



Merike Blofield. *The Politics of Moral Sin: Abortion and Divorce in Spain, Chile and Argentina*. New York & London: Routledge, 2006. ISBN 0-415-97775-4.

In Spain, Chile and Argentina, the overwhelming majority of citizens consider themselves Catholic. Their current democracies were preceded by right-wing authoritarian regimes. In spite of these and other similarities, regulation of divorce and abortion is very different in the three polities. Spain permitted divorce soon after its transition (1981). Since 1985, abortion has been regarded as a crime punishable by the Penal Code except when pregnancy is the result of rape, the fetus has malformations, or the pregnancy seriously endangers the physical or mental health of the mother. However, the mental health clause is *de facto* used as an (imperfect) proxy for abortion on demand. In Chile, a restrictive law permitting divorce was approved only in 2004, that is, fifteen years after the end of the dictatorship, while abortion is still illegal. In Argentina, divorce was liberalized five years after the demise of the authoritarian regime but abortion remains prohibited.

Merike Blofield shows that the different policy outcomes were not caused by differences (at the time of the transition to democracy) in women's education level, female labor force participation rate, religious beliefs and practices among citizens, or views on divorce and abortion by Spaniards, Chileans and Argentinians. Rather, during the transition, the degree of income inequality was in Spain considerably smaller than in the two Latin American countries. Due to this type of social structure, Spanish feminists were able to mobilize across the different social classes and within political parties, especially (but not exclusively) on the left of the political spectrum. The Catholic Church opposed divorce and abortion arguing that both were sins and termination of pregnancy was murder. However, comparatively speaking, the Spanish Catholic Church did not strongly mobilize against government attempts to liberalize divorce and abortion. As Spain's media ownership was diversified, progressive forces found channels to publicize their positions on moral issues.

By contrast, Latin American countries are among the most unequal countries in the world. In very unequal contexts, feminists find it extremely hard to find a critical mass of supporters for their demands across social classes and political parties. During his papacy (1978–2005), John Paul II prioritized moral issues such as divorce and abortion as fields of contention against secularism, and maintained a clear cut rejection of terminations of both marriages and pregnancies. The influence of Papal doctrine on moral issues was noticed much more in the politics of Latin American countries than in the Spanish case because of the chronology of the transition, which began in 1975 in Spain but in 1989 in Chile and in 1983 in Argentina. In Chile, media ownership and campaign financing were concentrated in the hands of a few conservative social and political actors who supported Vatican views on moral matters, and set very restrictive parameters to political debates.

At least one reason makes this book a superb contribution to the scholarship that studies the responses to feminist demands by democratic governments. Merike Blofield puts socio-economic inequality where it belongs: at the heart of the explanation of the differences between Spain, Chile and Argentina regarding divorce and abortion regulations. Generally speaking and with exceptions, social structure is a key explanatory variable in many comparative sociological analyses of gender, while it is absent in many political science studies. But Blofield convincingly shows that socio-economic inequality matters even when policy makers try to erode (or preserve) other types of inequalities including those based on gender. Political scientists usually explain differences in policy outcomes by analyzing ideas, institutions and policy makers – at times forgetting that governments rule different types of societies whose basic structures cannot be modified in the short run.

Some minor aspects could have been developed better in the book. For instance, when researching the Spanish case, Blofield frequently uses as a source the main nation-wide newspaper *El País*. While this is a high-quality newspaper, it is one that is strongly biased in favor of progressive actors and political causes. Other Spanish high-quality newspapers of different ideological color exist and should have been consulted. Also, the medical class is only briefly mentioned twice (pp. 88–90), when Blofield states that medical associations in general opposed abortion liberalization. But the medical establishment is a powerful policy actor, and should have received more in-depth attention. However, overall, these aspects that could have been improved are minor in comparison with all the merits that make *The Politics of Moral Sin* a magisterial study to be included in any collection of outstanding monographs of gender and equality policy making.

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