

Paul B. Preciado
The Hot War

01/08

Mapping the modalities of a revolutionary present involves factoring in not only the processes of political subjectivation, the invention of new practices and new languages, but also the counterrevolutionary strategies being implemented by techno-patriarchal and postcolonial institutions to prevent profound social and political transformations. Mapping the revolution that is underway also, and necessarily, entails counting the enemy's bullets in our bodies.

This past October 22, thirty-two states, including the United States, Brazil, Egypt, Poland, and Hungary, affirmed their political desire to restrict current laws regarding the right to abortion with the signature of the Geneva Consensus Declaration. A new techno-patriarchal bloc is thus being forged on a planetary scale. Developing strategies of resistance to counter this authoritarian neoliberalism is a matter of urgency.

That same day, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal ruled that abortions for "fetal abnormality" (the reason for 90 percent of abortions currently performed in the country) were illegal, thereby making it virtually impossible to have a legal abortion on Polish soil. This ruling tightens what already stood as one of the most restrictive laws in Europe: until then, Poland allowed abortions only in cases of rape, incest, danger to the mother, or irreversible fetal abnormality. Dunja Mijatovi, the human rights commissioner of the Council of Europe, urged Poland's parliament to reject the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling, endorsed by deputies from the PiS (Law and Justice Party, an ultraconservative party), Kukiz (an anti-party movement), and the PSL (Polish Peasants' Party), joined by Korwin-Mikke's far right formation.

It was only a few hours later that day that, in the midst of the media fog occasioned by the management of the pandemic and twelve days before the elections in the United States, the governments of Brazil, Egypt, Hungary, Indonesia, Uganda, and the US, cosponsors of the declaration, were joined by twenty-seven other countries in a virtual signing ceremony of the Geneva Consensus Declaration (so called because it was intended to be held in Geneva before the World Health Assembly was postponed due to the global health crisis), broadcast from Washington, DC.

Presented as a restrictive amendment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration "further strengthens the coalition to achieve four pillars: (1) better health for women, (2) the preservation of human life, (3) strengthening of family as the foundational unit of society, and (4) protecting every nation's national sovereignty in global politics. For

e-flux journal #114 — december 2020 Paul B. Preciado
The Hot War



Design for Polish Pro-choice protests (2020).

example, it is the sovereign right of every nation to make their own laws in regard to abortion, absent external pressure.”¹

During the virtual signing ceremony, Alex Azar, White House secretary of Health and Human Services, emphasized “that every country has its own sovereign right to determine its own laws with respect to abortion. We say clearly, ‘There is no international obligation on the part of states to finance or facilitate abortion.’” Katalin Novák, the Hungarian minister for families, asserted the importance of “protecting the right of a woman to be a mother.”

But who protects the right of a body to which the female gender was assigned at birth to be a sex worker, to be a lesbian, and even to be a mother who’s a sex worker or a lesbian? And what about the right to be trans, including the right to be a trans mother or father? Or the right to define oneself as nonbinary? The right to disidentify? And if the reproduction of human life is so important to the signatory countries, why is there no similar legislation governing erections, male ejaculation, and sperm flow?

It would be naive to see the Geneva Consensus Declaration as nothing but a bluff, an act of media propaganda, or a ritual of political intimidation. It is all these, of course, but it is more. This declaration is supported by a cascade of legal reforms already underway in several countries, including Poland and Hungary, but also Brazil and Uganda. In fact, a few days after the signing ceremony, the appointment of the openly pro-life justice Amy Coney Barrett to the US Supreme Court came to buttress the declaration.

In the so-called Western democracies, the Geneva Consensus Declaration is one more sign of the shift from neoliberalism to a form of neo-“authoritarian liberalism,” to borrow the expression that philosopher and legal scholar Hermann Heller used to describe the late Weimar regime before its collapse in 1933.² Oddly enough, the words that most closely resemble the Geneva Declaration were spoken by Hitler on November 5, 1937, revealing his plans for the acquisition of “*Lebensraum*,” or “living space,” through the annexation of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland.

Living Spaces

In legal terms, the Geneva Consensus Declaration is the affirmation of the expansion of state sovereignty against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In political terms, the declaration is an act of annexation of wombs as territories over which nation-states claim full sovereignty, “living spaces” over which they deploy a strategy of occupation. It is a mistake derived from the naturalization of bodies and

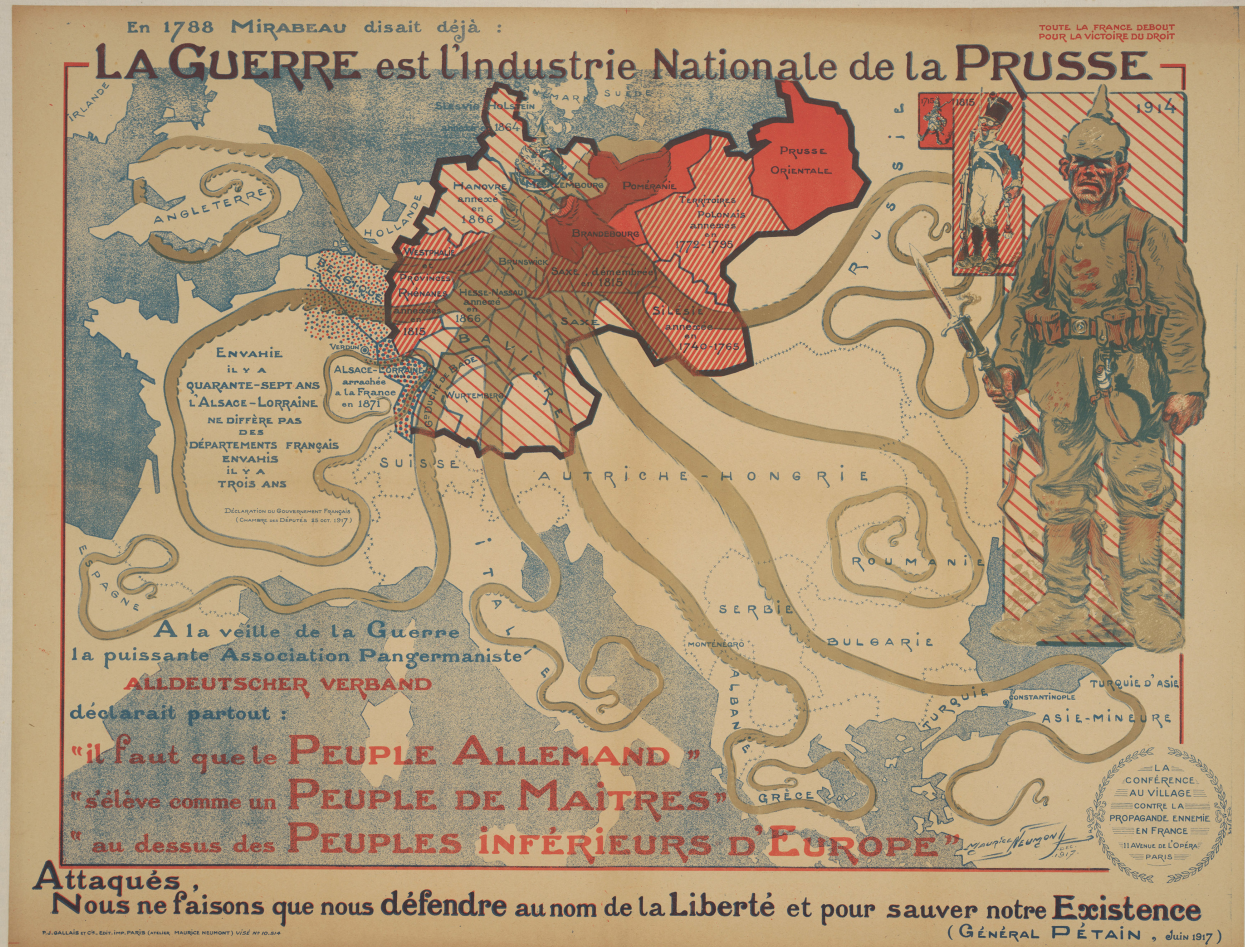
sexualities to imagine that the political notion of national territory, and the protection and extension of borders, concerns land alone. The sovereignty of the patriarchal and capitalist state is defined by its will to push the boundaries of the skin, infiltrate the interiority of the body, and designate certain organs as its “vital space.”

The declaration, signed by thirty-two countries, is a diplomatic attack on the bodies of what the signatory states call, in discriminatory terms, “women.” These “women” are not regarded as political subjects in their own right within their respective nation-states, but as “living spaces” over which national sovereignty can be extended.

With the Geneva Declaration, we are now in a position to formulate an updated definition of patriarchy. We are dealing here with a political regime that declares female gendered bodies, children, homosexual, trans, and nonbinary bodies to be territories where national sovereignty holds sway. On the other hand, male and heterosexual bodies, and their organs and reproductive fluids, are declared fully sovereign. The state has no power to legislate their private or public use. The building of gender differences is coercive but highly asymmetrical: in the patriarchal regime, the male body is meant to function as a military instrument of the state dedicated to the occupation and expansion of living spaces, while the female body is represented as a territory to annex, a colony to occupy.

The same could be expressed with the sexo-political equation: open hole / squirt of sperm = national sovereignty.

Just as Germany’s defense of “living space” in 1937 led two years later to the start of World War II, so the declaration of the thirty-two signatory countries to promote women’s health and protect the right to life is a declaration of war by the united techno-patriarchal states against the free wombs of the planet. The terms of the declaration are evidence that the most important battle in today’s global economy is focused on appropriating not only the means of production, but also and especially the means of the reproduction of life. The living human body is to the twentieth-first century what the factory was to the nineteenth: the seat of political struggle. It is not simply a matter of knowing whether the body has replaced the factory, but of understanding once and for all that the living body *is* the factory. The living human body is not a mere anatomical object, a natural organism, but what I call a “*somatheque*,” that is to say, a historically and collectively constructed political space that can in no way be treated as an object, much less as private property belonging to the subject. The *somatheque* can be brutally



This French propaganda poster from 1917 commissioned a map which portrayed Prussia as an octopus stretching out its tentacles vying for control and it is captioned with an 18th-century quote: "Even in 1788, Mirabeau was saying that War is the National Industry of Prussia." Photo: Maurice Neumont, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

objectified, as was the case in concentration camps; it can be expropriated, as was the case in the regimes of slavery. But it can never be entirely reduced to an object or property.

The proletarian and racialized body along with the body with a potentially reproductive uterus have been colonial capitalism's most important living machines since the end of the sixteenth century. Hundreds of thousands of African bodies were used as living machines on cotton plantations, tobacco fields, and in mines; indigenous fungible bodies which were not enslaved were treated as hands, legs, and muscles to carry loads until death, but also as sexualized bodies and penetrable orifices; and proletarian bodies were inserted into the production process as human engines forced to move to the rhythm of the great machine.

But of all living machines, none has been as thoroughly exploited, and in such a festive and disgusting, such a condescending and sacralized way, as the body with the reproductive uterus. Modern colonial and patriarchal medicine defines the uterus as an organ belonging to the female reproductive system. This definition is tautological: the concept of woman is bound up with that of the uterus and vice versa, in a never-ending loop.³ To counter the discourse of the epistemology of sexual difference, I propose to regard the uterus not as "woman's" natural organ but as a political territory to be conquered, as a "vital space" over which various political entities fight for control. The uterus is a highly vascular, muscular, hollow organ, suspended in the abdomen of certain bodies, which has an uncommon capability of transformation and production: it can enlarge from three to thirty centimeters in diameter to reach a weight of almost ten kilos when it becomes the space of a reproduction process.

A chamber of intensity, the uterus is not, however, a closed space: if it were, it would not be reproductive. Access to this "living space" usually includes the vulva, an area located in the perineum, the pubis, the outer and inner lips, the clitoris, the vestibule, the vestibular glands, and a fibromuscular tube that connects the outside of the vulva with the uterus. The transformation of the uterus into a reproductive space is not spontaneous, given that a process of intentional insemination with sperm is necessary. Therefore, an equivalence cannot be established between woman and uterus. For this reason, in philosophical terms, I prefer the descriptor "body with a potentially reproductive uterus" to "woman." The category "woman" is the result of reducing bodies to their reproductive potential. It conceals the process of sexual and gestational exploitation produced by the division between masculinity and femininity as complementary

poles of heterosexual reproduction.

Not all women have uteruses, and not all uteruses are reproductive. Defining women by their reproductive relations is as reductive as defining the existence of the racialized body in terms of the economy of the plantation, or defining the existence of the worker's body in relation to the profits that this body produces.

The Techno-Patriarchy Atlas

To map the new techno-patriarchal bloc that is being forged on a planetary scale, let us look, one by one, at the thirty-two countries that have signed the Geneva Consensus Declaration so far. In alphabetical order, they are: Kingdom of Bahrain, Republic of Belarus, Republic of Benin, Federative Republic of Brazil (cosponsor), Burkina Faso, Republic of Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Republic of Djibouti, Arab Republic of Egypt (cosponsor), Kingdom of Eswatini, Republic of The Gambia, Georgia, Republic of Haiti, Hungary (cosponsor), Republic of Indonesia (cosponsor), Republic of Iraq, Republic of Kenya, State of Kuwait, State of Libya, Republic of Nauru, Republic of Niger, Sultanate of Oman, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Republic of Paraguay, Republic of Poland, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Republic of Senegal, Republic of South Sudan, Republic of Sudan, Republic of Uganda (cosponsor), United Arab Emirates, United States of America (cosponsor), and Republic of Zambia. You will no doubt want to put these names down on your list of priority tourist destinations.

The world is divided, as Bruno Latour puts it, not only in relation to environmental politics but also, and even more sharply, in relation to sexual and reproductive politics. A new hot war divides the world into two blocs: on one side, the techno-patriarchal empire and, on the other, the territory where it is still possible to negotiate gestational sovereignty. But what is the common denominator that allows for consensus within the techno-patriarchal bloc? What is Trump's representative doing seated at the same table alongside his counterparts from Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Libya? What is Catholic Poland doing signing a sexual policy treaty with the Muslim Republic of Indonesia? How can we explain the fact that countries advocating white supremacy are signing a declaration with fifteen African states? Clearly it is not the opposition between Islam and Christianity that accounts for the lines drawn between the blocs in this new hot war.

Quite the opposite, theological-political countries, both Catholic and Muslim, fighting amongst themselves in other respects, are finding a common ground in the expropriation of women's reproductive work, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. Faced with

05/08

e-flux journal #114 — december 2020 Paul B. Preciado
The Hot War

liberated wombs, lesbians, sexually sovereign women, sex workers, transgenders, queers, and nonbinary bodies, the political relevance of the distinction between the Christian West and Islam, between North and South, is blurred. Faced with the sexual and reproductive power of pleasure and reproductive organs, oppositions and alliances are being reconfigured: on one side stand the patriarchs; on the other, the sexual cavities of this world, the nonbinary bodies, the potentially sucking mouths, the potentially penetrable anuses, and the potentially reproductive uteruses.

Let us examine the political-sexual demographics hidden behind the Geneva Consensus Declaration. The signatory countries have an average of fifteen million people with a potentially reproductive uterus, with the exception of the more populated countries of Brazil, the United States, and Nigeria, which together count approximately 375 million bodies with uteruses. That makes a total of about 825 million bodies that are affected by the Geneva Declaration. According to the World Health Organization, which defines abortion as a “woman’s right worldwide,”⁴ roughly forty-seven thousand to fifty-five thousand women around the world die every year due to unsafe abortions. Another five million suffer serious injuries resulting in sterility or chronic illness. These figures could rise significantly with the new restrictions promoted in the Geneva Declaration and implemented by laws in Poland and Hungary. Moreover, as Polish feminist Ewa Majewska points out, the impact of abortion laws are class related, inasmuch as the women who die are the ones who cannot afford to travel abroad for an abortion. Thus the hot war against the uterus is also a war against the poor working class.⁵ Death would also increase along political lines of race and migration. In this sense, the Geneva Consensus Declaration against the sovereignty of the uterus may very well be one of the broadest, most far-reaching, brutal, and deadly necropolitical measures to be implemented, with the power to generate more inequalities not only of gender and sex, but also of class, race, and migration.

In response to the techno-patriarchal bloc’s violent declaration, we consider it a matter of urgency to implement a number of strategies of resistance, following proposals by Polish feminist, queer, and trans groups:

1) As soon as possible and using all possible means, both physical and virtual, we must join the revolutionary demonstrations and actions taking place in Poland today, which constitute the most active front of resistance.

2) All bodies with a uterus in the thirty-two signatory countries are advised to cease as soon

as possible the practice of heterosexual sex with penetration and ejaculation without a condom in that territory; any accident would lead to a conflict of sovereignty, and hence to a situation of war between the state and the body of the person with a uterus, which would be settled by repression and even by the death of the body with the uterus.

3) Homosexual practices, masturbation, ecosexuality, fetishism with ejaculation outside the vagina, the use of sex toys, and nonheterosexual orgies are highly recommended practices of political resistance.

4) We urge all NGOs and people living in the bloc where abortion is still legal to send morning-after pills and abortion pills to various groups in the techno-patriarchal bloc as soon as possible. Such shipments can be sent through private postal services or using drones to cross borders.

5) If the measures proposed in the Geneva Consensus Declaration were to be legally and politically applied, all persons with potentially reproductive uteruses would be advised to seek political asylum in countries that are not signatories to the declaration. The acceptance by the non-signatory countries of these refugees would mean the displacement of 825 million bodies, which would amount to the vastest human migration in history.

This population displacement would be known by the name of “the great migration of wombs.”

The question now is whether the political antagonism produced by this reproductive division of the world can be addressed in terms of diplomacy, as Bruno Latour suggests, or whether the dispossession and violence to which certain bodies are subjected prevents a diplomatic approach to the struggle. Analyzing denialist theses and post-Holocaust trials, Jean-François Lyotard elaborated the notion of “différend” to account for the difficulty or even the impossibility of affirming the existence of the tribunal as a neutral space – a space outside history, so to speak, in which justice can be done.⁶ Similarly, in the current confrontation of the patriarchal regime against sexualized bodies, diplomacy cannot be taken for granted, but requires the creation of a space, the invention of a set of language games capable of restricting the use of violence. If diplomacy is, as Isabelle Stengers argues, necessary precisely where the parties involved are at war, then sexual and reproductive policies should be enclaves of diplomacy.⁷ Paradoxically, although the agents of patriarchy and the reproductive and sexualized bodies live under the same roof and even sleep in the same bed, they cannot easily sit at the same negotiating table, because that table is already,

like the domestic space and the bed, a site of violence in which the sexualized body is objectified as prey.

From a philosophical point of view, I think it is important not to establish an opposition between the logics of political resistance and diplomacy. In order to make diplomacy a form of potential political action in the face of the reproductive division of the world, one would have to understand diplomacy as an epistemological strategy: diplomats would not be those who sit at the table with representatives of the patriarchy, but those who through their practices of memory, struggle, survival, and resistance invent another epistemology of the living body that displaces the very table of the binary and heteropatriarchal epistemology. Stengers quotes a slogan of environmental activists, “We are nature defending itself,” as proof of a new epistemology of interdependence in which “nature” has ceased to be a mere externality.⁸ In the realm of sexual politics, the slogan would be: “Our living bodies are proof of the existence of another epistemic regime, not binary and not patriarchal.” Diplomats are epistemic messengers. Only within a shifting epistemic table will bodies stop being what they used to be, their positions as predator and prey reshuffled, and their use of techniques of violence reorganized.

x

Paul B. Preciado is a philosopher, curator, and trans activist, and one of the leading thinkers in the study of gender and sexual politics.

07/08

e-flux journal #114 — december 2020 [Paul B. Preciado](#)
The Hot War

1

"Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family," [hhs.gov
https://www.hhs.gov/about/agencies/oga/global-health-diplomacy/protecting-life-global-health-policy/geneva-declaration.html](https://www.hhs.gov/about/agencies/oga/global-health-diplomacy/protecting-life-global-health-policy/geneva-declaration.html).

2

Carl Schmitt and Hermann Heller, *Du Libéralisme autoritaire*, trans. Grégoire Chamayou (Zones, 2020).

3

See Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Harvard University Press, 1993); and Karen Newman, *Fetal Positions: Individualism, Science, Visuality* (Stanford University Press, 1996).

4

Marge Berer, "Making Abortion a Woman's Right Worldwide," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 78, no. 5 (2000): 580–92.

5

Ewa Majewska, "Poland Is in Revolt Against Its New Abortion Ban," *Jacobin*, October 27, 2020 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/10/poland-abortion-law-protest-general-strike-womens-rights>.

6

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Différend*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

7

See Isabelle Stengers's contribution to this issue, "We Are Divided."

8

Stengers, "We Are Divided."