

The Moral Crusade on “Gender Ideology”: notes on conservative political alliances in Latin America

Richard Miskolci

Federal University of São Carlos, Sao Carlos, SP, Brazil

Abstract

This article presents a brief synthesis of a broad and complex situation comprised by a reaction against advances in sexual and reproductive rights that emerged in several Latin American countries showing common elements, among which a shared vocabulary that labels such rights as “gender ideology”. Politicians and interest groups, acting as opportunistic moral entrepreneurs, have come to adopt the term as an electoral strategy by converting the grammar of the political dispute into the moral conflict between “good citizens” and others, often identified as feminists, homosexuals and trans people. Such Latin American crusade against “gender ideology” in its different national manifestations has already various consequences and results, but also common ones such as the impediment to the adoption of a gender perspective in educational policies, thus contributing to the maintenance of inequalities between men and women and above all to discrimination and violence against gays, lesbians, trans people and others.

Keywords: sexual and reproductive rights; religious activism; right-wing turn; religious-political alliances.

Almost a century ago, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf observed: "The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself." A similar sentiment applies to Latin America's recent history. In the decade of 2010, reactions emerged to advances in sexual and reproductive rights in several countries, mainly after the approval of civil unions or marriage between people of the same sex in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. In the case of the last three countries, the legal recognition of homosexual unions was made by the highest courts and the mobilization against them targeted educational materials created from a gender perspective that opposed sexual discrimination.

In this brief article, I will synthesize a broad and complex situation raising common elements in the Latin American context, while recognizing the importance of identifying local specificities, and avoiding a rushed diagnosis of the existence of an organized international movement. Until 2018, the evidence pointed to the existence of trading and exchanges between groups in different national contexts without an actual global orchestration that could characterize an unified anti-gender movement.

These reactions to the advance of sexual and reproductive rights, and their connections to gender studies, share several common characteristics, especially in their use of a vocabulary that labels such rights as "gender ideology," a term originally created in the late 1990s by Catholic and secular activists to oppose the reforms that involved equality between men and women, same sex marriage, access to new reproductive technologies, contraception and interruption of pregnancy, sexual education and the criminalization of homophobia.

The origin of the term "gender ideology" has been documented by scholars in various countries (Corrêa, 2018; Lopéz, 2018; Miskolci, 2018; Patternote & Kuhar, 2017; Rondón, 2017). Some twenty years ago a reaction was forged against the use of the concept of gender in international human

rights agreements. Most scholars tend to agree that it was after the IV World Conference on Women held by the United Nations in Beijing, in 1995, that secular intellectuals and Catholic religious leaders coined the notion of "gender ideology" to synthesize what they understand as a divergence between feminist thinking and their interests.

The pro-life militant Dale O'Leary, who participated in the UN's conferences, published the book *Gender Agenda* (1996) in which she accuses the United Nations of adopting a gender perspective in public policies (Junqueira, 2017). Sônia Corrêa (2018) observes that O'Leary does not use the term gender ideology, but "radical feminist ideology". In 1997, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI – warned that the concept of gender contradicts Catholicism and introduced what he defined as a new anthropology, that is, a new definition of the human (1997: 142). In 1998, the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church of Peru began to use the term, which it expressed in its theme: "Dangers and Scope of Gender Ideology."

The Catholic opposition to human rights activists and to feminist thinking based on the concept of gender therefore unified two different social groups as a single target; by doing so, it also associated them, in a mechanical way, with a specific (leftist) branch of politics. "Gender ideology" was officially defined in the Vatican Index of 2003; it also took a leading role in the Document of Aparecida (2007), which resulted from the Fifth General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin America and the Caribbean, and which expressed concerns about gender theory and its applications for gay people who demanded full citizenship rights.

The true point of inflexion and what triggered the panic about "gender ideology" on the subcontinent was the legal recognition that same-sex couples can have the same legal rights as married heterosexual couples in the decade of 2010. Thus, in the aftermath of the consequences of the global economic crisis of 2008 and the popularization of the use of online social

networks, religious groups initiated campaigns against LGBT rights in a variety of different national contexts. These groups stoked social concerns over gay marriage and its possible consequences for childhood, family, and society as a whole (cf. Scala, 2010). Making strategic use of mass and social media, political actors tried to attract popular support to their cause by spreading fear and anxiety. Eventually, these actors were able to cause panic with their newly created phantom of “gender ideology”¹.

LGBT Rights in Latin America

	Partnership / Marriage	Adoption	Gender Identity
Argentina	2010	2010	2010
Brasil	2011/2013	2010	2018
Chile	2015		2018
Colômbia	2015	2015	2015
Equador	2014	2008	
México	2007-2016		
Peru			2016*
Uruguai	2013	2009	2009*

* with restrictions

Conservative lay intellectuals and politicians have contributed to disseminating this ghost, therefore, the so-called “gender ideology” is no longer a mere creation of religious interest groups. The term “ideology” is used to associate feminism, gender studies and the demands for recognition of sexual diversity with a threat of a return of communism, which creates greater

¹ Stanley Cohen has coined the classical sociological analysis of moral panics in the 1960’s. According to Kenneth Thompson (2005), different analytical approaches about the phenomenon were developed in the UK – where there is an emphasis on the consequences of economic crisis – while in the US sociologists tend to focus on collective anxieties. On moral panics see Cohen (2011); Goode; Ben-Yehuda (2009); Thompson (2005). For a classical reference on sexual panics see also Rubin (1993).

anxiety in former-socialist countries of Europe and in Latin America among social sectors opposed to leftist governments and to the regimes of Cuba and Venezuela.

Contrary to the statements of groups against sexual and reproductive rights, there is no evidence that leftist governments have defended them, not even in those led by leftist female presidents in Argentina (2007-2015), Brazil (2011-2016), Chile (2006-2010 and 2014-2018) and Costa Rica (2010-2014). However, the hegemony of a political grammar involving the notion of "gender ideology" coincide with the arrival of women politicians to the presidency of these countries indicating that social fears about the break of gender hierarchies may have been amplified by the presence of women in the presidency.

Studies have documented a historic resistance of the left to the incorporation of feminist and LGBT demands in Latin American countries (Bimbi, 2010; Pinto, 2003; Alvarez, 2014). Despite that, the conservative segments tend to associate the left, communism and liberal ideas in the sphere of sexuality and gender to define supposed enemies who would threaten the moral construction of their nations.

Evidence from various countries of the region allow raising the hypothesis that there is a growing separation of the agenda against "gender ideology" from its Catholic or even religious origins. Politicians and interest groups, in the form of opportunistic moral entrepreneurs, have come to adopt it as an electoral strategy by converting the grammar of the political dispute to the moral conflict between "good citizens" and others, often identified as feminists, homosexuals and trans people (Messenberg, 2017). This tactic is usually adopted by politicians, parties and organizations who are conservative in moral terms and close to a right-wing populism in the public arena.

The alliance between Catholic activists, those in Brazil known as Neopentecostal evangelicals and civil society organizations with a right-wing profile frequently takes on characteristics of a moral crusade. The creation of a panic of a threat to children has been a common expedient in various countries

for fighting educational materials or reforms that include content about gender and anti-homophobia. This occurred in Brazil in 2011, and later in 2014 to 2015, during debate in congress over the National Education Plan and related state and municipal measures (Balieiro, 2018). In 2016, something similar took place in Colombia (Rondón, 2017), Mexico (Lopéz, 2018) and Peru, reaching Paraguay in 2017. In Brazil, this led to persecution of teachers, artists and intellectuals. The most emblematic case was the reaction to a visit by Judith Butler in November 2017, who was seen by these groups as the “mother of gender ideology” (Miskolci & Pereira, 2018).

The campaign in the shape of a moral crusade sparked alliances among heterogeneous social sectors interested in attracting followers on social networks and in mobilizing people to attend public demonstrations. In legislative arenas the aim was to stop the approval of laws, plans or programs that could include a perspective supportive of sexual and reproductive rights. In 2016, it was perceived that they joined to take advantage of opportunities to disseminate their ideology by tying it in Brazil to a campaign against corruption and for the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff (Workers Party) and in Colombia to the drafting of a peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Anchored in the capillarity of the Catholic Church and Pentecostal evangelical churches, but increasingly in the way that their secular arms act in online networks, they succeeded – with support at times from the mainstream media – in presenting themselves to public opinion as having expressive popular support even if only isolated studies have come to measure their actual social base. As observed in European contexts (Patternote; Kuhar, 2017, p. 261), in several Latin American countries, there are civil society organizations that function as empty shells, that is, they are led by a small group of people with economic and symbolic capital that allows creating a public image that they are a social movement with many supporters.

The relative success of the campaign against sexual and reproductive rights can be explained because it is based on an alliance that unites at least

three actors, each with its own but converging objectives. The first is the Catholic Church with its moral recognition and historic capillarity in Latin America, seeking to shape the human rights agenda according to its interests. The second is the evangelicals – especially the neopentecostals – who are striving to conquer greater moral and political protagonism in countries like Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela. The third are right-wing interest groups and politicians who make strategic use of the moral agenda to create or broaden their electoral support.

The alliance has proven to be beneficial to both its religious and secular components. The religious and political actors have become allies in efforts to bar the expansion of rights and greater equality of gender that they consider to contradict their principles and limit their action.² The alliance benefits the secular interest groups - and politicians who represent them – by helping them gain adepts to an agenda that often includes an unpopular neoliberal economic perspective regarding state involvement and public policies (Miskolci; Pereira, 2019).

The moral platform has been defended within a repertoire of action that involves the creation of moral panics to disseminate fear as a strategy of mobilization to stop legal and cultural changes, creating a polarization between feminist and LGBT movements and religious actors and their supporters. Probably, this polarization would not be created without the use of social media in the configuration of the campaign as a moral crusade. The social media networks are inured to the mediatic-communicational dissemination of slogans and strong images, but above all – because they allow individual access – they tend to convert political discussions into moral ones, spreading forms of behavioral vigilance (Machado; Miskolci, 2019).

² In the Brazilian case, studies such as those by Prandi and Santos (2017) indicate a gap between the conservative agenda of Neopentecostal evangelical politicians and the opinions of their potential voters in their respective churches. Thus, it is possible that the voters who support them in the moral agenda are secular, but only new studies can evaluate if this agenda results less in an adherence to their religious electorate than in an expansion of it.

Instead of making the personal political (as in the 1960's feminist slogan), social media tends to make politics a matter of personal opinion or belief. On the internet, posts and information circulate inside a culture of popularity that tends to favor content that can attract the most attention and the highest number of followers. Usually, such content is sensationalistic and based on common sense (Pasquale, 2017). Therefore, the online moral crusade against "gender ideology" functioned by connecting and creating conservative activist networks in which the main actors and leaders belonged to right-wing political interest groups, especially populist and neoliberal ones.³

The crusade's discursive trope involves hyperbolic language that presents gender studies and sexual and reproductive rights as a potential catastrophe for collective life (cf. Scala, 2010). In their public manifestations they defend the "natural" family and children as if they were threatened by a homosexual conspiracy. The moral entrepreneurs who mounted the crusade define the family as inseparable from heterosexuality and control by men of women and children, and thus defend the absolute authority of the father and the family as a true State of exception (Miguel, 2016).

In some countries it is possible to recognize in these ideas the coordination of conservative local organizations and international movements (both religious and secular ones).⁴ If, in some national contexts such as Colombia, Peru, Mexico, and Argentina, religious activists have been able to mobilize large street demonstrations in support of the family and/or in supposed defense of children, in others, like Brazil, their action has mainly

³ The associations between national and international organizations was observed in the European context by the studies of Cornejo-Valle and Pichardo (2017) and Patternote and Kuhar (2017). In Latin America, most of the studies available only identify the ties among Catholic associations. In the Brazilian case, there is evidence that interest groups such as the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL) are tied to the Atlas Network.

⁴ Those thinkers that considers them only as a reaction to conquests of feminist and LGBT rights extend an analytical model created in the U.S. context to different realities, giving little attention to their local particularities.

focused on smaller protests aimed at legislative chambers, in legal persecution of teachers who they believe are indoctrinating (from the left) students, and artists whose work or performances threaten childhood

The creation of a panic to trigger a campaign in the form of a moral crusade tends to make invisible the secular groups that are part of the circumstantial alliance against gender studies and sexual and reproductive rights, evoking equivocal diagnoses that its origin can be reduced to a religious fundamentalism. In fact, based on a national context, secular groups might be the most powerful in the alliance.

Patternote and Kuhar emphasize the fact that we are witnessing the emergence of a new generation of activists with traditional values, questioning, therefore, their classification as conservative because they effectively act to construct a future society. Thus, the evidence collected by researchers in Europe and Latin America indicate that we are facing a movement that cannot be accurately classified as religious fundamentalist or conservative.⁵ The doubt about what is retrograde, conservative or a new activism tends to take place more among analysts who presuppose an inexorable historic route towards the conquest of rights and recognition. It is important to be careful to recognize that nothing guarantees that we are heading in this direction.

Many researchers portray the dispute about human rights in international forums by affirming that there has been no overcoming of differences or a disappearance of adversaries of sexual and reproductive rights (Corrêa, 2018; Junqueira, 2017). Considering the Brazilian case, sociologist Berenice Bento (2017; 2018) affirms that we are witnessing the beginning of an intensification of disputes in this field in which traditionalist segments have expressed themselves since the 1960s.

⁵ Those thinkers that considers them only as a reaction to conquests of feminist and LGBT rights extend an analytical model created in the U.S. context to different realities, giving little attention to their local particularities.

The Catholic Church, for example, remains a powerful actor that recognized the change in its battle field from Europe to Latin America, which helps understand the political significance of the abdication of Benedict XVI followed by the election of Francis. The first visit made by the Latin American Pope was to Rio de Janeiro, to attend World Youth Day. In one of his talks, the supreme pontiff called on Catholic youth to be "revolutionaries", strengthening a new generation that, we now know, can struggle with the Vatican against the concept of gender in favor not of equality between men and women, but of their complementarity, and of the family understood in naturalized terms and sexuality as inseparable from reproduction.

Young Catholics, Neopentecostal evangelicals and secularists linked to right-wing groups and politicians that adhere to this moral agenda form a new generation of activists that we have barely begun to know. Their actions against gender studies in universities and sexual education in schools are inseparable from their interests in maintaining the criminalization of abortion and refusing full citizenship rights for LGBT people. Those who suffer the worst repercussions of these actions are non-white people, as well as the poorest and youngest portions of Latin America's population. Studies indicate that the inexistence of sexual education, access to contraceptives and official services to interrupt pregnancy expose poor, black, mestizo or indigenous women to greater risk of death, and that the non-recognition of sexual diversity relegates homosexuals, trans and transvestite people to constant physical and legal insecurity suffering continuous forms of discrimination, harassment and violence.

The moral crusade against "gender ideology" in Latin America is a multifaceted phenomenon with a similar repertoire of action and a common discursive trope, but that always develops from local issues and has involved agents who go beyond religious actors. Sociologically speaking, it is necessary to overcome interpretations that simply highlight the religious

every national context, have joined moral crusades.⁶ A second step would be to analyze how and why these groups participate in such campaigns, given that secular groups tend to be opportunistic moral entrepreneurs with their own political and economic agendas.

Of foremost importance is answering the classical question about moral panics: *cui bono?* Who benefits from the collective fear and persecution that they engender? The only provisional answer I can provide is based on the situation in Brazil, in which an alliance of religious and agnostic groups succeeded in creating a moral panic that paved the way for the victory of the populist extreme-right in 2018's presidential elections. In Latin America's largest and most populous country, this alliance brought together political actors and interest groups that had once been obscure, and that united under an unpopular neoliberal economic agenda.

Everything began in May, 2011, when the former military officer and little-known congressman Jair Messias Bolsonaro took the first step toward initiating a moral crusade after Brazil's Supreme Court conferred legal recognition on same-sex unions. A Catholic politician with strong ties to Brazil's evangelical caucus, Bolsonaro called media attention to anti-homophobia educational materials; he presented these as components of a supposedly dangerous "gay kit" that threatened to change children into homosexuals. Thus, Brazil's moral panic originated as a (homo)sexual panic that initially drew most of its support from an authoritarian segment of Brazilian society prone to believing that social cohesion is inseparable from sexual repression.

Later, between 2014 and 2016, discussions of a new federal educational plan – and its state and municipal versions – created an alliance among Catholics, neopentecostal evangelicals, and secular right-wing interest

⁶ Santos and Melo (2018) have proved that Brazilian legislative proposals against LGBT rights have skyrocketed after the conservative alliance unification of sexual and reproductive rights under the label "gender ideology". This fact confirms that instead of a religious phenomenon, the moral crusade arouse as a mainly agnostic trend.

groups disseminating panic about what they had begun to call "gender ideology". These right-wing interest groups were also concerned with what they described as leftist political indoctrination in schools. Therefore, groups that were primarily opposed to feminism, LGBT rights, and gender studies joined others opposed to purported Marxist indoctrination, thereby forming a marriage of convenience that quickly opened to yet another partner.

The campaign and massive demonstrations in favor of the impeachment of leftist female president Dilma Rousseff in 2016 associated the political actors described above with an even more popular cause: namely, corruption. In a snowball effect, what had begun as (homo)sexual panic gained support as a moral crusade against leftist political indoctrination, growing still more enormous when it embraced mass disgust toward corruption scandals associated with the Worker's Party government. Soon, feminists, LGBT people, communism and corrupt politicians were associated together as a bigger and more threatening phantom that attracted mass support to a growing extreme right-wing movement.

In a context of changing social hierarchies, economic crises, and political turmoil, the appeal of a moral platform embodied by an authoritarian extreme-right politician like Bolsonaro proved to be a recipe for success. Not by chance, his government is composed of a heterogeneous set of four interest groups: 1. ideological interests in charge of education, human rights and foreign relations; 2. military interests that provide institutional structure; 3. neoliberal interests that coordinate economic matters, and; 4. a moralizing branch charged with maintaining public security and investigating corruption schemes. In all likelihood, none of these groups could have won elections alone or with a platform based on exposing its individual interests. Instead, these groups joined forces to present themselves as saviors of the people against enemies like LGBT people and feminists, communism, and corrupt (leftist) politicians.

What was the fear that fed the successful Brazilian moral crusade against women's and LGBT's emancipation culminating in the election of an ex-army officer known for his homophobia, sexism, hate of Communism and apology of dictatorship? It is possibly the fear that people like women and homosexuals break established hierarchies, which would be an infraction of divine law or of the social order as good part of his supporters understand it – in an authoritarian manner. In their vision, homosexuals, women, indigenous people, blacks and others should be named and defined, and their rights restricted by religious, psychological and political authorities. It is not mere chance that many among them also persecute Afro-Brazilian religions, defend the "gay cure" or are apologists for the dictatorship and torture.

The Latin American crusade against "gender ideology" in its different national manifestations has already had various consequences and differing results, but also common ones such as the impediment of adoption of a gender perspective in educational policies. They thus contribute to the maintenance of inequalities between men and women and above all to discrimination and violence against gays, lesbians, trans people and others. As Virginia Woolf stated of her own European context, observing the opposition of certain Latin American men and women to gender and sexual emancipation may be more interesting than observing this emancipation itself. Doing so allows us to identify social anxieties and fears often involved – but rarely taken into account – in analyses of conflicts aroused by changing power relations, such as, in this case, those concerning gender and sexual hierarchies.

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Received: July 6, 2019.

Accepted: Oct. 3, 2019.