep this power in place has involved not only conventional strategies of suppressing labor militancy, through anti-union "lawfare," for example, but also ideological campaigns, so central to patriarchal backlash in many societies, to re-domesticate femininity while inciting a moral panic about a crisis of masculinity based on supposedly natural male breadwinner roles (Walker and Roberts 2017). Cooper (2017) highlights the significance of conjoined neoliberal and neoconservative discourses of family values in sustaining allegiance to a volatile, crisis-prone capitalist order from the 1980s onward, and it is to this site of spatial fix that we turn next.

Family values

Women's movements have always contested "the family" as a central site of struggle. Little wonder, then, that the family is another potent site of backlash politics, converging around nostalgic notions of tradition, reifying the family as a protected, private, and hallowed space of homecoming. Early formations of men's movements in the global North were animated by resistance to men's changing status within the family, often focused on issues of divorce settlements and child custody, challenged by rising divorce rates and by women's increased autonomy and legal protections (Jordan 2016). In India, Srimati Basu (2016, 46) finds that the men's rights movement "primarily focuses on divorce and domestic violence laws," with messaging that reeks "of misogyny, unexamined privilege, and conservative representations of heteronormative marital bliss as the ultimate social goal" (47). She points to anxieties over marriage as "diagnostic of the current crisis of the gender order in India, a 'crisis of masculinity' [where] marriage features at the core" (49) and finds statements by the Save the Indian Family Foundation to "foreground [a] rights discourse in the name of persecuted victim husbands and children without custodial fathers" (53).

Narratives of men's reactions to changes in their family breadwinner role—due to the increasing precarity of employment, women's increased labor participation, and development strategies focused on women's empowerment in Southern settings—have become familiar across different contexts. Margareth Silberschmidt has (2005) documented men's disaffection with economic

hardship and exclusion from development programs in East Africa. Similar findings have been shared from other countries, including Bangladesh (Kabbeer 2013; Kelbert and Hossain 2014); many cite increased domestic violence against women as a common outcome. Yet while deepening economic precarity, with its mounting care burdens on families—on women in particular—may increase conflicts between partners, this development narrative has also been critiqued for stereotyping and demonizing working-class men (Bedford 2007; Walker and Roberts 2017; Izugbara and Egesa 2019).

The neoliberal logic of the past four decades, in Brown's (2020, 45) terms, has implied an attack on the very idea of society through "shoring up individuals and families against their weakening first by capitalism and then [supposedly] by the social state." This involves "retasking families with shouldering everything previously provided by the social state" while "challenging social justice with the natural [*sic*] authority of traditional values." Cooper (2017, 21) notes that "when the liberation movements of the 1960s began to challenge the sexual normativity of the family wage . . . the neoliberal–new social conservative alliance came into being." The economic downturn in the 1970s (Benanav 2019) accelerated the ideological convergence of neoliberal and neoconservative commitments to "traditional" family values. Far from "a return to the Fordist family wage," however, this involved "the strategic reinvention of a . . . tradition of private family responsibility" (Cooper 2017, 21), an ideological convergence that Deniz Kandiyoti (2016, 106) terms a "marriage of convenience between neo-liberal welfare and employment policies and (neo)-conservative familialism." But these have been gradual trends since the 1980s, even if made more acute since the post-2008 recession. What role, then, does "the family" play in the more recent uptick in backlash over the past decade?

Characterizing opposition to gender equality from men's rights groups, Ruth Halperin-Kaddari and Marsha Freeman (2016, 166), argue that "at all levels . . . [it] is couched in the language of respect for culture and tradition." Transnationally, such groups are said to be connected by a "fundamental patriarchal resistance to equality in the family" (185) and provided with leadership from the Vatican as "far back as 2000, [when a] . . . review of the Fourth World Conference on Women exposed the reluctance of many governments to act on the commitments made" (192). Indeed, by 2012 the annual UN Commission on the Status of Women "did not adopt agreed conclusions. . . . The issue that stalled the discussion was equality in the family and the definition of family itself," a controversy that has held up progress ever since (192). Thus, the Vatican's mobilization against "gender ideology" also framed this as an attack on the "divinely" sanctioned family, mobilizing a broader countermovement. While many men's rights groups take resistant

reactive stances for restoring the patriarchal family, and some do have international connections, Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman may oversimplify dynamics and overestimate their political power. This, however, becomes more significant when seen in conjunction with other actors and governments—be they theocratic, ethnonationalist, capitalist, or some combination thereof.

As we discuss above, backlash against perceived changes in traditional gender norms and the “erosion of the family” has stimulated the rise of the Right (Kováts 2017; Datta 2018). In Europe, the Americas, and beyond, right-wing appropriations and applications of “gender ideology”—including in the wake of perceived migrant crises—have often been used to leverage anti-Muslim sentiment disguised as concern for the undermining of “progressive” values—including concern for women’s, sexual, and gender minority rights, and progressive family or household relations. In Europe, Sara R. Farris (2017) describes the co-optation and exploitation of feminist themes by anti-Islamic and xenophobic campaigns in collusion with certain Western feminists and “femocrats” (2) as “femonationalism.” Aside from demonizing Muslim men, she notes, such policies and rhetoric trade on the idea that “Muslim and non-western migrant women are backward [and] mostly confined to the home,” adding that, since 2007, “civic integration policies in the Netherlands, France, and Italy have encouraged these women to integrate economically by seeking employment outside the household” (14–15). But, rooted in deeper right-wing resentments over supposedly inadequate resources and space, such politics also stoke fears of ethnic “replacement” related to alien families’ allegedly higher fertility rates. Beyond Europe, Banu Gökarıksel, Christopher Neubert, and Sara Smith (2019) compare the recent rise of right-wing backlash politics in the United States, India, and Turkey with various resonant Great Replacement theories and “demographic fever dreams,” describing politics that use “vivid and fantastic fiction . . . to amplify, imagine, and obscure demographic patterns of migration, birth, or mortality so as to consolidate political power or to dismiss and undermine class tensions and create fictitious communities of homogeneity” (562–63).

Tracing the growth of a 1960s Brazilian counterrevolutionary organization into the transnational Tradition, Family and Property (TFP) network, Neil Datta (2018, 69) describes this as “a set of interrelated conservative, Catholic-inspired organisations . . . fusing social conservatism with economic hyper-liberalism and a legacy of complicity with far-right movements.” He points out that “TFP has found new horizons in Eastern Europe,” describing its strategies to influence the European Union and the United Nations using narratives “espousing religious orthodoxy and sanctifying economic inequality . . . offering religious legitimisation for illiberalism and authoritarianism.” In a further study, Datta (2021, 3) widens his mapping and documents some

“USD707.2 million in anti-gender funding over the 2009–2018 period originating from . . . 54 organisations. . . [in] the United States, the Russian Federation and Europe.” Rather than describing this as simply a “backlash” to progressive advances,” he interprets it as “several, overlapping, decentralised and mutually reinforcing projects fuel[ling] anti-gender mobilisation,” projects that “fall into three broad categories: a theocratic project, a hypercapitalist economic project and an illiberal political project” (81). If this funding represents the “tip of the iceberg,” under the surface lurk “the much wider overlapping political and economic projects accompanying the religious extremist normative project which undermines human rights while eroding the foundations of regulated market economies and . . . democracy” (82).

Not unique to current backlash politics, the appeal to heteropatriarchal “traditional family values” is a common trope that not only pervaded the neoconservative rhetoric in the 1980s (Faludi 1991) but goes back to other periods of crisis, such as the global tide of fascism and authoritarianism in the 1920s–’30s (Arendt 1951). Or, in post-independence Indonesia, the threat of the liberated “deviant” woman was central to the nationalist anti-communism of Suharto’s New Order regime, inaugurated in 1966 with the mass killing and rape of opponents and legitimated by the official state ideology of *Pancasila*, whose vision of unity relied heavily on linking the traditional patriarchal family to the nation (Wieringa 2011).

In the 1980s–’90s in the former Soviet Union, older state-managed models for gender relations began to be replaced with more traditional gender ideals in a “patriarchal renaissance” (Watson 1993; Edström et al. 2019), ideals useful to emerging capitalist and nationalist projects alike. In Turkey, Kandiyoti (2016) also notes the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)’s “neo-conservative ideology comprising a strong element of nationalist populism” (105) and “the paradox of the simultaneous deployment of neoliberal welfare policies with a conservative discourse that denounces neoliberalism’s ideological centre, ‘the West,’ . . . the foil to the ‘strong Turkish family’ as its imagined and maligned ‘Other’” (106). Also building on the patriarchal family as ethnically traditional, Valentine M. Moghadam and Gizem Kaftan (2019, 7) remind us that “in Hungary, Poland and Turkey, officials have assumed a pro-natalist policy, valorizing motherhood and calling on women to have more children ‘for the sake of the nation.’”

National imaginaries

The sexed body and the traditional family are supplemented by the orders and borders of the gendered nation, as modes of containment in the face of looming crises. Recent years have witnessed a revitalized symbiosis of

antifeminism and ethnonationalism, predicated on a racialized-gendered organicism of the “national family.” For example, in the Philippines, President Duterte’s “strongman style of governance . . . includes a distinct form of paternalism through which he justifies the drug war . . . to protect the country and its children from falling prey to its most subversive elements” (Diaz 2019, 695). In a context where silencing the poor has been a long-standing practice of the political elite, Nicole Curato and Jonathan Ong (2018) attribute Duterte’s landslide electoral success in 2016 to his political performance of listening to the “latent anxieties” of the people and his strongman promise to “bring an end to national chaos.”

While tropes of male protectionism and virility to bring order to the nation loom large in this familial paternalism, such order also demands strong borders. Indeed “border guard masculinities” (Keskinen 2013, 226) have been mobilized by anti-immigrant far-right leaders and forces, from North America to Europe and beyond. This patriarchal paternalism deploys gender in conflicting ways, as sections of the far Right use gender equality as a marker of ethno-national modernity set against the “primitive” gender practices of the other. Describing far-right parties across continental North-Western Europe as “Janus-faced,” Tjitske Akkerman (2015, 56) notes that general principles about “gender equality and freedom of choice are emphasized in the immigration and integration domain, while almost all . . . are conservative when they address issues related to the family, such as opportunities of women on the labour market, childcare, abortion or the status of marriage.”

This racialization of sexism (Scrinzi 2017), in which the allegedly primitive patriarchies of the racialized other are highlighted, has become a staple not only of anti-immigrant gender politics but of ethnonationalist claims to defend the nation from internal enemies. The Bharatiya Janata Party’s rise to power in India has featured the ongoing vilification of the male other, whether based on religion or caste, for the protection of the upper-caste Hindu everywoman—the de facto subject of Indian feminism (Shandilya 2015; Sen 2019). This has further normalized violence against women deemed to be outside of the Hindutva nation, including Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and other minorities, signifying the feminized body as an ethnonationalist battlefield (Ray 2018). In Turkey, the AKP government has deployed gender conservatism, and Erdoğan’s paternalist antifeminism, in its populist political project of establishing itself as the sole legitimate expression of the national will. As Kandiyoti (2016, 105) notes, norms and ideas about gender “and specifically women’s conduct and propriety” are deployed for the purposes of “delineating the boundaries between ‘us’ (God-fearing, Sunni, AKP supporters), and a ‘them’ consisting of all political detractors and minorities, cast as potentially treasonous and immoral.” The AKP’s use of gender conservatism

to police the boundaries of the nation and legitimize its rule is, in Kandiyoti's analysis, infused with "a heightened sense of crisis, enjoining followers to sacrifice their lives for country and leader (initially metaphorically, and now quite literally)" (111).

Feminism has also long been identified with crises of national sovereignty, both as a rhetorical strategy and as a geopolitical maneuver. Transnational organizing against gender equality commitments, certainly since the 1995 Beijing conference, has made increasing use of a discourse of national sovereignty, often articulated in an anticolonial idiom, continuing to resonate in both postcolonial and post-Soviet polities (Kováts 2017). Elizabeth Corredor (2019, 628) notes that "language equating gender ideology with colonization, imperialism, and unwarranted cultural imposition has been . . . [a] . . . prevalent counterstrategy for the global Right," adding that such framings "capitalize on political tensions and deep-seated resentments pertaining to Western liberalism, neoliberal hegemony, and colonialism, both in global politics and within feminism itself (628).

Discussing this anticolonial frame, Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff (2018, 809) argue that "genderism is seen as a global force, while resistance is always presented as local," meaning that "the set of values that antigenderists aim to defend and preserve includes national sovereignty and economic autonomy." They emphasize the political utility of such a frame for right-wing forces, as it "provides ideological coherence to an otherwise loose coalition of religious and national players worldwide" (799). They add that such diverse actors' rationales and propaganda should "be understood as part of a global socially conservative ideoscape, in which local actors draw heavily on each other's agendas while accommodating . . . to specific sociopolitical situations" (799) across "the post-1989 geopolitical landscape: [where] Eastern Europe, Russia, and the global South are the key battlegrounds" (805). For Corredor (2019, 629), "gender ideology has become a placeholder for social, economic, and political struggles that conservatives can leverage for political gain while thwarting feminist and LGBTQI policies that threaten their power and privilege."

Such struggles should also be understood in relation to the contemporary era of deglobalization, heralded by the 2008 financial recession and border anxieties related to the movements of people and viral pathogens. This deglobalization, both responding and contributing to multiple crises, has often been distinctly gendered, not only in its mechanisms for privileging the *ethnos* (an imaginary community based on race and culture) over the *demos* (a population or multitude of citizens) but also in its often antidemocratic, authoritarian practice, embodied by the male leader, by turns paternal and retro-macho. Anti-global rhetoric and sentiments are now common in backlash politics in

most settings.⁵ From Orbán’s institutional attack on “gender ideology” to Duterte’s crude misogyny and homophobia, a deeply regressive heteropatriarchal politics has served to legitimize and consolidate this authoritarian turn. Accompanying such politics is the commonly used discourse of emasculation: blaming feminism and/or LGBTQI struggles for the loss of national vigor in the face of purported—and frequently sexualized—threats of the male other, both inside and outside the imperiled nation. Examining “anti-genderism” politics in Poland in recent years, Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur, and Suzanna Walters (2019, 551) emphasize a sense of “moral panic around gender combined seamlessly with ‘enemies at the gates’ rhetoric.” This is “more than a threat of ‘our women’ being raped by racialized hypermasculine others,” they write, concluding that “genderism was presented as a plot to ‘soften’ Polish men and make them unable to defend the country” (551).

Emasculation has thus enabled a discursive bridge between authoritarian nationalism and long-standing antifeminist men’s rights organizing in some countries, and the more recent proliferation of the online misogynistic “manosphere.” Indeed, Alex Dibranco (2017, 15) notes that “misogyny is . . . the ‘gateway drug’ for the recruitment of disaffected White men into racist communities.” As a bridge, emasculation operates not merely discursively but also affectively, supercharging the circuits between authoritarian nationalisms and heteropatriarchal politics. The reproductive anxieties of the Great Replacement discourse, and associated racist and misogynistic anger, drawn on by ethnonationalists across the world, are symptoms of the emotional intensity that solders together the national with the patriarchal-sexual. Such virility anxieties, resentments, and rage have been mobilized by a broad range of nonstate actors in recruiting fighters for their own imagined communities, as research on Islamist political formations also shows (Van Leuven, Mazurana, and Gordon 2016; Brown 2020). These movements share with Christian white supremacist groups a masculinist millenarianism, infused with a sense of existential crisis.

While such fantasies may exceed the national, whether invoking Christendom, “Western civilization,” or the supranational Islamic *ummah*, their affective force often relies on resonant narratives of national decline, betrayal, and emasculation, at the imagined hands of global elites and feminist agitators. This affective force appears to function similarly for far-right and Islamist formations, notwithstanding their ideologically opposed agendas and geopolitically structured conflict. Fueling this patriarchal millenarianism and virulent

⁵ See Awondo, Geschiere, and Reid (2012), Lodhia (2014), Treat (2015), and Corredor (2019).

antifeminist politics is the infrastructure of the internet, an algorithmic engine of emotional intensification whose archetypal figure is the online troll. Richard Seymour (2019, 20) notes that “the spontaneous ideology of trolling is masculinist” and warns that from “ISIS to the alt-right, new fascisms are emerging around microcelebrities, mini-patriarchs and the flow of homogenized messages” (191). However, he argues, “if classical fascism directed narcissistic libido investments into the image of the leader, as the embodiment of the people and its historical destiny, neo-fascism harvests the algorithmic accumulation of sentiment in the form of identification-by-Twitterstorm” (191). Twentieth-century fascism presented both a national and a transnational counterforce to what it framed as a threat of global communism as well as the weakness of crisis-prone capitalist democracy; this is resonant with backlash discourses today targeting the ostensible global threats of neoliberal globalization and emasculating feminism, along with dismantling international frameworks and standards on rights and democratic governance. Hence, an understanding of the use and deployment of a similar national/transnational dual frame is required if the political challenges posed by today’s patriarchal backlash forces are to be met.

Confronting backlash in an era of crisis

A convening of feminist activists from around the world in August 2019 in Mexico City, to strategize toward the twenty-fifth anniversary of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, named its collective declaration “Women Radically Transforming a World in Crisis” (2019). The activists were unequivocal in their analysis that “neoliberal capitalism is a key driver of current global crises,” in that it has “exacerbated existing inequalities of power, particularly along the fault lines of resource and wealth disparities between countries, between rich and poor, between men and women, and between dominant and oppressed racial and ethnic groups” (2). They also noted that “women have long been at the forefront of struggles against this system, understanding it to be fundamentally incompatible with the liberation and empowerment of women, and transgender and gender non-conforming people” (2). In their “Notes for a Feminist Manifesto,” Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser (2018, 114) similarly argue that what “makes an anti-capitalist feminism thinkable today is the political dimension of the present crisis: the erosion of elite credibility throughout the world, affecting not only the centrist neoliberal parties but also their Sandberg-style corporate-feminist allies.” The question with which they open their manifesto is stark: “Will we reimagine gender justice in an anti-capitalist form, which leads beyond the present carnage to a new society?” (114).

This question has helped animate our effort to reconceptualize patriarchal backlash. Many accounts of backlash still frame its constitutive violence (whether through state policy, institutional practice, cultural expression, or interpersonal behavior) as preemptive resistance to women's demands for equality or as a reaction to feminist gains, seeking a patriarchal restoration. But such frames struggle to account for the contemporary dynamics of such structural, cultural, and interpersonal patriarchal violence, which are manifest in otherwise very differing societies, with markedly different levels of "progress" on conventional metrics of gender equality. Nor is it clear that manifestations of backlash are always concerned with maintaining a patriarchal status quo or figured as a return to a lost past; in some cases at least, misogynistic action and speech are deployed in service of a revolutionary vision of a world remade.

A different framing of backlash argues that it is better understood as a "symbolic glue," in which the politics of gender, as an empty signifier, is used to bind and thereby strengthen a range of reactionary agendas (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017, 13). While speaking more directly to the current context of systemic crisis, which has seen the rise or resurgence of a more overtly authoritarian politics in many parts of the world, figuring backlash as a glue that links disparate oppressive political forces underplays the extent to which the regressive politics of such forces are filled with gender already. Just as the consolidation of patriarchal social relations from the early modern period to today cannot be understood outside of evolving forms of (neo)colonial extraction and capitalist exploitation, so too must we understand contemporary racial and/or class politics as always already gendered.

For this reason, patriarchal backlash is better understood as a set of material mechanisms and discursive strategies for maintaining, asserting, or rebuilding hierarchies, which are at once gendered, classed, and racialized, in a contemporary context of systemic crisis that threatens such hierarchies. Misogyny is a resonant idiom through which to understand and react to perceived crisis and felt insecurity precisely because the patriarchal gender binary, entangled with class relations and racialized histories and structures, has long served to naturalize and thereby legitimize elite authority in otherwise very different societies. Ben Rich (2021, 3) reflects on how "social, cultural, sexual and political meanings . . . have become increasingly unmoored, decentralised and contested," with a deepening "sense of existential unease at the nature of society and politics." He notes that, in "the drive to alleviate . . . [this] . . . existential angst," "a myriad of rejectionist 'fighting identities'" are viscerally generated, producing fertile ground for nihilistic politics among those whose authority and privilege are most threatened (1). Certainly nihilism is a feature of the reactionary politics of petro-masculinity explored by Kari Marie Norgaard (2011) and Joshua Nelson (2020) in terms of "denial"

and by Cara Daggett (2018, 34), who notes that when “fossil fuels have become a dead end, . . . burning . . . [them] . . . can come to function as a knowingly violent . . . reassertion of white masculine power on an unruly planet.” Social media platforms have in their very logic also contributed to a sense of nihilism—digitally fueling the emotional intensity of backlash movements—as the “business model of the platforms presupposes not just the average share of individual misery” but also “a society reliably in crisis” (Seymour 2019, 171).

In framing patriarchal backlash as a spatial fix to the problem of elite rule in an era of systemic crisis, we also gesture toward the counterspatialities of an anticapitalist and antiracist feminism that can confront backlash. These are spatial practices and imaginaries that would unfix the gendered, racialized, and classed hierarchies and boundaries of the body, family, and nation secured by backlash and its constitutive violence. We take inspiration from Gago’s discussion of the “notion of body-territory, a concept elaborated by different compañeras from Central America to name the anti-extractivist struggles that begin with women’s resistance—especially those of Indigenous, Black, and Afro-descendant women, along with different feminist collectives” (2020, 6). With body-territory, the body is unfixed from its individualized bounds of subjectivity and identity. It is understood as a relational “composition of affects, resources, and possibilities that are not ‘individual,’ but are made unique because they pass through the body of each person to the extent that no body is ever only ‘one,’ but always with others, and also with other nonhuman forces” (71).

Similarly, a liberatory anticapitalist and antiracist politics of social reproduction is confronting backlash on the terrain of the family, rejecting its enclosure of care and associated labor within the bounds of the heteronormative, cisgendered family. As Vergès (2022, 90) notes with reference to COVID-19, this labor of care and its enclosure has long been racialized; “during lockdown, what Black feminists, feminists from the Global South, materialist feminists, or racialized trade unionists had explained for decades—that racialized women are the bedrock upon which societies build their comfort—was at last recognized by academics, journalists, politicians, and thus mediatized.” A liberatory politics of social reproduction that would unfix the enclosure of care labor within the “traditional” family so often invoked by antifeminist forces must also reckon with its imbrication within capitalism and associated “family values.” As Lewis (2019, 22) writes, “any understanding of this system of ‘economic’ reproductive stratification will be incomplete without an account of the cissexist, anti-queer, and xenophobic logics that police deviations from the image of a legitimate family united in one ‘healthy’ household.” Rejecting these oppressive logics of family values requires a politics of social reproduction that acts in solidarity with all of those most targeted by them, namely, the “drug users, abortion seekers, sexually active single women,

Black mothers, femmes who defend themselves against men, sex workers, and undocumented migrants [who] are the most frequently incarcerated violators of this parenting norm” (Lewis 2019, 22). As Gago (2020, 85) insists, “such a politics is not constructed in opposition to ‘the domestic,’ but rather to its restricted formulation as a synonym of ‘enclosure.’”

The nation as a third site of crisis management is also a critical space for confronting the fixes of patriarchal backlash. The policed borders and stratified orders of the ethno-nation, often celebrated as the national family, have been important spatial fixes for the forces of patriarchal backlash, but so too is the figure of the rights-bearing citizen whose security is guaranteed by the state. This figure obscures the structuring violence of bordering regimes and the neocolonial class relations and associated gender hierarchies that they reproduce within and across borders. A counterspatiality of an anticapitalist and antiracist feminism that would challenge backlash must invoke different forms of solidarity and belonging, based not on exclusionary and exploitative borders but on shared visions of collective care and social justice. Such a counterspatial politics is evident in migrant worker organizing. As Walia (2021, 144–45) notes, “migrant workers are spearheading vital labor, feminist, antiracist, and migrant justice campaigns calling for an end to policies of temporary labor migration that facilitate racialized, gendered indentureship based on citizenship status.”

As this example suggests, a counterspatial feminist politics to counter patriarchal backlash must also seek to unfix the silos, sectoral and geographic, into which so much of the “global feminism” that Watkins (2018) critiques has been confined, *inter alia*, by the pressures of NGO-ization (Alvarez 2009). This is a spatial politics of movement confluence, transnational in organizing and systemic in its analyses and visions, so evident in the global feminist strike movement that has energized and mobilized anticapitalist and antiracist feminist militancy over the past five years (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2018). Binding together struggles for abortion, and against femicide and sexual assault, and redefining what counts as a labor issue, the feminist strike movement began in Poland in October 2016 and spread across the world as those participating “withd[rew] domestic labour, sex and ‘smiles’—making visible the indispensable role played by gendered, unpaid work in capitalist society by valorizing activities from which capital benefits but for which it does not pay” (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2018, 116). Illustrating, then, that “class can no longer be abstracted from the colonial, racist, and patriarchal dimension without being revealed as a category that covers up hierarchies” (Gago 2020, 40), the feminist strike as a strategy for global feminist militancy thus “defend[s] the indeterminacy of what the body can do. In other words, the very idea of labor power” (41).

It is through such insubordination—through which the unrecognized labor power of exploited bodies is withdrawn—that patriarchal body politics, as well as the heteropatriarchal ideals of the family as an ordered and hierarchical space, can be resisted and hence challenged. The counterspatial politics of such militancy also involves reorganizing and reoccupying place. Gago’s account of feminist organizing for abortion reform in Argentina makes this point eloquently. As she writes, the “occupations, assemblies, and massive vigils, carried out on the streets while Congress debated abortion, invented another type of spatiality: one where the place of politics was reorganized and reinvented under the open sky” (2020, 85).

Conclusion

Using Harvey’s (2001) notion of understanding capital’s crisis management in terms of the spatial fix, we have framed antifeminist backlash as crisis management in the spatial sites of the “naturally” binary sexed body, the “traditional” heteropatriarchal family, and the beleaguered ethno-nation. As we illustrate above, diverse patriarchal protagonists engage with these sites differently—populist politicians and ethnonationalists more directly with the nation; theocrats, men’s rights groups, and illiberal hypercapitalists more so with the family. Yet, their engagements interact, symbiotically shoring up familiar and reassuring ideals of social order in the face of what Giddens (1991, 35) terms the “ontological insecurity” consequent upon the prevailing and pervasive sense of systemic crisis. The body-family-nation triad forms a generic and interconnecting set of building blocks onto which binary gendered identities can be (re)inscribed and idealized through contextually specific gendered narratives of racialized, ethnic, or faith-based identities, customs, and myths of origin. The reduction of gender to binary bodily sex readily justifies the gendered functions of the family and nation for the purposes of social reproduction and of defense/security, respectively. These sites are particularly potent because they are intimately personal to a sense of self, security, and future in an increasingly uncertain and hostile world.

Further research is needed to explore substantive unresolved questions, triangulate diverse analyses, and contextualize strategies for countering backlash, from local to global levels. At local or country levels, more research on backlash is needed, focusing on types of actors and their interests; exploring different modes of backlash in relation to perceptions of and feelings about time, progress, and crisis; deconstructing the intersecting gendered, racialized, and classed dynamics of othering narratives, including their deployment of resentment and anxiety; examining contestations playing out over symbolic spatial sites; and understanding how this relates to contemporary dynamics

of and debates about deglobalization. There is also more work to be done in mapping networks between backlash protagonists and their resource flows, as well as on how the spaces and processes for international policy on gender within development and international relations is being politicized and contested. As we find current patriarchal backlash to be always an international phenomenon, played out locally with contradictory frames of “local” versus “foreign” and yet always imbricated in transnational dynamics and projects, an important priority should be to connect debates and organizing on this and related topics across different regions, South, North, East, and West.

We have also gestured toward a counterspatiality of feminist struggle, grounded in a politics of anticapitalism and antiracism, that can confront the spatial fixes of patriarchal backlash. As Vergès (2022) suggests, in her *A Feminist Theory of Violence: A Decolonial Perspective*, such a feminism also draws on a temporality of struggle that can overcome the nihilism and nostalgia at the heart of the affective force of backlash. As she writes, “daring to make the leap in time, daring to imagine a world in which humanity is not divided into lives that matter and lives that do not, has always been a part of the political pedagogy of the oppressed” (98), for “this learning of the long-term temporality of struggle, its form of respiration, its patience, and its determination, its violence and its generosity, is what authentically guides our decolonial feminism” (103). As binaries, hierarchies, and divides are violently reimposed and reiterated through backlash, it is only through truly unfixing and unmooring power and privilege—conscious of the knotty politics at play as we do so—that a radical transformation of the deep structures of supremacist, capitalist, and heteropatriarchal power can be imagined and enacted.

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