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Comments

On the Precipice of Decision: The Struggle for Abortion Rights in Argentina

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As Argentina's upper house prepares for its historic vote on abortion rights, Verónica Gago, our leading theorist of the Feminist International, discusses how the struggle around abortion has opened up the central question of 'political decision' for those typically excluded from politics.

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At dawn on December 11, Argentina's lower house of Congress passed a bill that would finally legalize abortion in the country, as hundreds of thousands of women and feminist activists held an overnight vigil on the surrounding streets. This week, the country's Senate, which rejected a similar proposal in 2018, takes the bill up for consideration. It is the "green tide"—the massive wave of feminist activism marked by the green scarf that has become its symbol—that has fought for decades to reach this point, intertwining with, drawing from, and nourishing other feminist struggles along the way as part of Argentina's mass feminist movement. It has also become a key component of a feminist international [1], as the demand itself crosses national borders, while also impacting other struggles and enabling the creation of new alliances.

The right to legal, safe, and free abortion condenses a range of ongoing political struggles. The demand has recently taken center stage on the national level in Argentina, as the culmination of one of the most anomalous years on record. At the same time, its repercussions go beyond national borders. As Mabel Belluci wrote in her already classic book of the same name, the practice of and struggle around abortion traces "a history of disobedience," it saves an archive of activism made up of many layers and locations. At the moment, however, it stands out not only for its ability to persist

as a demand, but also for how it has expanded as a terrain of struggles. I would like to provide an account of some of the reasons why an issue that the political system long pushed under the rug has been able to synthesize and bring together a political agenda on multiple planes. That is why the reaction that it generates can also be analyzed in political terms and understood and articulated in relation to the neoliberal-conservative conjuncture that is interwoven with an unprecedented global crisis.

Becoming a Mass Movement

With the Campaign for Legal, Safe and Free Abortion playing a key articulating role, the demand for abortion in Argentina reached the mass level, undergoing a period of unprecedented expansion since 2018. The mobilization of millions of people in the streets that winter is unforgettable. Within the mass feminist movement, the issue of abortion has been taken up as a common objective because it is understood as an important element of fighting for bodily and territorial autonomy. It is a new way of disputing and practicing political decision making, of identifying the spatialities over which decisions are exercised and how those decisions are materialized.

Over the course of these two years, the debate about abortion has touched on everything. It was taken up in the most unexpected places. It leaped over historical fences and borders. It becomes a conversation in every household and every neighborhood, even in campesino organizations, like never before. In the streets, it is led by the youngest, with the patient support of the pioneers from previous generations. Thanks to the struggle of non-binary people and trans masculinities, we have started speaking of people with the capacity to gestate, rather than 'women' *tout court*. The struggle for abortion combines different tactical repertoires, deploying both parliamentary lobbying and advocacy and autonomous practices that have made it abortion a real possibility for thousands of people every year. Experiences of abortion are spoken about, accounts are given, the secrecy that covered it for years is dusted off. Bringing together these diverse stories manages to condense a shared objective without flattening out or "sacrificing" one perspective in favor of another, but instead keeping them in a contentious co-existence. In turn, the effort at advocacy and lobbying has put it into practice a relationship with parliamentary institutionality without being subsumed by it, while continuing to make demands of it. This accumulation of different tactical approaches, which has reached the mass level involving millions of people, goes some way towards explaining why the executive branch has sponsored the legalization bill for the first time.

I want to especially highlight what abortion—as a practice that interrupts the reproductive mandate—produces by making its opponents speak from Parliament using a language for which they are not prepared. Something is revealed by their non-expertise, the cocktail of concepts and ideas they use to discuss the issue. Mixing (sometimes deliriously) scientific discourse, religion, and sexual morality, what is heard in certain voices of the Congressional debates is the way of verbalizing something for which there appears to be no public language. Therefore, they don't know how to speak of it and use languages that draw their source of authority from other knowledges.

What is made explicit in this debate is that abortion opens a plane of the political-of decision making, of desire, of sovereignty—that democratic institutionality has always been reluctant to address, or even to recognize as political. Furthermore, it exhibits the naturalized and silenced sexual order that operates underneath the political order; it's revealed when arguments against abortion can only be enunciated using formulas from borrowed languages. What I mean is that the reticence (and incapacity) of many people to discuss abortion in political terms (and the manhandling of all types of extra-political legitimacy: moral, religious, medical) demonstrates the political centrality of abortion.

Another thing that stands out is that a novel element driving this debate has come from “the language of the streets” (the name given to various feminist days of action in 2019), that allows for combining demands for justice, visionary languages, and complex diagnoses that account for the intersectionality of violence, and even more so, of the politics of desire.



Labor and Abortion

Historically, the task of reproducing others was constituted as a specialized job exclusive to women (raising children within the heteropatriarchal family), privatized behind the closed doors of the domestic sphere (the home); it lost recognition in terms of economic value (as free labor) whilst the sexuality of gestating people was controlled through state criminalization of abortion. As feminist research has shown, especially the work of Silvia Federici, there is a twofold expropriation that structures the sexual division of labor at capitalism’s very beginning: expropriation of labor and bodies, dispossession and enclosure.

However, this twofold clamp of free and obligatory reproductive labor and sexual-moral tutelage over people with the capacity to gestate is not only the origin story of the modern political order. It is one of the most stagnant, long-lasting, profitable, and persistent elements of an indisputably colonial and patriarchal system of exploitation.

So I want to say that whenever abortion is spoken about, it also labor that is being spoken about. The economic dimension of abortion does not only refer to the business of the clandestine condition (the private clinics that profit from the practice’s illegal status), but also the mandate of obligatory maternity that guarantees free reproductive labor to maintain “human resources” and the extraction of value from an infinite number of uncounted working days.

Today there is a public discussion about care work and reproductive labor more generally (from how to measure it to how to remunerate it, but also how not to romanticize it or eternally bind it to feminized bodies). This is due to the massiveness of feminist movements that prioritized a discussion about what is recognized as labor and what is not, what is paid as such and what is not, and how rights are disputed while making visible people who have been historically disregarded.

Tracing the genealogy of convergence between the feminist strikes and the green tide of mobilizations for abortion rights allows us to make explicit the connection between the modes of differential exploitation of bodies marked by their class, race, and gender. An interpretative key was elaborated that connected unpaid and/or badly paid labor and expensive and unsafe abortions: the forms of precarization of lives, modes of control in the name of labor market democracy, and ecclesiastic tutelage over desire and autonomous decision making. Therefore, the right to abortion is linked to the refusal to accept the free and servile naturalization, based on gender mandates, of domestic servitude. In this sense, money and abortion are indelibly linked.

The Body-Territory

During the debates this December, anti-rights groups were more aggressive than ever. First, they sought to appropriate the color green, which had hitherto identified us as a movement, and did so under the aegis of an anti-abortion environmentalism; they said defending the planet meant being against abortion. They attempted to put forth an anti-feminist environmentalism. The failure of this operation demonstrated how the demand for sovereignty over our bodies—understood as body-territories—has expanded to become a shared vocabulary of struggle. The current of the abortion rights tide has enabled green ecofeminist alliances in a moment of civilizational collapse, seen, for example, in alliances between feminist organizations and anti-extractivist movements, connecting exploitation of reproductive labor to extraction of natural resources and fundamental ideas about ownership and control, of both bodies and territories. Abortion touches and disputes multiple issues that allows for calling out by name the feudal powers and abusers in the most reactionary institutions, as well as their complicity with the most advanced forms of dispossession in the territories.

The anti-rights campaign also tried to generate confusion in the streets. They have lined the streets with enormous, expensive, green posters saying that abortion is against the poor and against people who are born with Down Syndrome, returning to the old argument that defines abortion as discard and murder.

They tried, time and time again, to suggest abortion was a concern that doesn't matter to the poor and working class. And they received a response in 2018 and again in 2020. The network of feminist assemblies in the slums of Buenos Aires (Villa 31 and 31 bis, Villa 21-24 and Zavaleta, Villa Soldati, Bajo Flores and Ciudad Oculta) launched the campaign "Villeras [women of the slums] also have abortions." (Meanwhile some priests from those neighborhoods insisted that if the Virgin Mary had had an abortion, we would not have Christmas.) In parallel, the lobbying against senators who were favorable to abortion gathered intensity. The intervention of various actors such as churches and funding bodies from the Global North for anti-rights activism reveals the immediately transnational character of that campaign, and also shows that it is a reaction against the transborder force of feminisms.

So the green scarf has become a symbol of struggle, an image that weaves together diverse battles. Recently, we have seen it waved in the Chilean revolt, where there has been exciting feminist leadership; worn on the wrist of transfeminist protesters who took to the streets during the crisis in Peru; and also stamped on feminist and queer candidates in the municipal elections in Brazil. Again, beyond the legal situation of abortion in each country, the green worn on the hands of militants expresses a dispute over the very meaning of sovereignty, and for expanding the bodies and collectives that can participate in political decisions. It incorporates ways of living, of combining demands, and of proposing political alliances that impregnate different conflicts with feminism. It expresses resources of self-defense when it comes time to put one's body on the line in public space.

"Green, how I want you green," as is written, is a green that is conjugated in different places. By this, I want to underscore how versatile feminist movements have been in territorializing concepts such as the body-territory that come from other conflicts and other geographies. And, at the same time, they have produced situated experiences of translation, re-appropriation, and enrichment of those languages and imaginaries. Additionally, this creates a concrete image of a transversality of practices, which are not homogenized nor are their dissimilar contexts forgotten, but rather lead to a proliferation of what is at stake.