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Alejandra Castillo (2014)

**El desorden de la democracia. Partidos políticos en Chile**

Santiago de Chile: Editorial Palinodia, 194 p.

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*The politics of knowledge suppose  
in turn politics of ignorance.*  
valeria flores

“There is politics only where the singularity of a damage takes the floor in order to claim the place of universality proper to every order of representation. There is politics only when a ‘non-part part’, neglected/invisibilized, politicizes its own situation and disrupts the established framework of the political/policing order of representation, affirming itself as a universal representative and demanding the rearticulation of its particular position. There is politics, in other words, in every conflict in which the struggle for the order of visibility/inclusion is at stake” (p. 19).<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Alejandra Castillo opens her recent book *El desorden de la democracia. Partidos políticos de mujeres en Chile*. The first part of the book analyzes,

in three chapters, what is understood and postulated as the *signs of disorder* of Chilean democracy: “Republican Apories: Women and Politics”; “Maternal Feminism” (an oxymoron, needless to say, yet made explicit as such in the postulates of Amanda Labarca regarding the always-mother, everlasting-mother woman); and “The Female/Feminist Knot”.

For centuries, women –first in small groups, then in larger organizations, wider movements and their own political parties– have attempted (without much success) to solve the aporetical condition of their own political, social, and economic equality *qua* women within Chile’s *male republic*. In this state –presided between 2014 and 2018 by a woman, Michelle Bachelet, in her second period in office– in a cold morning of May” (p. 20), 1875, a group of women decided to register in the electoral registry of San Felipe in order to exercise the right to vote as “Chilean”, a term that according to the 1833 Constitution embraces both sexes. Yet, it is only in 1952 that they exercise for the first time the right to universal suffrage. Currently, political parity, quota systems, and balanced representation of men and women in the access to positions

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1 “Sólo hay política allí donde la singularidad de un daño toma la palabra para reclamar para sí el lugar de la universalidad propia a todo orden de representación. Sólo hay política cuando una ‘parte no parte’, excluida/invisible, politiza su situación y perturba la estructura establecida del orden de representación político/policial, afirmándose como representante universal y exigiendo la rearticulación de su posición particular. Hay política, en otras palabras, en todo conflicto en donde lo que está en juego es la lucha por el orden de visibilidad/inclusión”.

of popular representation, as well as within the parties, as members, are still discussed. Therefore, it remains an unresolved knot.

In the second part of the book, the author navigates the trajectories accomplished and substantiated by hundreds of women from their own political parties between 1919 and 1953 –namely, the Civic Female Party, the Alessandrista Female Party, the National Female Party, and the Progressive Female Party. The latter three displayed an Ibañista stamp, a type of right-wing populism (although the Progressive Female Party was also connected to the left).

To read Castillo's work is to learn about the local-global patriarchal culture that rules upon us –with no substantive, structural changes–, a culture that becomes apparent in the ideological orientations that permeated the participation of women in their own political parties and that, under different forms, extends to this day. The author states that “[t]he disorder of women's politics parties in early 20th century was mainly a consequence of the description of their politics, the confusion between a progressive rhetoric (the discourse on women's emancipation) and a conservative rhetoric of a 'maternalcivism' (p. 185).<sup>2</sup>

2 “El desorden de las políticas de las mujeres de comienzos del siglo XX se deberá principalmente a la descripción de su política confundida entre retóricas progresistas (discurso de la emancipación de las mujeres) y retóricas conservadoras de un 'civismo materno”.

On the other hand, this culture is crystal-clearly reflected in the generalized unawareness of the historical participation of Chilean women in female parties. Without sin of ignorance, anyone can ask if there was such a thing as a disorder in parties, politics, and feminism embedded in the composite feminist political parties—an almost always remissible unawareness insofar as women's history, considered as ornament or anecdotic fact, is not an essential part of the national history (and it is possible to deduce the place that the history of feminism might have taken) (p. 11).<sup>3</sup> Castillo adds that this “unawareness is due to the old practice of writing history, which taught us to conjugate the words politics and party understanding by them a certain universal reason blinded to the differences between sexes, and yet these words are universalized as masculine” (p. 11-12).<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, we can see traits of this local-global culture in the words of political philosophers such as Etienne Balibar, who states that the great difficulty of feminism has been that of determining what would be the *anti-patriarchal institution* that constitutes and maintains its political identity, in Castillo's words (p.

3 “Sin pecar de ignorancia, cualquiera se podría preguntar si hubo algo así como el desorden de los partidos, la política y el feminismo anudados en el sintagma de partidos políticos feministas –desconocimiento casi siempre perdonable debido a que la historia de las mujeres cual ornamento o dato anecdótico, no forma parte esencial de la historia nacional (se puede colegir el lugar que podría ocupar la historia del feminismo) –”.

4 “desconocimiento debido a una antigua práctica de escribir la historia que nos ha enseñado a conjugar las palabras de política y partido entendiéndolo por éstas cierta razón universal que no sabe de la diferencia de los sexos, pero que, sin embargo, se universaliza masculinamente.”

13; emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> This stance reflects a perception that keeps neglecting the dimension of feminism as a *movement*, which is crucial for its existence and transcendence in time. A movement that depends not on an anti-patriarchal institution, but rather on everyday feminist practices, individual as well as collective, and on autonomous, non-institutional groups.

In a similar vein, it is a common assertion that the achievement of political rights allows for “participation in power”, which is participation from a standpoint that reifies power as one, singular entity, external to those who exercise it from the top of the patriarchal hierarchy –*that* power, we must say, once again, recalling Foucault. All of this contributes to make the whole of society more and more ignorant of the fact that “progress” and the “achievements” of half of the population (but not exclusively of this half) do not come from *that* power. The critical transformations waged and promoted by feminist organizations, collectives, and networks –which address the causes, issues, and formal and informal norms that restrict freedom and equality (autonomy, in short) by virtue of class, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity,

age, etcetera– are only crystallized and thereby distorted within *that* power.

Article 1 of Chile’s Political Constitution states that people are born free and equal in dignity and rights. However, we still live in the country of the (dis)order, of the *aporia* instituted by force and accustomed as normal. As Montesquieu said, within a republic, women are free by law and captive by custom, which accurately translates feminine political participation in Chile. A situation similar to Chile’s is experienced in other countries of the region, as is confirmed by the study *Gender and Political Parties: Far from Parity* (2011), carried out in 18 countries based on 94 surveyed political parties.

It is worth mentioning that, in 2014, the unpublished manuscript of Alejandra Castillo’s important and substantial book was awarded the Honorary Mention of the Casa de las Américas’ Essay Prize in Havana, Cuba.

[Translated into English by Felipe Lagos Rojas]

#### Bibliography

Roza, Vivian, Llanos, Beatriz and Garzón de la Roza, Gisela (2011). *Gender and Political Parties: Far from Parity*. New York: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). Spanish Edition: 2010.

<sup>5</sup> “la gran dificultad del feminismo ha sido determinar cuál habría de ser la institución anti-patriarcal que constituiría y mantendría su identidad política.”