

'Theologies' and contexts in a Latin American perspective

SONIA CORRÊA*

Reading about the eruption of 'gender wars' at the 1990s United Nations conferences, as they are retraced in the Special Issue, I initially contemplated the idea of using this comment to more systematically revise the story being told adding few pieces of information that, in my view, are still missing. Yet, after some back and fourth, I preferred to discuss the many other contributions of this volume that I read with great interest, specially enjoying its explorations of the Vatican's role in the crafting of 'gender wars'.¹ This short commentary is organized as follows: it begins with more theological insights and ideas, and a further discussion of the linkages between 'gender ideology' and colonization. Then it highlights the various contributions of this special issue to current Latin America debates. Finally, it explores the ways in which Latin American scholarship could enrich these lines of investigation and interpretation.

'Modernizing' theology and the paradox of colonization

This special issue crucially locates the 'gender ideology' troubles in various countries within the wider perspective of the elaborations and politics of the Catholic Church. As Mary Anne Case observes, the Church's longevity to a large extent derives from its ability to transform what is profane into sacred. Or, to say it differently, from its proficiency to respond to external challenges by disguising what is 'contemporary' under the cloaks of tradition. Pulling this thread, Case, Fassin, and Garbagnoli scrutinize the long cycles of theological debates preceding the invention of the novel 'gender ideology' critique by the Vatican in the late 1990s. They also examine the past and present paradoxes of Catholic views on sexual difference and, most importantly, excavate the hidden connections between contemporary theological elaborations on this matter and highly modern constructs.

¹ These explorations expand the reflections I conducted few years ago with Rosalind Petchesky and Richard Parker in *Sexuality, Health and Human Rights* (Routledge, 2008). See, in particular, the sub-section "Vatican prosopopeia" in Chapter 3.

Case, for example, describes how the Catholic doctrine on sexual difference remained firmly premised on male superiority and women's subordination for centuries. She also discusses the contradiction between this hierarchical vision and the New Testament predicament claiming that all souls are equal or the same in the face of God. Then she recaptures how a new theological revision, strongly influenced by theologians from other religious traditions,² emerged from the early 20th century on and resulted in a novel Catholic doctrine of sexual difference *cum* complementarity (partially completed by the mid 1940s). Based on Thomas Laqueur's analytical frame (1992), she argues that this shift aimed, in fact, at adjusting the ancient Church doctrine to the Western modern ethos in which the two sexes model, with its emphasis on difference and complementarity, became hegemonic.³ This theological anthropology of complementarity anteceded and fertilized the Vatican critique of 'gender ideology', which was only crafted after 1994.

Another key insight emerging from Case's, Fassin's and Garbagnoli's articles is that this move can not be seen as a return to the 'divine order of things', as claimed by official Vatican rhetoric. 'Gender ideology' should rather be regarded as a new manifestation of this very rarely discussed Church impetus towards periodical 'modernizing'. Three popes – Pius XII, John Paul II and Ratzinger long before becoming Benedict XVI⁴ – were directly engaged in these convoluted theological elaborations, indicating how 'gender' is central to these ongoing doctrinal reviews. Given that such re-articulation usually takes a very long time in Catholic circles, it is not trivial either that the modern doctrine on sexual difference, which matured in the 1940s, was once again fully reviewed 50 years later.

In relation to this last *aggiornamento* however, as observed by Fassin and Garbagnoli, strong imprints from the 20th century anthropology of complementarity have been retained by the critique of 'gender ideology'. This is illustrated, for instance, by the centrality of reproduction and an emphasis on women's distinctive reproductive role in both frames that link these visions with the Church's draconian condemnation of abortion. These authors have also highlighted how the recent anti-gender theological turn implied a Copernican epistemological shift, which dislocated the core line of argumentation from the domain of culture towards the grounds of 'nature'. As insightfully noted by Fassin, this route was taken because the earlier anthropological frame was not effective enough to prevent the continuing de-stabilization of gender and sexuality orders. In his own words, the Vatican moved towards resorting to nature as a rhetorical wall against history and politics and therefore began to 'equate god with biology'. Within this new vision, 'gender theory' is portrayed as a threat to nature and humanity because it contests the (now) scientific divine law of sexual difference.

² Edith Stein who was originally an Orthodox Jew and Hildebrand a Protestant.

³ A parallel could have been drawn between this mid 20th conceptual swing towards sexual complementarity and the 19th century definition of abortion as a nefarious sin, which left behind centuries of controversies on the status of the embryo and the moment of its ensoulment, adjusting the Catholic doctrine as response to the first waves of birth control claims but also as an adjustment to new developments in embryology.

⁴ This special issue offers a substantive amount of information on the voluminous intellectual production by these three Popes and other Vatican thinkers, reminding us that one requisite to properly research and intervene in the 'gender ideology' battles underway is to engage with this vast literature.

The argument is politically compelling because it resonates easily with common sense and subtly brings the 'truth of science' into the picture.⁵ It can also be interpreted as a step further in the 'modernization' of theology. Moreover, as observed by Fassin, when the Church uses this argument to propel anti-gender battles it abandons the rarified realm of theological ruminations to get enmeshed in the worldly and muddy landscapes of gender and sexual politics. Against the backdrop of these contradictions and paradoxes, Fassin's heuristic return to the medieval scholastic controversies between nominalists and realists – which is inspired by Boswell – is perhaps one of the most intriguing insights of the special issue, although its further exploration would require a separate commentary.

In another vein, Bracke and Paternotte interestingly examine the Vatican's coupling of 'gender ideology' with colonization. This dyad can and should be interpreted as a manipulative assemblage of queer theory (gender) and post-colonial critical thinking (coloniality). This line of interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that Cardinal Bergoglio, right after being elected pope, quoted Feijóo – the Argentinean intellectual seen as one main precursor of post-colonial critical thinking – to present himself as the pope arriving from the 'end the world'. As discussed in the introduction, from there on, Francis I has constantly used this supposedly de-colonial positionality to attack the colonial nature of 'gender ideology', including in the Encyclical Letter *Amoris Laetitia*.⁶

However, when pursuing this investigation, it appears this is not the first time in history that the Vatican resorts to a colonization trope with a blunt political objective. Indeed, during the Cold War – that is when the second de-colonization wave was being completed – the Catholic Church used this semantic resource to counteract the expanding influence of Marxism in the recently independent countries of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. The reconstruction of this route provides another clue for understanding that the Vatican's post-1990s coupling of 'gender' and 'ideology' has probably been inspired by these earlier anti-Communist skirmishes. It is therefore not surprising that, as noted by Bracke and Paternotte and reiterated by Mgr Charamsa, this anti-colonial rhetoric projects and crystallizes powerful images of the Church's modern enemies; 50 years ago, they were used against the 'Communist ideology', today they incarnate the 'ideologues of gender'.

As deployed by the Vatican and its allies, the 'gender colonization' argument articulates a critique of the colonial traces of the global order – as manifested in the global economy and the multilateral system – with a severe description of the moral decay of Western values. In this narrative, both past and contemporary colonial powers – lobbied by feminists and LGBT rights advocates – use the UN

⁵ This conceptual move began to take shape in the mid-1980s when Cardinal Ratzinger published his work on human ecology that placed natural law above human rights and 'conflated the universalism of natural law and the universality of the laws of nature' (Ratzinger and Messori 1985).

⁶ The language used in the Encyclical Letter is as follows: [It is unacceptable] 'that local Churches should be subjected to pressure in this matter [gender equality] and that international bodies should make financial aid to poor countries dependent on the introduction of laws to establish "marriage" between persons of the same sex' (*Amoris Laetitia*, page 251), accessible at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.

and other development aid structures to impose their 'degraded values' on the gender and sexuality orders of the South, which are portrayed as pristine and molded by the laws of nature. These tortuous lucubration shamefully 're-naturalizes' non-European cultures and conceals the key role of the Catholic Church as a propeller and a crucial actor in the brutal realities of the colonialism.

The politics of 'gender ideology': context matters but commonalities can be traced

The country cases mapping out the development of 'gender ideology frays' in France, Italy, and Argentina compellingly remind us that context always matters, even when Catholicism is hegemonic and the political dynamics under examination are being propelled by the oldest Western transnational institution. Fassin and Garbagnoli, for example, identify marked similarities between France and Italy in what regards the surprising new styles of political mobilization used by anti-gender groups. They additionally observe that, in both countries, 'gender ideology' political disputes have shifted their focus from 'minority issues' such as same sex marriage to bold interventions around education issues.

Moving south, if a parallel can be made between Italy and Argentina in regard to the political weight of anti-abortion positions in national debates, the Argentinean undercurrents are decidedly distinctive. Firstly, because 'gender ideology' battles have not flared up as in the other two cases. But also because, as Pecheny, Jones and Ariza mention, of the negative effects of post-democratization transitional justice processes on the image of the Catholic Church hierarchy. Finally, when comparing with other Latin American countries, the authors also point towards the relevance of the configuration of electoral systems.

That said, these case studies also offer a preliminary template in terms of crosscutting trends and aspects that must be tackled. In terms of polities, for example, the rules and conditions of secularism, electoral systems, and political parties dynamics cannot be circumvented. The religious profile of each society and the very dynamics of religious politics is another nodal dimension. As importantly, future research must also engage with the problem of the political-cultural ethos, broadly speaking. For example, I dare say that the populist and anti-intellectual climate underlined by Fassin in the French case is perhaps the most rapidly expanding transnational trend to be tackled by future research on 'gender ideology' battles. Another important contribution of the European cases is their emphasis on the place and role of the gender and sexuality academic institutions in these battles. Last but not least, all three cases tell us that mapping out of key actors requires wide angle lenses able to capture not just those who are the open adversaries but also apparently neutral forces, such as bureaucracies, as well the heterogeneous visions and positions at play within gender and sexuality politics itself, as compellingly illustrated by the alliance between the 'feminism of difference' and Vatican ideologues in Italy.

Through a Latin American lens

As mentioned above, the attack on 'gender ideology' in Argentina has not – or not yet – assumed the glaring contours flaring up elsewhere. However, as the

authors of the Argentinean case themselves recognize, this is an exception,⁷ for 'gender ideologies' battles have erupted in a large number of Latin American countries. In a recent comment on Colombia, Mara Viveros suggests that this trail began in 2001, when the article 'What does Gender Mean?', written by theologian Jutta Burggraf, was published in Costa Rica.⁸ A decade or so elapsed however before open political attacks on 'gender' began to materialize, from above and in great style.

In 2013, Rafael Correa, president of Ecuador, both appraised feminist struggles for gender equality and strongly ranted against the 'extremism of gender ideology' in the same speech.⁹ In Brazil, eight state level legislative assemblies and a dozen municipal councils had eliminated gender equality premises from public educational policy guidelines by 2015. A year later, as a conservative political restoration swept the country, the place of 'gender' in educational curricula also featured high in the debates propelled by the School without Party Movement, whose main goal is to 'eradicate the diffusion of ideology in all levels of education'.¹⁰

While I have not been able to collect consistent information on what is happening across the region, a quick web search informs that a campaign against the imposition of 'gender ideology' in the school system has intensified last year in Chile. This is hardly surprising, given that president Michelle Bachelet, who was the first director of UN Women, tabled a law provision in 2015 to strike down the absolute prohibition of abortion established during the Pinochet era.¹¹ However, the most striking example of a 'gender ideology' flare-up came from Colombia, where these attacks had unpredicted impacts on the negative outcomes of the 2016 Peace Referendum.¹² Finally, as I was scribbling these notes, the Mexico Federal District Constitutional Reform became the stage of virulent attacks against abortion rights, sexuality education, same sex marriage, LGBT discrimination and trans rights, all clustered under the overarching umbrella of 'gender ideology'.

With these events in mind, this special issue appears both as an alert and an inspiration. It confirms the urgency to examine more systematically these conflagrated landscapes, given that the state of information and knowledge on these frays remains scattered and anecdotal. It also stresses that only a transnational streamlining of such research efforts will allow to connect the dots between what is happening in different countries of the region while linking

⁷ Which might also apply to Uruguay.

⁸ Jutta Burggraf was a German Theologian who worked at the University of Navarra in Spain, a private university belonging to Opus Dei. A similar article was published in the *Lexicon*. To read Viveros comments, <http://sxpolitics.org/the-controversy-surrounding-gender-nodal-question-of-sexual-politics-in-colombia/16218>.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4J7QMXpUt00>.

¹⁰ See <http://sxpolitics.org/14514-2/14514> for monthly assessments of Brazilian sexual politics in 2015–2016 and <http://educacaointegral.org.br/reportagens/especialistas-desconstroem-os-5-principais-argumentos-escola-sem-partido/> for additional information on Escola sem Partido (in Portuguese).

¹¹ See <http://elacontecer.cl/index.php/politics/item/814-bachelet-colegios> (in Spanish).

¹² See Franklin Gil's analyses at <http://sxpolitics.org/sexual-justice-and-political-culture-in-colombia/15641>, as well as the above quoted analyses by Mara Viveros.

up this map with dynamics at play elsewhere in the world. If nothing else, this means that translating the special issue is a real priority.

Furthermore, the strong focus on Vatican politics in this special issue is more than welcome from a Latin American perspective. It complements the research and critical thinking developed by scholars such as Jars Mujica, Juan Marco Vaggione, Juliet Lemaitre, Maria José Rosado or Martin Jaime, who have studied past and present Catholic re-articulations in theology, juridical thinking, and sociological interpretation aimed at deterring what the Church perceives as a destabilization of gender and sexuality orders. Nonetheless, further – preferably transnational – investigations are needed to better understand the deep and wide Catholic imprints on regional culture, politics and statecraft. Moreover, this is crucial to illuminate the role of the Vatican as the main intellectual force behind the 'anti-gender' battles describe above, as this role is not always evident to societies at large or even communities engaged in gender and sexuality activism.

It is interesting to briefly chart the factors explaining this concealment because they tell a lot about the contexts in which anti 'gender ideology' is ramifying regionally. In some countries, the Catholic Church is still not viewed as a main protagonist because it mostly operates from inside the state apparatus, mobilizing others, in particular authorities, to speak and act on its behalf. This happened for instance in Ecuador.¹³ In other contexts where the presence and influence of dogmatic Evangelism has geometrically grown in recent decades (such as Brazil or Colombia), the stridency of Evangelical diatribes easily overshadows the Vatican's intellectual role.¹⁴ Not less importantly, since 2013, the centrality and persistence of Catholic conservative thinking about 'gender' was blurred by the sporadic soft speech acts deployed by Francis I on homosexuals, single mothers, and even women who have aborted.

Reversely, the use of a Latin American lens to examine the political undercurrents of 'gender ideology battles' may also contribute to enrich the research on this topic. For example, as seen above, the contextual Latin-American conditions provide strategic empirical grounds to look more systematically into the strategies used by the Catholic Church to promote 'gender ideology' premises in state apparatuses and to map how this agenda is adjusted to take into account the growing religious plurality of the region. Although connections between Catholics and Evangelicals are nodal, I think that this line of investigation must be broadened to encompass 'Kardecist spiritualism' (very influential in Brazil),

¹³ This is the case, for example, of Peru where a large number of high-level policy officials are historically known to have very close connections with the conservative Church hierarchy. In Brazil the old and deep political connections between the PT (the Workers' Party in power since 2003), the national Catholic hierarchy and the Vatican itself is another case to be looked at, as it explains how a Concordate between the state and the Vatican was smoothly signed in 2009. Even in the highly secular political culture of Uruguay, President Tabaré Vasquez has been speaking the Vatican language on abortion for the past 12 years.

¹⁴ To illustrate that the analyses developed by the international and mainstream and LGBT media on the impact of 'gender ideology' debates on the Colombia referendum have not even addressed the deep and close connections between ex-president Uribe and conservative Catholic groups such as the Opus Dei.

Afro Latin religious groupings, Buddhism as well as Islamic communities whose numbers have increased in recent years as an effect of migration.

Latin American critical thinking can and should also contribute to the systematic de-construction of the Vatican coupling between 'gender ideology' and 'colonization'. While other and later manifestations of the European colonial expansion can eventually be interpreted as predominantly driven by economic interests and mercantile greed, the tenets of Catholic evangelization were inextricably linked in the Iberian colonial enterprise. For centuries, in the vast colonial territories conquered by Spain and Portugal, Catholic institutions were much more structured than the secular state machineries and, consequently, more present and influential in everyday life. Across these territories, the Church made all possible efforts to identify, describe, and punish gender and sexual transgressions, as exemplified by the Inquisition investigations. But the Catholic Church has also elaborated and imposed disciplinary devices aimed at aligning these practices with Catholic doctrines and norms, as illustrated by descriptions of sexual lives in Jesuit missions (Lavrín 2012).¹⁵

Indeed, at this 'world's end', the authentic and pristine formations that the Vatican declares to be protecting from gender colonization are to a large extent the legacies of centuries' old Church investments in gender and sexuality colonizing and disciplining, as manifested in the cultural idolatry of maternity (the ideology of Marianism) and the stigmatization (when not sheer demonization) of sexuality outside marriage, homosexuality, and gender variance. The Latin American colonial experience vastly documented in the historical and anthropological literature, but also in art,¹⁶ provides a solid ground to unmask the Vatican pretenses in posing as the beacon of gender and sexuality decolonization.

Finally, even if this comment focuses on Latin America, it is crucial not to lose sight of 'gender ideology' undercurrents in the Americas situated North of the Rio Grande, in particular in the United States.¹⁷ It suffices to remind us that these battles began when a North American religious right activist promoted the first attack on 'gender language' in the UN process leading to the IV World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). Since then, these actors have produced and disseminated vast amounts of anti-gender ideology materials and established transnational and interfaith connections. If elements of the anti 'gender ideology' frame were evident in the policies of the Bush administration (Girard 2004), its imprints on Trump's policy agenda are wider and deeper, as illustrated by the amplification of the Gag Rule reinstated in January, 2017, and the open

¹⁵ The Brazilian historian Sergio Buarque in his classical *Raizes do Brasil*, cites a 17th century chronicle describing the sexual life in the Bolivian mission in the following terms: 'At midnight the bells tolled to awake the indigenous couples because this was the time for them to have sexual intercourses' (Buarque, *Raizes* 2016: 397)

¹⁶ For instance, the magnificent decolonial art work developed by *Mujeres Creando* (Bolivia), Giuseppe Campuzano (Peru), Carlos Motta (Colombia) or Lilian Sepúlveda (Chile).

¹⁷ Though less visible and debated Catholic and other conservative voices have also been active in Canada since the 1990s UN conferences, as shown by the example of *Real Women from Canada* which works in close alliance with the American religious rights in those processes.

conflict that erupted around the right of trans people as this commentary was being finalized.¹⁸

As in Argentina, open 'gender ideology' battles have not erupted in the US. Even so, its complex and shifting gender politics landscape must also be charted with the lens used in this special issue to trace the trails through which the Vatican frame has penetrated the state apparatus in different moments and to map out the role played, domestically and transnationally by non state actors, in particular the Catholic Church and connected academic institutions and non governmental organizations.

References

- Buarque, Sérgio. 2016. *Raizes do Brazil*, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Corrêa, Sonia, Petchesky, Rosalind and Parker, Richard (eds.). 2008. *Sexuality, Health and Human Rights*, London: Routledge.
- Girard, Françoise. 2004. *Global implications of U.S. Domestic and international policies on Sexuality*, at <http://sxpolitics.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/workingpaper1.compressed.pdf>.
- Laqueur, Thomas. 1992. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lavrín, Asunción. 2012. 'Sexuality in Colonial Spanish America', in Jose C. Moya (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Latin American History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ratzinger, Joseph and Messori, Vittorio. 1985. *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press.

¹⁸ For the Gag Rule, see <http://sxpolitics.org/trump-reinstitutes-global-gag-rule/16392> and for the trans rights conflict see the NYT article 'Trumps Rescinds Rules on Bathrooms for Trans Students' at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/us/politics/devos-sessions-transgender-students-rights.html>.