

Francis and 'Gender Ideology': Heritage, Displacement and Continuities

JUAN MARCO VAGGIONE*

In the last decades, the Catholic Church has transformed itself into a political leader in defense of a sexual order which it sees threatened by the advance of feminist and sexual diversity movements. During the Papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI a political machinery was set up which, overseeing an objective and universal sexual morality, renewed its strategies and arguments in defense of a sexual morality constricted to reproduction and marriage. These Popes did not only uphold such morality, and made it more rigid, but also politically prioritized its public defense by activating believers' participation in sexual politics, organizing international congresses in defense of the family, instructing legislators on how to vote, and stimulate the generation of secular arguments (Vaggione 2012). This can be seen as a reactive politicization with the aim of counteracting the expansion of rights connected to sexuality and reproduction.

This leadership grew stronger in the mid 1990s as a reaction to the impact of feminist and sexual diversity movements on United Nations Conferences.¹ For the Vatican such Conferences are a turning point, which promoted a feeling of urgency in the defense of a moral and cultural tradition under threat. These reactions show up in, among other matters, the emergence of two concept maps that strategically aim at constructing truth with regard to the contemporary world: 'culture of death' and 'gender ideology'. The Catholic Church does not only adapt its strategies and discourses to achieve greater effectiveness but it also allows for the circulation of its own accounts and theories so as to frame the political defense of a conservative sexual morality. John Paul II formulates, particularly in his Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, a fierce opposition between the culture of life and the culture of death. The latter is characterized as a 'selfish concept of freedom which sees procreation as an obstacle to the development of one's own personality' (John Paul II 1995: 13). Thus, the Vatican prioritizes the defense of a cultural (not religious) way that is challenged, even denied, by the growing legitimacy of a 'culture of death', associated with sexual freedom and diversity. Also in the 1990s, 'gender ideology' emerges

¹ Different analyses show how during the Cairo and Beijing Conferences these movements were able to successfully introduce reproductive rights, first, and then sexual rights, later, as part of the human rights agenda.

*Correspondence: Professor of Sociology at the National University of Córdoba, and Researcher of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), Argentina. E-mail: juanvaggione@yahoo.com.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License (3.0)

Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | Uopen Journals

as a label representing the demands and theories of those who 'deny nature' and consider sexuality as part of a social construction (Scala 2010). This label emerges from a conflation of analyses originating from sectors within the religious hierarchy, intellectuals and activists from the Catholic arena, as a reaction to what they call 'a feminist invasion' of the United Nations.²

The labeling of gender as an ideology enables different political operations (Paternotte 2015) in defense of the 'culture of life'. Among them, the concept operates as an empty signifier which allows to outline the main threats (see Garbaroli in this volume). All the demands that seek to expand the legal spaces for non-reproductive sexuality are deemed as belonging to 'gender ideology' and as manifestations of a culture of death. The 'non-reproductive mentality', which according to John Paul II (1995) characterizes the culture of death, traces a line that connects the demand for contraceptives, sexual diversity rights, and abortion (Vaggione 2012). The denunciation of gender ideology hides, then, the diversity of demands and tensions characterizing sexual and reproductive rights. This labeling also permits the Church to externalize the enemy and to fail to recognize (to make invisible) the complex fabric of sexual practices and identities which occur among its own believers. Feminist and sexual diversity movements become the external constituent, the common enemy, which enables a transcendence of the marked heterogeneity characterizing the practices and sexual identities of Catholics. Finally, gender ideology circulates as a conceptual apparatus to defend a morality and an identity beyond Catholicism, which permits several alliances with other sectors (religious and non-religious), since this ideology threatens the very cultural substrate upon which the social order is based.

These concepts and theories demonstrate the sharp antagonism with which the Vatican intervenes in sexual politics. The political machinery built by the most conservative sectors within the Catholic arena has radicalized the resistance to sexual and reproductive rights since these are deemed as threats not only to a moral order but also to a social and cultural order. The resignation of Benedict XVI, a key man in the construction of such machinery (first as prefect and then as Pope), together with the 'sexual scandals' which intensified during his papacy, generated questions about the future of the Catholic Church. Bergoglio's assumption of power as Francis I has as one of its main challenges (and conundrums) the Vatican's rigid positioning on sexual morality (far from believers themselves) and on sexual politics, constructed by his predecessors. This inheritance, at a moment of institutional crisis, opens a window of opportunity to disarm if not sexual morality itself, at least the political rigidity with which such morality is defended.

Bergoglio, Francis I and 'gender ideology'

Before being elected Pope, Bergoglio was a protagonist during key moments of sexual politics in Argentina, inasmuch as he was the president of the Argentine

² Crucial writings that initiated the reading of the feminist invasion of the United Nations notably include those by O'Leary and by Mary Ann Glendon. In Latin America, Dr. Jorge Scala has been one of the main disseminators of the concept of 'gender ideology'. For an analysis of this process, see Buss and Herman (2003).

Episcopal Conference (CEA by its Spanish acronym), a position he held between 2005 and 2011. During this period, he represented a Church deeply antagonistic to the demands of feminist and sexual diversity movements, which, among other matters, denounced gender ideology as a threat to both Argentina and the region (Pencheny et al. in this volume). In 2006, for example, the Argentine State recognized the right of primary and secondary school students to receive sex education. The CEA publicly expressed its opposition to the basic contents proposed by the Ministry of Education, stating that '... the inclusion in the curricular contents of the non-discrimination on the basis of gender ('gender ideology'), a principle that is opposed to the reality of human nature, since man, from his biological conception, is a sexed being, male or female; and therefore, this inclusion enables a distortion in sex education' (CEA 2008). In 2010, the right of same-sex couples to marry was debated and finally granted in Argentina. Bergoglio was one of the key actors against this law, and inasmuch as he was president of CEA, he was the Catholic Church's public mouthpiece rejecting the legal reform. During the time the bill was up for votes in the Senate, he even claimed that the law threatened the identity and survival of the family, since this 'is not about a mere legislation draft (this is a mere instrument), but rather a 'move' by the father of lies who wishes to confuse and deceive the children of God' (Bergoglio 2010).

Before his designation as Pope, Cardinal Bergoglio also played a leading role in the Latin American Church. During the Fifth Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal General Conference (*CELAM* by its Spanish acronym), which took place in Aparecida, Brasil, in 2007, Bergoglio was appointed president of the commission in charge of producing the final document. Analyzing the context in the region, this text establishes: 'Among the premises that weaken and undermine family life, we find the ideology of gender, according to which each everyone can chose his or her sexual orientation, without taking into account the differences set to them by human nature.' In addition, this document considers that this ideology is responsible for the different legal reforms which 'gravely injure the dignity of marriage, respect for the right to life, and the identity of the family' (CELAM 2007: 40), since such reforms put aside the common good in order to give way 'to the creation of new, and often arbitrary individual rights' (CELAM 2007: 44).

Despite these precedents, the appointment of Bergoglio as Pope provoked a transmutation, a political construction of Francis I as an initiator of a new time for the Church when it comes to inequality and social injustice, and the expectations also included a new stance toward sexuality. His statements and gestures immediately were read as a sign of a new temporality, a displacement in the Vatican's politics with respect to poverty. After the confrontation between John Paul II and the sectors most critical of capitalism, linked to Liberation theology, and the sustained (almost obsessive) focus on sexual morality, the 'time' of Francis I seems to be decoded as one in which the Church leans toward the poor and the excluded; a time in which the Church, according to some, takes back the legacy of the Second Vatican Council. The centrality that the 'culture of disposal' (not the 'culture of death', like his predecessors) takes up is particularly surprising: it emerges as a construct that encompasses economic exclusion, exploitation, and biotechnology, among other aspects. The reiterated appeal to confront the 'culture of disposal' sets a pace in which marginalization and poverty become central aspects in the pontiff's speeches. The impact of his

declarations and gestures do not remain limited to the Catholic community, which strengthens the Pope's image as a global leader, who is critical of the excesses of neoliberalism.

The new Pope also generates expectations regarding the Vatican's positioning on sexuality. After a rigid defense of a sexual morality removed from believers and after the scandals (even crimes) which provoked a severe institutional crisis, Francis I seems to initiate a renovation. Several statements on the part of the pontiff, multiplied by the media, resonate as indicators of a future change in the sexual morality and politics upheld by the Vatican, that is a distancing with respect to the political machinery constructed by his predecessors. The greatest media impact in this respect occurred when, in the middle of a press conference in 2013, the Pope stated that 'if a person is gay and seeks the Lord and has goodwill, who am I to pass judgment on them?' Although the focus of attention was put on the question 'who am I to pass judgment on them?', it is the employment of the term 'gay' on the part of the Pope that appears especially striking. One of the main strategies in confronting gender ideology has been an avoidance of terms that recognize (and inscribe) in some way a distance between biology and culture. A Pope who uses the word 'gay' could be considered as willing to overcome the antagonism created by his predecessors regarding gender perspectives and theories.

Another moment of expectations was the call to the Synod on the Family in 2014 and 2015. Choosing the topic of the family for his first Synod as Pope was not a minor detail for those who expected sexual morality to become more flexible. Particularly relevant were some of the questions included in the questionnaire sent to different episcopal conferences. One of the nine sections of the questionnaire dealt with the unions between same-sex people, and included a set of questions related to the civil law on 'unions between same-sex people' in each country, the attitude adopted by the churches before the State as a promoter of these recognitions, the attitude taken by the churches regarding the people involved in these unions, their pastoral attention, and the adoption of children on the part of these same-sex unions, particularly in the light of the transmission of the Catholic faith (Sgro and Vaggione 2016). The call to express an opinion and debate over these issues seemed to pave the way for the Synod to also re-think, or at least discuss, the rigid stance on sexuality defended in the last decades.

None of these moments, however, prevailed in time. During an interview a few days after his use of the term 'gay', the pontiff himself confirmed his words stating that he had not said anything that the Catholic doctrine does not state itself but, this time, he employed the term 'homosexuals'.³ The mistake (be it voluntary or not) in his use of the term 'gay' was not a sign of the Pope distancing himself from gender ideology. On the contrary, Francis I, on different occasions, referred to gender ideology by condemning the ideological colonization process which takes place in the forms in which gender is incorporated into education⁴ or hinting that the '...so-called gender theory is... an expression of

³ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html.

⁴ <https://notifam.com/2015/el-papa-francisco-condena-la-ideologia-de-genero-portercera-vez-la-familia-esta-siendo-atacada/>.

frustration and resignation, which seeks to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it.⁵

The Synod did not make the position of the Catholic Church more flexible, either, but instead it strengthened, in different ways, the inherited sexual morality. The energy of the questions that initiated the process was displaced when the *Relatio Synodi* was produced, centering on 'pastoral attention' for '*people with a homosexual orientation*', channeling – and reducing – the debate at the Synod to how the Catholic Church ought to assist and accompany situations of people with '*homosexual tendencies*' (Sgro and Vaggione 2016). Even the post-Synod document by Francis I (Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*) in 2016 does not only inscribe a continuity regarding sexual morality but it also explicitly refers to gender ideology as a contemporary challenge since it 'empties the anthropological foundation of the family'. It also condemns the attempt of this ideology to impose itself as 'a sole way of thinking' and states that ideologies which 'attempt to split in two the inseparable aspects of reality' ought not to be accepted (Francis I 2016).

The Pope offers gestures that seem to displace this inheritance, but he remains responsible for preventing any flexibility regarding sexual morality. Irrespective of the way in which this politics of opening and closing may be interpreted, it is possible to observe the existence of, so far at least, a continuity which manifests itself, among other matters, in the denunciation of gender ideology as one of the problems of contemporary societies. This continuity unfolds not only with regard to the political machinery put in force by John Paul II since the middle of the 1990s but also with respect to Bergoglio's own acts and stances before being appointed Pope.

Without overlooking that, at least discursively, this Pope is more critical of neoliberalism as a power system his criticism also encompasses the demands of feminist and sexual diversity movements. The 'culture of disposal' seems to include not only the devastating consequences of economic oppression and exclusion but also the cultural and legal changes involved in sexual and reproductive rights. Francis I has raised many expectations when it comes to a Church concerned with the environment and with economic and social exclusion as interconnected problematics, as he considered during his address to the United Nations. However, as the Pope also affirmed during this address,

the defense of the environment and the fight against exclusion demand that we recognize a moral law written into human nature itself, one which includes the natural difference between man and woman... and absolute respect for life in all its stages and dimensions... (Francis I 2015).

References

- Bergoglio, Jorge. 2010. Carta del cardenal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, arzobispo de Buenos Aires a las Monjas Carmelitas de la arquidiócesis de Buenos Aires. [on line] http://www.aica.org/docs_blanco.php?id=463. Consulted: 02/08/16.
- CEA-Conferencia Episcopal Argentina. 2008. *Ante la aprobación de los lineamientos cur-*

⁵ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150415_udienza-generale.html.

- riculares para la educación sexual integral. [on line] <http://www.aicaold.com.ar/index2.php?pag=CEEC080617>. Consulted: 02/08/16.
- CELAM-Conferencia Episcopal Latinoamericana. 2007. *Documento Conclusivo de la V Conferencia General en Aparecida* [on line]. <http://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf>.
- Doris Buss, and Didi Herman. 2003. *Globalizing Family Values: The Christian Right in International Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Francis I. 2015. *Meeting with the Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organizations* [on line]. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/sep-tember/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html.
- Francis I. 2016. *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*. [on line] https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.
- John Paul II. 1995. *Evangelium vitae (The Gospel of Life)*. Encyclical Letter. [on line] http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html. Consulted: 01/09/2016.
- Patternote, David. 2015. 'Blessing the Crowds: Catholic Mobilizations Against Gender in Europe' in Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa (dir.) *(Anti-)Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 129–148.
- Scala, Jorge. 2010. *La ideología de género o el género como herramienta de poder*, Ediciones Logos, Rosario.
- Sgró Ruata, María Candelaria, and Juan Marco Vaggione. 2016. 'Francisco I y la sexualidad: políticas de la dislocación'. Manuscrito presentado para su publicación.
- Vaggione, Juan Marco. 2012. 'La "cultura de la vida": desplazamientos estratégicos del activismo católico conservador frente a los derechos sexuales y reproductivos', *Religião & Sociedade* 32:2, 57–80.