

## Exorcising a ghost: The Interests Behind The War On “Gender Ideology”\*

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**Abstract:**

The persecution of philosopher Judith Butler during her visit to Brazil in late 2017 revealed the power of the ghost of the so-called “gender ideology”, a specter that serves as an articulating focus of various interest groups that struggle against the advance of sexual and reproductive rights. This article seeks to identify these groups and their interests, analyze their alliances and the political grammar of their action. The article presents historic elements to retrace the emergence of the campaign against sexual rights in Brazil and to sociologically analyze the conditions that permit its dissemination as a moral crusade.

**Keywords:** Gender Ideology, Interest Groups, Moral Entrepreneurs, Moral Crusade, Human Rights.

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In an article published as "The Phantom of Gender: reflections on freedom and violence" (2017), Judith Butler analyzed the protests against her visit to Brazil in late 2017. Her work involving gender and sexuality became a specter by haunting groups united against what they call "gender ideology". Some of their members persecuted her as if she incarnated not a philosopher engaged in the struggle for human rights, but someone whose ideas threaten our children. From the perspective of those who know her work, the absurdity of the protests, petition and persecution at the airport were proportional to the degree of unreality in which they are based: a specter.

In this brief article, my proposal is to dissipate the specter of "gender ideology", contributing to deconstruct the policy of fear and persecution that it instills against intellectuals, artists and educators. This fear makes the Other an enemy to be fought by supposed "good people" who have acted performatively as members of a type of moral crusade. Despite its historic form, I will argue that the movement is contemporary and that what feeds it are quite earthly objectives.

For a few years, political conflicts over human rights – in particular those concerning sexual and reproductive rights – have taken place in an environment of fear and persecution of ideas that defend equality, for example between men and women, and between hetero and homosexuals. This leads us to ask: are we experiencing in Brazil an unexpected attack of a conservative wave that – after advances in the wake of recognition of differences since the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 – could carry inevitable setbacks to our democracy?

I will present a partial and inconclusive response to this question, which can only be fully answered based on an analysis of the developments in Brazilian political life in coming years. This dynamic has not ended, perhaps it is - as Berenice Bento observed (2017) – only beginning. Above all, the reaction to the expansion of sexual rights and to the vocabulary that justifies it can be seen as proof of its success, and not necessarily as a setback.

The image of an *unexpected wave* that threatens the legal conquests of groups who were until recently maintained in a limbo of

citizenship may be misleading. The idea that the groups that form them can be classified as “religious fundamentalists” may also be misleading, as Ronaldo Almeida (2017) has observed, which is a more accusatorial term than an analytical classification. A careful look at the recent conflicts also permits rejecting the simplistic vision of a battle between conservatives and progressists, right and left or even between religious and secular people. Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira (2018) shows that there are internal differences within religions and followers of some of them are engaged in struggles for recognition that involve the advance of sexual rights.

A plausible hypothesis is that at least some of those who adhere to fighting against what they call “gender ideology” associate it to various threats reacting to a phantom that was presented to them by opportunistic moral entrepreneurs. Those who fear changes caused by the expansion of sexual rights and see it embodied, for example, in Judith Butler, react to the specter of “gender ideology” that is disseminated by interest groups that may even have objectives that are different than their own. We must have the sociological caution to distinguish those who are reacting with panic from those who have created the specter that feeds this panic.

In this sense, only a historical reconstitution of international developments will allow a clearer understanding of what is taking place in Brazil today. To do so, I begin by seeking to identify the main interest groups that created the specter by disseminating the panic that allows them to organize the crusade against what they baptize as “gender ideology”.

#### A brief genealogy of the crusade against “gender ideology”

Various researchers have documented evidence that some twenty years ago a reaction was forged against the use of the concept of gender in international human rights agreements. Most 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.

In 1996, the pro-life militant Dale O'Leary, who participated in the UN's Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994) and the Women's Conference in Beijing (1995), published the book *Gender Agenda* in which she accuses the United Nations of adopting a gender perspective in public policies (Junqueira, 2017). As Sônia Corrêa (2017) observes, 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 would contradict Catholicism and introduced what he defined as a new anthropology, that is, a new definition of the human (Miskolci; Campana, 2017:726). It was in 1998 that the specter began to be disseminated at the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church of Peru, whose theme verbalized the notion: "Gender ideology: its dangers and scope" (cf. Furlani, 2016).

Sônia Corrêa (2017) affirms that the use of the concept of gender in international agreements represented a dual movement that was of concern to the Vatican: the concept of gender brought to the human rights agenda demands involving sexuality, in particular from homosexuals, and also attested to an autonomy in relation to Rome of the group of more than 70 countries that formed the block of the Global South, an autonomy led by Brazil and Mexico. Moreover, these facts could be read as the indication of a geopolitical shift in the discussions about sexual and reproductive rights from the United States and Europe to Latin America, which helps understand the resignation of Ratzinger and the election of a Latin American pope in 2013.

In an article published in the journal *Sociedade e Estado*, Maximiliano Campana and I sought to reconstitute how the dissemination of the notion of gender ideology can be associated to the expansion of sexual and reproductive rights in Latin America, marked by the Document of Aparecida, of 2007, which was the result of the V General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin America and the Caribbean, which expressed concern for homosexuals demands

for citizenship.<sup>1</sup> But the true point of inflexion and what triggered the moral 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 Argentina, in 2010 and a year later in Brazil.

Nearly one week after Brazil’s Federal Supreme Court recognized the legal union of same-sex couples, federal congressman Jair Bolsonaro led a movement against educational materials that were to be distributed in schools to confront discrimination and violence against homosexuals, bisexuals, transvestites and transsexuals. Dubbing the material the “gay kit”, the congressman soon had support from the so-called Evangelical caucus, and less visibly, but in greater number, from Catholic and agnostic conservative congressional representatives. They constructed, according to Fernando F. Balieiro (2018), the image of a threatened child, a successful strategy that gained considerable media attention and President Dilma Rousseff’s veto to distribution of the material. Above all, they forged a movement against the advance of sexual and reproductive rights in congress.

The Evangelical’s interest, particularly from Neo-charismatics, in taking a lead role in the majority Catholic congress, caused the media to give the impression that it was only Evangelicals who evoked the specter, at that time, of a supposed homosexual danger. This spirit gained greater strength when unions of people of the same-sex gained a legal equivalence with marriage, in 2013, the year in which – not by chance – the Rousseff government allowed the presidency of the congressional human rights commission to be transferred to Pastor Marcos Feliciano. In the same year, deputy Anderson Ferreira (PR-PE) presented proposed law 6583/2013 proposing the Family Statute.

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<sup>1</sup> In the article cited, we historically reconstitute where tensions arose between the State and the Catholic Church in Latin America and explore how the arrival of the first women to the presidency in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica may have contributed to the emergence of campaigns against abortion and homosexual rights.

According to Luis Felipe Miguel (2016), it was in 2014, during the debates about a National Education Plan, that the Non-Partisan School Movement (*Escola sem Partido*), a previously barely known association, which had been created in 2004 to combat what it defined as "Marxist doctrine" in schools – and at the time closer to the neoliberal economic agenda of the Instituto Millenium – came to adopt as its target the so-called "gender ideology" and its agenda was increasingly joined by various political groups. Then in 2015, a year in which states and municipalities discussed their educational plans, lay people, Evangelicals (Neo-charismatics or not) and Catholics joined them and disseminated the specter of "gender ideology" as a supposed threat to children and the Brazilian family.

Thus, it was by means of the discussion of educational plans throughout the country that the specter spread throughout Brazil – and contrary to what was reported in most of the media – less by means of Neo-charismatic leaders than by Catholics and lay people. Moral entrepreneurs leading various interest groups joined to react to the advance of sexual rights, in particular to bar the struggle against homophobia in schools and the recognition of gender diversity. Their alliance, which has circumstantial characteristics, probable internal divergences and even objectives that go far beyond combatting what they call "gender ideology", unquestionably launched a moral crusade that was based on a single discursive field of action.

Sonia E. Alvarez (2014) denominates as a discursive field of action the political-cultural concerns shared by various groups and that delimit their practices even if their diagnoses about the same issue are different. In the case addressed here, it is possible to comprehend "gender ideology" as a shared reference, despite various diagnoses about what it means and the reasons for which it should be fought. If for the Catholic Church it represents a theoretical and political line that questions its hegemony in international forums; for other religious political activists it is a notion that threatens idealized concepts of the family and its social role; and for agnostics with right wing political or economic interests it represents a hidden agenda of "Marxist" indoctrination.

The specter of “gender ideology” marks a discursive field of action that we can recognize as imaginarily joining a supposed threat of return of Communism to feminist academic thinking, establishing a framing of politics around a fear of changes in the order of relations between men and women, and above all, of the extension of rights to homosexuals. Macro-political discussions have been substituted by a rhetoric that brings to public opinion the diagnosis that social problems originate from behavioral changes that must be fought.

#### Gender: the “contagious word” and sexual rights

In this discursive field of action that is based on fear and performed as a moral crusade against so-called “gender ideology”, politics understood as an agonistic dialog –perspectives that are divergent but have common purposes – is transmuted in a war that can only end with the elimination of the adversary understood to be an enemy, which in this case is a type of deceitful doctrine that threatens the Brazilian family. What is it these groups present as a Mephistophelean danger to be avoided, or worse, combat? Judging by the messages that circulate on social media,<sup>2</sup> on protest posters in legislative chambers at the time of discussions of education plans or even against Butler’s presence in Brazil in late 2017, they were ideas linked in the concept of gender, which effectively open discursive conditions for seeking equal rights for people who remain in the limbo of citizenship because of their gender or sexual orientation.

Discourse has the power to delimit social practices such as the recognition of differences or their rejection. The rejection can be direct and explicit, like a prohibition, but as in the struggle to erase the term gender from educational plans, the current repulsion to differences tends to take place more by making invisible the subjects who embody them. Presenting or not an inclusionary vocabulary is not only a

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<sup>2</sup> There are sources like the observatory Manchetrômetro [Headline Meter] of the IESP-UERJ which allows weekly accompaniment of the most shared posts on social networks, among which have stood out those from politicians with a religious electoral base. See [www.manchetrometo.com.br](http://www.manchetrometo.com.br)

question of a cultural order understood to be separated from the "real". To have words for positively understanding oneself or not generates concrete consequences for subjects in daily life. Censorship of the term gender in educational plans – like others such as gender identity – is not a mere semantic issue, but a deliberate action to impede learning about the means for demanding equality and autonomy by the part of women as well as fundamental rights such as safety and respect for life itself in the case of homosexuals, trans people and others.

Butler, in an article in the late 1990s, entitled "Contagious Word", discussed a policy of the armed forces during the government of President Bill Clinton, accepted homosexuals as long as they did not openly declare themselves to be so. This was the so-called *Don't ask, don't tell* policy. Upon analyzing the rejection of the use of the word "homosexual" in that context Butler helps us to decipher our own context. What does a moral crusade against a concept, that of "gender", reveal to us about part of our society? At a time when homosexualities gain visibility and rights and even their rejection is not preponderant,<sup>3</sup> the crusade examined here seeks to suppress them from documents. That is, it is as a continued reaction to the approval of gay marriage in Brazil that these groups seek to restore the image of homosexuality as a supposed threat to "social cohesion".<sup>4</sup>

For moral entrepreneurs and their followers, social cohesion is inseparable from the repression and regulation of desire. Among them, the sense of social solidarity emerges from the sublimation of homosexuality, and establishes a sense of guilt as a community tie. This guilt is based on prohibition, which takes the place of desire and

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<sup>3</sup> Prandi and Santos (2017:194), based on a study by the Pew Research Center conducted in 2013, show that 39% of Brazilians consider homosexuality to be morally unacceptable while a study by DataFolha in 2014 found that only 27.4% of voters nationwide believed that "homosexuality should be discouraged by all of society".

<sup>4</sup> Prandi and Santos indicate an increase in support for same-sex marriage in Brazil from 1997, when it was 38%, to 2014 when it reached 56.7%. But beyond the considerable one-third of voters who reject gay marriage, 48% were against homosexual couples adopting children (2017:195).



its satisfaction, given that repression is part of the libidinal economy in such a way that, in Butler's words, "The prohibition does not seek the obliteration of prohibited desire; on the contrary; prohibition pursued the reproduction of the prohibited desire" (1997:117). In other words, the struggle to eliminate a term, gender, becomes self-referent and disseminates it, generating a social and psychic circuit of interdiction that intensifies desire. Thus, the paranoia over homosexuality creates "the social" from the inside out in the persecution of a specter from which they are unable to be freed.

What would be the fear that feeds the moral crusade against a word, recently incarnated and persecuted through the person of one of the most important intellectuals of our time? It is possibly the fear that people like homosexuals speak in their own name, which would be an infraction of divine law or of the social order as moral entrepreneurs understand it – in an authoritarian manner. In the vision of these groups, homosexuals, women, 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 moral crusade rejects and reacts to changes in power relations under the disguise of the defense of the family, in reality a domestic arrangement understood by these groups in a way that has little to do with Brazil's sociodemographic reality. 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.

Luis Felipe Miguel emphasizes that the alliance between defenders of the market against the State (led in Brazil by the Instituto Millenium), those who struggle against the Political Left (such as the Movimento Brasil Livre) and those who are engaged in the defense of the family and children (who have among their sources of support Escola sem Partido/The Non-Partisan School Movement) create a "*sui generis* program, according to which the state should abstain from

interfering in economic relations and from providing services, but strongly regulate private life" (2016:594). This phenomenon attests to the current Brazilian situation of criminalization of politics and its reduction to a moral agenda aimed at policing behavior.

Is this moral crusade opposed to human rights? The majority of the religious leaders and their followers are against the death penalty, but tend to support reducing the age at which youths can face criminal charges as adults (Prandi; Santos, 2017). Thus, perhaps it is more accurate to affirm that they constitute groups with diverging views on human rights and their scope.<sup>5</sup> As said previously, the religious political activists dispute the definition of human rights, and thus, try to set the limits of what would be "human", defining what lives can be lived and which will remain outside of legal equality. Indirectly, their action against the term "gender" keeps many people outside their vision and consciousness. Thus, to ignore them relegates them to prejudice and discrimination and at the extreme, to violence and death.

The phantom of "gender ideology" has helped boost adhesion to interest groups that defend agendas that represent the first great setbacks in matters of citizenship since the enactment of Brazil's Constitution of 1988.<sup>6</sup> These include the mentioned censure of the word gender in educational plans, sweeping labor law reform, an attempt to make norms against slave labor more flexible, the proposals for "gag laws" to persecutions of intellectual and artistic work and of teaching that mark recent years.

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<sup>5</sup> Many make strategic use of the human rights discourse. The best example is the use of chapter 12 of the American Human Rights Convention of 1969, by the Non-Partisan School Movement, which uses it in extrajudicial notifications against teachers who they accuse of "indoctrination".

<sup>6</sup> Future studies will have to explore the role of social media in the configuration of the campaign against sexual and reproductive rights 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, disseminating forms of behavioral vigilance. About this field of investigation see Miskolci, 2016.

Despite its format as a crusade, the campaign cannot simply be attributed to religious fundamentalists or be characterized by the homogeneity of its members, but first by the hunt for a specter in which various interests groups that are circumstantially joined see enemies considered their prey. The heterogeneity of the agents that range from the Catholic Church to Neo-charismatic Evangelical leaders and lay defenders of economic liberalism, as well as objectives that range from the dispute for the control of public policies, parliamentary commissions or to electoral niches, do not prevent their articulated action from being quite successful. The reasons for this are related to the time in which the alliance has formed in Brazil.

Since 2014, we live in a period marked by corruption scandals, judicial operations against politicians and parties and the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff. The criminalization of politics may have been the factor most responsible for: 1. Strengthening interest groups with a moral agenda (religious or not) in the public sphere and in particular in politics and 2. the rise of the discursive field of action around sexual and reproductive rights – re-baptized by the moral entrepreneurs as “gender ideology”- as a delimiter of disputes over rights and public policies. As a whole, these inflections create ground that has been propitious for actors with a neoliberal political and economic agenda to join with historic moral entrepreneurs (such as the Catholic Church and followers of Evangelical religions) reinforcing the campaign against the advance of sexual and reproductive rights.

In response to the initial question, the historic evidence indicates that we are living in a period of intensified disputes between established groups and those that demand recognition and rights, which, however, did not appear like lightning in a blue sky. The current moral crusade had gestated for nearly two decades until it emerged between 2011 and 2013 and gained strength in 2014 in the continuous work of interest groups that, since then, have acted as moral entrepreneurs in their communities that are disappointed with politicians, stricken by the economic crisis and unemployment and, therefore, weakened and scared, inured to phantasmal explanations

for real problems. Under the command of fear, authoritarian groups engender hate and persecutory actions, for which reason it is necessary to dissipate the specter of "gender ideology" upon which they support themselves by bringing to light the fact that they seek to maintain as second class citizens the men and women that the concept of gender welcomes within that of the human, in order to guarantee their legal equality, safety and right to life.

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