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WHAT THREAT? THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST “GENDER IDEOLOGY”

JUDITH BUTLER

University of California Berkeley (U.S.A.)

Abstract: The idea of gender ideology emerged in the 1990s when the Roman Catholic Family Council warned against the idea of “gender” as a threat to the family and to biblical authority. In subsequent years, gender has become an issue in several major elections all over the world. Gender is understood as a single “ideology” that refutes the reality of sexual difference and that seeks to appropriate the divine power of creation for those who wish to create their own genders. Today the defense of the natural and normative character of the heterosexually organized family, linked with the insistence that reproduction requires heterosexuality and the privileged power of the father within the family, becomes an especially intense political issue where state-funded social services to families have been decimated and dependency on Churches has increased for basic services to those abandoned by the state. Significantly, the radical changes in economic life, including the loss of basic structures of social welfare produce a heightened sense of precarity and fear among populations who are then told that it is “gender ideology” that is breaking apart the family, destroying heterosexuality as a natural law, threatening both God’s creative powers and civilization itself. In this paper, I would suggest that we understand the historical formulation of neoliberalism and financialization (the imperative to increase assets at the expense of securing fair wages) not as the cause of the anti-gender ideology movement, but as part of the complex scene of heightened conflict where nationalism, racism, and heightened militarism ally with anti-gender ideology propaganda.

Keywords: gender, ideology, neoliberalism, financialization, social welfare.

The idea of gender ideology emerged in the 1990s when the Roman Catholic Family Council warned against the idea of “gender” as a threat to the family and to biblical authority¹. Although one can trace its origins in the Family Council documents, it has travelled in ways that track the political power of the Vatican as

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well as its newly formed alliance with the Evangelical Church in Latin America. One could approach the topic by offering an academic argument that disputes the claims made about gender, and that would surely be important (Butler 2019b). But such an academic task goes only part of the way in trying to understand why gender has become such a polarizing term, inciting rage and fear across many communities. The reasons for that incitement are surely various, and sometimes rooted in local struggles, but they also are linked, especially through internet petitions and newsletters that construe “gender” as a threat to the family, the distinct values of masculinity and femininity, society, the Church, and civilization itself. It appears that the proposition that gender is a social construction lead to a conviction that individuals could choose their gender or live in ways that are unconstrained by marriage and heterosexuality. That inference, however, assimilated the doctrine of social construction to an unbridled view of personal liberty, and there are many reasons to be suspicious of that reduction. Among those who propagated such views as Joseph Scala who published a book in Argentina and read by Catholic communities and then was widely distributed by the Evangelical Church attacking “gender ideology” (Scala 2010). It warned against the voluntarist and destructive character of the concept of gender which was then condemned as inimical both to religion and to science. In subsequent years, gender has become an issue in several major elections in Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, France, Switzerland, and Germany, and it is now intensely contested in Hungary (where gender studies was abolished as a field) and throughout the Balkans.

In all of these contexts, gender is understood as a single “ideology” that refutes the reality of sexual difference and that seeks to appropriate the divine power of creation for those who wish to create their own genders. Personal choice is understood to have taken the place of divine creativity. In other regions, such as Germany, gender ideology or, indeed, gender studies, is regularly characterized as totalitarian, suggesting that it prescribes gender



roles and suppresses personal liberty (von Redecker 2016; Hark, Villa 2015). In Brazil, the very idea of the nation, of masculinity itself, is understood as threatened by a “gender ideology” characterized as a dangerous cultural import. In all of these cases, there seems to be no interest in what the complex and conflictual field of gender and sexuality studies actually includes, its regional variants, its guiding methodological debates. Whether it is “gender” as a term or “gender ideology” as a spurious reference to “gender studies” it is summed up by a phantasm that deflects from the fact that hardly anyone who opposes this matter has read texts within the field or considers their arguments. Indeed, the position against gender seems to be a position against reading more generally. In Switzerland, I was once accosted by a woman who let me know that she prays for me, and when I asked why, she explained that gender was “diabolical” and that she hoped I would find redemption for my responsibility in circulating the term or the theory or the phantasm. When I asked whether she had ever read my work, she exclaimed that she would never read any book on gender! As I was trying to ask whether she felt fine about dismissing a book she had never read, she was already moving swiftly out the door.

The furor began some years ago when the Pope’s family council, then directed by Joseph Ratzinger, warned that gender theorists were imperiling the family by questioning the notion that appropriately Christian social roles could be derived from biological sex. It was in the nature of sex for women to do domestic work and for men to undertake action in public life. The integrity of the family, understood as both Christian and natural, was said to be imperiled by this gender ideology. The arguments were starkly pre-feminist, which is perhaps one reason why the first objection on the part of the Catholic Church to the concept of “gender” was considered odd, even amusing, by feminists who did not then anticipate the implications of the opposition. Ratzinger made public his concern at the Beijing Conference on the Status of Women in 1995, and then again in 2004, as head of the Pontifical Council on the Family, in a Letter to Bishops, underscoring the



potential of “gender” to destroy feminine values important to the Church and the natural distinction between the two sexes (Vatican 2004). As Pope Benedict XVI, he went further in 2012, maintaining that such “ideologies” deny the “pre-ordained duality of man and woman”, and thus deny “the family” as “a reality established by creation”. Because, he argued, man and woman are created by God, those who seek to create themselves deny the creative power of God and are misled by an atheistic set of beliefs. By 2016, Pope Francis, despite his occasionally progressive views, continued the line developed by Pope Benedict: “We are experiencing a moment of the annihilation of man as the image of God”. He specifically included as an instance of this defacement “[the ideology of] ‘gender’”. He was clearly outraged that, “today children – children! – are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex... And this [sic] terrible!”. Then he made affirmative reference to Benedict XVI and claimed, “God created man and woman; God created the world in a certain way...and we are doing the exact opposite” (San Martín 2017). It would appear from this perspective that humans have taken over the creative power of the divine. Pope Francis has gone further to argue that proponents of gender are like those who support or deploy nuclear arms and that their target is creation itself. This suggests that whatever gender is, it carries enormous destructive power in the minds of those who oppose it – indeed, an unfathomable and terrifying destructiveness. It is represented as a demonic force of destruction pitted against God’s creative powers. This is one reason that gender is understood as exercising demonic powers – “a diabolical ideology”.

Perhaps it was renewed papal support of the fight against gender in 2015 and 2016 that encouraged bishops throughout the world to escalate the anti-gender ideology campaign into an international project, one that crosses hemispheres, affecting elections in Colombia, Mexico, and Costa Rica, and recently playing a significant role in the election of right-wing Jair Bolsonaro as President of Brazil. His inaugural speech in early January of 2019 con-



tained a commitment to eradicate “gender ideology in the schools” and he vowed to resist “ideological submission” (Presidency of the Republic of Brasil 2019). Since being elected, he has sought to eradicate sex education in schools and replaced it with a curriculum that enforces the idea of binary gender difference. In October of 2018, Hungary not only eliminated gender studies from the list of approved master’s programs but forced the Central European University, known for its international gender program, to relocate to Vienna in part because of its sponsorship for western academic projects such as feminist and gender studies (Peto 2018).

After the successful legal battle for gay marriage in France in 2013, a backlash took place the following year. A prominent course curriculum in France called *ABCD de l’égalité* offered students a way to think about the difference between biological sex and cultural gender, and it was rescinded after strong public accusations that gender theory was being taught in the primary schools. Pope Francis met with one of the organizers of the effort to withdraw the program. Argentina, the Pope’s country of origin, is the country with the most progressive laws on gender freedom, allowing any person to choose to change gender without medical authorization. In 2014, and in reaction to its progressive Gender Identity Law passed in 2012, *La ideología de género* published by Jorge Scala started to circulate among Christian communities, both Catholic and Evangelical, in Argentina and, in its Portuguese version, in Brazil. In the Spanish region of Andalucia, the ultra-conservative Vox party has recently petitioned the center-right Ciudadanos Party to combat what they call “the jihadism of gender”. They oppose singling out men who commit violence against women and trans people and call for an opposition to “intra-familial” violence rather than gender-based violence, pointing out that men can be victims too.

The aim of this movement is not simply to eliminate the word “gender” or even to outlaw the so-called theory of gender, but to undermine the justification for a wide range of policies. The alli-



ance of right-wing Catholics and Evangelicals has a clear platform: they oppose feminism, LGBTQI rights, especially gay marriage and trans legal and medical rights, single mothers, gay parents, and more. My wager is that as neoliberal economic policies devastate the work lives and the sense of futurity for many people who face contingent labor and unpayable debt, the turn against “gender” is a way of shoring up a traditional sense of place and privilege. It also draws the line between public and private, walling off the family and its patriarchal privilege from the market, where humiliation and dispensability have become the norm. Both the nationalist and traditionalist investment in prohibiting gay marriage, gay and lesbian families and adoption rights, trans and *travestis* rights, single parent adoption and access to reproductive technology, gender inequality, and the concept of “gender” itself follows from the fact that the heteronormative family is now being defended, sometimes violently, as the sole defense against devastating market forces. The anti-gender ideology movement has taken hold in the wake of gay marriage legislation, arguing that religion ought to be the arbiter of marital arrangements and that “progressive” legislation ought not to undermine the heterosexual family with its distinct, natural, and hierarchical roles for women and men. Opposing or reversing inclusive trends in family law, demanding new laws that prohibit forms of procreation or adoption outside the traditional family form as well as changing genders assigned at birth, or affirming the equality between men and women all work to this end.

Consider that the defense of the natural and normative character of the heterosexually organized family, linked with the insistence that reproduction requires heterosexuality and the privileged power of the father within the family, becomes an especially intense political issue where state-funded social services to families have been decimated and dependency on Churches has increased for basic services to those abandoned by the state. I say “abandoned” by the state, but in such cases, many understand themselves to be saved by the Church. How does that saving dis-



simulate and continue the conditions of abandonment? Although not a model for Church interventions cross-regionally, the evangelical Church in the US gained much of its power in the wake of the decimation of state funds for AFDC, as Melinda Cooper has shown (Cooper 2017; see also Halley, Rittich 2010). As asset appreciation becomes the source of wealth, and massive cuts in wages, secure employment, and social welfare follow, and as unions and their bargaining powers are increasingly subject to destruction, criminalization, or disregard, the heteronormative family assumes, or reassumes a crucial role. It is not just, as Cooper argues, that the family becomes the central site and mechanism for the transmission of wealth, but that family dynasties become popular ideals, and family fortunes, like the one that is currently running our country, become exemplary modes of wealth accumulation. The funds the state expended on welfare, including securing payments to mothers and children – in the US, especially African American communities – became figured by neo-conservatives as a drain on the state, and an inappropriate intervention into the family through legal and economic instruments. The withdrawal of state support, with the help of Bill Clinton, abandoned poor families, destroying whatever safety net might have once existed. In its place was instated the idea of responsibility that drew both on individualism and its Christian variants.

My point is that what I am calling “abandonment” is the very phenomenon championed, as we know, by neo-conservatives and neo-liberals as sound fiscal policy, that is, a policy that regards as appropriate the withdrawal of the state from private, moral, and social matters. In the US and elsewhere, the authority of the Evangelical Church has stepped in, as it were, not just to give moral order to the family without which the economy cannot function but to aid and abet free market economics as it intensifies precarity for increasing numbers of people. The complex alliance between the spread of Evangelicism and the support for neoliberal economics is one that I cannot explain at length in these pages, but Bethany Moreton (2010) has persuasively argued that



in the US context, white Christian women who constitute the driving force of the evangelical movement understand quite clearly that “family values are an indispensable element of the global service economy, not a distraction from it” (Moreton 2010: 5). Indeed, the evangelical church is itself part of free enterprise, or what some call Christian enterprise, and that the convergence consistently claims to be the only alternative to socialism or communism or to elites on campus. Thus, the centrality of Walmart as a “populist multinational”. Just as family values are indispensable to the service economy, so faith-based welfare networks are indispensable to the withdrawal of government from the mandate to provide social services to those in need, from the basic ideals of social democracy.

Some have argued that it was the legal advances of the LGBTQI movement that spurred the anti-gender ideology movement, especially the right to privacy that struck down anti-sodomy laws, but also the legalization of gay marriage. Both have been understood as triumphs of an elite, secular, and nihilistic set of social movements galvanized in part by college campuses and compliant corporations. These new rights are themselves the sign of the destruction of culture, humanity, sexual difference, or religious authority. The battles against women’s rights, trans rights, and the rights of LGBTQI people more generally is regarded as the effort to save civilization, the natural order, the divine order, and in its suppression of freedoms moves closer to the full embrace of authoritarianism. The authoritarian strains of the states that adopt the anti-gender ideology position are sometimes mixed with fascist trends – another paper would be required to explain the difference and the connection. Yet, the confusion of discourses is part of what constitutes the fascist structure and appeal of at least some of these movements. One can oppose gender as a cultural import from the North at the same time that one can see that very opposition as a social movement against further colonization of the South. The result is not a turn to the Left, but an embrace of ethno-nationalism. The social movement of gender rights and



freedoms is itself positioned ambivalently: some human rights frameworks are arguably culturally imperialist, but some queer and trans movements are clearly part of an anti-imperialist struggle on the Left. When the anti-gender ideology advocates see themselves as energized by anti-imperialism, they drawing upon the very energies of movements they seek to defeat.

Significantly, the radical changes in economic life, including the loss of basic structures of social welfare produce a heightened sense of precarity and fear among populations who are then told that it is “gender ideology” that is breaking apart the family, destroying heterosexuality as a natural law, threatening both God’s creative powers and civilization itself. Clearly, the effort to fortify the heteronormative family through more autocratic moral and religious mandates seeks to stop queer alternatives to the family, single mothers, assisted reproductive technology to those out of wedlock, trans rights, all because *a*) they challenge collectively the heteronormative fantasy that sustains the idea of the nation, one that often depends upon a doubling of the two fathers (familial and state masculine leadership), but also *b*) relieves the state of having to provide financial assistance to dependent women and children. We should not underestimate the assault on family dependency entitlements by neoliberal policies. Fathers have to be hauled back into the family as an alternative, whether through legal constraints or religious requirements. The defense of the place of the father within the family against assaults by “gender” facilitates the state decimation of public programs and social services, the transfer of such services to faith-based initiatives and enterprises (and their profits), at the same time that it seeks to prevent further legal progress for feminism and the LGBTQI movement, both of which are considered destructive in nature, if not outright demonic. Devils, apparently, must be expelled, burnt in effigy, or imprisoned, but they cannot be accommodated. And they surely don’t deserve rights.

I would suggest that we understand the historical formulation of neoliberalism and financialization (the imperative to increase



assets at the expense of securing fair wages) not as the cause of the anti-gender ideology movement, but as part of the complex scene of heightened conflict where nationalism, racism, and heightened militarism ally with anti-gender ideology propaganda. The focus on the figure of the father in its familial/political overdetermination is part of this constellation, especially in its relation to fascism. My wager is that the more fully social services are decimated in favor of private contracts and outsourcing, the more that national wealth is determined by movements within global capitalism that culminate in dispossession and precarity, the stronger the two Churches become, supplying as it were the moral complement to dispossession as well as its rationale. First, the precarity is one that the Church can ameliorate, exchanging basic goods for ideological exposure, but also, perhaps more fundamentally, through a process that seeks to mandate and instill the singularly moral character of heterosexual marriage social and the destructive character of all other sexual formations. In other words, the strategic abandonment of populations in need, together with the refusal to guarantee decent wages or working conditions facilitates the role of the state to license and protect the maximization of assets without limit. The specific feature of financialization that seems important here is that finance is based on speculation on future outcomes, and it always carries the risk, if not the certainty, of a new crisis (Brown 2015). It may well be, as some have suggested, that the relation between financialization and crisis is structural. Under these conditions, what sense of future and stability can there possibly be, especially for those who have no power to engage in so-called asset appreciation? Something is clearly destroying the sense of future for many people, but how we name that “something” has never mattered more.

And yet, the new alliance of Christianity and fascism proclaims that one main cause of this chaos, this threat to futurity itself, is gender understood as a threat to social structures, to the nation, to communities, their histories and their futures. For conservative Catholics and Evangelicals, the instability and chaos that



must be fended off is that which challenges the normative character of the family, but that argument does not take into account the abandonment of families by the state when wages cannot be secured. The problem is not just that men cannot make the living they require to sustain a family, but that women and young and old people everywhere are subject to increasingly precarious work conditions, foreclosed horizons, and exposed to a moral message that they are individually responsible for conditions that have undermined their very capacity to work and act. Those who are gender minorities – gender non-conforming or trans – are subject to these precarious conditions even more intensively, as is the case for queers of color in Bahia, Brazil².

When gender and sexual “freedoms” are regarded as destabilizing and destructive, we have to ask, from what perspective does this seem true? And what other kinds of destabilizations in society are being registered as the fault of gender? Perhaps gender is an overdetermined site where a host of such fears collect and register in such a discourse in the form of a fearful phantasm? Is it sexual freedom that has created this pervasive sense of precarity, or is it rather that the normative family emerges as the sign and the supplement of radical economic abandonment? Is the tacit understanding that the family must be restored to absorb the blows of the economy, or that any challenge to the necessary and normative structure of the family will expose the population to a yet more severe precarity? Once the family in its normative version becomes installed as the only possible safeguard against chaos and destruction, then it is freedom that is attacked in the name of preserving a social order that is, paradoxically, under attack by other means. The state requires the Church to oppose gender freedoms in order to reinstall and naturalize modes of masculine authority in the family and the state, but also to empower the state to follow financialization as if it were the name for a bright future, even as it systematically exposes populations to precarity whose political support it requires, condemning them to a life whose sense of futurity is constantly under threat.



NOTES

¹ For the Family Council Statement from 2004, see http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html. See also Case 2011, 2016. Parts of this discussion are taken from my forthcoming essay (Butler 2019a).

² For crimes of violence against LGBTQI people in Bahia, see <https://grupogaydabahia.com.br>.

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