

"GENDER IDEOLOGY" AND THE RISE OF THE RADICAL RIGHT. A GLOBAL PHENOMENON WITH LOCAL PECULIARITIES.

"Ideologia De Gênero" E a Ascensão da Direita Radical. Um Fenômeno Global Com Peculiaridades Locais.

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Abstract

In this paper, I will discuss the role of "gender ideology" as a key element of the construction of field of adversity of the political radical right, with special emphasis on the case of South America. To do so, I will try to define first the main features of the radical right. Then, I will analyze regional and ideological specificities of the radical right and its links with anti-gender movements. Hence, I will try to historicize how the denunciation of gender ideology has become a key element of the cultural battle of religious activism and later of the radical right. Although there is no simple identification between anti-gender movements and the far right, many scholars have identified similar patterns of development and opportunistic synergies between them. More importantly, the attack on feminist and LGBTQI activism has become a key element for the articulation of different streams of the radical right, enabling forms of political cooperation between them. Therefore, I consider that the construction of gender ideology as an absolute enemy has had a strategic role for the rise of the radical right that we are experiencing in different geographies and that these developments are threatening liberal democracy.

Keywords: Gender ideology, radical right, cultural battle, anti-gender movements, South America

Resumo

Neste artigo, discutirei o papel da "ideologia de gênero" como um elemento-chave da construção do campo de adversidade da direita radical política, com ênfase especial no caso da



América do Sul. Para isso, tentarei definir primeiro as principais características da direita radical. Em seguida, analisarei as especificidades regionais e ideológicas da direita radical e seus vínculos com os movimentos antigênero. Assim, tentarei historicizar como a denúncia da ideologia de gênero se tornou um elemento-chave da batalha cultural do ativismo religioso e, posteriormente, da direita radical. Embora não haja uma identificação simples entre os movimentos antigênero e a extrema direita, muitos estudiosos identificaram padrões semelhantes de desenvolvimento e sinergias oportunistas entre eles. Mais importante ainda, o ataque ao ativismo feminista e LGBTQI tornou-se um elemento-chave para a articulação de diferentes correntes da direita radical, possibilitando formas de cooperação política entre elas. Portanto, considero que a construção da ideologia de gênero como um inimigo absoluto teve um papel estratégico para a ascensão da direita radical que estamos vivenciando em diferentes geografias e que esses desenvolvimentos estão ameaçando a democracia liberal.

Palavras-chave: Ideologia de gênero, direita radical, batalha cultural, movimentos antigênero, América do Sul

Introduction

In this paper, I delve into the intricate dynamics surrounding the concept of “gender ideology” and its pivotal role in shaping the landscape of political radical right movements, with a specific focus on the South American context. I begin by establishing a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental characteristics of the far right in general and the radical right in particular. Within the latter, I distinguish between authoritarian neoliberals and social identitarians. Subsequently, my analysis seeks to unravel the regional and ideological nuances inherent in the radical right and its intersections with anti-gender movements. An essential aspect of my inquiry involves tracing the historical trajectory wherein the denunciation of gender ideology has evolved into a central element within the cultural battleground of religious activism and, subsequently, of the radical right. While acknowledging that the alignment between anti-gender movements and the far right is not a straightforward identification, numerous scholars have discerned analogous developmental patterns and opportunistic synergies between them. Then, I examine how the attacks directed at feminist and LGBTQI activism have enabled the emergence of a unified front, fostering



collaboration among diverse streams within the radical right. Despite the geopolitical and ideological differences between different members of the radical right universe that I analyze in the paper, I try to show that the vehement opposition to gender ideology assumes a strategic role in the rise of the radical right across various geographical landscapes, posing a substantial threat to the foundations of liberal democracy.

1. The rise of the radical right

In recent years, there has been a debate about the electoral growth and political demarginalization of new far-right political movements and parties. (Mudde, 2019). Within the far right, Cas Mudde distinguishes the extreme right from the radical right. While “the extreme right rejects the essence of democracy, that is, popular sovereignty and majority rule” the “radical right accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers” (Mudde 2019, “Terminology”). This is the political right-wing that is on the rise today. It combines nationalism, nativism, authoritarianism, xenophobia, misogyny, etc. but without glorifying the fascist past or claiming to expel foreigners, except illegal ones (García Olascoaga 2018). In this sense, we are witnessing not so much a new wave of neo-fascism, but rather “the mainstreaming and normalization of the far right in general, and the populist radical right in particular” (Mudde 2019, Introduction). For example, only three or four decades ago, the emergence in Europe of leaders or parties with a xenophobic or anti-immigration discourse and platform was a cause for scandal, protests, and even international boycott campaigns, as happened with Austria in 1999 when Haider’s FPÖ formed part of the Popular’s Party (ÖVP) government. Twenty years later, not only those previously marginalized parties take part of governing coalitions in different countries but also set the agenda of the traditional center-right parties. In part, this is due to the combination of the social consequences of neoliberal policies and the overwhelming presence of “cultural wars”. In this



sense, Mudde (2019) argues that if the extreme right has been a normal pathology of liberal democracies—a pre-modern phenomenon of a minority disconnected from reality—the centrality of the radical right is a pathological normalcy, as it represents an authoritarian radicalization of the values of the prevailing political system.

This radical right is often populist in the sense of proposing itself as a genuine expression of the people in the face of corrupt elites (both political and economic), who—according to this discourse—only seek their own benefit and corrupt the nation with their postmodern, progressive ideas or their “cultural Marxism” (Mudde 2019). At the same time, it tends to advocate an ethnocracy, closing borders to immigrants and accepting only those foreigners who manage to assimilate culturally. This gives rise in Europe and the United States to a strong Islamophobia, since, according to these new rightists, Muslims seek to destroy Western culture and replace the white population—as we will see, they will say something similar of gender activism. This xenophobia is reinforced by an obsession with security, the absence of which is associated with the presence of foreigners—who are accused of being criminals. Both in Europe and the Americas, immigrants are accused of crime, stealing jobs to locals and free riding in the use of public services and the Welfare System.

In terms of foreign policy, the far-right distrusts supranational organizations, such as the United Nations or the European Union, accusing “globalist elites” of disregarding the sovereignty of nations. Likewise, religion plays a fundamental role in many of these groups, as another way of separating ‘us’ from ‘them’ and of rescuing the true values of the nation in the face of discourses that question the hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, or nation. Usually, these movements are authoritarian to the extent that for them even personal problems are perceived as “essentially law-and-order issues which can only be countered by a tough punitive approach and prevented by reintroducing “moral” or “traditional” education in schools”. (Mudde 2019, “Ideology”).



The mainstreaming of the radical right can also be exemplified by biographical and political trajectories. For example, in Eastern Europe, the Law and Justice (Poland) and Fidesz (Hungary) governments have shifted from liberal conservatism to the radical populist right. In the process, they have undermined the division of powers, an independent judiciary and press, a professional civil service and non-party aligned cultural and educational institutions, and the possibility of expression of political dissent. Despite the limited presence of foreigners and LGBTQI activism in their countries, they have promoted Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and the fight against the left and the LGTBQI movement. In Argentina, the center-right political alliance called *Cambiamos*, won the 2015 election with a liberal-conservative discourse. However, it became more and more punitive when the economic crisis gained strength, especially after 2018. Today, they have allied with the paleolibertarian president Javier Milei, who attacks Unions, feminist and LGBTQI movements, and progressives in general. The president since December 10th, 2023, who was saluted by far-right leaders in his inauguration and ignored by the main geopolitical powers, in his first week in government has sent a decree that derogate or modify more than 300 laws. Soon afterwards, he has sent an omnibus reform package to the Congress that seeks to reform the functioning of the state and society in its totality, including legislative delegations to the National Executive Power of public emergency in economic, financial, fiscal, social, social security, security, defense, tariff, energy, sanitary and social matters for two and possibly four years. Both measures show the intention to transform a liberal democratic Republic in a sort of Autocracy.

Now, although the political centrality of socio-cultural aspects has given impetus to the various far-right currents, there are programmatic differences within the radical right in the socio-economic field. While the right in the U.S. and Latin America has been neoliberal by default, the new right-wing populist parties in Western Europe often adopt welfare chauvinist positions. Indeed, the radical right can be divided into a sector that questions elements of global neoliberal capitalism—but does not modify them when it has the opportunity, as in the case of Fidesz, the



Five Stars Movement of Italy (M5S), etc.—and an ultra-liberal radical right, as in the case of Trumpism, Bolsonaroism, Vox, The FPÖ, La Libertad Avanza, etc. These authoritarian-neoliberals combine:

... a fierce defense of the free market and the development of unrestrained capitalism, with reactionary moral values... recovery of religion in its most fundamentalist versions, as the governing body of society, total reform of mores, hostile positions towards immigration and minorities, hatred of feminism, rejection of abortion and the LGBT movement. (Ramas San Miguel 2019, 72, my translation)

On the other hand, social identitarians incorporate elements of traditional anti-modern and anti-liberal conservatism mixed with the defense of Welfare and redistributive policies for those who are considered legitimate national citizens—which excludes immigrants. Although these currents criticize the financialized global economy, they do not address the root causes of the economic crisis and social unrest but seek to scapegoat immigrants, progressives, LGBTQI activists, undeserving poor, etc.

In that framework, the notion of “gender ideology” has become a key issue of the radical right’s cultural battle. However, it wasn’t right wing activists who invented this notion. It originated in the catholic fight against the deconstruction of gender and the enhancement of sexual and reproductive rights to later be adopted by rightists as the epitome of ‘cultural marxism’.

2. The Catholic roots of the term “gender ideology”

To understand the meaning of “gender ideology” in the radical right’s discourse, let me make a brief genealogy of the term, which can be characterized as an empty signifier (Laclau 2004) given its centrality in the struggle for political and cultural hegemony in our societies. It emerged



within the Catholic Church and then was adopted by the discourses of other religious congregations and conservative movements and by the new radical right.

The origin of the term “gender ideology” is usually placed as the Vatican’s response to the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, when the term “gender” entered the vocabulary of the United Nations in relation to claims linked to sexual and reproductive rights. The following year, dozens of “experts” were assembled by the Vatican to launch a counter-offensive aimed at reaffirming Catholic doctrine and the naturalization of the sexual order (Diniz Junqueira 2018).¹

As Corredor puts it:

In the aftermath of the Beijing Conference, the Holy See accelerated its attack on feminist and LGBTQ efforts by developing more robust counterstrategies. Its leading tactic was to manufacture gender ideology terminology and couple it with provocative rhetoric that exploits deep divisions within feminist and LGBTQ movements. (Corredor 2019, 625-626)

Although from an Eastern-European perspective Eszter Kovats (2022) opposes the generalization of the idea of cultural backlash, in most cases anti-gender campaigns and the very notion of “gender ideology” have a strong component of reaction against the growing importance of the feminist movement and the conquests in terms of sexual and reproductive rights. (Biroli 2020; Gago 2019; Butler 2021)

In 1994, Christina Hoff Sommers, an anti-feminist essayist and professor of philosophy at Clark University, published *Who Stole Feminism? How women have betrayed women*. In that

¹ Morán Faúndes (2019) shows that many of these ideas were already being discussed in Argentina, especially after a Women’s Conference held in Mar del Plata in 1994.



book, she attacked what she called “gender feminism”: an “ideological” feminism that, instead of seeking to achieve equal rights between men and women, interpreted historical gender-based inequalities in terms of antagonism, speaking of “patriarchy,” “male hegemony,” sex-gender system, etc. The book had a great diffusion and repercussion, to the point that it continues to be quoted by anti-gender authors, especially in South America.

At that time, Dale O’Leary, a journalist linked to Opus Dei and entities that performed therapies to “cure homosexuality”, put into circulation the notion of “gender agenda” as a neocolonial tool of an international feminist conspiracy (Gago, 2019) that sought to impose itself on the different countries through the United Nations. In *Gender Agenda* (1997), the writer recovers Hoff Sommers’ critique of “gender feminists” as Marxist-inspired and promoters of an “ideology” that does not respect biological differences, calls for a “gender war”, affirms the social construction of sexual roles with the aim of “abolishing human nature” and prevents the primary mission of women in the sphere of education and care. In the conclusions of her book O’Leary maintained:

The UN is inhabited by people who believe that what the world needs is: 1) Fewer people 2) More sexual pleasure 3) The elimination of differences between men and women 4) No full-time mothers. These people recognize that increasing sexual pleasure could increase the number of babies and mothers. Therefore, their recipe for the salvation of the world is: 1) Free contraception and legal abortions 2) Promotion of homosexuality (sex without babies) 3) Sex education courses, encouraging sexual experimentation among children; teaching them how to get contraceptives and abortions, that homosexuality is normal, and that men and women are equal. 4) The elimination of parental rights so that parents cannot stop their children from having sex, sex education, contraception or abortion 5) Fifty/fifty, male/female quotas 6) All women in the workforce 7) Discredit all religions that oppose this agenda. This is the “gender perspective” and they want it integrated into all programs, at all levels and in all countries. [. . .] The Gender Agenda cannot be defeated until people are willing to stand up and say, “No more inclusive



language, no more politically correct speech.” We must refuse to say “gender” when we mean “sex.” Those who are offended by reality and human nature will have to live with it.²

That same year, Belgian Monsignor Michel Schooyans published the book *L'Évangile face au désordre mondial* (1997), prefaced by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who at the time was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In addition to his criticisms of abortion and the use of contraceptives, this bishop accused international organizations of drifting to the interests of subversive minorities promoting an anti-family culture, “sexual colonialism” and the “ideology of death”. His contributions were fundamental for the formulation of the idea of a “gender ideology” formulated by “ultra-feminists” and as an inaugural moment of the anti-gender crusades. (Junqueira 2018)

It was precisely Pope John Paul II “ho spoke of a culture of death (which favored abortion, divorce, contraception, recreational sex, or dissident sexualities) as opposed to the culture of life that the Church sought to defend. The polish pope’s writings on Women’s Dignity also propose a shift from earlier ideas of the subordination of women to men, towards the complementarity of men and women (Case 2016). These essentialist ideas build the foundation for all argumentations against the critical and constructivist contents of the concept of gender, gender equality issues or homosexuality (Kovats 2021).

Recovering the notion of gender feminism put forward by Hoff Sommers, the Vatican has been seeking to separate legitimate and illegitimate forms of feminism. The latter are described as antiscientific and totalitarian, promoting constructivist views of gender and the idea of the traditional family as an institution that enslaves women.

² It is noteworthy how this denunciation and program will be adopted by the radical right.



But it wasn't until April 1998 that the term "gender ideology" appeared for the first time in an ecclesiastical document. It was a note from the Episcopal Conference of Peru, entitled "Gender ideology: its dangers and scope", written by the ultra-conservative Monsignor Oscar Alzamora Revoredo, auxiliary bishop of Lima. Alzamora recovers O'Leary's arguments, insisting on the biological difference between the sexes, while "gender ideology" seeks to make any type of sexual practice acceptable.

Shortly afterwards, the term "gender ideology" appeared for the first time in a document of the Roman Curia, with the publication of *Family, marriage and "de facto unions"* of July 26, 2000, by the Pontifical Council for the Family, which affirmed that this ideology seeks to destroy the family and to make society adapt to practices such as homosexuality and not the other way around. The document denounces that the idea of gender would give family status to de facto unions, even homosexual ones, undermining the sacredness of the family.

At that time, the Church published *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* (2003) and *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and World* (2004). In the Lexicon's entry on gender, Judith Butler is accused of decoupling sex from gender, allowing the proliferation of the latter, and it also traces an affinity "between gender ideology and an "individualistic anthropology of radical neoliberalism." (Gago, 2019) Since then, "gender ideology" has become not simply a term to analyze what happened at the United Nations, but also a Catholic strategy for action in the struggle for cultural hegemony. In that framework, "gender ideology" is depicted as a virulent theory designed to disaggregate sex from gender and destroy the family unit through "procured abortion [...] homosexuality, lesbianism, and all other forms of sexuality outside marriage)."Equity feminism," on the other hand, refers to a strand of feminism that seeks moral and legal equality and conceives the status of women in the world as improving. This use of the word "equity" is important to note. As witnessed in Beijing, the Vatican perceives "equality" as a term that



diminishes essential biological differences between sexes and one that implies sameness between men and women. Dividing feminism serves to position the Church within the benevolence of equity feminism while distancing itself from pernicious forms of gender feminism and radical gender ideology. It also capitalizes on the debates within feminism regarding sameness, difference, and equality among the sexes. By dividing feminism into opposing camps, the Vatican also carves out space that enables it to selectively support certain feminist agendas (e.g., antipoverty and antiviolence) while rejecting feminist views that challenge its official stance on gender, sexuality, and the family.

In this framework, Pope Francis follows the line of his predecessors and adds one more element to it: gender is now portrayed as a weapon for ideological or *cultural colonization* (Correa, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). The Pope of the South, which many liberal-conservatives have accused of holding communist ideas, coincides here with the view of the radical right. In effect, “gender ideology”, which puts the family at risk, is described as a threat to Human Rights and as an imposition of Western imperialism and cultural colonialism that is detrimental to the sovereignty of the peoples. At the same time, his discourse denounces that this ideology is the result of individualistic tendencies and the “technocratic materialism” of neoliberal capitalism, which includes abortion as part of its “throwaway culture” (Vaggione 2020, 256)). This association is directly juxtaposed with another one that links gender ideology with a neo-Marxist current that was at the origins of the term, and which we see repeated ad nauseam in the texts of emblematic intellectuals of the anti-gender Latin-American right-wing (*Ibidem*).

Hence the importance of stressing the Catholic origins of this fight against “gender ideology” which will later be taken up by conservative and reactionary social, political, and intellectual sectors. For them, gender ideology is an enemy to be fought since it poses a threat to the moral and legal order they support.



2.1. “Gender ideology” in South America

Anti-gender ideas developed very quickly in South America. In fact, after a Conference held in Mar del Plata (Argentina) in 1994, previous to the Beijing Conference, Cristina González de Delgado writes a report that questions the denaturalization and deconstruction of gender. In 1995, she participates in the publication of the book *La mujer hoy. Después de Pekín* (1995) (*The woman today. After Beijing*), co-written with priests and neo-conservative civil society activists such as Jorge Scala and Marta Siebert, who will be influential in the opposition to gender theory and politics. (Morán Faúndes 2019). However, as I have already mentioned, the term “gender ideology” appears for the first time in 1998 in a document of the Peruvian Episcopal Conference which denounces that behind the concept of gender there is an individualistic ideology where anything is allowed. The opposition to sexual and reproductive rights and comprehensive sexual education play a central role in this denunciation.

Gradually, “gender ideology” was incorporated into official documents and public statements of the Catholic hierarchy in Latin America. At present, it is referred to in declarations of the Episcopal Conferences of several countries on issues such as sex education, gender identity, the rights of same-sex couples and abortion. (Vaggione 2020, 259).

A key moment in this expansion was the incorporation in 2007 of the term in the Conclusive Document of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops (CELAM). The document states that: ‘Among the premises that weaken and undermine family life is the ideology of gender, according to which each person can choose his or her sexual orientation, without taking into account the differences imposed by human nature’. Furthermore, the document considers that this ideology is responsible for a series of legal reforms that “seriously harm the dignity of marriage, respect for the right to life and the identity of the family” (CELAM 2007, 40), insofar as these reforms set aside the common good to give way “to the creation of new, and often arbitrary, individual rights” (CELAM 2007, 44 apud Vaggione 2020, 259)



In this framework, the notion of “gender ideology” enabled the alliance between Catholics and Evangelicals, something unthinkable decades ago, giving rise to a Christian activism where the defense of the nation appears as a limit to the imperialist tendencies of “gender ideology”. (Vaggione 2020, 260)

For instance, Jorge Scala, whose arguments were widely used in the parliamentary debates on Abortion that took place in Argentina in 2018 and 2020, has published multiple works warning about the need to defend human rights against “Marxist, feminist and homosexual sectors that use them to obtain privileges”. According to this author, human rights are the main strategy to impose gender ideology all over the world... (Vaggione 2020, 261). Indeed, these ideas echo a broader framework where “anti-gender ideology as a construct that threatens traditional families is the master frame that seals alliances between movements not only against abortion policies but also against same-sex marriage, sex education in schools, the gender approach in public policies, as well as the entire LGBTIQ+ agenda” (Machado, Defago and Malca 2022, 20). In that framework, the claims of feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements are denounced as “cultural Marxism”, a new Marxism that no longer aims to transform economic structures, but culture, including family structure, gender identities and sexuality (Morán Faúndes, 2019). Hence, the discourse of “gender ideology” emerges a series of moral panics associated with sexuality and gender, and even the specter of communism, in a rhetoric that recalls the logic of the Cold War. (Machado, Defago and Malca 2022, 20).

As Corredor (2019) states,

“gender ideology” can thus be conceptualized as a rhetorical counterstrategy that aims, first, to refute claims concerning the hierarchical construction of the raced, gendered and heterosexual order; second, to essentialize and delegitimize feminist and queer theories of gender; third, to frustrate global and local gender mainstreaming efforts; fourth, to thwart gender and LGBTQ



equality policies; and finally to reaffirm heteropatriarchal conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality. (2019, 616)

3. From religion to politics: the role of “gender ideology” in the discourse of the radical right.

As Kovats and Poim (2015) have pointed out, “gender ideology” has become a symbolic glue that assembles different right-wing and conservative movements that otherwise would not collaborate between them. In the same sense, Graff and Korolczuk maintain that there is an opportunistic synergy between right-wing populisms and anti-gender movements: “Opposition to “gender” has become a key element of the rise of right-wing populism, which successfully harnesses the anxiety, shame and anger caused by neoliberalism, and threatens to destroy liberal democracy”. (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, front cover)

As Kovats points out,

Anti-gender politics is a global phenomenon of the 2010s, with roots in the 1990s and 2000s (Kuhar/Paternotte 2017). Reproductive rights, violence against women, sexual education, LGBT issues, gender mainstreaming, gender studies, supranational organisations (like UN, EU or WHO) and treaties (like the Istanbul Convention) are targeted by social movements and right-wing populist parties. Some of these are old issues (like abortion), others are new (like attacking gender studies). What connects them, is, that they are now contested for being representative of ‘gender ideology’, ‘genderism’, and represent a global conspiracy to destroy the human civilisation. (Kovats 2021, 78)

According to Graff and Korolczuk, what sets present-day anti-gender campaigns apart from earlier forms of backlash is not just their focus on the term “gender,” but also their close



relationship to right-wing populism. They maintain that “contemporary anti-gender discourse is structured as a populist discourse, in that it persistently juxtaposes innocent, gender-conservative people, whom it claims to represent, against corrupt, immoral elites who are accused of spreading “gender ideology.” Anti-gender actors consistently position themselves as warriors for justice and defenders of ordinary people against the corporate greed of global capital”. (Graff & Korolczuk 2022, 7)

In many locations, populist right-wing parties have allied themselves with ultraconservative religious actors and embraced anti-gender rhetoric in order to enhance their popular appeal as defenders of the common people against the depraved elites. In fact, “anti-gender rhetoric is used by mainstream populist right parties, providing them with a mechanism of social polarization and in some cases helping them into power” (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022: 8). This “opportunistic synergy” benefits both sides: anti-gender activism has helped populists into power, and, in return, “anti-gender actors gained substantial access to money, political institutions and decision-making processes” (Graff & Korolczuk 2022, 8) as we have witnessed recently in Poland and Brazil.

Although the use of the term “gender ideology” originated in the Catholic sphere, it now characterizes the politics of several countries in which a wave of neoconservative activism is developing. In Latin America, this struggle is being waged through different linked actors: factions of the Catholic and Evangelical hierarchies, pro-life/pro-family NGOs, journalists, influencers and anti-gender parties and politicians. (Ravecca et al., 2022) This movement, which transcends the religious-secular dichotomy, is changing the political map of the Latin American region and pushing “gender ideology” to the center of public debate. In that framework, right-wing populist parties use anti-gender ideology selectively and instrumentally in order to moralize political conflict and demonize political opponents. At the same time, economic crises and austerity measures have encouraged protests against gender ideology, not only in Europe but also in



America; these movements arise from discontent with the effects of neoliberalism and with “the corruption of the elites,” which resulted in the scapegoating of minorities and the spread of conspiracy theories (Gregis Estivalet and Dvoskin 2022). Furthermore, the pandemic and the communication through social networks by isolated individuals exposed to all kinds of fake news was a perfect scenario for presenting “gender ideology” as a conspiracy and a threat.

This confluence and intersection between anti-gender movements with strong religious roots and radical right-wing populisms has been observed globally in the last decade, as both claim to attack “corrupt elites” accused of following the globalist agenda and to defend innocent children and silent majorities against powerful lobbies that would seek to depopulate the planet through non-reproductive sexual practices (such as homosexuality, contraception, etc.) and, in the European case, replace the white population through immigration. This overlap provides a springboard for anti-genderists while fueling illiberal discourses and sentiments (Correa, Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018).

In Latin America, this term has become central in the last two decades, in the fights against the decriminalization of abortion, same-sex marriage or the possibility of adoption of children by same-sex couples, gender identity laws, reproductive health laws, and even policies that favor the prevention of unwanted pregnancies. In this context, the opposition to comprehensive sex education laws played a central role, denounced as attempts to take away from parents the monopoly on the values to be transmitted to their children and as a way of early sexualization of children, which in many cases was associated with pornography and even pedophilia. Indeed, the protection of children from the threats of gender ideology is one of the main aspects of this activism, which presents GI as a form of indoctrination. Thus, in Latin America there were several campaigns with the aim of denouncing the interference of this ideology in public policies and legal reforms. Indeed, as Graff and Korolczuk (2022) point out, anti-gender movements have been remarkably successful in converting culturally undervalued identities, such as the identity of a



parent, into a source of righteous anger and collective pride. Conservative movements such as *Escola Sem Partido* and *Con mis hijos no te metas* are good examples of religious and parents' movements that set an agenda that has been taken up by far-right political parties.

In Brazil, *Escola sem Partido* emerged as an initiative in the face of “ideological indoctrination” in schools, which later started the fight against gender ideology as a banner. The alliance between Catholics and Evangelicals, and the development of their lobbying and political advocacy strategies allowed them to veto gender issues in national and regional educational plans (Miguel, 2000). The work with right-wing think tanks strengthened their discourse and was reflected in ideas such as reducing the teaching profession to an act of instruction. Slogans such as “Meus filhos, minhas regras” (My children, my rules) reflected an anti-state reaction. The use of electronic media allowed broad mobilization, with low economic costs and high impact. (Serrano Amaya, 2017).

“*Con mis Hijos no te Metas*” originated in Peru in 2016 within evangelical churches and quickly spread to several countries where “gender ideology” was being denounced as a threat by conservatives. This campaign touts the slogan “don’t homosexualize our children” and uses the colors blue and pink to highlight the biological difference between boys and girls.

Another example that also highlights the transnational nature of this activism is an orange bus created by the Spanish organization Hazteoir, with the slogan: “Boys have penises and girls have vulvas. Don’t be fooled”. It circulated in several Latin American countries. In this context, education has become a key field of struggle, especially regarding comprehensive sex education. While this seeks to offer tools to children and teenagers so that they can make their own informed decisions and accept the different ways of experiencing sexuality, this ultraconservative activism prioritizes the rights and freedom of parents to make decisions about their children’s education and considers that teachers do not have the right to educate future citizens. At most, they can provide information about the functioning of the reproductive organs and sexually transmitted diseases. In



fact, the strategy used by these sectors, is not to refute arguments about gender from a moral, religious, or ideological point of view, but rather from a fundamentally scientific one. In this framework, they denounce as ideological the notion of gender proposed by post-structuralist and deconstructivist feminists. To the latter, they oppose the positivist logic of the biological sciences, which recognize the existence of a sexual dimorphism that is generated a few weeks into the life of the fetus (Laje, 2022).

At the same time, anti-gender NGOs use the term “gender ideology” to cause moral panics, spreading fake news such as the viral WhatsApp messages where it was told that in sex education classes they make children undress, touch each other and practice sexual positions or about the “gay kit” that Fernando Haddad (Workers Party candidate) was going to distribute in schools if he won the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections. For Junqueira (2016, 230), “gender ideology” is, therefore, a powerful slogan, which in many countries can ignite the political arena and trigger violent demonstrations against social policies, legal reforms and teaching activities aimed at promoting sexual and reproductive rights, as well as the promotion of gender equality, and the prevention of heterosexist violence and discrimination.

A regional peculiarity is that although opposition to “gender ideology” is key for the radical right, as the cases of Bolsonaro, Kast and Milei show, there have been also left-wing representatives who combined the improvement of the situation of women and LGBTQI people with a sexist and anti-gender discourse, like Correa, Chávez or Morales (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015).

On the other hand, anti-gender movements and campaigns, which are not exclusively religious, involve Catholics and Evangelicals, especially Neo-Pentecostals. If we take the case of Bolsonaro or Trump, neither of them came from the evangelical sectors most committed to the anti-gender crusade, but both have been recognized by them as key players in that struggle and have put the anti-gender agenda at the center of their campaigns, of their speeches and of their



public policies. In fact, the vindication of a provocative machismo has been constant throughout their political careers.

Another aspect to point out is that, if in the Americas the most influential currents that attack “gender ideology” are the paleolibertarian, neoliberal-authoritarian and conservative ones, in Eastern Europe, but also in countries such as Italy and France, the rejection of “gender ideology” is increasingly linked to political currents that promote welfare chauvinism. In both cases, a communitarian discourse is adopted, where gender theories and policies are seen alien to national, Western and Christian culture, as an imposition of the globalist, financial and academic elites, within the framework of a cultural battle that the left would have won so far. This anti-colonial dimension of the discourse of radical right-wing populisms is very strong in Eastern Europe where gender policies are seen as inspired by extreme individualism, consumerism, and the destruction of traditional social ties.

According to Graff and Korolczuk (2022), by focusing on the “natural family” and combining it with welfare chauvinist positions, the extreme right attracts mainstream audiences, while side-stepping explicit racism and ethno-nationalism. In former socialist countries, anti-genderism takes on a distinctly nationalist form: resistance to Western ideologies of gender equality is presented as a mark of national sovereignty and a chance to regain a rightful place in the moral geography of Europe.

In North and South America, the expansion of rights for women and for the LGTBIQ+ collective was possible during the prevalence of left-wing, “anti-neoliberal” governments. Therefore, the right-wing denounces the increase in bureaucracy, social spending, economic inefficiency, and moral dissolution, opposing social policies in general from a paleolibertarian or paleoconservative point of view. In this sense, right-wing influencers and politicians denounce that there is no gender politics without statism. On the contrary, in Europe right-wing populists usually maintain the need for the State to help families economically and encourage the birth rate of



nationals, to avoid the “great replacement” that would threaten white populations. What unites them in a right-wing populist discourse is that in both cases they speak on behalf of the common citizen who, according to them, is being victimized by elites who follow their own agenda and defend foreign interests. Hence, they seek to exclude the use of terms referring to “gender ideology” in public policies regarding issues such as sex education or violence against women.

As we can see, the term “gender ideology” has become detached from its Catholic origins and has become a signifier for those politicians facing the influence of the feminist and LGBTQI movements. These anti-gender politicians have begun to include the fight against “gender ideology” as part of their campaigns, legal initiatives, and public decisions, receiving electoral support from different sectors of the population. According to Vaggione:

Gender ideology has become a conceptual tool that, despite the absence of a clear definition (or perhaps because of this absence), provides an effective framework for capturing (while reducing) the complex politics of feminist and LGBTQI movements. According to this framework, these movements actively seek to impose an agenda contrary to scientific rationality and Christian values. At the same time, the struggle against “gender ideology” has become a political tool that demands public action to defend a series of values, such as family, life, national sovereignty and human rights (among others). (Vaggione 2020, 263)

As Julia Roth and Gabriele Dietze observe, gender has become a “meta-language” and an “affective bridge” giving order to populist movements’ political objectives (2020, 14–15). By invoking the concept of “gender,” right-wing populists can popularize their worldview, presenting themselves as defenders of the “freedom of speech,” the family and commonsense, a necessary corrective to the excesses of the cultural left and radical feminism.



As we can see, the fight against gender ideology is a reactive response projected into the future. It is part of a political rationality that is changing contemporary democracies in different regions and involves, among other goals, the mobilization of the radical right against the expansion of sexual and reproductive rights.

As Mudde points out, far right positions on gender are directed by *nativism*—understanding the nation in racial or ethnic terms—and *familism*—which subordinates the choices and the reproductive rights of individuals to the reproduction of the nation. Most far-right groups maintain a traditional view of women whereby they are seen exclusively as mothers (current or future). This means that they are discouraged from working outside the home, let alone pursuing any kind of career. In addition to the promotion of traditional gender roles, including generous state subsidies, staunch opposition to abortion is another key aspect of (far-right) familism.

4.2. Some recent examples: Hungary, Poland, Brazil

In Hungary, radical right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has consecrated familism in the country's new Constitution, which proclaims that Hungary will protect the institution of marriage understood as the union of a man and a woman because the family “is the basis for the survival of the nation” and that the country will support the commitment to have children. (Hungarian Ministry of Justice 2011, art. L).

In Poland, the PiS government has adopted a policy of “demarginalization of the family” that places the heteronormative family at the center of “the political rules of the government”. (Mudde 2019). There have been also physical attacks on collectives and individuals which promote feminism (or homosexuality), who are labeled “traitors” or “agents of a transnational lobby”. Kaczynski has declared that “the LGBT movement and gender are a danger to our identity, our nation and our state” (France 24, 2019) in a context of harassment towards feminist activists.



Indeed, the 2020 presidential campaign was dominated by the theme of “LGBT ideology” as a threat to the nation and Christianity, and soon thereafter the Minister of Justice officially announced the intention to terminate Poland’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe’s treaty to prevent violence against women. Later, a ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal deemed abortion in case of fetal abnormalities unconstitutional. It was opposed by the largest protest in Poland since the Solidarnosc movement, against the Pis government and demanding separation from State and Religion.

Radical right-wing populist governments in Hungary and Poland have acted directly against women’s rights NGOs by passing new tax regulations that harm them and by carrying out searches of their offices and arrests of their activists. Many far-right and conservative groups have targeted the academic discipline of “gender studies,” which they consider a “pseudo-science” that undermines the structure of the traditional family. Accordingly, the Orbán government banned Hungary’s two existing gender studies programs in 2018 on the grounds that “people are born male or female, and we do not consider it acceptable for us to talk about socially constructed genders rather than biological sexes” (Oppenheim 2018).

Following a similar line, various far-right governments have weakened the position and rights of the LGBTQ community. Within hours of his inauguration, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, known for his long history of gender violence and homophobic comments, stripped the Ministry of Human Rights of its authority on LGBTQI issues and appointed Damascos Alves, an ultra-conservative pastor, minister of Women, Family and Human Rights, and of indigenous peoples. Alves argues that diversity policies have endangered the Brazilian family and that, with the new administration, there will be “no more ideological indoctrination of children and adolescents in Brazil. Girls will be princesses and boys will be princes” (Folha de Sao Paulo 2019).

Neither Bolsonaro and his misogynist and sexist anti-gender discourse were new in Brazil. In 2003 he intercepted congresswoman Maria do Rosario in the corridors of congress and told her



that he did not rape her because she did not deserve it. He also stated that homosexuality is due to not having received enough beatings and that he was not worried about any of his children dating afro-descendant women or turning out to be gay because he gave them a good education.

Regarding sex education, he argued that it seeks to pervert children in schools. The bulk of his hate speech is directed at the LGBTQI community. He said he would rather see his children die in an accident than see one of them show up one day with a boy with a mustache and that if he saw two men in the street holding hands, he would give them what they deserved. He also said that 90% of children adopted by LGBT couples become sex slaves and that legalizing same sex marriages would legalize child abuse.

In Brazil, as elsewhere, the conservative mobilization is part of a counter-movement. It arose especially in opposition to the Bolsa Familia and Zero Hunger programs with which Lula da Silva's first government sought to combat social inequalities and the measures taken in terms of gender and sexuality policies as well as in terms of race. Gender equality was part of the debates that took place between 2009 and 2010 to elaborate the third National Human Rights Plan. It not only included the fight against torture and possession of weapons, but also rights to free sexual orientation and gender identity and policies against gender violence. Faced with the national education plan proposed for the 2010 decade, the evangelical and Catholic sectors lead the anti-gender offensive. Thus, a conservative counter-offensive arose in favor of the carrying of weapons, and against gender, sexual diversity, sex-education in schools, and access to higher education for poor Black people and indigenous people. All this is part of the sustenance of the reactionary, authoritarian and anti-rights discourse that Bolsonaro articulated and managed to represent from the right-wing camp. (Berdondini 2023)

In this framework, antigender mobilizations are central to explain the rise of bolsonarismo in the Brazilian right-wing camp. This marked a new form of political articulation in the streets and in social networks and sealed an alliance between Catholics and Evangelicals against gender



ideology. Gender ideology was to be fought with the ideology of Genesis. The denunciation of gender ideology as a coherent and systematic whole of an anti-scientific nature whose objective is to separate gender from sex and to dilute biology in culture and as the spearhead of cultural Marxism enabled the alliance between secular and religious elements in the radical right.

The rise of Bolsonaro and the development of his government show the intersectionality of sexual politics and economic policy. In the Americas, the family is fundamental to the alliance between neoliberalism and neoconservatism (Morán Faúndes 2021).

4.3. (Geo)political differences in the uses of “gender ideology” by the radical right

Although radical right-wing currents declare their enmity towards gender ideology and defend the traditional family, there are also more nuanced positions, especially in societies where there is greater equality and tolerance between genders. For instance, in many parts of Northern and Western Europe, the defense of gender equality and women’s and LGBT rights is usually adopted against immigration in homo- or femi-nationalist terms (Stefanoni 2021). These discourses seek to paint immigrants who go to Europe escaping from wars as “rapefugees” who threaten the purity of white women and of the nation understood in feminine and white terms. Gradually, for radical right-wing sectors, the French, German, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, etc. identity begins to be constructed in opposition to immigrants, represented as Islamic and racialized males whose values do not fit in the receiving nation. The arguments are often cultural, securitarian, economic and even civilizational.

In this context, cases in which immigrants take part of rape are instrumentalized against immigration *tout court* and to point out that these aberrant practices show that the attitudes of immigrants are incompatible with Western, liberal, secular values. Moreover, Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni denounces that refugees are not really such, because they would be mostly male



young-adults. This seeks to increase resentment towards those racialized males who would represent a threat to white women and who would be defended by leftists. Thus, as it happened with religious activism in the 90s, nowadays the radical right can both oppose the gender perspective—as a colonizing invention of cultural Marxism—and present itself as the only political group that cares about “real” women.

In this sense, in countries where gender equality and respect for sexual diversity is part of the national identity, the radical right supports it as far as it serves an anti-immigration and anti-Islam purpose. Despite these developments, traditional gender roles largely dominate the dynamics among far-right movements and actors (Inger Skjelsbæk, Eviane Leidig, Iris Beau Segers, and Cathrine Thorleifsson, 2020).

However, this attitude of strategic defense of gender equality by the radical right is not widespread in global terms. In Latin America, Africa, Eastern and Southern Europe, mobilization against gender equality is more common, framed as part of a global liberal and multiculturalist agenda, described as gender ideology by far-right movements and intellectuals. In Europe, where the white population is progressively aging, this is seen as part of a race struggle, where Western civilization is threatened by declining birth rates. Traditional values and gender roles are therefore fundamental, where the ideals of “*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*” (Kids, Kitchen, Church) are supported by various right-wing groups.

In fact, the far right seeks to produce a *renaturalization* of gender roles. Adopting the position that femininity is a result of biology, far-right ideology holds that women should assume traditional gender roles such as motherhood, maternal care tasks and domestic work. Women are seen as vulnerable and in need of a protective family unit headed by a man with natural leadership abilities.



Not surprisingly, the voters and militants of the radical right are mostly male (Mudde and Rovira, 2015). In any case, even when they have female leaders, such as Marine Le Pen, Pia Skjaersgaard, Giorgia Meloni or Alice Weidel, who do not respond to the stereotype of the submissive, married, straight woman and housewife, their positions are favorable to traditional gender roles, criticizing multiculturalist, liberal or pro-immigration feminism.

One of the peculiarities of the new right-wing parties and movements in the Americas is that, in addition to being male-dominated, as in Europe, their main audience are the younger generations, who feel aggrieved by progressivism and claim not to trust democracy. This partly has to do with the fact that these new generations have not lived under authoritarian regimes (in South America, Southern and Eastern Europe) and the discourse of these new radical rightists claims to oppose the establishment. In fact, parties such as Vox in Spain, La Libertad Avanza in Argentina, or Bolsonaro's Liberal Party in Brazil can defy the democratic consensus and present the defense of genocidal, authoritarian regimes of the past as a way of defying political correctness or the establishment. Hence also their populist character. According to their discourse, progressive thinking in general and "gender ideology" in particular, which they reject, have today become mainstream: in academia, in public policies, in schools, in Netflix series and even in social networks. Therefore, today to be a rebel would be to be right-wing, to dare to be politically incorrect, attacking 'cultural Marxism' as the mainstream thought of our time and the Orwellian neo-language it implies, where inclusive language stands out (Stefanoni 2021; Morán Faúndes 2023b).

This parody of rebellion has enabled the election of Javier Milei as Argentinean President with a huge support of young and male voters. Not surprisingly, one of his first measures was to shut down the Ministry of Women and Gender together with other nine Ministries and even the phone line to denounce gender violence, while opening one to denounce social organizations and protesters. According to his view, there is not such a thing as gender violence. The only violence



comes from the state and from those who protest the unconstitutional reforms he wants to pass without the approval of the Congress. Of course, it includes the *Ni una menos* collective as one of its enemies, since may reforms seek to reverse all the advances made in terms of sexual and reproductive rights.

4. Concluding remarks

Throughout this paper, I have delved on different aspects of the emergence of the radical right and its confluence with anti-gender movements in the erection of “gender ideology” as an enemy to fight against.

First, I have analyzed the process of demarginalization of the far right, and, in particular, of the radical right. I have also differentiated national-neoliberals from social identitarians. I have stressed that, despite their differences, they coincide in their opposition to “gender ideology”, which has become a common enemy.

Secondly, in order to understand the synergy between anti-gender movements and the radical right, I have analyzed the origins of the term gender ideology as a conceptual and political tool created in the catholic intellectual sphere. Hence, I have commented on the different contents assigned to “gender ideology” and how it became part of the radical-right discourse in its nativist, familist, nationalist and authoritarian ideology. Then, I have sought to point out some peculiarities of South America vis a vis Western Europe, commenting briefly on the Brazilian, Polish and Hungarian cases.

I conclude by stating that “gender ideology” has become a key concept for the right-wing in its intersectional counterstrategy and countermovement against the advances in sexual and reproductive rights and in its project of renaturalization of gender roles. In that framework, the



management of biological reproduction and reproductive labor are key for the confluence of ethnonationalism, social conservatism, and neoliberal ethos.

By building “gender ideology” as a common enemy, different streams of the radical right are gaining strength and are threatening civil, political, social, cultural, economic, and even human rights that were achieved after decades of ideological and political struggles. Therefore, far from undermining what they denounce as a privilege of minorities, they are putting at risk pluralism, tolerance, freedom, and liberal democracy as such.

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