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“GENDER IDEOLOGY”: A MANIPULATIVE DISCOURSE THAT DEMONIZES GENDER STUDIES

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Joana Topa

Today the conflicts between different views in the fields of sexuality and gender have become increasingly stark. The so-called “gender ideology”, which currently arises as a category created within Catholicism, is used for

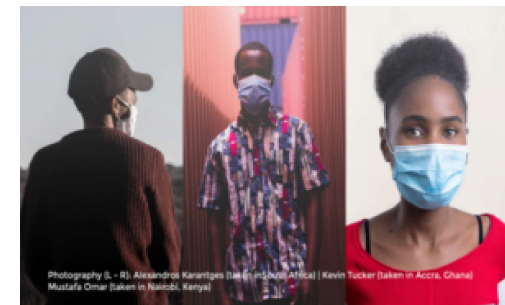
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attracts and is claimed by various religious segments with a view to fighting against feminist, queer and LGBT movements and studies. Often disseminated through the media, the concept of “gender ideology” is presented out of context, and used to manipulate public opinion around gender equality, which is defended by leftist public policies in many countries.

From the concept to its consequences

Talking about “gender ideology” demands that we take into account not only its theoretical and conceptual characterization but also its current consequences, both in terms of political strategies and public opinion in general.

The concept was used for the first time by conservative Catholics to address the evils of liberalism in the realm of human sexuality. Inherent in the “culture of death” and “bad feminism”, this concept dates back to the papacies of John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła) and Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger). This Catholic invention emerged under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for the Family and the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, between the mid-1990s and the beginning of the 2000s (Corredor, 2019). It resulted from a reactionary anti-feminist rhetoric aligned with Karol Wojtyła’s thought and catechism (Ratzinger, 1997). The matrix of this Catholic neo-fundamentalist rhetoric, which went against the provisions of the First Vatican Council, appeared as a result of what the Catholic Church considered the degradation of female nature, harmful to women and contrary to what is recommended for a good Christian man or woman (Perintfalvi, 2016).

If we look more closely, we realize that “gender ideology” represented an attack on the feminist ideas expounded at the time, in particular a direct attack on the Beijing World Conference, which took place in 1995, organized by the United Nations. In this conference the term “woman” was replaced by the concept of “gender”, establishing that:

“It is essential to design, implement and monitor, with the full participation of women, effective, efficient and mutually reinforcing gender-sensitive policies and programmes, including development policies and programmes, at all levels that will foster the empowerment and advancement of women” (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995, 3)[1].

There is recognition that women’s inequality is a structural problem that should be approached through taking a global perspective on gender. Pope John Paul II wrote his “Letter to Women” as an immediate reaction, in which he stresses the need to defend female identity by adopting an essentialist perspective. Years later, in his “Letter to the Bishops”, he voiced his disagreement with the feminist discourse, reiterating that maternity was a key element of female identity.[2] From then on, the Catholic counter-offensive consisted of fighting against the “gender perspective”, according to which feminist and gender studies were seen as just an ideological tool



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feminist studies, as if it were a closed or system of thought / comparing it to various forms of totalitarianism, including Nazism and communism (Miskolci & Campana, 2017). This vague but dangerous term was thus adopted by the Holy See to refer to a movement supposedly led by gays and feminists with the goal of subverting traditional family and social values – a clear reaction against women’s rights and the growing protection of sexual and gender minorities.

The Catholic Church’s stance and attack against gender studies surpasses the limits of religion to gain new allies from right-wing parties and individuals who present themselves as non-partisan or dissatisfied with institutional politics (Miskolci & Campana, 2017). These turn the critique of “gender ideology” into a militancy that interferes with education (Perintfalvi, 2016).

Therefore, this discourse appears embodied in the transnational politics of anti-gender mobilization, as a political-discursive counter-offensive against feminism. In this way, it arises as a large-scale and influential global conspiracy that draws on moral panic discourse, traditional family values, the association of pleasure and sin and the natural order of society, arguing that this behavior intends to restrain children’s educational freedom in school contexts. For these reasons, it values and defends patriarchy and heterosexism, which attack and oppress the concept of gender itself, as well as groups of women, gays, lesbians, transgender people, and others who do not align with heteronormativity (Graff, 2016).

What is at stake here is the political exploitation and instrumentalization of this concept in the fight for power and maintenance of the status quo. These conservatives use the media in general, and social media in particular (e.g. Facebook, Instagram and blogs), to speak up vehemently against draft laws that involve the reproductive rights of women and LGBTI people, since these supposedly defend “gender ideology”.

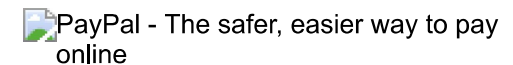
Around the world the issue of equality between men and women has never been as contentious and problematized as it is today. This fake concept – of gender ideology – has become increasingly entrenched in many European countries. France and Spain are good examples of this. Right now Poland offers one of the most striking examples. In 2013, the Catholic bishops launched a campaign against “gender ideology” that was rapidly adopted by socially conservative activists, groups and politicians. Unsurprisingly, the campaign, which began with a bishop saying that “gender ideology” was a bigger threat than communism and Nazism, backed a conservative proposal to make abortion illegal (Odrowąż -Coates, 2015).

This movement is also felt in Portugal. In a political moment when we realize that schools are an ideal context for working on issues of active and participatory citizenship and reducing or even eradicating gender inequality, social gender roles, and racial and ethnic discrimination, the National Strategy for Citizenship Education was



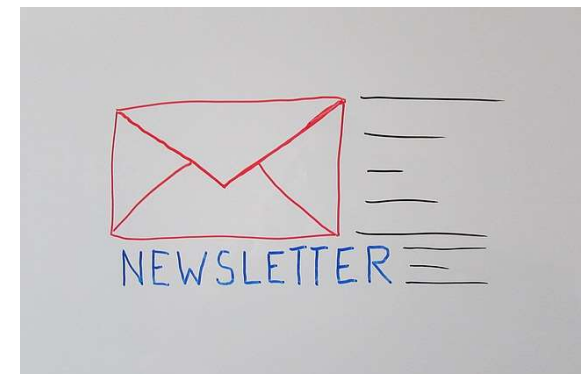
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Several people have railed against this educational policy. Right wing and conservative politicians have publicly stated that feminists and LGBTI people want to force “gender ideology” on society and schools. According to them, under the guise of working on human rights, gender ideologists convince their interlocutors and “subdue” them without resistance (Perintfalvi, 2016). These parties defend the view that we should not talk about different sexual orientations and gender identities in school contexts, since allowing different ways of living and multiple sexualities and genders may confuse or “infect” other young people, i.e. compromise traditional family values, by subverting sexuality and the “natural” family. The same discourses arise against the discrimination of ethnic-racial and regional inequalities (Graff, 2016).

We know that an education geared towards diversity and inclusion is not a doctrine but a process whereby we create conditions that allow every man and woman to learn and teach about living with difference. Educational and social inequalities are linked to sex, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, class, and age. By not recognizing these inequalities and the intersectionality that permeates them we are infinitely perpetuating them (Corredor, 2019).

Therefore, it is clear that the manipulation goes so far that these moral entrepreneurs resort to a religious concept that privileges patriarchy, heterosexism and the maintenance of other systems of oppression in favor of “family values”, but use it to describe the work done by feminist and gender studies. These conceptual misunderstandings lead to a moral panic that strategically manipulates public opinion and deludes and deceives people, with dangerous consequences (Corredor, 2019).

Gender theorists and feminists need to come together to deconstruct an action orchestrated in the fight for the “natural” family by conservative groups. The realization of the dangers that these discourses may represent in terms of losses for human rights and gender equality is inevitable and is starting to have effects in many countries, such as Brazil and in some European countries.

Notes:

[1] For more information about Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, [consult here](#)

[2] For more information about Letter to the Bishops, [consult here](#)

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Joana Topa has a PhD in Social Psychology from University of Minho. She is Professor at University Institute of Maia and Researcher at the Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies (Institute of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Lisbon). She published a book entitled *Maternal and Child Health Care for Immigrants in the Greater Porto Region: Pathways, Speeches, and Practices*. She was a member of the research team of 'Lights, Camera and Action against Dating Violence' funded by the European Commission. The translation of this article was supported by Portuguese national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, under project UID/SOC/4304/2019. To access more Portuguese bibliography please contact the author.

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