

Gabriele Wilde, Annette Zimmer, Katharina Obuch, and Isabelle-Christine Panreck (editors)
Civil Society and Gender Relations in Authoritarian and Hybrid Regimes: New Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Case Studies
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“Is gender justice an indispensable democratic feature?” ask Eva Maria Hinterhuber and Silke Schneider in the last words of their contribution to this edited collection, an alas timely examination of the various relationships among gender norms, civil society, and authoritarian regimes. Since the answer to that question *must* be a resounding “yes,” what the essays in this collection show is that even in consolidated but new democracies, and even with seemingly supportive leaderships, gender relations are constantly subjected to various forms of compromise, providing a clarion call for vibrant and vocal feminist movements in every type of political system.

A number of the contributions here review assorted approaches to understanding civil society and its relationship to democratic governance, but most emphasize a Gramscian conception of civil society as “a sphere in which the struggle for social hegemony takes place” (27), and so where *struggle* over ideas and norms is an essential constitutive component. This notion of struggle is especially important in this book’s focus on authoritarian and “hybrid” regimes, the latter defined as systems combining elements of democratic institutions such as elections, parties, and courts, with “autocratic legacies in their political liberties, civil rights, and rule of law” (138). The book thus emerges at a crucial moment in global politics, in which democracy is experiencing notable setbacks in many parts of the world, and it especially skillfully examines the gender contradictions that emerge in these processes. Some of the major issues the book addresses include the complicated relationship among civil society, democracy, and gender norms, the resurrection of traditional gender roles in autocratic and other regime types, and the nature of women’s movements in authoritarian and transitional regimes; its central question revolves around how democratic backsliding goes hand in hand with regression in gender policies and norms as well, and indeed how these are often mutually constitutive.

A first major theme that this volume addresses is problematizing relationships among civil society, democracy, and gender norms. Moving beyond conventional political-theoretical formulations that an active civil society is conducive to democratization, many of the authors here first question that long-standing assumption as well as examine the nature and function of civil society in nondemocratic settings. In a parallel fashion, they also challenge tendencies to

focus on authoritarian governments to assert the importance of understanding societies and gender norms in autocratic regimes (15). While reviewing various dimensions of civil society, both normative and empirical, they emphasize the central importance of civil society to political, social, and cultural hegemony, whereby there are both institutional and noninstitutional dimensions of dominance, emphasizing that civil society is “the site where the battle for hegemony is located” (27–29). Some of the chief philosophical underpinnings of the book’s overall society-centric approach include Gramsci’s notion of civil society as a place of conflicts over meaning and Nancy Fraser’s discussion of the role of “subaltern counterpublics” (31), as well as Hannah Arendt’s counterposing of the role of “plural publics” in genuine democratic deliberation (48) with the role of ideological control in totalitarian regimes (107).

Thus, an important assertion especially of this book’s first four theoretical chapters is how civil society may *support* authoritarian rule. This is partially the case due to ways that civil society in a number of different countries has turned toward service-provision rather than social-movement mobilization, dulling its critical force. This makes civil society at best problematic and at worst inimical to feminist goals, due to adopting a largely status quo function through which civil society organizations are more concerned with their own “future and growth” (82) rather than with challenging hegemonic gender norms. Thus, autocratic regimes can “make use of both civil society and gender relations in order to stay in power” (17–18).

This leads to the book’s second major theme: its comparative approach to the “re-traditionalization” of gender roles occurring especially in autocratic and hybrid regimes, although this can be seen in other systems as well. Feminist thinkers such as Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser have long been determined to emphasize conceptions of civil society as a site of struggle over gender norms (31), and feminists have also long criticized the conservative and traditional elements of civil society due to its privatizing tendencies (84–85). Thus, the study of women’s organizing and activism in democratization processes as well as the gender practices normalized in civil society within authoritarian contexts are both vital to a full comprehension of how civil society can be more or less beneficial to democratic aspirations and realities. In particular, Gabriele Wilde valuably introduces “a feminist post-structural analysis” of “the constitutive connection between authoritarian systems and gender relations” (110), complemented by Isabelle-Christine Panreck’s “framing” analysis of struggles for hegemony in transitional and authoritarian regimes (123–24). For both of these thinkers, “battles over interpretation” at the societal level are central to consolidation of authoritarian power. Such a focus allows for attention to the negative effects on gender relations of resurgent authoritarianisms, and indeed emphasizes “the inscribing of gender and gender relations as the basic organizational principal [sic] of autocratic systems” (101).

A third major contribution of this volume is its detailed case studies of women’s movements in transitional and hybrid regimes. The aforementioned chapter by Wilde sets up the cases by emphasizing the need for “analysis of the constitutive connection between authoritarian systems and gender relations,” in particular inquiring whether “political self-organization of gendered subjects is possible” as well as what the role of critical and “regime” women’s movements and organizations might be (110–11). Wilde offers “the working hypothesis that authoritarian and hybrid systems favor the private sphere in the form of family ideologies and specific identity politics of ‘motherhood’” (114). The Panreck chapter on framing also introduces a case study of

the Serbian “Mother of the Nation” discourses in the Yugoslavian civil war as an example of traditionalist gender discourses going hand in hand with resurgent authoritarian political forms.

The subsequent five case-study chapters both build upon these themes and methodological approaches while also diverging from them in some ways. Katharina Obuch’s chapter on Nicaragua applies the concept of “regime-hybridity” to gender relations in a vitally important way that transcends the Nicaraguan case: just as regimes can be democratic-autocratic hybrids, so too might gender relations exist between traditionalist and feminist discourses and policies. In fact, this concept helps in understanding the seeming contradictions in gender relations in so many of the countries covered here and beyond. A number of the chapters examine forces contributing to the muting or suppression of feminist and women’s organizations in hybrid and authoritarian regimes, as well as in states more clearly transitioning toward democracy. These include statist views of civil society as representing outside or even imperialist forces leading to negative discursive and financial effects for women’s organizations, as in the case of Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega in recent years, as discussed by Obuch, but also evidenced in crackdowns on foreign NGOs in countries such as Russia, Egypt, Hungary, and elsewhere. The Nicaraguan women’s organization sector has also seen an NGO turn toward service-provision, diminishing its transformative feminist potential. Two chapters, by Gabriele Wilde and Jasmin Sandhaus on Tunisia and by Patricia Graf on Chile, look at cases of countries transitioning to democracy. Tunisia’s constitutional process mediates between feminist principles and pressures to maintain traditionalist notions of the family (178–79), whereas in Chile, even during the presidency of Michelle Bachelet, “authoritarian ideologies” (252) and “antifeminist and conservative gender models” (256) have dulled the critical edge of the feminist forces who were important to the democratic transition in the first place.

At the same time, there are ways that authoritarianism can serve to unite feminist and other social causes within civil society. A clear instance of this is Joyce Mushaben’s chapter on Turkey, which focuses on that country’s Gezi Park protests of 2013 and the vibrant civil society and feminist movement created by demographic shifts favoring youth, the conditionality of Turkey’s process to join the European Union, and “the growing assertiveness of women themselves” (186–87). Despite the conservative regime of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), diverse women’s groups emerged but also united in what Mushaben calls the “Spirit of Gezi” and its indicators of increased “citizen engagement” (206–07). In a postscript, Mushaben notes the undercutting of “democratic progress” following the 2016 alleged coup attempt in Turkey but remains optimistic that foundations have been laid for long-term continued progress (212–13). Meanwhile, in the case of China, Stephanie Bräuer finds that its “hybrid” circumstances of gender egalitarianism commingling with patriarchy matches the “hybrid” nature of the reform-era Chinese Communist Party-state, which features some elements of greater social engagement coexisting with continued authoritarian institutions (217). Bräuer focuses on the strategies of activists to have some sort of platform in China’s hybrid situation, where “professional expert organizations” have provided services and shaped the creation of anti-domestic-violence legislation, while also breaking ground for more independent, “provocative” forms of “performance art” activism (238).

The changes that have occurred in very recent years in Turkey, China, and beyond are a fourth dimension of this book’s overall theoretical contributions. Both Turkey and China evince the

resurgence of overtly authoritarian strategies of rule, which is of course so evident in many other places around the world. The book thus has relevance beyond the cases it covers in that it begins to offer a theoretical understanding of the role of civil society and gender relations that can be applied to many countries experiencing populist movements, including those that still seem to be maintaining their democratic institutions. The book addresses the vitally important question of the function of gender relations under resurgent and novel authoritarian formations and indeed suggests that gender conservatism is *central to* and often *constitutive of* authoritarian and populist movements in the early twenty-first century. Important elements of authoritarianism thus originate in civil society, which means that the emblematic political-theoretical emphasis on civil society's democratic potential must be modified.

This dimension, no doubt partially resulting from fast-moving, real-world political changes in the past few years outpacing the ability of scholarship and especially book production to keep up, but also as a result of the cases analyzed in the book, is unfortunately one of the book's flaws as well. While promising to identify the ways that civil society often contributes to gender conservatism in authoritarian regimes, the case studies instead are focused more on either gender norms in societies transitioning to democracy (that is, Chile, Tunisia), or about the women's movements in societies moving more or less toward authoritarianism (that is, Nicaragua, Turkey, China). All of the cases, regardless of their democratic status, exhibit traditionalist tendencies, but none of the chapters go into great detail regarding the discourses by which traditionalism is maintained and even extended, although some of them feature this as one element of their analyses. Although related, looking at gender relations as an important *origin* of authoritarian regimes is different from examining women's organizations *within* authoritarian regimes, and many of the chapters are more devoted to the latter task.

I highlight this only because I find the theme of gender conservatism under authoritarianism to be of great relevance in our current political moment worldwide, and the ways that civil society is both inherently political and also potentially quite conservative is *more* relevant in the era of neoliberalism, high-tech distraction, and increasing surveillance. Understanding civil society's support for authoritarianism, through its status quo tendencies, is of current relevance to democratic as well as autocratic and hybrid regimes, and the sweeping nature of this book sometimes misses the forest for the trees. The important ways that this book merges various literatures—political theory on civil society, empirical research on authoritarianism, and feminist theory and research—means that it misses out on ways that women's movements in many places today often seem to be engaging in triage regarding the manifold issues facing them rather than focusing on deep, structural feminist transformation.

Thus, the chapters presented in this book poignantly echo the critique by Nancy Fraser of second-wave feminism as (unwittingly, in most cases) supporting neoliberalism in its turn toward a "recognition" oriented identity politics (Fraser 2013), in that it too looks at the co-option of "civil society" in "hybrid" circumstances of formal commitments to some version of gender equality coexisting with discursive, social, and economic pressures toward traditional family forms. As populism and authoritarianism are resurgent in both the global North and South, the realization of Chantal Mouffe's "radical democracy" (109–10), and the manifestation of a vibrant, conflictual, deliberative civil society, is both more fragile and more necessary than ever.

Reference

Fraser, Nancy. 2013. *Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. London: Verso Books.