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Gender, Sexuality, And Body Politics In The Dispute For Cultural Meaning In Current Times

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Abstract:

This article deals with the current dispute for cultural meanings, or what is also called cultural war, on the sexual and reproductive rights of women and LGBTQIA+ dissident sexualities based on the debate around gender and gender ideology, as named by conservative religious groups. The article analyzes papal and Brazilian episcopal documents, the UN's international conferences on women, and recent tensions in Brazilian society. The results show that this rising confrontation around the question's choice that involves the rights of women and sexual dissident bodies occurs within the historical and structural context of transition from one era to another. The swift from industrial modernity to post-industrial times has questioned the elementary aspects of modernity, such as the definition of personhood; the notion of citizenship, the limits between public and private; the relation between Church and State, and the nature of the national project. This way, the article identifies the topic's complexity through the position of Catholic hierarchy analysis. It contextualizes the historical and structural moment in which the dispute intensifies, especially in the Brazilian case.

Keywords: Sexuality; Narratives; Sexual and reproductive rights; Gender ideology.

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I. Introduction

The subject of this paper deals with the controversies and disputes around the cultural meaning in the current age, having as its goal the problem involving sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights as central to body politics, seen from two perspectives: one of the sacred and natural order, the other, of a historically constructed order. Thus, it is possible to notice the confrontation of these disputes, which also organize themselves in institutional struggles, passing by the national State sphere while imagined community and wielder of the legal powers over society.

In the current agenda, the sexual and reproductive rights, the body of women and LGBTQIA+ people (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual, and others) have been a source of dissent that mobilizes public opinion in Brazil and other parts of the West. In 2017, there was an extensive mobilization in Brazil of women's and feminist movements against the 181/2015 Constitutional Amendment Bill (PEC, in Portuguese), which proposes to introduce in the Federal Constitution the protection of life starting from the conception, making embryos and fetus in rights holders, turning illegal cases of abortion provided for by the law (rape cases, life-threatening for the woman and anencephalic fetus). This proposal is headed by the Pro-life and Pro-family caucus, created in 2006 and which has been pushing for the approval of bills that restrict reproductive rights.².

Religious groups have as their primary target gender issues and sexual diversity in a discourse organized around an essentialist view of gender identity and sexuality, systematically opposing the criminalization of homophobia; the decriminalization of abortion, as well as advocating for legislative bills that seek to reinstate a social morality grounded on a sacred and natural order. Bills such as the "gay cure" (4931 Constitutional Amendment Bill, from 2016) and the PEC 181/15 already mentioned, which prohibits and criminalize each and every kind of abortion, are examples of this quarrel. There is also the conflict over the discussion of gender or gender ideology and sexual orientation in education, which has influenced

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² According to the newspaper "O Estado de Minas," in 2020, this caucus numbered 311 representatives, 54% of them being Catholic and 46% Evangelic: https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2020/01/28/interna_politica,1117561/parlamentares-catolicos-planejam-frente-conjunta-com-evangelicos.shtml.

representatives to introduce bills on different government levels (local, state, and federal) prohibiting this subject from being discussed in textbooks or by teachers.

Although it is recurrent in different religious denominations, this article will discuss the subject solely based on the Catholic hierarchy's guidelines in counterpoint to the non-essentializing worldview of gender identity, sexual and reproductive rights, and sexuality.

II. Methodology

The methodology used contextualizes the problem to be analyzed by exposing the narrative of Catholic Church leaders and their representation of the gender category and of sexual and reproductive rights as an essentiality that reproduces the divine and biological order. Thus, the speeches and documents of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, and the stances of the Brazilian bishops, will be considered through the analysis of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB, in Portuguese) and of a note from the Peruvian Episcopal Conference, which coined the term gender ideology. This narrative states that feminists and LGBTQIA+ militants use the gender category as an ideology, threatening the continuation of the familiar institution and society.

The articulation and analysis of this narrative will be based on two key theoretical axes: the authors who consider the current world's transformation as the collapse of the modern project of civilization and the capitalist, liberal industrial society, incapable of fully addressing the social demands underlying the model established in the previous centuries; and the authors who reflect on social agents amid these transformations, in their pursuit for recognition of new citizenships based on a historical and cultural view of gender relations, of body and sexualities.

Finally, it is essential to note that the resources used, that is, the papal speeches and the CNBB notes, have no pagination and were consulted from the official websites of the Vatican, the CNBB, and Catholic movements. Information was also consulted and collected from the YouTube video platform, newspaper portals, and various websites.

Articulating the problem: Discussion and results

Sexuality, abortion, gender equality, and body politics are contemporary issues with a strong emotional appeal, which have incited tense discussions both inside and outside Brazil, especially on social media. In particular, Brazil is currently facing a public debate about the margin of women's reproductive autonomy and also about the rights of the LGBTQIA+ population to marry and adopt a child, start families, undergo the gender reassignment process, and use social names by transgender people. There is still a broad political discussion about gender issues in education.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, this public debate has influenced elections, established a new political agenda, and some events have been crucial to identifying this problem. In the 2010 elections, presidential candidates Dilma Rousseff and José Serra had to sign a letter of intent with conservative religious sectors, taking responsibility for not putting on the agenda any bill that could legalize same-sex marriage, the decriminalization of abortion and drugs, or even addressing gender issues, named by these segments as gender ideology.

In this regard, religious groups have been lobbying representatives of various legislative instances to create laws to prohibit and even punish schools and teachers who address this issue in the classroom. Articulated around Catholicism and other Christian denominations, the religious people condemn "the pernicious gender ideology."³, as we have seen in debates during the last decade about the Brazilian National Plan for Education.

According to Rosado, the force of gender deconstruction can be indeed frightening to society, and especially to Christian religions, for which this force seems to be more frightening since it displaces gender identity and sexuality from nature to history, casting doubt upon the existence of a natural and sacred order over the production of bodies. The centuries of religious hegemony, especially Catholicism in Brazil, allowed the construction of an understanding of sex as:

Linked to reproduction and heteronormativity absoluteness. It was thus possible for the Catholic Church to strongly influence the principles of social regulation of sexuality, acting upon the State and establishing a sexual morality to be followed by the entire population. (Rosado, 2018, p. 18)

In Brazil, the expression of gender ideology has become an effective way of marking and disqualifying activisms that seek to transform gender and the sexual hierarchies that define masculinity and heterosexuality as privileged referents in world-building. According to Rosado (2018), the term refers to a strategy of conservative Catholic activism to oppose by creating worshipper citizens, the politicization of pleasure, and the configuration of sexual citizenships made by feminists and sexual diversity activists in the last decades. Along with its

³ https://www.ofielcatolico.com.br/2005/05/a-perniciosa-ideologia-de-genero.html.

counterpart, the death culture, it constitutes the spearhead of conservative strategies to revitalize the weakened hegemony of the Catholic Church over the religious, moral, and legal monopoly of sexuality.

Mariano's (2013) research points out the rising diversity in the Brazilian religious scenario, especially after the democratic reconstruction of the late 20th century, to the globalization progress of rights and liberties discourse, as well as the transformations of secularized modernity that followed the emergence of new religious movements, especially of neo-Pentecostal evangelical groups, marking the decline of the Catholic Church's influence in the country. According to Mariano, these groups have coalesced around a more affective and emotional religion and defenders of conservative values (pro-life and pro-family) (Mariano, 2013, pp. 119-120).

However, according to Vaggione (2017), it was the advancement of feminism and of sexual diversity movements on an international scale from the mid1980s onwards that seriously questioned sexual regulation as a Catholic Church discourse:

These movements politicize and make visible the influence of Catholic morality in constructing the cultural dimensions of citizenship. The demand for rights linked to sexuality interrupts (at least partially) this fiction by highlighting how Catholic sexual morality universalizes under the citizen's garb. (Vaggione, 2017, n. p.)

According to Junqueira (2017), the term gender ideology refers to the "processes of naturalization of gender relations, the subordination of women, the asymmetry of power and women's access to resources in relation to men." (Junqueira, 2017, p. 48)

Souza Junior (2019) points out that the term is a Catholic invention that emerged from the doctrinal set of the Pontifical Council for the Family and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith between the mid-1990s and early 2000s. "It is a syntagma warped within the formulation of a reactionary anti-feminist rhetoric, attuned to the thought and catechism of Karol Wojtyla." (Souza Junior, 2019, p. 57).

However, the identification of the term gender as an ideology can be found for the first time in a note from the Peruvian Episcopal Conference published in April 1998 under the title: "La Ideología de Género. Sus Peligros y Alcances"⁴. In the text's note, the bishops warn that many people, perhaps for lack of information, are unaware of the new proposal and its dangerous implications. According to them, this ideology was already growing in strength in developed countries, especially in universities in the United States. However, it also began infiltrating Latin American countries through teaching materials disseminated in schools and prestigious universities.

Although the term was an invention of Catholic hierarchy based on a neo-fundamentalist thought in effect during the papacy of John Paul II, in Brazil, the term was widely accepted by the neo-Pentecostal Church and other conservative movements in civil society, such as the Escola Sem Partido⁵ (Nonpartisan School), having as its objective the defense of values linked to the traditional family, to the essentializing roles of men and women, and alleged political neutrality in textbooks and teacher's teaching.

In this regard, as an object, gender ideology is inscribed in discursive flows and networks of conservative activism on a global and continental scale that articulate themselves in specific national logic. Therefore, more than an object "imported" by religious people to Brazil to defend the place of religion in modernity, gender ideology is produced in various places, appropriated by religious and non-religious agents, and mobilized through means oblivious to the rights of women, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people.

Gender ideology is difficult to define, as its meaning is vague. Moreover, although it alludes to particular struggles and agents, its reference is open-ended. Therefore, it is ready to be emptied and filled according to the context of its deployment, and therein lies much of its effectiveness. Consequently, defining it according to the desired end is more practical.

It can be seen that the term gender ideology involves a naming practice, and it refers to an Other, which it ceaselessly delimits. In Brazil, it has been used to name individuals and institutions, for example, teachers, intellectuals, public universities, Ministers of the Supreme Federal Court, judges, political leaders, social organizations, and even international entities, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and agencies of the United Nations system. When stated, gender ideology establishes neighborly relations between agents defined as threats to a natural and sacred order, often symbolized by the figure of children. The undesirable place it constitutes is paradoxically reinforced by those who, when named, seek to disassociate themselves from gender ideology.

Given its boundaries' open-ended and expansive nature, no one is excluded from being named as a gender ideologist. Classifying such disparate agents as gender ideologists is possible by not partially or fully differentiating them, making them all equally equivalent. In this regard, gender ideology can be understood as a meaningful emptiness.

⁴https://www.aciprensa.com/controversias/genero.htm?fbclid=IwAR1ikZsBLZnMuz-0kgukAD_Lx9Vzo47F70f-wOeNPOJo8MsTnRDYt1oRv6Y.

⁵ https://www.escolasempartido.org/

According to Laclau (2013), in the domain of the political struggle, agents with differentiated political objectives or opponents of a repressive regime are often perceived as equivalent due to their confluent antagonism towards the system. Consequently, the "community" they compose as antagonists are the product of a "renunciation of their differential identity" in favor of their equivalence association, that is, the emptying of the meaning of the articulated elements (Laclau, 2013, 78).

However, the logic of equivalence is an unfinished process. It is a tendency simultaneously opposed by a differential logic since for the community to be represented, it must have "some identity constituted within the space of equivalence" (Laclau, 2013, p. 80). This choice depends on the historical moment, which gives more or less relevance to the articulated agents.

Both logics are present in the definition of gender ideology, although in this case, related agents do not embody the community but its Other. In Brazil, the PT's (Worker's Party) administration was heavily criticized in all instances due to its defense of an agenda considered as promoting gender ideology through the program Brasil Sem Homofobia (Brazil Without Homophobia)⁶, "gay kit", authorization to conduct the gender reassignment process in the public health system⁸ and other benefits granted to transexual people, such as the use of social names⁹. Moreover, in 2013 the National Justice Council of Brazil compelled every registered office in the national territory to officialize same-sex marriage¹⁰.

Thus, activism against what is called gender ideology has made equivalents in its discourse: atheists, communists, homosexuals, feminists, corrupts, immoral people, and other groups that are repeatedly named as the enemies of the nation, the family, the religion, and the State. In the collective imaginary of conservative religious people, the reference associated with gender ideologies has oscillated around "gay lobbying," "abortionists," and "communists," according to the context.

In this worldview, gender ideology defines a place of excess. Excess has been linked to transgression and sin in the history of Christian metaphysics and modern philosophy. In Western thinking, its expression has been rage, madness, barbarism, and lack of self-control. According to Dumoulié (2007), in politics, excess embodies tyranny and "revolutionary terror" (Dumoulié, 2007, pp. 263, 265, 272).

In this context, gender ideology is characterized by its inflation. Its advocates make up an extended family of heterogeneous political and intellectual ascendancy but dangerous in the eyes of the Catholic doctrine. The moral theologian Pedro Trevijano states that the nature of the creators and defenders of the gender ideology is evidenced by a life marked by excesses and immorality. Philosophers like Nietzsche, Foucault, and Althusser, sexologists like Kinsey, writers like Bataille, feminists like Firestone, Millet, and advocates of family planning like Margaret Sanger were marked by madness, drug addiction, suicide, Satanism, communism, and homosexuality. All of these thinkers and researchers were tyrants and revolutionaries in their way. Excess defines their practices and thoughts. (Trevijano, 2018, pp. 11-12)

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, still as Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, in a letter to the Catholic bishops about the collaboration of men and women in the Church and the world (2004), states that excess is identified as a way of insurrection against the natural and sacred order by pointing out that in current times there are two prevalent discursive tendencies about women issues. According to him, the first tendency, in speaking of subordination to the man, is pointing out that for the free woman, one must put themselves in an antagonistic position to the man, "her most immediate and nefarious setback in the family's structure." (Ratzinger, 2004, n.p.). The second tendency in the cardinal's understanding derives from the first and establishes that any and every movement towards women's liberation serves as a nuclear center for any libertarian activity, both political and anthropological, intending to make the human being free from its biology. The biological phenomenon of sexuality is then distinguished from its historical and cultural forms, called gender. However, the so-called revolution against historical forms of sexuality leads up to a revolution against biological premises. It is no longer admitted that "nature" has nothing to say; it is better that man can shape himself to his liking, he has to free himself of any premise of his being: the human being must make himself according to his desires, only in this way will he be "free". To Ratzinger, this idea only disguises an insurrection

⁶ Health Ministry/National Council for Combating Discrimination, 2004 (Ministério da Saúde/Conselho Nacional de Combate à Discriminação),

The alleged kit was an educational material composed of videos, bulletins, and booklets with an approach to the universe of homosexual teenagers that would be distributed to six thousand public schools in the Mais Educação (More Education) program. President Dilma Rousseff banned the production and distribution of this material in 2011 due to pressure from the religious caucus in the National Congress. However, according to the ruling of the Superior Electoral Court on 10/16/2018, the kit never existed. The ruling prohibited Bolsonaro from spreading false information about the material.

⁸ Directive number 1,707 of the Health Ministry

⁹ Decree 8,727 from 04/28/2016 - of President Dilma Rousseff

¹⁰ Resolution 175/2013 of the National Justice Council

of man against the limits he carries as a biological being. It is against, ultimately, being a creature, not accepting yourself as a creature, becoming your own creator, a modern version of that "you will be like gods: he has to be like God." (Ratzinger, 2004, n. p.).

Pope Benedict XVI retrieved the subject of the defense of the natural and sacred order in the Encyclical Deus Caritas Est of 2005, stating in an excerpt that "(...) we are facing a degradation of the human body, which is no longer integrated into the totality of the freedom of our existence, it ceases to be a living expression of the totality of our being, ending up as if relegated to the purely biological field" (BENEDICT XVI, 2005, n. p.). The Pope also qualifies same-sex relationships as "weak love", since it does not bear fruits in terms of bringing new life into the world. Only the heterosexual love is considered "strong", while the homosexual love is hedonist and selfish.

Years later, in a Christmas letter addressed to the Roman Curia (2012), he mentioned that the interreligious dialogue should deal with specific problems that affect social coexistence, the State, and humanity, the most pressing being: "a new philosophy of sexuality", defined in terms of gender, which threatens the very conception of men. Citing Gilles Bernheim, a French rabbi, Benedict XVI stated that the conceptual core of this philosophy was found in the Simone de Beauvoir feminist sentence, "One is not born a woman, one becomes so." from which it collides that it is society, and not God, that defines human nature. To the Emeritus Pope, this extreme autonomy, in which man is a master of himself, disregards his "creation demand" and eliminates the sacred and natural order. To him, this represents an "anthropological revolution". The correlation of this would be that the "child", which is no longer submitted to the natural law, has become an object of a right contested by different social groups.

To use categories (revolution, insurrection) that refer to the destabilization or rupture of political order as a sacred and natural order is meaningful since it defines feminists' struggles as a "destructive power" aimed at God, nature, and human identity.

The excess of freedom and autonomy that feminists and LGBTQIA+ activists had sought took the form of colonization for Pope Francis. In his tour around Sri Lanka and the Philippines in 2015, Francis publicly addressed families at an event in Manila. There, he asked his listeners to "be aware of the new ideological colonization [...] that seeks to destroy the family by imposing a "materialist" lifestyle" (Francisco, 2015, n.p.). He compared this threat to the Philippines' invasion by foreign powers and asked his public to have the "maturity" to reject every ideological colonization as they did with the political colonization. (2015). In July 2016, speaking to Polish bishops, Francis strengthened the warning about the ideological colonization 12:

In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and some countries of Asia, there are authentic forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these – I will call it clearly by its name – is the ideology of gender! Today children – children! – are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this? Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money. Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money. And this is terrible. (Apud Battisti, 2017, n. p.)

To explain what he was referring to, in a press conference still in 2016 during World Youth Day in Kraków, Poland, the pope recalled an event in Argentina when he was still the cardinal of Buenos Aires. According to him, the Minister of Education managed to get a loan to build schools for the impoverished; however, lenders had demanded that she include in the curriculum "a textbook, a didactically well-prepared textbook, teaching gender ideology". He argued that these resources were part of an ideological colonization strategy once they brought foreign ideas to people with the intent of changing their minds. He then compared the efforts to transform gender inequalities in schools with mid-20th century Nazi propaganda aimed at children and young people: "But this is not new. Just like the dictatorships of the last century. They came with their doctrine. Remember, the Hitler Youth colonized the people" (2016)¹³.

Gender ideology is depicted, in these speeches, not only as an excess but also as a threat to the religion and the "people". Thus, while it involves ways of conceiving the family, men's and women's roles in society, and the accepted ways of managing desire, it burdens gender and sexuality since it also proposes projects of nation and citizenship, granting it a particular political relevance.

The National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), in a note from 2010¹⁴, explains that there are differences between legitimate feminism and delusional feminism:

Legitimate feminism has conquered spaces that were impossible to foresee before Christ, such as the right to vote, professions, and an active voice worldwide. Women, as they are very intuitive, know that Christianity has

¹¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/pt/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi spe 20121221 auguri-curia.html..

¹²https://www.cnbb.org.br/ideologia-de-genero/.

¹³https://operariosdamesse.org.br/blogs/artigos/674-atualidadeideologia-de-generopais-e-filhos-o-que-pensa-o-papa-francisco-sobre-a-ideologia-de-genero.html.

https://www.cnbb.org.br/elas-deverao-aprender-de-novo/.

granted them a change of scenery. The more enlightened ones are grateful to the Good Master who, unlike all the famous people, never campaigned against them, not put them in an infamous or disdainful situation. (CNBB, 2021, n. p)

Legitimate feminists, it clarifies, struggle to improve women's living conditions, to ensure better salaries and equal treatment, while some women from the "polluted side", those without peace, who are aggressive and faithless, seek to destroy the distinction of the sexes and the identification of women's interest with those of their families:

Yes, instead of wanting to be a wife, now the plan is to be a mistress with no strings attached. Her glory is no longer being a mother but practicing the breastfeeding strike. Instead of being the custodian of life, she favors abortion. The monotonous education of children is handed over to other people. (CNBB, 2021, n. p)

From 2010 to 2021, CNBB published 19 notes about this subject, continually reinforcing that the Church is not opposed to feminism in general and respecting the dignity of LGBTQIA+ people. However, it always stands against movements that deny the correlation between sex as a biological truth and gender. To the bishops, gender ideology emerges, therefore, as an excess of feminism, of intellectuals, and of more radical militants, but not of those who seek equality and respect. In a note published in 2021, CNBB understands that the excess is expressed in the fanatic nature of ideologies with which it is impossible to establish a dialogue; and that, instead of celebrating the equality achievements between men and women, they accuse those who do so of being alienated. To the Catholic hierarchy, the only interest of this so-called "polluted" side is to say that "there are neither men nor women" and to "deconstruct everything". They are the "gender feminists." ¹⁵.

By invoking gender ideology, this conservative activism stresses antagonisms between feminists and LGBTQIA+ activists on the one hand and the religious believer citizens on the other. It also makes a distinction between good and bad feminists: those that seek equity and those insurgents who violate the very condition of the human being as a divine being and biological creature. Consistently, gender ideology as a naming practice disqualifies and produces acceptable and "democratic" ways of making claims about gender equity. At the same time, the Church refuses the excess of gender ideology, thus raising an opening to feminism, but one that knows how to articulate its demands without questioning sexual difference as a fact of nature. In this regard, gender ideology has a normalizing potential.

It is also worth mentioning the religious offensive against the right to legal and safe abortion. In 2020, the case of a 10-year-old girl from the state of Espírito Santo, who got pregnant due to being raped by her uncle, obtained a court order to have an abortion in a public hospital. The court, however, referred the girl to perform the procedure in the city of Recife, in the state of Pernambuco. The court order generated protest and reactions that reached the victim through insults from Catholic groups such as Escravos da Virgem Maria (Slaves of Virgin Mary) and Porta Fidei 16, and from other Christian groups. These groups advocate celibacy until marriage and the submission of women to men.

Besides these groups, Catholic priests also participated in the protest. Even the archbishop of Recife, Dom Fernando Saburido, published a repudiating video of abortion, saying: "I would like to challenge this decision entirely. The Church supports life in any circumstance. This child is indeed capable of surviving. "We need to save the lives of mother and child¹⁷".

The protest to prevent the raped girl from having a safe and legal abortion occurred in front of the public hospital where the procedure was performed. On the YouTube platform 18, videos show how opponents of abortion blocked the clinic's entrance and tried to prevent the doctors in charge of the procedure from passing through. The blockade was only broken with the intervention of the police. The girl also had to enter the hospital under police protection, where she could finally move on with the procedure. The religious people insulted the ten-year-old girl, who called her a "murderer." 19.

The case went public after the Minister of Women, Family, and Human Rights, Damares Alves²⁰, who called herself "terribly Christian."²¹, deplored the court's decision on social media. As a result, other religious politicians and supporters of the ex-president Jair Bolsonaro put pressure on the Judiciary and the girl's family, even going so far as to publicize the name of the children and the hospital where the abortion was performed.

We can also note the moral panic installed in these sectors, which in the last few years have criticized and censored art exhibitions, concerts, and artistic performances, placing them on the list of those things they

¹⁵ https://www.cnbb.org.br/elas-deverao-aprender-de-novo/.

 $[\]frac{16}{\text{https://marcozero.org/as-comunidades-catolicas-por-tras-do-protesto-contra-aborto-no-recife/.}$

¹⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IZephzCmSA.

^{18:} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mo9qIkIzxuw.

¹⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5hKgWECJss.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SGTgISv6acp4AeBr3jV2pDm70RnRvJaI/edit.

²¹https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2019/01/02/estado-e-laico-mas-esta-ministra-e-terrivelmente-crista-diz-damares-ao-assumir-direitos-humanos.ghtml.

consider to be a misuse of public money to finance pedophilia. In 2017, the cases of the exhibition "Queer Museu: Cartografias da diferença na arte brasileira²²" (Queer Museum: Cartography of differences in the Brazilian art) in Porto Alegre; the performance by artist Wagner Schwartz²³ at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo, the demonstrations and aggressions directed at the American philosopher Judith Butler on the occasion of a seminar about democracy in São Paulo became nationally known. After the controversy, Banco Santander, the sponsor of the exhibition "Queer Museum," immediately canceled the exhibition²⁴. In Mato Grosso do Sul, also in 2017, the painting "Pedofilia" (Pedophilia) by artist Alessandra Cunha was taken by the Civil Police. The action was a result of a police report filed by state deputies linked to the religious caucus, Paulo Siufi (Brazilian Democratic Movement), a Catholic doctor and activist against abortion, Herculano Borges (Solidarity), and Colonel David (Social Christian Party) at the Depca (Specialized Police Station for the Protection of Children and Adolescents), soon after a parliamentary session in which the subject of the canceled exhibition in Rio Grande do Sul was heavily criticized by the deputy/priest Lidio Lopes. The artist defended herself by saying that pedophilia is a taboo subject that cannot be touched. The painting intended to denounce the existence of pedophilia. However, it was taken on charges of inciting it, being considered by the police chief who seized it as a work that "offended morals and good manners." ²⁵.

Within the same context, Bento (2019) draws attention to the vote on the admissibility of the impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff, which took place on April 17, 2016, in the Chamber of Deputies. To the author, it is as if the "March of the Family with God for Freedom" was happening again. Not in the streets, as in its first edition in 1964, we witness in style the consolidation of a political agenda of the moral elite of this country. In style because it all happened within the framework of the Rule of Law, in the House of the People, anointed by the popular vote. In 1964, a coup was called for to save the families from the communist threat. In 2016, the impeachment vote was in the name of a moral agenda to defend the family.

Whoever hears these statements a few years from now will surely wonder: was the Bill being voted on to save the family? It was not. And it was. It was not because the discussion should have been around the impeachment or not of the president of the Republic. Furthermore, it was because the debate around morality held an important place in the disputes that took place in all instances of the parliament (in the Committees, in the Plenary). At some point, the conservative sectors (I prefer to use "conservative" instead "evangelicals" because the adherence to the traditional thinking of family was not an exclusive prerogative of evangelicals and/or other religions). (Bento, 2019, p. 12)

Bento underlines that the outcome favoring the former president's impeachment has as a unity point the settling of scores with human rights advocates, feminists, and LGBTQIA+. Moreover, the congressmen who voted yes to the impeachment were also saying no to the project politically oriented of the Worker's Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, in Portuguese) government, which encompassed inclusion policies for women and sexual minorities. The voting represented, above all, the return of God's country/kingdom without the presence of what the religious regard as abject beings.

The dispute over cultural hegemony control continued in the following years and largely guided the presidential election of 2018. Jair Bolsonaro, a candidate linked to the conservative and religious movement, accused the then-candidate for the Worker's Party, Fernando Haddad, of favoring the "gender ideology" and that if he were elected, he would hand out the "gay kit" in every school. For Bento (2019), the "gay kit" became significant as people from different social segments began associating it with the increase in homosexuals in the country.

One elderly woman said she would not vote for the "Lula's" candidate because the Worker's Party had handed out the "gay kit" in schools. I countered this (by accessing websites) by claiming that the "gay kit" never existed. The elderly woman was unconvinced and asked: "Well, if this gay kit never existed, why are there so many homosexuals these days? (Bento, 2019, p. 16)

This moral agenda was widespread during the entire electoral campaign. No matter how much people were warned that it was fake news, they (whether middle or low class) saw in practice "what was irrefutable: there are more homosexuals today than before the Worker's Party government. And the analytical relation is direct: there are more LGBT people today because of the Worker's Party" (Bento, 2019, p. 16).

All of these issues around the discussion of gender (ideology) and sexuality are some of the narratives surrounding the tensions produced in the country and the social institutions, allowing us to recognize these problems as one of the emblematic cultural phenomena of our time.

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²² https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/09/11/politica/1505164425_555164.html.

^{23 :} https://www.rfi.fr/br/brasil/20180416-apos-ser-acusado-de-pedofilia-no-brasil-wagner-schwartz-apresenta-la-bete-em-paris.

²⁴http://www.ufrgs.br/ppgmuspa/news/nota-publica-sobre-o-fechamento-da-exposicao-queermuseu. Retrieved November 15, 2021

²⁵https://veja.abril.com.br/entretenimento/obra-quedenuncia-pedofilia-e-tirada-de-museu-acusada-de-incita-la/.

Thus, we will discuss ideas and concepts to sketch out hypotheses that give an understanding of the strength and centrality of these issues, which are marked, above all, by a political and moral dispute for the cultural control of the current era. Then, why do issues like the decriminalization of abortion spark such heated debates? Why does homo-affective marriage, same-sex couples' right to adopt, and the human rights issue in the 21st century seems for certain groups to be an abomination and that the State should not support this family configuration? From which biopolitical and biocultural logics emerge the exalted defenses of these discourses? How do these discourses create the politics of bodies, desire, reproduction, and the affection of dissident and constantly controlled bodies that do not allow themselves to be controlled? How can we think of differentiated subjects, with daily lives governed by different values, based on fundamental premises of imagined ideological communities, which despite sharing a familiar territory, do not seem to be guided by diversity and difference? Nowadays, in Brazil and other parts of the world, the meanings attributed to gender and sexual diversity integrate distinct societal proposals, which name things, and interpret and understand them in different ways. They represent socio-political views supported by different moral premises and legal codes, with institutional patterns that have entirely different forms and contents. These are different ideas in the dispute for the cultural interpretation hegemony. They are emblematic issues of the contemporary struggle for citizenship in times of maladjustment, instability, and uncertainty, times that many consider to be a transition between eras.

Hunter (1991) uses the concept of a culture war in his book of the same name to present the proposition that in countries like the United States, public culture experiences a notorious realignment and polarization that creates tensions and conflicts emanating from the proposals about the meaning of difference, diversity, and freedom. These are different representations of the national identity, of what it means to be American, centered primarily in the women's reproductive bodies and in the desire, though encompassing other rival themes such as systems of moral understanding, values, and beliefs that constitute collective identities, existential goals, social cohesion forms, and disparate social imaginaries. According to the author, these moral ideals establish disputes about social order, laws, and governance, often based on religious worldviews that have already been superseded in the public sphere but which interrogates today's democracy (p. 42-43).

Interestingly, this sharpening of tensions around substantive equality and effective citizenship of these new social subjects and women's autonomy and decision-making power over their bodies are inserted in a particular historical context. This context in which the reconfiguration of time and space is produced by an intense technological innovation and structural reorganization of globalized neoliberalism destroys the solidity of modern institutions, making them maladjusted and dysfunctional.

In this regard, Touraine (1999) notes that deinstitutionalization is articulated in the current context and potentiates desocialization, manifesting significant variations of reproduction of established institutional norms due to expressions of resistance and existing processes of re-accommodation. Therefore, the sense of normality of previous eras is replaced by an existential atmosphere permeated by irregularity, unpredictability, and improvisation (p. 33-35).

On the other hand, Beck (2018) refers to the contemporary capitalist organization as a model of industrial production without an industrial society, describing industrial society as a congruent system of production, politically and culturally: "A life model in which sexual roles, family unity and class form part of the same chain" (Beck, p. 206).

Indeed, as Giddens (2012) points out, the family is a place to display the dispute between tradition and modernity. On the other hand, it is a source of security and sociability at other times; it has lost its roots in the past, like no other institution. Suppose nowadays, as Giddens states, private life is the terrain of a "global revolution" that affects how we think and how we connect with other sexual fields, romantic relationships, marriage, and family. In that case, it is not surprising the emotional intensity of the dispute that is being established. In short, the gap between the speed of transformations and daily life and the generalized precariousness of institutional forms opens the space for disputes over the hegemony of cultural meanings. Allied with the technological, structural, and daily changes in process, the debate around citizenships and recognition of sexual subjects, such as women and LGBTQIA+ people, suggest that more than a time of intense crisis and constant change, we are entering a transition of an era.

Discourse on gender equality and recognition of dissident and transgressive LBGTQIA+ bodies erupted in much of the Western world – especially in the central countries of capitalism – during the second half of the 20th century when new collective actors interrogated roots deeply rooted in the social imaginary and individual habitus. ²⁶ These beliefs considered maternity as the natural essence of women and heterosexuality as

²⁶Bourdieu (1996:29) introduces the category of habitus to refer to the processes of assimilation of social normative mandates into individuals' psychic and bodily depths. The habitus encloses a dialectic between the structured – the existing normativity – and the structuring – the reproduced normativity – functioning as a device for producing and reproducing asymmetrical social relations. Specifically speaking about gender, the author explains the sexed and gendering habitus, which somaticized in the very reflective body tissues of

the only acceptable sexual orientation. A growing accumulation of theories about female inequality, subordination, marginalization, and exclusion has identified these existential dimensions – reproduction, and sexuality – as fields marked by power, highly normalized, yet susceptible to historical transformations.

Conceiving the body as a source of citizenship with autonomy, capacity, and the right to choose its processes, desires, and drives has contributed to denaturalizing the industrial modernity standard view – intimately connected to the Christian imaginary – of the biological, ahistorical, and without cultural influence body, whose nature, in the case of women, is that of an essential and unconditional producer from another presumed nature: heterosexuality. Therefore, it is not surprising that the nuclear family figure, with a deep patriarchal orientation, is the symbolic referent that agglutinates and inspires through religious orthodoxies the politically oriented conservative movements in Brazil and elsewhere.

In this regard, in modern industrial societies, creating a private family sphere is inseparable from introducing mechanisms to control impulses and affections in public life. Affective and bodily self-discipline is the condition of subjects' engagement in the social order, Foucault (1987) would say, for whom voluntary submission is the subjective arm of power. Continuous self-policing is the price to be paid for modern life, especially in cities. In the 18th century, the body was discovered as an inexhaustible source of power, as a machine, system, and discipline. It is at once docile and fragile, something that can be manipulated and easily tamed, in sum, susceptible to domination. This disciplinary power did not only reduce its applicability to the individual's body but also addressed the social bodies responsible for hierarchizing and classifying the subjects in the social field. Every social relationship thus implies a space of struggle, given the different types of connections and interests the same individual can maintain with others for his or her position and recognition. The Foucauldian argument regarding the phenomenon of power understands its action in the social body with its techniques and strategies, exercised not only in negative aspects of censorship and prohibition but also in positive aspects concerning bodies, pleasures, and knowledge. After all, this would explain much of how this power established and perpetuated itself throughout modernity.

Butler (2015) links the discussion on body and gender with precarious lives. These potentially undesirable contemporary lives do not rely upon the same social recognition as lives worth living: lives with no citizenship, lacking the full rights that the notion of citizenship found in the modernity project promised to protect. The precarious lives intimately relate to gender performativity by not fully conforming to the usual expectations that socioculturally shape sexual identities. That is to say that with differential manifestations and margins, precarious lives represent expressions that are not fully intelligible in the context of gender-normative mandates, established and institutionalized in a binary way, and which, moreover, are faithfully reproduced through performativity. The author emphasizes the performativity role in the reproduction of gender, invoking the regulatory norms that define the identity prototypes and the themes of desire and logic of power. Together, these facets are perceived in the social imaginary as an inherent truth in manifest nature, an innate essence. However, performative repetition is not an exercise lacking in agency.

According to Butler, "gender reproduction is always a power negotiation" (2007, p. 156), pointing out that it is precisely through the replication of gender norms that the margins of compliance or non-compliance with them become evident. Moreover, this "[...] opens up the possibility of redesigning gender reality through new ways" (2007, p. 156). From this perspective, gender is not something fixed or pre-established, but it is in rather continuous tension through the filter of individual performativity of gender norms in specific sociocultural and historical contexts. In other words, performativity reinforces or questions normativity through acceptance or transgression of subjects, discourses, and acts in particular terms. Therefore, the irruption and consolidation of new actors and discourses on gender and sexuality and the reaction of religious groups are examples of the historical moment of fracture and transition, thus showing the emblematic dimension of the dispute for normative hegemony in this time of uncertainty.

As such, these are not only instances of power, and Butler (2007) defines gender performativity as the meticulous and continuous individual repetition of physical expressions, attitudes, and emotional manifestations associated with the sexual identity of men and women, always preceded and informed by a cultural gender normativity – usually binary – that makes up part of the collective imaginary of societies. "Not only do they reflect wider notions of power, but also how power operates" (BUTLER, 2007, p. 154). Hence, through the interventions and regulatory controls of biopolitics, in each historical stage of socioeconomic and cultural formation, sexual politics are institutionalized – and disputed – drawing a dividing line between socially recognizable lives and precarious lives. The latter are exposed to rejection and exclusion, physical, emotional, and psychological harm, violence from society and the State, and many times, even death.

Therefore, the passionate debates around cultural values and meanings involving gender issues and sexual diversity in Brazil during the last few years have stamped a sort of body geopolitics on the national map,

people's bodies and standardized in the psyche the relation of domination between men and women, thus forging their respective identities in ways that appear binary, system and discipline.

which divides the country into lines that limit the dialogue between multi-diversity advocates on one side, and the religious on the other. Such geopolitics offers different possibilities and prohibitions to the bodies according to the position they are placed in.

For women and LGBTQIA+ people, the international and national institutionalization of sexual and reproductive rights during the 1990s represents one of the most important mechanisms for achieving full citizenship. The recognition of each person's right to pleasure, sexual and reproductive health, freedom of conscience, and to decide about these fundamental aspects of life defines new fields of subjectivation and citizenship.

The term *reproductive rights* sprang onto the global institutional scene for the first time in 1984 at the International Tribunal of Reproductive Rights Meeting in Amsterdam as a confirmation of the growing acceptance of feminist thinking on reproductive autonomy and sexual freedom (Correia; Avila, 2003, p. 19). Its subsequent materialization in the Programme of Action of the United Nations Conference for the Decade of Women, held in Nairobi (UN, 1985), and in the Platform for Action of the Fourth Women's Conference in Beijing (UN, 1995), provided the cornerstone of a new discourse that defines the components, conditions, actions, and guidelines of public policies for the sexual and reproductive well-being of individuals and couples (Corrêa; Ávila, 2003, p. 22-23).

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo (UN, 1994) and the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (UN, 1993) defined sexual health as a human right for both sexes and emphasized its importance as a fundamental aspect of human being, intimately connected to the right to integral health and displaced from the discourse – hegemonic until then – of the rule of morality. This opens the possibility of perceiving the different expressions of sexual diversity as recognizable human manifestations that – following Butler – are the condition for a social subjection as a body that matters, a life worth living (Butler, 2015, p. 322).

Also inserted in the concept of integral health, reproductive rights refer to two fundamental aspects of women's subjectivation and citizenship: the right to make informed decisions over the exercise of their reproductive capacity and access to resources that guarantee the fulfillment of these decisions under ideal conditions. For the same reason, specialists consider that reproductive and sexual rights combine the exercise of personal freedoms with fulfilling social rights (Costa, 2009; p. 1078), articulating the private and the public and the personal and the political in a dialectic that values the quality of life.

Promoting these rights globally, nationally, and locally has meant, to its supporters, the enrichment and expansion of the concepts of equality, justice, and citizenship; however, to the Church, they represent the violation of divine will, sacred texts, and religious orders. Therefore, two radically different interpretations of human rights are incorporated, with differentiated evaluation and ordering, based on equally different sources of legitimacy. The first one considers the historical evolution, the emergence of new subjects, and the popular will as the driving forces of these rights' development, characterizing them as inalienable, imprescriptible, and indivisible, recognizing them as products of human history. From this perspective, there is no hierarchical evaluation of these rights, but they all compose a set of ethical-moral guidelines with an equal value that, as a whole, represents a paradigmatic lay proposal of global citizenship. Thus, the right to sexual and reproductive health will have the same value as the right to life, work, freedom of the press, one's own culture, or a healthy environment.

By the contained interpretation, the divine representation is the one that grants human rights to people. It is the omnipresent consciousness that gives social meaning, elevating in the first place the right to life – because of its presumed relationship with the sacred intention to administer that life – and emphasizing in priority and hierarchical order the rights anchored in sacred texts and religious teachings. This human rights perspective reproduces ecclesiastic premises, guidelines, and values in another global paradigmatic totality guided by religious hermeneutics.

Because of that, the current dispute over the cultural meanings of hegemony does not only involve the interpretation of human rights, but it also refers to the very nature of the State and its relationship with religion, something central to the definition and functioning of the modern State.

In this sense, human rights and State have also become fields of intense dispute today. Two perspectives of State and law involved in the tensions over the control of women's bodies, the personification of the embryo, and the social recognition of the diversity of sexual subjects are addressed: one, supported by the secular paradigm; the other, anchored in the religious lens. The first restricts the inheritance of religious canons in state work, reciprocally guarantees religious autonomy and freedom, and the exercise of freedom of conscience, and relies on the validation of popular sentiment as the ultimate authority and source of accumulation of rights. The second perspective considers sacred texts as faithful representations of the divine word and intention, considering these sources – God's word and intention – as universally legitimate, ahistorical, eternal, and prior to social order. This understanding is based on a hierarchical order of an all-powerful deity

that includes everything and everyone under the interpretation, control, and punishment of religious experts and authorities. Its authoritarian essence is replicated in fundamental social institutions like the family.

Therefore, in the 21st century, even though the dispute between secular and religion is once again placed on the first page of the political dispute, now, in the new round of capitalist globalization, the arena of dispute is different. In contrast to the first centuries of modernity when feudal-ecclesial structures and secondary shakes were fought over, fighting for the Church's land, property, and political powers in the public sphere, today, amid the collapse of the industrial life model that articulated the roles of the sexes, of the family unit, and classes into a harmonious whole, the dispute operates directly in the intimacy of bodies, sexual desire, and reproductive capacity, spaces in which the rivalry to delimit control-autonomy symbolizes a new struggle for the margins of religious influence in public and political work, and thus in the very definition of the State. Conversely, this affects the formulation – and the institutionalization – of social content, social values, normativity, beliefs, collective imaginations, identities, and allowed actions.

Likewise, it fundamentally contributes to the definition of who the recognizable actors are, which lives are precarious, what kind of action is allowed, and which have bargaining power for more minor or more significant degrees of individual and collective freedom. Conversely, this affects the formulation – and the institutionalization – of social content, social values, normativity, beliefs, collective imaginations, identities, and allowed actions.

III. Final remarks

The heated debates and legislation on abortion and gender issues in the last few years marked some kind of body geopolitics on the national map, dividing the population into well-defined stripes of multiverse cosmopolitans on the one hand and the conservative and religious on the other. This geopolitics offers different possibilities and prohibitions to the bodies of women and LGBT people, sexual and reproductive rights are interpreted and applied differently in different country entities, forging specific bodily cartographies that differ not only in the degree of citizenship but also in the equality of rights.

Moreover, bodily geopolitics acts on different biopolitics, making visible to the Brazilian public sphere the demarcation of different societal proposals that symbolize the facts and characterize the social reality from disparate cultural filters. Therefore, they are two distinct social proposals with different perspectives on morals, values, recognizable subjects, the interpretation of human rights, the relationship between the State and religion, and the very nature of the nation-state project. These competing sociopolitical perspectives emerge from the tensions and opportunities of the current historical conjuncture of intense technological and structural changes: institutionality, desocialization, instability, uncertainty, risks, and changes in conception that characterize the current epoch.

In the interstices of the institutional dysfunctionality of this transition, the social discourses dispute the cultural interpretation hegemony. In the case of the emblematic issues of abortion, sexuality, and gender, the nature of the family is discussed. Differing positions around these questions (re)define the composition, the kinship, the sexual division of labor, the organization, and – especially – the power relations of this *basic unit* of society. It is the very definition of *family* that, in turn, affects the character of the State and other social relations. Moreover, this is why the interpretation of abortion, sexuality, and gender is contested so passionately and has become central in the dispute for cultural meanings in what we can call collapsed modernity.

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