

CARING DEMOCRACY AS A RESPONSE TO THE FAR-RIGHT POPULISM: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE FROM BELARUS AND BEYOND

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Abstract. *The text offers, on the one hand, an analysis of the context in which the politics of right-wing conservative populism, which undermines the very idea of democracy, is being shaped today. The rejection of the ideas of social equality and social justice is seen as decisive for right-conservative populism. On the other hand, the text proposes to go beyond the politics of right-wing conservative populism by relying on the notion of caring democracy. It is suggested that what is central to caring democracy is not simply the assertion of fundamental rights and freedoms, but the struggle over the conditions for their realization. The most important of these conditions are: changing the so-called “sexual contract”, giving meaning to (ethical) social relationships, redistributing responsibilities for caring activities, and work.*

Key words: *neoliberalism, post-democracy, solidarity, care, caring democracy, care infrastructures, protests in Belarus 2020.*

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“You’ve done enough talking. You’re not winning this,”
Trump told him at one point. “You gotta be thankful. You don’t have the cards.”
“I’m not playing cards,” Zelensky replied. “I’m very serious, Mr. President.
I’m the president in a war.”
(From a public conversation at the White House on February 28, 2025)

“The new capitalism will resemble a big casino.”
(Branko Milanović)

Economist Thomas Piketty begins his text on participatory socialism for the 21st century with the observation that

If someone had told me in 1990 that I would publish a collection of articles in 2020 entitled “Vivement le socialisme!” in French, I would have thought it was a bad joke. (Piketty 2021: 10)

Born in 1971, i.e. belonging to a generation that, on the one hand, had not had time to be seduced by communism and, on the other hand, had lived through the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the early 1990s Piketty, like other members of his generation, began to share the conviction that it was the market economy and private property that was the most important condition for democracy. However, 30 years later, the economist’s opinion has radically changed, because the “hypercapitalism has gone much too far, and I am now convinced that we need to think about a new way of going beyond capitalism, a new form of socialism, participative and decentralized, federal and democratic, ecological, multiracial, and feminist” (Ibid.).

Piketty’s experience of ideological transformation unites this scholar with me, and I believe, with a number of other researchers and groups who, unlike Piketty, have the state socialism of the USSR under their belt. I also believe that the group of critics of hypercapitalism or neoliberalism will expand as a result of the pushback against Trump’s policies and far-right populists worldwide.

The preconditions for this are both the turnout at elections in European countries in recent years ¹ and the mass demonstrations—at the time of writing this article, such anti-authoritarian demonstrations are taking place in Turkey, Serbia, Slovakia, Hungary, and are beginning in the United States. These processes of social mobilization are linked to processes of social emancipation that bring hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets, as was the case, for example, in the Arab Spring (Bayat 2021). The significant grassroots organization of protests is the most important evidence of social emancipation. At the same time, it is associated with the fact that protesters today, in many cases, lack

¹ “In 2024, over 51 percent of EU citizens voted in the European parliamentary elections, the highest voter turnout since 1994, when it was 56 percent. The highest turnout occurred in the first set of European parliamentary elections, held in 1979, in which 61.99 percent of eligible Europeans voted. Voter turnout declined in every election subsequent election, however, reaching a low of 42.61 percent in 2014” (Macchi 2025).

clear ideologies and organizational forms, making it difficult to achieve the desired goal of replacing authoritarian governments with democratic ones.

These protests, including those in Belarus in 2020, testify to the public demand for political participation, as well as the search for new bases and forms for social solidarity and cohesion, the erosion of which unites democratic and authoritarian countries today. What should this solidarity look like? Is it possible for it to be a force that erases the differences between social groups, or should it rather be about intersecting solidarities and the formation of a new agency at this intersection? Are the protesters seeking to defend liberal values, i.e. freedom, fundamental rights, equality of all citizens before the law and political pluralism, or do they want something more, i.e. also to ensure real access to these freedoms and rights, which has declined over the past 30 years around the world and which politicians like Trump are even more eager to reduce by destroying the institutions of the welfare state?

I would like to address these questions by drawing on both theoretical studies and the concrete case of Belarus, specifically the 2020 Belarusian protests. At the same time, the perspective of my consideration will be feminist, because, like Piketty and other scholars I will refer to below, I believe that the struggle for the restoration of the idea of social equality and justice, which complement the idea and value of freedom and are called into question by neoliberal globalization, is impossible today without a more decisive critique of patriarchy and colonialism than it was in the 20th century.

1. From neoliberal globalization to far-right populism

In the 2000s and 2010s, scholars analyzing global economic change over the past three decades have vigorously debated the emergence of right-wing conservative populism. In 2016, Branko Milanović, author of one of the most important books on global inequality at the beginning of the 21st century, noted that the increase in intra-country inequality in the era of “high globalization”, i.e. the period 1988–2008, will inevitably lead to the rise of plutocracy, populism and nativism. Its consequence would be the undermining of democracy, since, according to Milanović, populist and nativist movements would gradually abolish or redefine some fundamental rights of citizens, “regarding them not as inviolable but as contingent on approval by national majorities” (Milanović 2018: 210).

One of the most important concepts used by scholars to explain the reasons for the growth of social inequality as a key condition for the strengthening of right-conservative populism was the concept of neoliberalism, which emerged during the 1988–2008 period. In the philosophical sense, David Harvey defined as its core the justification of economic, legal, and political changes aimed at abandoning the idea of social justice in favor of the idea of absolute individual freedoms (Harvey 2005: 39–63). This idea found expression in the formulas of “each person for themselves” and “self-made man”—personal responsibility rather than social security in all spheres of life, without exception. According to David Harvey, market exchange has become “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs” (Treanor, ‘Neoliberalism’ cit. by Harvey 2005: 3).

The two factors without which neoliberal ideology would be hardly possible are the new stage of globalization itself and the new round of technological revolution. The main impetus for the new phase of globalization has been capital's drive since the 1980s to enter new, global markets. Combined with new digital technologies—enabling easily accessible information and global access to banks and stock markets—globalization has, as a result, made the welfare state more vulnerable (Milanović 2016: 54).

The most obvious consequence of neoliberal politics was the 2008 financial crisis. It revealed a new state of social inequality generated by neoliberal ideology and practice: for example, the ratio of the average salary of a top manager in an American corporation rose from 30:1 (in the early 1970s) to almost 500:1 by 2000 (Harvey 2005: 16). The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small percentage of people while stagnating middle-class wages have occurred, however, all over the globe. As economist Thomas Piketty notes,

... that the share of the richest 1% of the population fell sharply during the twentieth century: it was around 55% of total wealth on the eve of World War I and is now close to 25%. However, it should be noted that this share is still about five times higher than that held by the poorest 50%, who currently own just over 5% of the total wealth (despite the fact that they are by definition fifty times more numerous than the richest 1%). The cherry on the cake is that this low share has also been declining since the 1980s and 1990s, a trend that can also be observed in the United States, Germany, and the rest of Europe, as well as in India, Russia, and China. (Piketty 2021: 13)

One of the most significant side effects of growing social inequality in democratic countries is the decline—or even erosion—of the middle class. Among its most far-reaching consequences is the growing political and social influence of a small elite of the wealthy and super-wealthy, whose primary interest lies in preserving the status quo to the detriment of all other people and social groups (Milanović 2016: 194ff.).

1.1. Aspects of the decline of democracy

It is the decline of the middle class, to return to Branko Milanović, that marks the erosion of democracy, as politicians express the interests of the rich much more readily, and studies in the United States show that the views of low-income voters may not influence senators' votes at all. The decline of the middle class further turns to social separatism:

This class bifurcation has many implications: politically, the middle class becomes increasingly irrelevant; production shifts toward luxuries, and social expenditures change from being directed toward education and infrastructure to policing. (Milanović 2016: 198–199)

This marks the onset of plutocracy—the growing influence of the super-rich on politicians and companies. Its most important component is the suppression by the rich of democracy (although not always directly), which implies that political processes are influenced not only by the rich, but also by representatives of all social groups.

The undermining of democracy found expression in another notion that was actively discussed in the 2010s, namely the notion of post-democracy, which is most extensively

elaborated by political theorist Colin Crouch. This term, according to Crouch, means the model, “while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams” (Crouch 2005: 4). Voters are given a passive role in this spectacle, while decisions are made behind closed doors by governments and elites who are driven by their business interests.

Philosopher Wendy Brown, like Colin Crouch, suggests that in the context of neoliberal transformations, there was a “stealth revolution” that shaped a new “governing rationality.” This rationality is denoted by Brown, following Koray Caliskan and Michel Callon, also by “‘economization’ of heretofore noneconomic spheres and practices, a process of remaking the knowledge, form, content, and conduct appropriate to these spheres and practices” (Brown 2015: 30–31). It turns all citizens, without exception, into market subjects, i.e., it forces us to think in market terms and act in accordance with them in areas that are primarily valuable in themselves, such as our pursuit of education, health, fitness, family life, or neighborhood.

The most significant expression of economization is the transformation of all forms of life into something resembling a business enterprise, an assessment in which Crouch aligns with Brown, thereby subordinating individual diversity to the logic of “human capital.” To strive to act in the logic of human capital is thus to invest in oneself, “in ways that enhance its value or to attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurative credit rating, and to do this across every sphere of its existence” (Ibid. 33).

The flip side of this transformation is the constant development of new methods of top-down management, both in the state, in labor, and in the subjects themselves.

Centralized authority, law, policing, rules, and quotas are replaced by networked, team-based, practice-oriented techniques emphasizing incentivization, guidelines, and benchmarks. (Ibid. 34)

This cannot but affect politics. Neoliberal rationality, according to Wendy Brown, translates democratic political principles into economic language as well, so that the state itself becomes a manager of the nation on the model of the corporation, which consequently destroys much of the content of democratic citizenship and even popular sovereignty.

Another crucial aspect of the depoliticization and de-democratization caused by economization is the undermining of the idea of equality, which, along with liberty and solidarity (originally in the version of fraternity), has formed, since the Great French Revolution, the foundation of democracy—“inequality, not equality, is the medium and relation of competing capitals” (Ibid., 38). In other words, a democracy based on human capital deals with winners and losers, rather than ensuring that all citizens are equal and equal before the law. The pervasive power of capital also undermines the category of labor and all its collective forms, such as class, forms of labor solidarity, union activity, and others. This returns to Milanović’s thesis about the undermining of social cohesion and social solidarity as such in the era of neoliberal globalization.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in 2025, we are witnessing the political vocabulary of Trump, who views the pursuit of economic gain as the foundation of both domestic and foreign policy, and literally describes politics as a card game. Thousands of human destinies and lives are at stake, both in the US and abroad, and scholars use not only the notion of authoritarianism but also neo-fascism in relation to the new policies of Trump and his administration (Stanley 2025; Reich 2025). However, this situation is no less related to the lack of an alternative agenda centered on freedom, equality, and solidarity.

This also concerns the countries of the former Soviet bloc and the USSR, particularly Belarus. Here, many experts remain hostage to the discourse of the 1990s, a perspective that Thomas Piketty mentions and can be interpreted as libertarian (*Пятая республика* 2023). This can be explained as a reaction to state paternalism in Belarus, but the reaction to it was also the reaction to the 2020 protests in Belarus, for which the key was idea and value of solidarity, alien to libertarianism. In this regard, a fair and important question is whether the rejection of the idea of social justice and the creation of a society of competing “human capitals”, which also eventually turns into a barrier to democracy, is the only substitute for state authoritarian paternalism?

2. The Perspective of Caring Democracy. Belarusian and global contexts

The protests that swept Belarus in the summer and fall of 2020 demonstrated that the demand for freedom from state violence can and must be complemented by the value and practice of solidarity. These protests were an unprecedented event in the country's recent history and also ranked among the 15 largest and longest political mobilizations that have taken place in more than 100 countries over the past 50 years (*Towards a New Belarus* 2021: 68). They led to an unprecedented anti-authoritarian politicization in Belarus that affected 57% respondents in Belarus in December 2020 (Belarus at a Crossroads 2021: 9), and one in five Belarusians participated in protests in 2020 (Astapenia 2020).

The comparison of this social activation with the mass demonstrations in the GDR in 1989 seems most appropriate to me today (Stykov 2020: 123). For them, the decisive factor was the constitution of the people as a demos, i.e., the commitment to the right to political self-determination, which was directed against the country's political leadership. Considering the right to political self-determination as the core of the 2020 Belarusian mass protests thus allows us to identify them as pro-democratic, i.e., as those in which Belarusian society was united, in Jürgen Habermas's words, by a claim (Anspruch) for democratic transformations in the country.

Second, it is necessary to fit what is happening today in Belarusian society—both in Belarus itself and in the Belarusian diaspora, which, strictly speaking, emerged in 2020 (Shparaga 2021: 150) and now numbers, according to various estimates, at least half a million people—into the broader context of socio-political transformations that Eastern Europe experienced after 1989. The demand for democratic change in Belarus was not only linked to the outrage over state violence, which was the main motivation for people to take to the streets in 2020. It was also related to the gap that had emerged, especially

in recent decades, between the authoritarian paternalistic political regime as such and the emancipatory values of Belarusian society (see: Stykow 2020: 118; *Belarus at a Crossroads* 2021: 14; *Towards a New Belarus* 2021: 48ff; Bekus & Gabowitsch 2023: 3).

These values were embodied, on the one hand, in the desire for and practice of solidarity actions during the 2020 protests in Belarus and after 2020 in the Belarusian diaspora, and, on the other hand, in empathy, caring for each other, and sharing responsibility for practices of supporting each other and different groups (Shparaga 2024). Since this embodiment can be identified with the values and practices of caring democracy, I think it is productive and justified, together with other Belarusian theorists (Стебур & Толстов 2020; Возянов 2021), to interpret the Belarusians' claim to democratic transformation in terms of caring democracy.

This form of democracy involves the combination of protest and caring practices that transcend the socio-politically established boundaries between the so-called public and private spheres, making visible the crucial role of various social relations in democracy and the struggle for it. It also contributes to the individual and collective subjectivization of women and other vulnerable groups, which has become a hallmark of political struggles at the beginning of the twenty-first century also outside Belarus.

In these struggles, care and self-care have taken the place of victory at any cost, which demands “the endless and unbounded struggle, which, also because it was attached to the figure of the heroine, virtually demanded self-sacrifice” (do Mar Castro Varela & Oghalai 2023: 31). The decisive role of the unifying moment in political struggles related to care is that “every life matters.” This is what motivated the most vulnerable groups of Belarusian society, such as people with disabilities or elderly people, to become part of the protests and seek new forms of resistance.

In Belarusian prisons since 2020, caring practices have also contributed to the revitalization of the concept of sisterhood and its collaborative discourse (Shparaga 2023; Komar 2021; Mickiewicz 2025). This form of women's political solidarity, characterized by recognizing one's own vulnerability and finding new ways to overcome it, as well as the idea of “connectedness in difference” (see: Bargetz, Scheele & Schneider 2021), became in 2020 a model for caring solidarity of the whole Belarusian society, transcending different identities and social group boundaries.

Disappointment in the ability of the Belarusian state to “deliver on the promise of care that existed under the ‘authoritarian bargain’ between the authorities and the public” (Bekus & Gabovich 2023: 4), on the one hand, and the belief of Belarusian citizens in their own forces united by horizontal solidarity, mutual support and care for each other, on the other hand, became the basis not only for the mass protests that followed the election fraud in August 2020, but also for the formation of the concept of a new society centered on the claim for socio-political collective self-government (*Belarus* 2024).

Therefore, it is not surprising that already during the 2020 Belarusian protests themselves, as well as in the following years, Belarusian scholars, including myself, did not stop considering the new Belarusian political subjectivity not just as a political, that is, as a subjectivity of collective democratic self-government, but also as a caring

subjectivity (Вазьянов 2021; Стебур и Толстов 2020; Every Day 2021; Shparaga 2021; 2023). In this context, Belarusian curator, art historian, and art critic Antonina Stebur and Belarusian artist Aleksey Tolstov conclude that “in a situation of instability and fragility of every citizen, care becomes a central political message and program” (Стебур & Толстов 2020).

2.1. Democracy and the dimension of caring practices

In her latest book, *Cannibal Capitalism. How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What we can do about it*, Nancy Fraser examines the field of care or social reproduction as the “major site” of the contemporary capitalist crisis (Fraser 2022: 74). This field encompasses a range of paid and unpaid, professional, private, and civic activities, work, and efforts that are performed primarily by women and migrant women. This means that it is not simply a crisis of care work (Dowling 2021; Jurgens 2010), which is expressed as “care needs, care relations, and political regulation are not (or no longer) aligned” (Jurczyk 2018: 7; Lorey 2020: 192). It is also about a decisive collapse at the heart of the democratic socio-political order itself.

This assessment of the socio-political role of the caring activities stems from the fact that caring practices serve as a basis for creating and maintaining social ties or relations, from friendship, family, household and community to political networks and solidarity, and giving them an ethical character (Fraser 2022: 74; Ludwig 2023: 23; Puehl & Sauer 2018: 7–21). These relations give people the strength for self- and mutual support and development on a daily and intergenerational basis (see also Mayer-Ahuja & Nachtwey 2021: 19). In addition, it is about “sustaining the shared meanings, affective dispositions and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation” (Fraser 2022: 77), as well as social cohesion and commitment to the common good. In other words, these are fundamental conditions for the very possibility of democracy.

Sharing this understanding of care, feminist scholars distinguish between social relations and ethical social relations because,

Care as relevant to an ethics of care incorporates the values we decide as feminists to find acceptable in it. And the ethics of care does not accept and describe the practices of care as they have evolved under actual historical conditions of patriarchal and other domination; it evaluates such practices and recommends what they morally ought to be like. (Held 2006: 39)

It was the erosion of (ethical) social relations, not simply a lack of resources, power, or political opportunity, that guided the actions of governments in the COVID-19 pandemic situation and can be interpreted as a sign of the current degradation of democracy itself (Calhoun, Gaonkar & Taylor 2022: 25). Because capitalism assumes that care work, like natural resources, is available in unlimited quantities, the depletion of basic social-natural relations is inevitable in this system (Winker 2021: 93). This depletion, in turn, destabilizes democracy if democracy “requires certain rough equalities in a real capacity to affect political outcomes by all citizens” (Crouch 2005: 16–17).

The most important historical condition guaranteeing citizens real opportunities for democratic participation and influence was the mitigation of vertical inequalities

(between classes) by the welfare state. The fact that this process has been accompanied by the reproduction of new inequalities at the horizontal level of recognition—above all at the expense of women and migrant women in care and reproductive work (Nachtwey 2018: 40)—and that today, with the neoliberal dismantling of social and economic civil rights, these horizontal inequalities among women have reached a new peak, testifies in particular to the shortcomings of liberal democracy itself.

It is about hegemonic definitions of liberal democracy in the post-war period that established “a procedural understanding of democracy, advocated by authors such as Robert A. Dahl, Hans Kelsen and Norberto Bobbio, which in many respects retains a number of elements similar to the elitist conception of democracy developed by Joseph Schumpeter” (Asara 2020: 146). A crucial element of these definitions is the observance of civil and political rights based on established rules. This corresponds to the formal dimension of democracy, which, however, differs from the “contents of a social order” and tends to be interpreted as paternalistic in the embodiment of the welfare state (Habermas 1996: 304).

In the words of Jürgen Habermas, the proceduralist conception of rights is said to play a central role in liberal democracy, a role reinforced in the post-war period by welfare state policies. This means that in the case of women, the individual rights that are supposed to “guarantee them a privately autonomous way of life” should first be articulated and justified by women themselves in public discussions in the form of the “respective relevant aspects for the equal and unequal treatment of typical cases” (Habermas 1996: 305).

The fact that liberal politics itself generates gendered unequal treatment is not in doubt. The prerequisite for this is the positioning of women (and representatives of other marginalized groups) as subordinate subjects, relegated to the private sphere as an area of social reproduction, which in turn has a subordinate and undervalued importance in democratic societies. This private sphere of reproduction is contrasted as subordinate to both the private sphere of economic production and the public sphere, which are understood as the domains of predominantly male autonomous, sovereign, unbound and rational subjects (Ludwig 2023: 23). According to feminist political scientists, there is also “no general social consensus in Western societies that equality is not limited to formal, legal equality, but rather requires actual, material equality and thus material freedom in the sense of agency” (Maihofer 2017: 67).

Critical analysis of these policies is closely linked to the perspective of feminist state theory, which exposes the male-paternalistic organization of the welfare state, which, while developing to ensure formal legal equality, also contributed to the maintenance of patriarchal structures. As a result, this version of the welfare state shaped women as objects and clients—instead of giving them the necessary positioning, agency, and resources to shape their political participation as subjects and actively realize their rights (Sauer 2001; Sauer 1997: 119; Kulawik 1996: 48).

It is therefore not surprising that in this situation, the policies of the welfare state, which compensate for the actual inequalities, remain paternalistic. In addition, since the 1990s the (welfare) state models have been experiencing a neoliberal restructuring and

financialization of the economy, “which has brought with it social cuts, deregulation and the strengthening of market economy principles, but without the strong state having disappeared” (Penz & Sauer 2023: 13). This leads both to the perpetuation of gender hierarchies and to the destruction and devastation of the social fabric, especially in the areas of care and nursing, but also in public health, care and educational institutions (ibid. 9).

The neglect of the so-called private sphere of reproduction as a sphere of “people’s neediness, their reliance on social relationships, social support, care and emotionality” and “the (white) masculinization of the public sphere as a sphere of generality and rationality,” autonomization and separateness leads Habermas to reduce the foundations of social integration or the principles of equality and solidarity, which together with the principle of freedom make democracy possible, to nation in sense of a “particular people’s community” (Ludwig 2023: 23). This complements the notion of nation in the sense of the “egalitarian legal community” and is characterized by common language and history (Habermas 1996: 139), i.e. it completely ignores the care practices of “reproductive privacy.”

In order to go beyond procedural, liberal democracy and thereby resist the degradation of democracy, the substantive dimension of democracy must be linked to practices and contents of (ethical) care, since the nurturing of people, the safeguarding of nature, and democratic self-rule are the highest social priorities (Fraser 2022: 243). Considering a substantive dimension of democracy, such as care, in terms of social and socio-natural relations or care infrastructures helps rethink the relationships between production and reproduction, as well as public and private spheres, and to interpret them as interrelated elements of caring democracy.

The care infrastructures are understood in this context as something complex, i.e., “as environment, social relations, and networks of support and sustenance by which the human itself proves not to be divided from the animal or from the technical world” (Butler 2016: 21). They point out that people exist as vulnerable beings in a situation of dependence and interdependence, which challenges the prevailing ontological understanding of people, groups and communities as separate from each other and, above all, as competing subjects, and allows them to be thought of relationally, that is, based on an understanding of socio-political relations (Young 1990: 34).

The creation of conditions for women’s full participation in economic, political, and public life, which in turn is an essential condition for strengthening the ideas of social equality and justice, is impossible without criticizing the social status of women. Their inferior status to that of men is maintained by the fact that

Men’s psychology defines most sports, their health needs define insurance coverage, their socially manufactured biographies define job expectations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define quality in teaching and research, their experiences and obsessions define achievement, their military service defines citizenship, their presence defines family, their inability to get along – their wars and leaderships – define history, their image defines God, and their genitals define sexuality. (MacKinnon 1994: 49–50)

This inferior status of women further means that men “can take the deputy position for women in every most decisive body” (Birkhan 1990: 132). Women's inferiority is reduced to their “mute sensuality”, which in turn is associated with “female privacy.” The division of societies into the public and private spheres plays the most decisive role here because, according to Birgit Sauer, it forms a “pattern of organization and perception of reality, of politics and society”, since “public and private are ordering concepts that regulate social relationships, that allow, prohibit, permit” (Sauer 1997, cited from Ludwig 2023: 24).

As a result of this ordering, I conclude, women's inferiority is doubled and characterized as an asymmetrical, subordinate relation to men, on the one hand, and as an asymmetrical, subordinate relation of women's domestic privacy to men's market privacy and political publicity, on the other. An ethics of care is able to reap a response to this doubled inequality because, according to philosopher Lea Susemichel and sociologist Jens Kastner, a care-centered political program should be at the heart of the political program, “which takes differences into account and combines the idea of interdependence with the utopia of a society characterized by equality that enables a good life for all” (Susemichel & Kastner 2021: 37).

2.2. The “sexual contract” and its asymmetries

The American political theorist Joan C. Tronto gives this program the form of a caring democracy. The starting point of this democratic project is the placement of care at the center of political life. Caring is understood by Tronto “in its broadest and most public form, as a way in which a society allocates responsibilities, offers a substantive opportunity to reopen the closed, game-like political system to the genuine concerns of citizens” (Tronto 2013: IX).

The link between the allocation of responsibilities for caring activities and care work and the strengthening of the participatory, i.e., in this case, including women, aspect of democracy is linked by Tronto to her understanding of caring as caring-with, i.e., shared and solidary caring. This means that

... to be a citizen in a democracy is to care for citizens and to care for democracy itself. [...] Citizenship, like caring, is both an expression of support (as when the government provides support for those who need care) and a burden – the burden of helping to maintain and preserve the political institutions and the community. (Tronto 2013: X)

The relevance of this definition of citizenship is particularly important in situations where far-right conservatives are attacking political and social institutions, defending the idea that everyone is capable of taking care of themselves, and asserting that the market and market rationality are the most important social standards and models for action and caring activities. From a feminist perspective, however, this means not only the task of defending political and social institutions, but also changing or transforming them, since many of them are paternalistic and tailored to hegemonic notions of masculinity (compare: Ludwig 2023: 93).

However, when considering the question of what social institutions should look like from the perspective of a caring democracy, it is worth revisiting the notion that people's desired existence is exclusively autonomous, independent, and self-sufficient. As feminist theorists have shown, the fact that these very orientations keep popping up is embedded in the idea of the "sexual contract", which has been the flip side of the "social contract" since the emergence of its philosophical theories in the seventeenth century.

While the "social contract" is understood as the basis of the power that equitably binds the state and civil rights, and the basis of the legitimacy of modern democratic governance, its origins relate not only to political rights, but also to patriarchal rights or gender privileges, "which concern power over women" (Pateman 1994: 73). This power, according to Carol Pateman, means that women are included in a sphere that is and, at the same time, is not part of civil society:

What it means to be an 'individual', a person who enters into contracts and enjoys the freedom of a citizen, is revealed by the subjugation of women in the private sphere. (Pateman 1994: 85)

This also means that the public sphere of politics, on the one hand, and the private sphere of the market, on the other, are constructed as the sphere of independent, autonomous, rational, producing and competitive masculinities, while the private dimension of paid and unpaid activities and care work is constructed as the sphere of dependent, heteronomous, emotional, reproducing and caring femininities. Since the second sphere is subordinated to the first two, i.e., devalued and partially invisible, being women, dependence, emotions, and caring are also devalued.

According to Gundula Ludwig,

... it is only by relegating people's neediness, their dependence on social relationships, social support, care and emotionality to the private sphere that the public sphere could become one in which all these social and emotional needs are excluded as non-existent or irrelevant. The phantasm of the liberal subject, which acts in the public sphere as an autonomous, sovereign, unrelated and rational being, could only become possible through the privatization of social and emotional reproduction, which is primarily assumed by women, which in turn was derived from their "natural" destiny as mothers and wives. (Ludwig 2023: 23)

The ideology of free-floating and independent public-private masculinities signifies, *on the one hand*, a rejection of the meaning of social relations that leaves both any masculine ties in the public and private spheres and the predominantly female reproductive caring relationships in the private sphere as irrelevant. Historically, as feminist political researchers have shown, this has allowed for the development of a masculinized bureaucratic rationality that still defines social institutions today and is based on hierarchies and gendered mechanisms of exclusion. As a consequence, masculinity as a system is "embedded in the organizational structure (e.g. professional ethics, ritualized ways of working, games of discrimination and exclusion) of political institutions independently of concrete men and masculinities, and represents their standard form" (Kreisky & Loeffler 2009, cited from Ludwig 2023: 93–94).

On the other hand, however, this ideology leads to the interpretation of privacy and especially of the family as a “law-free” sphere, which, paradoxically, is to be “protected” by the non-interference of the state and, as a result, legitimizes “the (married) husband’s power of disposition over the (married) wife up to the right of physical violence” in this sphere (Ludwig 2023: 83).

One of the most important consequences of this ideology, the exploitation and devaluation of social relations, is the erosion of solidarity relations. When the public sphere is dominated by the competition of “free-floating” male subjects, and the private sphere merely reproduces the conditions for male freedom and female dependency, public solidarity becomes redundant and unnecessary. However, the fact that, in the so-called private sphere, it is women who continue to create and maintain a multitude of social ties and attempt to give them ethical form becomes particularly evident at the moment of social explosions.

I saw an example of such an explosion in Belarus in 2020, when these diverse social relations, taken out of the so-called private sphere, became the main driving force behind the protests. Women, along with the LGBTQI+ community and individuals, offered the entire society new models of communication, horizontal interaction, and the formation of new forms of collectivity (Shparaga 2021). It was caring and social relations that had previously been pushed into the private sphere that created spaces of protest as spaces of heterotopias, “where people of different faiths, ages, genders, classes and abilities come together. Places where diversity is not demanded but simply arises spontaneously and unasked” (do Mar Castro Varela & Oghalai 2023: 11). This implies that solidarity “not only binds but also helps to transcend social and political boundaries” (Ibid.) and thus creates the conditions for new democratic understandings of one’s own societies.

2.3. Caring infrastructures for gender equitable democracy

But how can we move from this new and productive dynamic of protest to new sociopolitical structures? Theorists of the ethics of care and caring democracy call for a rediscovery and rethinking of both central sociopolitical principles and the social practices and institutions that emerge from them.

The movement toward a caring democracy must, in my view, begin with a rethinking of privacy and publicness by moving them from being domains or spheres to being “attributions to specific fields of action and communication structures” (Lang 1995, cited from Ludwig 2023: 23). This rethinking is also linked to the question of the conditions under which “a space, an action, a discourse is perceived as public or private” (Spillers 1987, cited from Ludwig 2023: 24).

Autonomy, understood as the most important principle of action and the most important structure of communication, should be seen as the goal of a wide variety of—and not only so-called masculine—activities, be they political decisions, the organization of educational or upbringing processes, or family, friendship, and other relationships. However, autonomy should also be understood as relational or, in my terms, augmented

by alteronomy, which is achieved not by independence from others, but by building horizontal and mutually respectful relationships with or towards them.

It also leads to the realization that it is necessary to question the material, psychological, and social preconditions of autonomy, since the “[p]ersons without adequate resources cannot adequately exercise autonomous choices. Autonomy is exercised within social relations, not by abstractly independent, free, and equal individuals” (Held 2006: 84).

The notion of relational autonomy or alteronomy thus makes visible different social conditions. These conditions allow some subjects, primarily masculine ones, to assert their intentions and actions as public, for example, thanks to the resources and networks available to them. While others, in this case, feminine subjects, are prevented from asserting their agency in the public sphere because their status, for example, as a housewife or parent, is naturalized and devalued, i.e., not seen as a full-fledged private-public activity involving different, individual, and collective actors.

Viewing housework or parenting as private-public activities open to different actors, rather than assigned to specific, feminized and marginalized subjects, also implies a different view of social rights and services, which, from the perspective of relational autonomy, should not be seen as static things, but as functions of social relations and processes (Young 1990: 16). In other words, house work and parenthood should be seen as infrastructures that require various resources—material, financial, psychological, and others—to sustain them, the functionality of which cannot be reduced to women’s responsibilities and private practices.

Joan C. Tronto, therefore, emphasizes the need for a redistribution of responsibility for care activities in modern societies. And Gabriele Winker considers the starting point for a care economy based on solidarity to be the social-public infrastructure of support that protects the life of each person, both individually and through various collectively organized structures that include education, child-rearing, health and care, but also social housing, public transport, culture, digital infrastructure, water and energy supply (Winker 2021: 152).

Democracy, or as Winker refers to it—expanded democratic structures—can be viewed productively as an integral part of this socio-public infrastructure of support. It involves the interconnection of existing political principles and institutions with new forms of democratic participation, such as in various fields of care work and social movements. It is this infrastructure of democratic care, rather than profit-making, production or competition as such, that should be seen as the core of modern democracy, in which access to basic rights is as important as those rights themselves, and therefore social equality and justice complement freedom.

3. Conclusions

In my article, I have attempted, on the one hand, to show that the neoliberal transformations of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have led to the erosion of

democracy across the globe. On the other hand, I sought to argue that it is impossible to remedy this situation by relying solely on formal democratic principles and institutions dominated by masculine hierarchies. The struggle for democracy today requires new forms of social activism and solidarity, which are hardly possible in a situation where social ties, one of which is solidarity, are structurally anchored in the so-called private sphere of reproduction, devalued and opposed to politics as a sphere of male competition and technocracy.

Placing social solidarity and care at the center of politics is the starting point for a caring democracy. Its theorists see the redistribution of responsibility for care practices—from domestic labor to caring for the democratic institutions themselves—as the most important step toward the practical realization of this version of democracy. We can observe an analogue of this redistribution of responsibility at the beginning of the 21st century in the course of mass protests, including those in Belarus in 2020. It is precisely this redistribution that ensures unprecedented social mobilization and forms the basis for political transformations in the present and future.

In modern democratic societies, the move toward caring democracy means fighting for democratic practices and institutions, including welfare state institutions. This struggle also involves transforming these institutions—from household management and parenting to political parties and ministries—so that their participants receive support and resources while remaining subjects, i.e., jointly, equally, and contributing their unique experiences to decisions about the structure of these institutions and the rules that underpin them. This will also serve as a guide for future democratic transformations in Belarus.

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