

# “Don’t mess with my kids”: building the moral panic of the child under threat\*

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## Abstract

In recent years, diverse moral entrepreneurs have been responsible for disseminating a moral panic against school teaching materials, educational programs and art exhibitions that addressed gender differences and sexuality. This paper aims to analyze three episodes involved in panic: the reaction, in 2011, against teaching materials for confronting homophobia in schools; the discussion, that happened between 2014 and 2015, on educational plans in which the notion of "gender ideology" was disseminated; and, in 2017, the persecution to exhibitions and artistic performances in Porto Alegre and São Paulo that preceded the arrival of Judith Butler to Brazil. We will discuss how the building of moral panic depended on the strategic discursive resource of transforming initiatives that aimed to promote advances in sexual rights in a threat to children.

**Keywords:** Moral Panic, Threat to Children, “Gender Ideology”, Human Rights, Judith Butler.

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We cannot allow gender ideology to  
exterminate our country because they don't  
want an endeavor on sexual equality in any  
way. They do want child sexualization!  
[...]  
Get out, Butler! Get out, Butler! Get  
out, Butler!<sup>1</sup>

Get out, Butler: don't mess with my  
kids!<sup>2</sup>

In a video posted on YouTube, Judith Butler and Wendy Brown, both professors at the University of California, Berkeley, dispatch their luggage at the airport of Congonhas, São Paulo, while being observed by an amateur cellphone camera. The camera films two women who pursue the professors. One of the aggressors shouts “Judith Butler!” – the philosopher turns back – and completes: “you are not welcome in Brazil!”. The professors try to reply, but the aggression continues: “you guys are evil [...] you are pedophile”. Brown is attacked with a trolley pushed in her direction, and after that Butler and the aggressor are not watched by the camera.

From now on, a second opponent starts to direct the aggression, holding a signboard with the expression #ForaButler (“GetOutButler”) and her image with mephistophelic horns,

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts of the protest in front of SESC Pompeia, against the presence of Butler in Brazil, from the Facebook page of Douglas Garcia, one of the leaders of the right-wing group Direita São Paulo (<https://www.facebook.com/DouglasGarciaOficial/>).

<sup>2</sup> Facebook cover page of Sara Winter, a moral entrepreneur who is against sexual and reproductive rights, in her online campaign against the visit of Butler in November of 2017. *Con mis hijos no te metas* is an expression that circulates in Latin America that became known from the prominence of the Peruvian movement of opposition to educational programs that sought to promote the inclusion of gender equality and respect to differences in the school curriculum. The movement organized national marches in Lima to bar the governmental initiative.

following Brown, who was mistaken for Butler, to the boarding area. In Portuguese, the offender directs offenses such as “pig”, “assassin”, “corruptor of minors”, when the cameraman adds to the choir, crying out: “You are not welcome in Brazil!”, “Against gender ideology!”, “Killer of children!”.<sup>3</sup>

The offenses and accusations at the airport were the outcomes of a series of reactions to Butler’s figure, in campaigns and online petitions against her coming and in protest in front of an international academic event in which the American philosopher was one of the organizers. Online and offline, her image brought the threat of “pedophilia”, “infantile sexualization”, and even “murder of children”. Butler was conceived as the incarnation of evil: posters associated her with the devil, and a witch doll picturing her face was burnt in public, retaking the inquisitorial symbology of times that seemed long overpassed. How to explain such event in the 21st century?

The intense reaction to the philosopher can be explained by the consolidation of a moral panic that reflects the opposition to politics of recognition of gender differences and sexuality, and to the increasing visibility of sexual diversity issues in Brazil. The Butler danger, to the eyes of her detractors, would be the elaboration of her gender and sexuality theories, which would turn her into the greater representation of what they call “gender ideology”.

The reaction to the politics that recognize gender differences and sexuality, sedimented on the notion of “gender ideology”, has a transnational dimension. Authors had demonstrated the formation of a moral crusade (Correa, 2017; Junqueira, 2017), which was consolidated by lay Catholic intellectuals, politicians and the Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI himself. According to Correa (2017), it is a counter-offensive that has been articulated since the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994, and the

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<sup>3</sup> The video that went viral on the internet can be watched at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itKZzsyO2es> – accessed on: Feb. 15, 2018.

1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, both marked by the inclusion of gender and sexuality discussions on the international human rights agenda.

Miskolci and Campana (2017) discussed how the Latin American context from a little more than a decade until now has been conducive to the development of a coordinated reaction to what is termed “gender ideology”. This is a strategic region to the Vatican since during left-wing governments discussions about educational reforms with a gender approach and legal decisions of equal marriage rights to same-sex unions were instigated.

In Brazil, a large-scale public reaction, spread out by the media, was only accomplished from 2011 onwards. Politicians from the evangelical bench had the media’s attention on didactic materials elaborated under the coordination of the Ministry of the Education that were part of the Escola Sem Homofobia (“School Without Homophobia”) Program and aimed at opposing the violence and the discrimination of LGBT people in schools. The State has now recognized the need to develop educational politics directed to human rights and involving the gender and sexuality issues. In response, a moral panic was created from the promotion of a campaign about the alleged harmfulness of the material to children.

The opposition to such human rights agenda was set from a strategical discursive resource: an interpretative change in which the expansion of rights to the LGBT people (present in the governmental initiatives) was conceived as a threat to the children. Instead of presenting themselves as contrary to the equalization of rights, the moral panic agents were shown as defenders of the children's rights, while their adversaries were transformed into enemies with presumed occult intentions that would threaten the bases of society. The interpretative change, handled by the agents who had triggered the moral panic, obliterated prejudiced positions that, if explicit, could have disqualified their speech. The construction of the threat to children has been an intense appeal to public opinion, gaining publicity and taking a passional character,

with effective consequences as it barred initiatives to combat homophobia or respect for sexual diversity.

This paper aims to address the moral panic of the “threat to children”, focusing on three recent episodes: in 2011, with the opposition to didactic materials produced under the Escola Sem Homofobia Program; in 2014 and 2015, with the discussion of National, State and Municipal Education Plans; and in 2017, with the persecution of exhibitions and artistic performances held in Porto Alegre and São Paulo. We analyzed the positionings of moral entrepreneurs, from parliamentary speeches, public debates with repercussions in the conventional media, as well as contents spread out on social networks. Resuming the emergence of the three episodes of moral panic allows us to reflect on a discursive strategy that has not only helped to break the strides of sexual and reproductive rights in Brazil, but it has left us with evident setbacks, such as the threat to intellectual and artistic freedom, which was evident on the persecution of artistic exhibitions and Judith Butler.

### **The school as an inductor of homosexuality and pedophilia**

[...] short pornographic films and the so-called didactic material to fight homophobia are indicated for children from the age of 4; in fact, I repeat, they stimulate homosexuality and open the door to pedophilia.<sup>4</sup>

Jair Bolsonaro, then member of the House of Representatives for the Partido Progressista of Rio de Janeiro, discoursed in the plenary on May 5, 2011, about what he considered to be a perversity set by the Ministry of the Education.

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<sup>4</sup> Speech on May 5, 2011 [http://www.camara.leg.br/internet/SitaqWeb/TextoHTML.asp?etapa=5&nuSessao=096.1.54.O&nuQuarto=10&nuOrador=1&nuInsercao=0&dtHorarioQuarto=09:18&sgFaseSessao=BC&Data=05/05/2011&txApelido=JAIR%20BOLSONARO,%20PP-RJ – accessed on: Feb. 9 2018].

On May 11, several newspapers reported that the deputy was distributing pamphlets contrary to didactic materials to combat homophobia developed under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. In a manipulated booklet, with the title “National Plan for the Promotion of Citizenship and Human Rights of LGBT”, under which an inserted text was addressed to “Illustrious Gentlemen and Ladies Householders”, the document presents what he calls the “National Plan of Shame”.

That is the controversy involving what was called “anti-homophobia kit” by the government and transformed by its critics in “gay kit”. As part of the Escola Sem Homofobia Program, the material, which was created by an NGO from São Paulo called ECOS – Communication on Sexuality, consisted of part of the Program coordinated by SECAD<sup>5</sup>, in conjunction with civil society organizations, involving a range of materials aimed at educators and students.

The controversy began in November 2010, when two public hearings were held in the National Congress regarding the Program's planning, with the presence of the parties responsible for its elaboration. On that occasion, Congressman Jair Bolsonaro addressed the Chamber of Deputies. Apart from the openly prejudiced character of the deputy's speech, he emphasized what is supposed to be the target age range of the material:

Attention, parents of 7, 8, 9 and 10-year-old students from public schools: next year, your children will receive a kit titled Fight Against Homophobia. In fact, it is a stimulus to homosexuality, to promiscuity [...] if a boy has a misconduct at a young age, he must be redirected to the right path, even if some slaps are needed.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Secretariat for Continuing Education, Literacy and Diversity, which changed its name to SECADI, incorporating Inclusion.

<sup>6</sup> Speech available at:  
<<http://www.camara.leg.br/internet/SitaqWeb/TextoHTML.asp?etapa=5&nuSessao=208.4.53.O&nuQuarto=29&nuOrador=2&nuInsercao=0&dtHorarioQuarto>

The subject did not reverberate much until the first half of May when other political leaders assumed the opposition front, linked to the evangelical and catholic benches, next to Bolsonaro, to position denouncing the material then renamed "gay kit".<sup>7</sup> The splurge led to a threat of voting obstruction in the legislative house, in addition to pressure on the newly elected Dilma Rousseff government to convene the then Minister of Civil House Antonio Palocci to give explanations on his atypical patrimonial evolution, according to media reports. What changed from the end of 2010 to the beginning of May 2011, when the so-called "threat to children" theme becomes the neuralgic point of the national political debate?

On May 5, 2011, the same day when Bolsonaro spoke in the Congress, the Federal Supreme Court (STF) judged the Direct Action of Unconstitutionality n° 4277, and the Arrangement of Non-compliance with a Basic Precept n° 132, guaranteeing recognition of the stable union between people of the same sex. The following week, the Human Rights Commission discussed the Complementary Law Project n° 122/2006, a long-running project for the criminalization of homophobia, marked by systematic criticism for allegedly curtailing freedom of expression.<sup>8</sup> On May 11, at the same moment when the reporter of the project in the Commission of Human Rights, the then-senator Marta Suplicy, gave an interview to the press on the Complementary Law Project, Bolsonaro divulged in the Congress pamphlets contrary to the

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=14:56&sgFaseSessao=PE&Data=30/11/2010&txApelido=JAIR%20BOLSONARO,%20PP-RJ>. Accessed on: Feb. 15, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Many congressmen stand out, particularly João Campos (PSDB-GO), Anthony Garotinho (PR-RJ) and Eros Biondini (PTB-MG). The first ones as leaders of the evangelical bench, and the last congressman as leader of the Catholic bench. For a more detained understanding of the process, cf. Cunha, Lopes, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> On the quarrels in the session, see: <<http://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,evangelicos-impedem-votacao-do-projeto-que-criminaliza-homofobia,718322>>. Accessed on: Feb. 9 2018.

didactic material contrary, seeking the attention of television broadcasters.

The proximity of the dates and the connection between the events allow us to perceive the consolidation of the first manifestation of moral panic as a reaction to a scenario of advances in human rights policies aimed at confronting homophobia and equating matrimonial rights, including the LGBT population. Although other alarms had been raised, such as the threat to the family and the suspension of the right of expression, it was with the construction of the threat to children that the discussion gained wide media repercussion, with effective consequences such as human rights initiatives being barred when regarding gender and sexuality.

On May 26, Dilma Rousseff's government suspended the courseware, and the president positioned herself for the press saying that "The government defends education and also the fight against homophobic practices. However, we will not allow any government agency to advertise sexual choices".<sup>9</sup> Under pressure and criticism from their political allies, the outcome of the episode attests that Dilma's government agreed that there could be an incitement to homosexuality in the material, corroborating the idea that the educational initiative contained a threat to children.

### **The battle for the school with no “gender ideology”**

[...] anything goes for gender ideology. It takes beastly sex, sex with animals. It takes the incest, which is the parent-child relation, and the siblings relation, the sexual relation [...]<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [<http://www.brasil.gov.br/educacao/2011/05/governo-defende-a-luta-contras-praticas-homofobicas-diz-presidenta> – accessed on: Feb. 15, 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Video from the YouTube channel “Silas Official Malafaia”, the evangelical leader of Assembleia de Deus, recognized for his ultraconservative positions [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uk4FyOLl5Y> – accessed on: Feb. 9 2018].



The teacher will respect the parents' right of their children to receive the moral education that is in accordance with their own beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

The Public Power will not interfere in the process of sexual maturation of students nor allow any form of dogmatism or proselytism in the approach to gender issues.<sup>12</sup>

Between the middle of 2014 and the end of 2015 the notion of “gender ideology” spread in the news and in the social media, when new moral entrepreneurs appeared on the scene, waging a battle to bar educational initiatives from a gender perspective. For its critics, “gender” would be the name of an “ideology”, which would have a definition that is as comprehensive as it is diffuse, of harmful consequences to children and adolescents. In the most diverse positions of its opponents, this “ideology” has presumably inducted homosexuality, pedophilia and even communism.

In June 2014, the National Education Plan (PNE 2014-2024) was decreed and sanctioned by President Rousseff. According to Keila Deslandes (2015), the Plan had been processed by the National Congress for four years, after extensive debate, public hearings and seminars with broad participation of the civil society, setting goals for public educational policies. The approval of the Plan came after intense debates on the so-called “gender ideology”, leaving no mention of gender in the final version of the document.

The subsequent moment is marked by the drafting by various politicians, commonly aligned to the evangelical and Catholic parliamentary fronts, of bills that would prohibit the use of the so-called “gender ideology” in education. In 2015, after heated

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<sup>11</sup> Teachers' duties, set in bills of the Movement School With No Party [<https://www.programaescolasempartido.org> – accessed on: Feb. 9 2018].

<sup>12</sup> Excerpt from federal, state, and municipal bills of the Movement School With No Party [<https://www.programaescolasempartido.org> – accessed on: Feb. 9 2018].

discussions in the assemblies and chambers, which drew attention and disseminated the notion of “gender ideology” throughout the country, the mention of “gender” was vetoed in the state and municipal education plans.

At the moment, the already existing Escola Sem Partido (ESP) (“Movement School With No Party”), recognized for combating the supposed communist “ideological indoctrination” in schools, becomes a prominent moral entrepreneur in combating “gender ideology”. Luis Felipe Miguel (2016) emphasizes the sense of opportunity of the Movement School With No Party. Founded in 2004, under the leadership of São Paulo State Attorney Miguel Nagib, it only adopted moral standards as one of their flags during the discussion of education plans, increasing the visibility of the group while thickening the field of militant moral conservatism.

The ESP makes federal, state and municipal bills available on their website, inspiring parliamentarians from all regions to regulate educational normative bases with the objective of prohibiting gender and sexuality discussions in schools, as it is seen as a way to “interfere in the sexual maturation process”. It also regards posters in classrooms and in the teachers’ room, with the “duties of the teacher”, among other obligations, preventing them from discussing moral issues that confront the convictions of the students’ parents. The figure of the child or adolescent to be protected was given a new framework with the idea that they would be a captive audience in the hands of potentially manipulative teachers.

The movement also elaborated a model of anonymous extrajudicial notification for parents to use in order to coerce teachers who could presumably violate the movements’ dictates - a resource that aims to intimidate the teacher to, for example, not address the gender dimension in the classroom. The teacher came to be seen as a harmful intruder in the sacralized relationship between parents and children, something attested in slogans like “my children, my rules” or “do not mess with my kids”, provoking the creation of Facebook pages such as Mothers for School With No Party.

The denunciations against the so-called “gender ideology” began to swarm in social media, mobilized by moral entrepreneurs ranging from religious leaders, such as Silas Malafaia, to young agnostic entrepreneurs using various online platforms to spread conservative ideas. The association of the so-called “gender ideology” with the left wing, sedimented by the Movement School With No Party, opened the possibility of discourse mobilization by moral entrepreneurs located at the right-wing of the national political spectrum, not necessarily bound to any religious morality.

### **The art seen as a promoter of “pedophilia”**

Education, culture, and diversity are works of art with zoophilia, pedophilia, trans children?

[...] this is clearly part of an authoritarian left-biased agenda. People wanting to push this down the throat in an authoritarian way, not only for adults like us but for children and for young people.<sup>13</sup>

On September 10, 2017, the art show *Queermuseu – Cartografias da Diferença na arte brasileira* (Queermuseum – Cartography Differences in Brazilian Art) was prematurely closed at Santander Cultural in Porto Alegre. An art exhibition focused on the issue of differences, with works of internationally recognized Brazilian artists, was closed by manifestations that interpreted it as an apology for “pedophilia” and “zoophilia”. A campaign was opened on social networks to boycott not only the exhibition but also the bank that sponsored and organized it.

The Movimento Brasil Livre (Free Brazil Movement, or MBL, in Portuguese abbreviation) was the driving force behind this new moment of moral panic, disseminating videos and boycott posts

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<sup>13</sup> Video on Mamãefalei channel, from the youtuber and member of the MBL Arthur Moledo [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiSNvXJYmP4> – accessed on: Feb. 15, 2018].

against the exhibition. A few days later, the performance *La Bête*, by Wagner Schwartz, in which the artist acts naked in rereading of work *Animals*, by Lygia Clark, part of 35th Panorama of Brazilian Art at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM), became the new focus of heated controversy. In both events, MBL's positioning, whether through their Facebook page or their members' positioning on pages and YouTube channels, was to accuse the expositions of eroticizing children or promoting pedophilia. A fragment of Schwartz's performance with a video of a child interacting with him, images from unknown sources shared as part of the Porto Alegre exhibition catalog, followed by hauling on pedophilia and eroticization of children, went viral on social networks.

On the act *La Bête*, Kim Katagui, one of MBL's young leaders, published a video with the following subtitle: "Exhibition at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art is another one that shows the lack of common sense and decency of people who want to follow a criminal and harmful agenda for our children".<sup>14</sup> In this video, he says: "And I don't know what kind of fetish these people have for kids! [...] Why do this to a child? [...]. Now, why? For what? What's the agenda behind it?". The interpretation of intentionality that attributes to the Museum the purpose of taking the children to "do something" (harmful) to themselves, is more striking; and more than that: there would be a hidden agenda, an implicit objective beyond the performance itself, which was presumably aimed at children.

The association between art and pedophilia did not stop on the criticism, but it was unfolded in the persecution of its mentors. Gaudêncio Fidelis, the curator of Queermuseu, was summoned to testify at the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry to Investigate the Ill-Treatment of Children and Adolescents, on November 23, 2017, presided over by Senator Magno Malta, in which it was

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<sup>14</sup>[<https://www.facebook.com/katagui.kim/videos/vb.833053646745836/1668934713157721> – accessed on: Nov. 25, 2017].

presented the need to respond to the Rapporteur of the Commission, Jose Antonio Medeiros (PODE-MT), and the President, persistent questions about the presence of children and the content of the works allegedly directed at them.<sup>15</sup> In the case of Schwartz's performance, the Public Ministry opened an inquiry to investigate allegations of improper content to children, and the artist still had to give testimony during almost three hours in the 4th Pedophilia Police Repression Police Station. He recently claimed to have received recurring death threats after online pedophilia allegations.<sup>16</sup>

### Final considerations

Opponents of including respect for sexual and gender diversity in the human rights agenda have hidden their restrictive positioning on differences by disseminating moral panic. From constructing the threat to children, they were able to stop initiatives to combat homophobia in schools, to prevent the use of the term *gender* in educational plans, and even to prevent or curtail artistic exhibitions with the theme of diverse sexualities. The triggering of moral panic served to prevent the rational apprehension of events, distorting them, contributing to the spread of prejudices, reiterating aggressive persecutions to momentary targets, and even forcing limits on free thought.

The persecution of Judith Butler in Brazil signals how such reaction has long distanced itself from divergences appropriate to the democratic debate, revealing its authoritarian character. Unveiling the strategies of the analyzed discourse, and facing them, has become an imperative in defending the democracy, in

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<sup>15</sup> Further information on the investigation can be found at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnJqjAhHpPU>>. Accessed on: Feb. 9 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Interview granted to Eliane Brum [[https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/02/12/opinion/1518444964\\_080093.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/02/12/opinion/1518444964_080093.html) – accessed on: Feb. 14, 2018].

favor of deepening sexual and reproductive rights, but also of freedom of thought and rejecting the persecution of teachers, artists and intellectuals who resist and insist on building a more just, egalitarian and less violent society.

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