Neoliberal Discourse:

How Reproductive Progressivity is a Result of Neoliberal Convenience

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Reproductive rights are one of the most contested social issues in the developed world. Perceived progressivity surrounding government’s policy has taken place in many countries around the world, however, on the issue of reproductive rights a two sided discourse has clouded the progressivity of policy reform. With the world divided on reproductive issues, abortion, contraception and other female rights have caused friction among countless political parties and social movements. Pro-life activists and conservatives take up one position, while leftist pro-choice activists take the other in a constant tug of war over social policy. The United States (U.S.) and Argentina are central in the examination of this two sided Neoliberal political discourse. In Argentina alone, 20% of maternal deaths in 2005 were caused by unsafe abortions (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Neoliberalism is defined in many ways across different fields. For our purpose, Neoliberalism will be defined as a set of economic policies, a discipline, and a political project (Zilberg, 2011).

In response to reproductive rights issues, scholars and theorists have presented examinations of the neoliberalism debate from an economic, political, and time period perspective (Brown, 2015; Zilberg, 2011). In addition, recent literature has looked at the paradoxes behind neoliberalism leading to the double sided discourse underlying the neoliberal agenda (Bernstien & Jakobsen, 2016; Cheng, 2016; Shepard, 2000). Beyond theory, recent literature looks at describing the policy outcomes and effects of the recent Neoliberal regimes (Lopreite, 2015).

Extensive research and studies have been dedicated to the causal relationship of neoliberalism and policy or circumstances relying on economic or political reasoning. One gap to be explored is the extensive research on the how neoliberal discourse has shaped reproductive rights policy and activism. Another gap in literature is the lack of attention given to religion as a driving force in the neoliberal dialogue behind governments in the U.S. and especially Argentina. In this paper, we will uncover and compare the dilemmas behind the neoliberal practices engraved in the American and Argentinian governments from the traditional Neoliberal perspective as well as the underlying structures imposed by neoliberal religious strategies.

Social policies surrounding abortion, contraception and other reproductive rights in the United States and Argentina have begun to regress after a significant period of progressive government policies. There are now stronger divides in countries surrounding reproductive issues, which means female reproduction is once again at the forefront of domestic policy issues with political parties. The current reproductive rights issues reach far beyond what was previously conceived as reproductive health. That is, women and their rights concerning childbearing. We are beginning to understand the breadth of dilemmas around reproductive rights, which encompasses economic benefits, political ideals, and how fundamental beliefs play a larger role in the shaping of governmental policies today. Today’s neoliberal driven world understands reproductive rights as arguments attached to or apart of broader issues such as strengthening the economy. Policy reform surrounding reproductive rights now operates outside of the traditional ethical and moral arguments of human rights.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the role neoliberalism has played in shaping reproductive rights policy from a constructivist styled inquiry. Constructivist inquiry aims to examine phenomena to help explain the world we live in. I will use this paper to compare and contrast the ‘neoliberal effect’ in The U.S. and Argentina from the 1970s to present. In such comparisons, I will draw on current literature and current events to find what neoliberalism does to social policy focused on abortion and contraception. I will explain why countries like the U.S have had extensive progress over the last decade while Argentina has only seen incremental change. In this explanation I will offer ideas as to why Argentina’s heavy Catholic roots offer less progressive change compared to the U.S. and how neoliberalism plays a role in that as well.

**The Neoliberal Economic and Political Shaping of Reproductive Rights**

Previous studies examining reproductive rights in light of neoliberal influence are shaped by three effects of neoliberal policy from the last few decades. The first effect to be discussed is the economic model highlighted in the neo-Marxist argument. This economic model proposes that progressive policy is solely tied to the economic advantage associated with the reform. Next, I turn to the literature based on personal conduct, dating back to Foucault’s understanding of the neoliberal effect. Personal conduct within the realm of neoliberalism refers to the shaping of societal behaviors based on the maintenance of the hierarchy of power. Lastly, current political theorists tend to focus on neoliberal policies as a new mode of statecraft (Bernstein and Jacobsen, 2013). This understanding of neoliberalism sees the effects as being a transfer from public to private across many issues (Zilberg, 2011). All three understandings of neoliberalism contribute to the double discourse political agenda found in both the United States as well as Argentina. However, a third more prominent force of religious governmental reason is at play, contributing to the restrictions surrounding reproductive rights (Brown, 2015).

**Economic Model**

Since the turn of the 1970s, neoliberalism has taken the forefront in molding policy. An important shift in the political manufacturing of public policy since 1970 has to do with the increased importance given to the economy. Wendy Brown (2015) shapes her argument within the context of the economic model and neoliberalism by discussing the neoliberal mindset, and how it is fundamental in the de-democratization around the world. Present examples include Obama’s state of the union address, capturing accolades across the globe when calling for progressive models of minimum wage, immigration, clean energy, tax reform, education etc.., however; every single progressive reform was weaved into the economic success of the nation. This raises the question of whether progressive policies, like reproductive rights in the U.S. or Argentina, are passed by any means outside of furthering the economic benefit of the country. When comparing the literature on neoliberalism and the written work covering the issue of reproductive rights, it becomes increasingly clear that reform is generated by winning the economic battle of justification. In the U.S the country is divided on the social issue of abortion, yet the debate is fought over economic gains (Saletan, 2014). For instance, in an economic stimulus package, former speaker Pelosi looked to increase federal funding for abortions on the basis that lowering the amount of children being born into low income families would help stimulate the economy (Hair, 2009). Pelosi’s attempt to pass progressive abortion policy in the U.S reflects the synonymous ties reproductive rights has to economic expansion due to the nature of neoliberalism. Meanwhile, Carter, a republican representative, countered Pelosi’s policy proposal by attributing pro-life justification in his conclusion that it is immoral to “Kill a life” for economic gains (Hair, 2009). What Hair fails to provide is how many republicans refer to the economic anti-abortion stance, arguing that abortions decrease the amount of consumption, eventual consumers, and people contributing to the economy as a whole (Roberge, 1995). The economic umbrella has grown larger in light of neoliberal discourse, encompassing more women’s rights issues like abortion. Moreover, the legitimacy of an argument does not rest on ethical or moral principles anymore, the legitimacy of policy reform is reflected by its persuasive characteristics within the economic model of neoliberalism.

Argentina has seen similar neoliberal ties to economic means. A common misperception in the Argentinian culture is that abortion, contraception and other reproductive services impede economic growth (Human Rights Watch, 2010). The director of the largest hospital in Buenos Aires provides insight into the common perception that population growth is in the nation’s best interest because “Family planning always sounds like control.… It’s not well-viewed. We have so many unpopulated areas in this country that perfectly well could be populated” (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Many people in both the US and Argentina believe in a correlation between population growth and economic prosperity due to factors such as innovation, taxing and increased GDP. What is left out in this argument is the fact that laws restricting abortion affect young, poor women the most (Shepard, 2000), creating a never ending cycle of poverty. An example of this is in wake of the 2001 economic crisis when president Kirchner’s solution was to invest in social capital for poor families, helping them participate in their communities. Lack of reproductive access happened to be a proponent of the increased poverty within neighborhoods, thus the issue of reproductive rights was addressed (Lopreite, 2015). It is important to note that Kirchner only began reform on the dilemma of reproductive access because of the economic relief it would bring to impoverished neighborhoods in Argentina.

Another example of the economization of reproductive rights is the issue of criminalization. As soon as Cristina Kirchner took office in Argentina, following her Husband, she immediately made abortions illegal and appointed Garcia Ocaña as the minister of health who declared abortion a matter of criminal law (Lopreite, 2015). This represents the immediate criminalization of reproductive health within Cristina Kirchner’s administration. This criminalization of abortion targets a specific class: the young poor woman (Morgan, 2015). After enforcing strict abortion laws, Kirchner and her administration began the double discourse of announcing an extension of the child allowance to pregnant women program, but failed to provide the necessary reproductive health services necessary for low-income women (Lopreite, 2015). The criminalization of abortion facilitates the apparent amorality of neoliberalism, while ravaging the population of poor young women. This mirrors the paradoxes of neoliberalism expressed by Sealing Cheng (2013).

**Personal Conduct**

Criminalizing reproductive rights like abortion fosters upward economic redistribution, while also systematically organizing the social subject within the realm of the state. In this sense, neoliberalism takes the form of a political philosophy, or in Foucault’s words a political rationality (Brown, 2006). Political rationality is defined as governing “the sayable, the intelligible, and the truth of the criteria within these domains,” molding and producing citizens that adhere to the government's desires (Brown, 2006). The pro-choice and pro-life arguments in the US and Argentina are examples of social movements molded by opposing political views.

During president Bush’s second term, he passed policy calling for a vast increase in federal funding to be allocated towards abstinence programs in the US, while assuring federal support for abstinence-only education programs as well (McFarlane, 2006). Additionally, when Bush assumed office, he authorized the third federal abstinence program called Community Based Abstinence Education (CBAE), where the grantees were required to teach that abstinence is the only way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (McFarlane, 2006). What is more, the grantees that often informed and educated through the CBAE were religious organizations. President Bush’s clear bipartisanship towards abstinence created a religiously supported agenda looking to market abstinence as the best way for kids to not have out of wedlock pregnancies or to stay clear of STDs, effectively governing the knowledge and reproduction of truth surrounding reproductive health. In comparison to the US, Argentinian molding of the social subjects in society is much more upfront than behind the scenes. Due to the convenience of the economic relief, Cristina Kitchener’s administration took on greater measures to generate more progressive policies in terms of reproductive rights. That being said, even after more progressive measures were achieved, the actual access to reproductive health services remained scarcely low (Human Rights Watch, 2010). The law states that doctors providing abortions, prescribing birth control or other forms of contraception, have the right to opt out. In other words, the doctor can state that due to their religious beliefs, they do not want to serve or offer reproductive health services (Human Rights Watch, 2010). This portion of the law reflects the shaping and organized governance of the social and political life surrounding subjects (Brown, 2006).

The political rationality of neoliberalism goes far beyond limitation to access or increased funding towards abstinence programs. Intrinsic in America as well as Argentina is the cultivation of a certain culture based on neoliberal political rationality. The US and Argentina have crafted a society where people believe abortion is shameful and wrong. By restricting or limiting reproductive health, these governments have repressed women’s rights, devaluing them as human subjects. The constant struggle between pro and anti-abortion reveals Foucault’s restructuring of cultural beliefs surrounding social issues.

**Political Philosophy**

Finally, a third consequence of the neoliberal political philosophy is the transformation from public to private institutions as well as the increased importance given to the power of the individual over the state (Bernstein and Jakobsen, 2013; Brown, 2015). Since the adoption of neoliberal political strategies, the US, Argentina, and the entire world has a seen a surge towards privatization. Privatization is understood as the “transfer of assets or service functions from public to private ownership” (Hank, 2016, p 2). The transfer from public to private control is positively correlated with the movement towards liberalized trade and the promotion of neoliberal ideas (Doyle, 2010; Chwieroth, 2009).

This is evident in America when looking at health issues surrounding reproductive rights and Planned Parenthood (PP). PP is naturally a progressive institution through its promotion and stance on abortion and other reproductive health services. However, because it is a private institution rather than a public one, it has limited access and coverage for citizens. The institution is funded through federal aid as well as private donations. The government's funding of PP shows the states’ new mode of statecraft established by the neoliberal project. The state shifts responsibility of health services in the US to the privatized Planned Parenthood, detaching itself from the issue.

Alternatively, Latin America as a whole has seen detrimental effects from the neoliberal agenda being applied to health services. In the after-math of the economic crisis that plagued Latin America in 1980, the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) aggressively pushed for the privatization of health management and distribution (Homedes & Ugalde, 2005). The influx of privatization in Latin America had many negative effects including: reduced job security, increased inequity, less efficiency, higher dissatisfaction, and no improvement in quality of care (Homedes & Ugalde, 2005). Those who benefited from the privatization of the management and distribution of health services were transnational corporations. The US treasury put pressure on the IMF and WB to impose corporate America interests in Latin American countries. The result of the neoliberal ideology towards privatization of health services in Latin America is a direct result of US corporate interest and influence (Homedes & Ugalde, 2005).

Neoliberal health reform holds the belief that the private sector is more efficient than the public sector. Moreover, this neoliberal health reform calls for less government control, allowing the private sector to provide health, medical and reproductive services (Homedes & Ugalde, 2005). Thus, the privatization of formerly public health services and the rise of new governing institutions gives validity to the political theorists’ recent understanding of neoliberalism as a new mode of statecraft.

**Religious Backlash**

What is left unanswered among neo-Marxist, Foucauldian, and political theorist explanations of neoliberalism when examining reproductive rights is the issue of religion. Religion plays an obvious role in the dilemma of reproductive health, however, few scholars have examined the incorporation of religion into the neoliberal framework surrounding reproductive rights. The neoliberal framework is often centered around the economization of every domain of life (Brown, 2015). Everything becomes about capital. Although, in the context of reproductive rights, the force of religion prohibits the full encroachment of neoliberal ideologies.

If neoliberalism had completely consumed the social issue of reproductive rights, then abortions would theoretically be legal due to the cost benefits of legalizing abortion. The total cost of illegal abortions in the developing world is estimated to be anywhere between $375 million and $838 million dollars (Vlassoff, 2008). Likewise, it is estimated that the total cost of unsafe abortion-related morbidity and mortality (UARMM) would be much greater than providing direct health (Vlassoff, 2008). This means that in a country like Argentina, where 40% of all abortions are illegal (Human Rights Watch, 2010), the cost of putting restrictions on abortions doesn’t make sense from a neoliberal perspective. The reason for the continued restriction of reproductive rights has to do with religious governmental reason. Wendy Brown (2015) discusses neoliberalism as a form of governmental reason that is an all-encompassing project, applied to every sphere of life. I use this idea of governmental reason in a similar way, adding the implication of religious ideologies. Religion, specifically Catholicism, degrades the very movement towards progressive reproductive rights by undermining the economic side of neoliberal ideologies. In other words, the homo-economicus model of governmental reason, where every person and thing becomes a firm, takes a back seat to the religious governmental reason. For example, during president Bush’s second term, the republican party’s closer relation to religious reason made Bush pass policy advocating for abstinence funding and programs rather than contraception (McFarlane, 2006). In addition, when Cristina Kirchner took office after her husband, she immediately implemented regressive reproductive policies, effectively making abortion illegal due to her religious faith (Lopreite, 2015). Lastly, in Latin America, the Catholic church directly oppresses the ‘Catholics for free choice’ movement by threatening the jobs of those that are a part of the Catholic Church (Shepard, 2000).

In the end, the clash between the contemporary neoliberal ideology and the historical Catholic ideology has created a tug of war over the social dispute around reproductive rights. With neoliberalism increasing inequality, and religion squelching social freedom of poorer citizens, it seems those who are affected the most are the less fortunate. As the tension grows between to the two ideologies, the marginalized in society experience greater repression of their rights in all aspects of life.

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