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Conservative Movements and Identity Movements: An Analysis of Clashes in The Public Sphere in Contemporary Brazil*

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The book *“Batalhas morais: política identitária na esfera pública técnico-midiatizada”* (2021) by Richard Miskolci addresses one of the most effervescent themes of our time: the debate in the public sphere about the moral agenda, especially concerning sexual and reproductive rights. Miskolci analyses in depth the rise of conservative movements in Brazil in recent decades, most visibly manifest with the electoral victory of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. He also examines so-called identity movements, highlighting their ambivalent character. The background of his analysis could not be other than social media, which amplifies the existing debate and rescales the ability of agents to impact other subjects.

The book is based largely on the defense of his degree as Full Professor, at the Federal University of São Paulo in 2020, however, he has reflected on clashes involving so-called “gender ideology”¹ before. In previous studies, Miskolci reflected on how this phenomenon emerged as a moral panic in Brazil. He has highlighted how these issues directly involve sexual and reproductive rights and their strengthening, at least since 2010, which reoriented conservative moral entrepreneurs² from the fight against communism to the fight against gender ideology³. Miskolci, brings a new angle of analysis when highlighting the fact that the moral panic over gender ideology has been intensified by the advance of identity activism in Brazil. Although his observation can be questioned, mainly for the way he includes so-called “identity movements” in this phenomenon, since in my perspective these

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¹ The term gender ideology was coined originally within the Catholic Church in the 1990s as a “response” to the advance of sexual and reproductive rights. This concept has been widely used by conservative religious and secular groups in the public sphere in Brazil and several other countries. Although the category gender is well established in the field of human and social sciences, referring in its genesis to medicine, it has been employed to induce moral panic by conservative movements. While they use the term in a plastic way, without a clear definition of its meaning, the effort is based exclusively on the idea that this gender ideology represents a threat. It is also noteworthy that such movements repeatedly contrast the term gender ideology with a conception based on a perspective that reduces social roles (related to gender and sexuality) to biological sex.

² According to Miskolci and Campana (2017:730) “The classic sociological analysis on moral entrepreneurs was developed by Howard Becker (2008) in his now classic *Outsiders*, as well as by a strand of the moral panics theory, both of which emerged in the 1960s.” For Miskolci and Campana, those who combat gender ideology do not constitute a social movement within civil society, but rather moral entrepreneurs acting within a discursive field.

³ The ascension of conservative movements in contemporary Brazil has involved the production of a certain worldview that is crystallised in the speech of some leaders. This reading of reality is based on an understanding that there is a moral conflict between two poles of Brazilian (and world) society. On one side would be right-wing groups that defend Christian and family values, and on the other the left, which aims to destroy these values (Massenberg, 2017). In this sense, in addition to reactivating the anti-communist sentiment already present in right-wing movements in previous moments, new narratives produced by those in the “defence of the family” pole are added, as in the case of the fight against gender ideology, which gained a special echo in the debate on educational policies (Oliveira, 2022). Notably, such concepts are used as empty signifiers, without being well delimited in the speech produced by these agents (Cesarino, 2019).

movements have a substantially different relation to science and academic knowledge than that portrayed in this book, as I will explain⁴.

One of the interesting advances in Miskolci's work is that it simultaneously recognizes the local and *sui generis* character of this debate in Brazil, without forgetting its international articulation, since the rise of conservative movements has been observed in different parts of the world. As the author observes; "The Brazilian moral crusade against the so called 'gender ideology' is only understandable when placed within our historical and political context" (Miskolci, 2021:22). Moreover, it is important to highlight the current relevance of this discussion, considering the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has made the impact of these movements even more visible, especially in the context of post-truth (Oliveira, 2020).

Chapter 1, entitled "The differences in the technical-mediated public sphere", highlights that the power of social media in Brazil has been patent since the widespread street protests of June 2013, whose effects were deeply contradictory.

The protests that brought crowds onto the streets generated diverse and alternate reactions: from the enthusiasm of some who still associated the people on the streets with demands for democracy and equality to the fear of others who rejected them for the same reasons. But the protests were born one way and were transformed when far-right groups saw in the anti-institutional impulse that agglutinated them the window of opportunity to take control over them, redirecting them towards their goals (Miskolci, 2021:31).

The author emphasizes that far-right movements best capitalized on this moment, mainly through social media. This phenomenon occurred concomitantly with the growing visibility of the "identitarianism" of the Brazilian LGBTI+ movements. However, when connecting the two phenomena the author alerts us to the fact that: "This observation is - in no way - intended to seek blame, but rather to identify and understand the structuring conditions of agency in the field of sexual and gender politics" (Miskolci, 2021:39). A common aspect can be seen in the two movements, the attack on professional institutions that the author classifies as social mediators.

Miskolci also analyses moral battles around so-called "Gender Ideology", in which agents he classifies as moral entrepreneurs (religious and secular) unite to react to the advances of sexual rights and recognition of gender diversity in schools. Notably, the School without Party movement gained visibility in this process, and as Miguel (2016) notes, at first, this movement focused mainly on the "fight against communism" and only afterwards on the campaign against so-called "gender ideology". For Miskolci (2021:53) "gender ideology" is "a shared referent despite diverse diagnoses of what it means and the reasons why it should be opposed". This is something substantially distant from what "gender ideology" is in fact: a concept created by medicine in the 1950s and later incorporated into feminist academic studies.

One of the merits of Miskolci's work is its emphasis on the heterogeneity of the actors involved in this scenario, and his analysis associates both religious and secular actors, involving both "defenders of the market" and those "engaged in the defense of families and children". The author highlights how these agents have managed to be successful in this process, using the "moral panic" produced by gender ideology – although this seems to be fading since the 2018 election.

In the third chapter, entitled "Identity politics in neoliberalism", Miskolci ventures into thornier terrain, beginning with a summary of incidents that occurred during an event at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp) in 2010. A panel composed of feminist researchers was interrupted by a protest from a wing of the "LGBTI+" movement, in which "an activist climbed on stage naked and made a speech against science, the university and the panel - which they claimed to be made up of 'white feminists from [Brazil's] South and Southeast'" (Miskolci, 2021:67). For the author "Identity-

⁴ Colling (2022) also criticises the book discussed here, indicating that Miskolci does not provide empirical data to support his interpretation of the action of identity movements, especially in the academic sphere. "What brought the far right to power was the construction of hate speech against *Petism* [referring to the Worker's Party], hate speech towards identity agendas, the huge production of fake news, and a huge criminal operation to remove the leading name of the opposition from the election (see, for example, the works of Cepêda, 2018; Chaloub; Lima & Perlatto, 2018; or Souza, 2016). The queer sociologist does not cite any of these reasons. His focus is on attacking identity movements" (Colling, 2022:58).

based sexual activism has sown what we might call the entrepreneurialism of the self, the capitalization of a victim-identity-condition crystallized in time and space” (Miskolci, 2021:70), something that relates in his reading to neoliberalism and its refusal for mediations. He also affirms that these agents use mainly two strategies: mockery and cancelling, not only against common adversaries but also against colleagues in the same field of political action and knowledge production. In his critique, the movements disdain the role of science, and favor a perception that sees identity as something transparent, and which is therefore a form of anti-intellectualism.

In part, I agree with these arguments, however, I understand that the conservative and identity movements are based on substantially different assumptions, in both political and academic terms. Intellectuals of the new right are marked by a distancing from and even a rejection of academic knowledge (Rodrigues, 2018). In contrast, identity movements engage in a certain dialogue that often results in dissensus and denial, yet is grounded in academic debates. It is undeniable that the identity movements also seek forms of legitimation in academia, while conservative movements do not. We also recurrently find in conservative movements a denial of the need for academic knowledge in the world, and of the entire structure that produces it, while identity movements tend to demand reforms within this system. This difference implies greater distances between the two movements than Miskolci indicates.

Moreover, one could question the capacity to empirically demonstrate the extent to which these movements succeed in silencing certain agents in the academic space, since gender and race inequalities persist in the academy, as has been empirically demonstrated (Candido; Feres; Campos, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021). In other words: despite “complaints” and “attacks” from identity movements, academic spaces of power continue to be dominated by certain agents, and it is hardly credible that they are being silenced since their status has perpetuated.

After entering this thorny terrain, Miskolci ventures into another current and controversial debate: issues involving “place of speech”, “experience” and “cisgenderism”. He affirms:

Notions such as “place of speech”, “experience” and “cisgenderism” do not hold up in empirical and epistemological terms. They only make sense as rhetorical weapons in fights over a market reserve in events, in a field of studies and, of course, in a social movement organised based on the juxtaposition of identities that, while allowing the recognition of its internal heterogeneity, weaken its unity and, in neoliberal times, promote competition and conflict rather than alliances (Miskolci, 2021:89).

These categories certainly need to be further examined, and considered within a wider debate, however, this does not necessarily invalidate them. I also agree with the author that the social world is more dynamic than these categories often make seem, however, this does not mean that they do not encompass concrete realities. This is especially true of the issue of cisgenderism. It is important to recognize that these categories are often co-opted by the neoliberal agenda, as has occurred with the idea of *queer*, which has taken on various uses in this context (McRuer, 2021). However, in my perception, this does not invalidate the fact that they effectively serve as relevant guides that can help certain subjects interpret reality and take positions in the social world. Yet it cannot be forgotten that these are concepts in dispute and that they are defined based on a myriad of factors, including the market itself.

In any case, we should highlight the relevance of the following statement by Miskolci (2021:90): “A field of studies - perhaps even a field of political struggle - could be open to anyone committed to the arduous task of investigating the object that defines it by creating works on a solid empirical and methodological basis”. However, this does not mean - in my assessment - that one can ignore how our being in the world has implications on how we insert ourselves in a certain field of studies, and how we stand in theoretical and methodological terms.

Miskolci argues that policies of recognition could be treated dialogically, but in Brazil in the 2010s there was a move in the opposite direction. His diagnosis of the reasons for this process is accurate:

not only because of the emergence of the technical-mediatized public sphere but also because priority was given to a policy based on the essentialist affirmation of identities and their repertoire of practices. Added to the better articulation of the conservative alliance and its successful

communication strategy, they have contributed to our living through an era of moral confrontation that has favoured the opponents of science and sexual and reproductive rights (Miskolci, 2021:91).

This scenario, Miskolci adds, contributes to the dissemination of conspiracy theories, often nurtured by false ideas about the dissemination of knowledge. Educational institutions - schools and universities – are now attacked not only from the outside but also from within. Two main forms of internal conflict within educational institutions stand out:

The first is the questioning of the educators' authority through the apology of horizontality as synonymous with democracy, a fallacy promoted by commercial social media services. The second is the questioning of curricula and educational content on behalf of the recognition and incorporation of differences, a more nuanced phenomenon that has caused everything from outbursts of censorship of authors to the positive expansion of themes and bibliography (Miskolci, 2021:94).

One of the effects of the post-truth era has been to question the ability of educators to to arbitrate facts (Peters, 2017; Oliveira, 2021). This reflects the very dynamics of this global phenomenon in which facts become less relevant than personal convictions (McIntyre, 2018). However, one of the most original and controversial conclusions of the book is certainly that which links conservative movements that have risen to power in Brazil in recent years with identity movements:

The anti-egalitarian alliance that gained power demands analyses that do not fail to recognise how the adepts of essentialist identity politics have contributed to its victory by tearing apart democratic forms of coexistence that could have strengthened alliances in the field of human rights advocacy, especially in the areas of gender and sexuality. Paradoxical as it may seem, both of those who played a leading role in the clashes discussed above - moral entrepreneurs and identity activists - have in common the rejection of the concept of gender. Conservatives because they recognise it as an opening for LGBTI+ and feminist claims, while for identity activists it is a concept that challenges the essentialist perspective on which their political repertoire is based (Miskolci, 2021:99).

Miskolci's arguments focus on a radical defense of the formation of a spirit of critical thinking, which he understands to be the best antidote against the traps of the technical-mediatised public sphere. The construction of his arguments leads to an original interpretation of recent events, considering mainly the singularity of the rise of Bolsonaroism in Brazil, a phenomenon directly connected to social media and post-truth (Cesarino, 2019). Although the rise of conservative movements and the anti-gender agenda are global phenomena, unique local agendas in fact exist and Miskolci's work helps us to unveil the Brazilian case.

This book is thus a must-read for those who want to understand academic and political debates and clashes over the concept of gender, including direct attacks synthesized in the idea of "gender ideology". Moreover, this work is fundamental to understanding academic dilemmas today, considering external and internal clashes, and the challenges to rekindling a belief in science in the contemporary world.

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