

# The woman destroyed: from Simone de Beauvoir to “gender ideology” \*

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## Abstract

In 2015 French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir received a motion of repudiation from the Campinas City Council, which accused her of mentoring so-called “gender ideology”, a phrase used by conservatives to challenge feminist scientific work. Seventy years after the publication of *The Second Sex*, why does “becomes a woman” continue, for some, to be such a provocative or even dangerous phrase? Do the fears and criticisms that she aroused at the time continue to be the same, or are we facing a new moral panic in contemporary Brazil? By analyzing the words of the city council members involved in the debate, it becomes evident, in the face of significant advances made by those who are oppressed by socio-hierarchical gender relations, that there has been a strong reaction from those sectors that do not understand the inexorable social transformation promoted by feminists, and who tremble at the sound of Beauvoir’s name.

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## Introduction

The first edition of *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, disrupted French society. Simone de Beauvoir received thousands<sup>1</sup> of letters from women thanking her for revealing feelings that they had never before been able to put into words, such as sadness and indignation towards the construction of difference between men and women. One reader said, “I was disturbed to realize that you expressed with penetrating clarity things that I myself had felt, but didn’t know how to express” (Rouch, 2017:7). Another affirmed,

It was a very violent revelation. First, a slow awakening to dignity (...) I sincerely believe that these two books gave me back my reason to live and, especially, to not suffer eternally (Rouch, 2017:8).

The conservative response was also dramatic. When the first chapters were printed in the magazine *Les Temps modernes*, edited by Jean-Paul Sartre, the writer François Mauriac declared in the newspaper *Le Figaro* that the book approached the “abject limits” and called on Christian youth to react. His words sparked a public debate in the press about the book. There was even criticism from the left, where Simone de Beauvoir placed herself politically. Philosopher Jeannette Colombel, for example, who came from a family of communist leaders, wrote that

the enemy isn’t men but capitalism. Declaring a conflict between men and women distracts one from the real problem: the misery of the working class and the threat of war” (Galster, 2004:12).

As Sylvie Chaperon affirmed, “with often similar arguments, right-wing groups and communists who embrace a traditional morality, were the most aggressive in their criticism of the book” (Chaperon,

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<sup>1</sup> Estimated at around 20 thousand in the first years (Rouch, 2107:2).

1997:5). From pedant to liberator, being attacked or defended, Beauvoir received all kinds of comments.

The scandal the book caused corresponds to the intense impact of its content. By pointing out the inadequate contributions of biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism in explaining the social hierarchy between the sexes, the author embarked on a revision of history, ethnography and human myths to reveal, by considering women's concrete life experiences, the system that produces and maintains their domination. *The Second Sex* was powerful and transcended the era of its release. It inspired and prompted innumerable later works on feminist theory, from Gayle Rubin and Monique Wittig in the 1970s to Angela Davis in the 1980s and Judith Butler in the 1990s – to name but a few – fomenting a rich field of debate. Furthermore,

*The Second Sex* is considered a precursor of “second wave” feminism, which began in the 1960s and was championed by organized women's groups in various parts of the world (Piscitelli, 2009:133).

In Brazil, the book was very important to the education of feminists, according to Heleieith Saffioti:

What seems important to me, now, is the repercussion of this book outside of French society, in other countries like Brazil. Look at my generation (...), everyone passed through this book, so it was certainly a milestone, it opened the minds of everyone who read it, it was very important. It's a historical landmark, and continues to be so, and this recognition, tributes were paid to it even by those who criticized it – they always paid it tribute because it continues to be a reference, and must also be recognized for its precociousness. At that time, the book was fundamental and continued to be so for a long time (Saffioti, 2000:35).

Seventy years later, *The Second Sex* continues to provoke reactions both in its cradle of origin, France, and throughout the

world, including Brazil. The author’s work continues to be fundamental to the development of feminist studies and reflections upon gender identity, as well as a reference for woman’s demonstrations and protests. In addition, Beauvoir and Butler are seen as the intellectual matrix of what conservatives<sup>2</sup> refer to as “gender ideology”, and suffer strong opposition to their formulations.

As Corrêa (2018), Miskolci and Campana (2017) and Reis and Eggert (2017), among others have indicated, “Gender Ideology” is a term that was first propelled onto a global level in 1995, by the reaction of the Catholic Church leadership to the World Conference on Women in Beijing, when the word “woman” began to be substituted by the word “gender” (Almeida, 2018:35). With the passage of time, this discourse was taken up by other Christian sectors and gained social capillarity in countries such as Poland, Hungary, the United States, France, Columbia, Peru, Argentina and Brazil. The toughest confrontations over gender in Brazil are in the institutional sphere, in the legislative and executive branches (Mano, 2019:15). The strategy most commonly adopted by anti-gender groups has been the proposal and approval of laws,<sup>3</sup> pronouncements by representatives,<sup>4</sup> ministers<sup>5</sup> and even

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<sup>2</sup> I understand that there is a current difficulty in identifying the meaning of the term “conservative”. For the purposes of the article, I submit as a reference a recent comment by Ronaldo de Almeida about the conservative wave in Brazil: “think in terms of broken lines of force which are the product of social processes, and which, by definition are unequal, asymmetrical and temporally distinct” (Almeida, 2017:25). These lines of force, the author asserts, are economic, moral, security-based, and interactional.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the city councils of Londrina and Foz do Iguaçu approved, in 2018, the prohibition of gender instruction in schools.

<sup>4</sup> The Evangelical Parliamentary Front (A Frente Parlamentar Evangélica), for example, released a document in 2018 asserting that “gender ideology diverts the school from its normal responsibilities and invests in the subversion of all the values and principles of civilization”.

<sup>5</sup> The Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights, Damara Alves, who at the beginning of 2019 said that “boys wear blue and girls wear pink”, among many other examples.

the President, Jair Messias Bolsonaro – who declared at his inauguration that he would fight gender ideology – as well as pressure from the religious caucus to bar specific government policies.<sup>6</sup>

Among the episodes, I will highlight one that I consider to be prototypical and that will be the subject of analysis of this article: the motion of repudiation the Campinas City Council issued to Simone de Beauvoir in 2015. The philosopher, who died in 1986, was rebuked by the legislative branch of the city, which is home to the academic journal *cadernos pagu*, after *The Second Sex* was the theme of a question on the National High School Exam (Exame Nacional de Ensino Médio – Enem). The case exposes how initiatives against gender took shape, the arguments used to uphold them and who are the actors. Using statements made by the council members and their life trajectories, which will be presented below, I ask if we are facing a new moral panic, different from the one that Beauvoir faced when she first published her work, or if there is nothing new in the front presented by those opposed to the rights of women and LGBTQIAs (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transsexuals, Queer, Intersex and Asexual people).

My hypothesis is that a continuity exists between the arguments and the protagonists, but differences between the historical periods cause a role reversal between the current movement and those of the past. While in the late 1940s and following decades feminists were on the offensive, struggling for rights and space and questioning social hierarchies, today they are on the defensive, trying to preserve gains already made in face of conservative attacks. This assertion, obviously, does not mean that women now hold a privileged position in society. On the contrary, data shows that the motives that led women into the streets during the second wave persist, such as low participation in the institutional policy arena, inequality in the workplace, and meager sexual and reproductive rights. This data must, necessarily, be

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<sup>6</sup> Such as the program “School without Homophobia”, which was given the nickname “Gay kit” by conservatives.

cross-referenced by race and ethnicity. Nonetheless, it should be recognized that significant advances have been made, such as the expansion and consolidation of gender studies, as well as individual rights, such as gay marriage or the names of transgender individuals, which provoke the reaction of conservatives.

To organize the article, I first present the quote from Beauvoir’s work that was the focus of discussion in the Campinas City Council and then a critical analysis of the arguments used by the council members for and against the motion. Finally, I will weave some concluding remarks.

### **To become a woman**

The Enem exam, which seeks to evaluate the quality of the country’s high school education and is used to determine admission into public universities, contained the following question, in 2015:

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine (Beauvoir, 1999:330).

In the 1960s, Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion contributed to the creation of a social movement marked by

- a) Legal action to criminalize sexual violence.
- b) Legislative pressure to impede dual work shifts.
- c) The organization of public protests to guarantee gender equality.
- d) Opposition of religious groups to impede same-sex marriages.
- e) The establishment of government policies to promote affirmative action.

The quote is the best known part of *The Second Sex*, and is located at the beginning of Book II, in which Simone de Beauvoir reflects upon the experiences lived by women and describes “the common ground from which all singular feminine existence stems” (Beauvoir, 1967:introduction). The sentence is in the chapter about childhood, in which the author expounds upon differences in how boys and girls are raised based upon their bodies, which, at least until the beginning of adolescence, are very similar. Supported by the existentialist doctrine, Beauvoir presents the social circumstances which, from the beginning years of their lives, are imposed upon women to limit their freedom. With this claim, she

seeks to disconnect gender identity from natural identity. We aren't what we are because of our sex, but we become what we are through what we are taught and what demanded of us, as a result of our sex (Passos, 2000:44).

This criticism of the naturalization of masculine and feminine roles also appears forcefully in other parts of the book. In discussing life in society, Beauvoir conducts us on a journey of feminine adornment, from skirt to hair, from posture to gestures. A woman walks a narrow line to be considered suitable for marriage. She can't heighten her femininity and provoke excessive desire, or she will be associated with prostitution, nor can she demonstrate masculinity, which would place her close to lesbianism. A pastor's wife, for example, should use make-up sparingly, be discreetly fashionable and indicate, by taking care of her physical charm, that “she accepts her role as female” (Beauvoir, 1967:299).

In the chapter about the mother, marriage and children are a prison for women, often accepted by them, which perpetuates this model of family relations and impedes its transcendence. Pregnancy is viewed as enrichment, but also as mutilation. A parasite and simultaneously a part of her body, the baby sucks out the feminine energies, which could be used in an inventive or creative manner. She asserts that,

it is through motherhood that a woman completely realizes her physiological destiny; maternity is her ‘natural’ vocation, therefore her entire organism finds itself focusing upon the perpetuation of the species (Beauvoir, 1967:248).

However, Beauvoir writes, society is not “abandoned to nature” and “specifically, it has been more or less a century since the reproductive function was no longer a simple result of biological chance: it is controlled by will” (Beauvoir, 1980:248). However, as Andrea Nye claims in reflecting upon *The Second Sex*, “the oppression of women is even more powerful in that which lies hidden behind nature, behind the belief that the destiny of women is to be passive” (Nye, 1988:108).

With the existentialist understanding that there is no essence before existence, it is possible for Beauvoir to assert that men and women are social constructs. “The ‘becomes’ speaks of cultural interferences, but also of one’s own effort at self construction”, recalls Elizete Passos (2000:46). It’s both a sad and liberating journey. Thus,

based on the Sartrean idea, the “becomes” signifies choosing what you want to be, so that women will be what they design themselves to be. We become our gender, and not our body (Passos, 2000:46).

As we will see below, it is precisely this construct that problematizes the correspondence between sex and gender, which is at the core of the arguments by Campinas city council members’ against Beauvoir.

### **Discourse of nature, religiosity and the majority position**

“The majority supports the law of nature: man is man, woman is woman”, affirmed Campos Filho, of the Democratic Party (DEM) upon proposing the motion to repudiate Beauvoir. For the councilman, the text of the *The Second Sex* was a “demonic” initiative:



We represent the vast majority of the Brazilian population (...) We are positioning ourselves in opposition. Once again, the minority will protest and will lose because the majority supports the law of nature: man is man, woman is woman. We can't negate this. I was in Mogi Guaçu giving a lecture about this and a citizen said "you have to understand that you lack love; this is an impulse that we feel. There are women who have a man inside them. They are exceptional cases." And I said "be careful with this impulse, this impulse can land you in jail. You might pass in front of an ATM and feel an impulse to steal and you'll get arrested. You might feel an impulsive desire to rape and you'll be arrested." (...) The newspaper showed that 86% of the population of Campinas is against this demonic initiative that the government used in the Enem (Campos Filho, 2015).

In his speech from the tribune<sup>7</sup>, it is possible to perceive two recurring arguments against Beauvoir. Firstly, the use of references of a religious character ("demonic") to support the discourse of nature ("man is man; woman is woman"), which is also associated with a repudiation of any divergence from *hetero thinking* (Wittig, 1980). Campos Filho associates transsexuality and homosexuality to crimes like bank robbery and rape. Secondly, a perception derived from the first, that if the majority of the country is Christian and we are in a democracy, this majority can decide for everyone ("We represent the vast majority of the Brazilian population"; "86% of the population of Campinas is against it").

The next council member to announce his support of the motion, Cid Ferreira of the Solidarity Party (Solidariedade –SD), reinforced the principle of reproductive functions associated with cisgender<sup>8</sup> individuals: "man and woman make [sic] child, make

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<sup>7</sup> All of the speeches of the council members were transcribed using the broadcast made by the Campinas City Council and are available here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDEXfUBK0-k>>. Accessed on March 10, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> We use the term cisgender in reference to transgender. The word, which began to circulate in the 1990s, has a political usage. As Viviane Vergueiro explains,

male and female child as well.” His speech strongly emphasized the generational question in conjunction with religion – they “lack God in their hearts” – and the bias against the LGBTQIA population – “foolishness”:

This never should have been in the Emen. I hold it as a principle that father is father, son is son, mother is mother and man is man. This principle that man and woman make children, make male children and female, as well (...) It's very easy for me to say that I will change the world, but change it for the better, never in the way proposed by these who approve of this kind of thing. This is a lack of religiosity. These people lack God in their hearts. They want to change a system that we've had for a long time. 'Oh, but you're a square, you're elderly, you're old.' I don't care. I refuse to accept this marriage of men with men and women with women and don't respect those who accept it. For me this is foolishness. This is a desire to make those who believe in God to stop believing (Ferreira, 2015).

Jairson Canário, another council member from the Solidarity Party (Solidariedade – SD), based his argument even more explicitly upon a religious foundation:

I'd like to go back a bit in history. We told of Brazil's historic struggle, of the revolution, but I would like to tell a story for those who remember what happened in Sodom and Gomorrah. (...) I want to send a message to those who believe in a creator, who is there in Genesis. This creator,

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cisgenderity is “an analytical concept that I can use like heterosexuality is used for sexual orientations, or like whiteness is for racial questions. I think of being cisgender as a positioning, a subjective perspective which is accepted as being natural, as essential, as the norm. In establishing this norm, those whose gender is viewed as natural, cisgenders, can signify a de-colonial turn in thinking about gender identities, that is, naming one as being cisgender or naming cis-men, cis-women, instead of other previously used terms such as biological woman, true man, normal man, man born as a man, woman born as a woman, etc.” (Vergueiro, 2014).

our God, our father, he knows everything from the beginning to the end of humanity. Those who believe that God exists, should believe that, if this was the will of God, he would have made Adam with two genital organs. He wouldn't need to create woman. So he created Adam and said: it isn't good that man should live alone. And so he made woman, and not from the sole of his feet, he made her from his rib, to show that she is a partner. This is in every bible (...) in it are written the divine instructions which we should follow. Well, this is for those who believe. And God is the same yesterday, today and always. So those who think differently, could it be that they no longer believe in him? This is a big concern. Because I am sure that when a man is born he is a man because it is God that created him, because he knows it from the moment of his birth. I say that we are respectful, but our principles, our positions, everyone defends (Canário, 2015).

For these legislators there is a direct correlation between male and female reproductive roles, and the social roles of fathers and mothers, based on a Christian viewpoint, where the only possible family is a heterosexual one. Their words relate to what Colette Guillaumin called the “the discourse of nature,” which is an ideological effect of the hierarchical relations between the sexes in which nature supposedly explains what women are. The construct enunciated is that “a woman is a woman because she is female” (Guillaumin, 1992:51).

This nature is not the fruit of a range of elements which pass through transformative and evolutionary processes, these council members argue, but has been defined by God, according to the biblical text. The positioning here is clear of “women as mothers and caretakers, which justifies (and expands) their exclusion and their disadvantageous inclusion in other spheres. (Biroli, 2018:117), which is only possible in heterosexual relations which adhere to a sexual division of labor. As Flavia Biroli (2018:123) asserts,

the heterosexual norm has been one of the pillars of the modern idea of the family and of the conventions employed in discourse, in which the defense of ‘the family’ corresponds to idealizations and exclusions.

In his pronouncement, Edison Ribeiro, of the Social Liberal Party (Partido Social Liberal – PSL), repeated the argument about sex roles cited above, but added a new element: the classroom. Common among those who defend the principles of the School Without Political Parties law (*Escola Sem Partido*), which in some proposals calls for prohibiting using the concept of gender in schools – as if this were possible considering a transversal and fundamental dimension of human life – debates over inclusion or removal of gender from schools also occurred in voting for national, state, and municipal education plans. In speaking of Beauvoir, Ribeiro affirmed that:

These days we see this barbarity, as my work colleagues say, men with men, women with women. This is a real joke that’s happening. In fact, I’ve already said that I’m against these gay parades that they have on Paulista [Ave.]. You just see chaos, just see a mess. Men kissing men on the mouth, women kissing women on the mouth. This is shameful beyond belief. I never saw this during my childhood because I was raised in another system, another more rigid system. Now there are many people, male teachers, female teachers, who are involved. If my children, or grandchildren, were to have this kind of teacher, I’d prefer that they didn’t learn to read. That they be taught at home (Ribeiro, 2015).

There is a conjunction here in which we can see the roles played by different institutions that are important to the reproduction of the ideology, such as school, church, political party and family. Not “gender ideology” in the way that it is raised by legislators, but in the original meaning of the term, that is, that which produces the structures and discourses that create the

hierarchies in the systems of social relations between men and women, a definition used by feminist theorists themselves, in particular Teresa de Lauretis (1987).

The city councilman known as Professor [teacher] Alberto, from the Republican Party (Partido da República – PR), now the Liberal Party (Partido Liberal), added to the religious argument the position of the “majority”:

If you are so tolerant, why do you want to attack those who don't agree with you, like the Bolsonaros of the world? What discourse is this? What's this about religious fundamentalism? What a minute. We have a right to think differently from the left in this country. I have a right to disagree with gender ideology. I have this right. It's incredible. And now you want to label me. There is something wrong with this discourse of the angry left. It's always like this. You can't go against them. They are all so delicate. Touch them and we're suddenly fundamentalists. Bolsonaros of the world, super religious. What is this, people? I think it's hypocrisy, a strange, contradictory argument. And then they start talking about tolerance. What kind of tolerance is this? Yes, I'm against it. I think Enem shouldn't have done this. You read the question. Look here what they wrote: “no one is born a woman, one becomes a woman.” This is an ideology. I even respect those who think this way, but that's not the reality. One is born a woman. One is born a man. Now you come with this story which is a philosophy and try to impose it upon Brazilian society, knowing that Brazilian society has a Christian heritage. It was founded under the sign of the cross, on religiousness, and now they have the nerve to label me. I don't accept these labels, no sir. I, too, want to be respected. I would say that a majority, 70% of the Brazilian population rejects this kind of thing. Now they come here and label us, thinking that it's modern, that it's vanguard. This is how this group of people, who I respect, think, but most people don't think that way, no (Professor Alberto, 2015).

The same data, though in a different way, was cited by Cid Ferreira, who said, “we have research; we have 80% in favor of discriminating this population”. Thus, instead of reflecting on

individual and collective rights, the political representatives positioned themselves in such a way as to assert that women are destined to be mothers, cisgenders and to be in a heterosexual relationship. Professor Alberto claims to “even respect” only to, right afterwards, state that in a Christian society one is born woman and man. This kind of argument questions the democratic regime by allowing socially hegemonic subjects to restrict the rights of minority groups, including their sexual, reproductive and labor and intellectual rights as well those to physical integrity, etc.; which are as plural as the gender agenda is able to encompass. Since the motion was approved with only five dissenting votes, it is evident that institutional space is also subject to domination. In this regard, Luis Felipe Miguel reminds us that acceptance of the

institution as the definitive arena for dispute, [and] which can only be reformed through its own mechanisms, condemns dominated social groups to engage in political dispute under conditions that are, from the outset, unfavorable (Miguel, 2014:127).

### **Subjects matter**

Considering that their trajectories influence their political activities, as feminist epistemologies teach, it is necessary to situate subjects to verify if, in fact, there is a confluence between an explicitly religious profile and its political position. Campos Filho (DEM), author of the motion, defines himself as “one of the precursors of the Charismatic Catholic Renewal,” in addition to having been Secretary of the Archdiocese of Campinas, of the Secretariat of “Faith and Politics,” and participant “in the community of the Couples’ Encounter with Christ (Encontro de Casais com Cristo – E.C.C.) together with his wife Fátima. He is part of the Family Orientation Center (Centro de Orientação Familiar – C.O.F.), where he gives lectures to families”. On his internet page, where all this information is available, he also registers that his main work is in defense of the family and notes that he is “author of a bill whose objective is to prohibit gender ideology in municipal

schools” and “propagating the idea that children aren’t defined by their biological sex (girls and boys), allowing variations that go against nature” (Campos Filho, s/d).

City councilman Professor Alberto (PR), according to his internet page, has a master’s degree in religious sciences, and an undergraduate degree in history, law and theology. He was president of the Human Rights Commission of the Jundiá Municipal Council (1997-1998) and vice president and theological director of the Christian Research Institute (Instituto Cristão de Pesquisas – ICP) and one of the coordinators of the first edition of the Apologetic Bible (Bíblia Apologética) and the Apologetic Series (Série Apologética) of the ICP. He is a history teacher in the state public school system, where “he was a teacher of numerous biblical and secular classes” (Alberto, s/d). He is an evangelical from the Assembly of God Evangelical Church and teacher of the continuing education course for teachers at the Dominical Bible School (Adults) of the Campinas Assembly of God. He is also author of the book: *O Povo de Israel, Uma Perspectiva Pentecostal* [*The Israeli People, A Pentecostal Perspective*].

Both council members seem to confirm what Reginaldo Prandi and Renan William dos Santos raise in their analysis of the behavior of evangelical legislators, when they assert that, even though they may be more progressive than their bases, this is not the case in questions relating to gender and sexuality. In this case, the caucus would be a group opposed to the modernization of customs. “Without a doubt, this seems to be this jewel topping their moral crown, among other notorious anti-modernist rejections of a moralistic nature” (Prandi; Santos, 2017:203). With a similar perspective, Ronaldo de Almeida asserts that:

Abortion and homosexuality between people who are close are more accepted in daily life than defended in the public sphere (understood as legitimate visibility and legal order). This is not intrinsically a characteristic limited to evangelicals, but speaks to the conservatism of Brazilian society itself, which responds more flexibly in interpersonal

relations and with greater rigidity to moral values in public sphere (Almeida, 2017:12).

Among the other city council members who declared themselves in favor of the motion, the religious affiliation is not self-evident, which shows that the agenda has adherents beyond those who place religion as a centerpiece of their mandate. Cid Ferreira (SD) is a metalworker, lathe operator, trade unionist, and, at the time of the city council session, the oldest member of the chamber. He administers the Campinas Association of Retirees and Pensioners of the Metallurgical and Other Industries, also known as the Cid Ferreira Association, which, according to its internet page has 25 thousand members. Ferreira was investigated for racist statements and accused of being a ghost employee in the Campinas City Government.

Edison Ribeiro, of the Social Liberal Party (Partido Social Liberal – PSL), was first elected in 2012. He was previously a member of the Democratic Workers’ Party (Partido Democrático Trabalhista – PDT) and the National Mobilization Party (Partido da Mobilização Nacional – PMN). A native of Minas Gerais state, he began working on a farm at the age of 12, and later worked in the retail sector. In an interview given to TV Câmara Municipal, he claimed to represent “the whole city of Campinas.” He created a more populist profile by supporting road, sewage and multi-purpose athletic court projects for the poorest areas, like the one from which he came. He concluded: “I like to place God at the forefront of all of my activities. May God bless everyone. If God is with us, who will be against us?” (Ribeiro, 2019).

I found little information about Jairson Canári. He was first affiliated to the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT), from which he was expelled in 2013, because he agreed to participate in the city government with the Brazilian Socialist Party (Partido Socialista do Brasil – PSB).

It is appropriate here to note that, among those who made pronouncements about the measure, all were cisgender men. Five were in favor of the motion, already cited above, and two



opposed; Paulo Búfalo, of the Socialism and Liberty Party (Partido Socialismo e Liberdade – PSOL) and Pedro Tourinho, of the Workers’ Party. Despite the problem of classifying Brazilian parties using a conventional ideological yardstick, it can be asserted that there is a clear separation of positions between those of the center-right (SD), right (PR) and far right (PSL), and those who identify themselves as center-left (PT) and left (PSOL).<sup>9</sup> The appeal to morality, therefore, appears as a reference to the right, combining anti-liberal and anti-egalitarian movements.

The two city council members who defended Beauvoir employed multiple arguments, which positioned them on the side of tolerance, secularity of the state and as emphasizing the importance of philosophy to denounce gender inequality. Pedro Tourinho (PT) is a doctor whose political involvement has its roots in the student movement. Whereas, Paulo Bufalo (PSOL) is a teacher who entered politics via the Rural Youth Pastoral (Pastoral da Juventude Rural). They both have trajectories which are very common to militants from the left.

In a certain way, Tourinho appealed to a majority position, not in the legislature, but in society, by saying that “many people” celebrate gender progress:

one more movement (...) whose objective is to deny the irreversible course of history in the direction of greater equality and overcoming gender-based oppression. Today, Brazilian society is gradually overcoming this medieval vocation, which I see embodied by this motion and by the entire initiative that my honorable colleague [Campos Filho] has championed, which attempts to ban the discussion of

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<sup>9</sup> We must not ignore the fact, however, that at least two council members who repudiated gender had at one time been members of parties from the center-left, the PT and the PDT, which indicates either a change in position of both, or a programmatic flexibility of the parties. According to Tarouco and Madeira “despite the fact that very often those embracing right-wing ideologies are also conservative, including in Brazil, the left-right axis doesn’t merge with the progressive-conservative axis, instead it is cut by it, defining a two-dimensional political space” (Tarouco; Madeira, 2013:159).

gender-based themes in schools. (...) I do not agree with this motion and think that the Ministry of Education was right when it posed a question citing this great author, this great intellectual, this proponent of feminism, and in truth, this proponent of twentieth century women, that was Simone de Beauvoir, who challenged numerous issues based on this machismo, this homophobic, misogynistic thinking, which is characterized by this movement to block the discussion of “gender ideology” – which you invented – but evidently the discussion of feminism, sexism, of the reality of gender here in Brazil. (...) As much as the backward, obsolete sectors within our country try to impede the progress in our country toward confronting and overcoming violence against women, gender oppression, we are progressing, we are advancing. Whether this motion is approved or not, I hope that many people realize that there are those who celebrate this advance in Brazil.

Tourinho classified the statements of his colleagues as homophobic and misogynistic, and as seeking to block progressive advances against gender oppression and violence against women. Paulo Bufalo, in turn, opposed what was said about tolerance and restrictive models of family:

We are increasingly creating and deepening a division of the waters between those who want their religious beliefs to prevail over the principles of the Brazilian state, of the secular state, stipulated in the Constitution, and with this goal in mind have been imposing legislation, decisions, and positions which wall off the concept of a secular state. The second issue I would like to highlight is the question of tolerance. To say one is tolerant, tolerance doesn't just involve tolerating what the other person is, the choices, orientation, the identity, tolerating the gender of the other. The question of tolerance presupposes respecting the other. And when they insist on introducing the issue here, even calling it gender ideology, which is a farce created by the fundamentalists to put across the idea that it's not they who are debating the question of the state, but are the ones who

defend liberty, those who defend life. We defend the family, but we defend all families. It's not for us to create standards here, and precisely for this reason we are going to vote against the motion of the honorable councilman, because it prevents the Brazilian state from staging a central debate about this very question of gender oppression. It was this that led, in 2014, to our country having almost 80 thousand cases of violence towards women.

Tolerance here appears as a value associated with liberty, which, in the interpretation proposed here, has more kinship with groups on the left, which is very different from the supposed tolerance mentioned above by Alberto, the council member and teacher. On the contrary, what one sees in the speeches of the latter is a restriction to liberty: he claims to accept an existence divergent from the norm, only to, later, reaffirm the norm. It is a semantic game in which those in the majority claim to be discriminated against by the minority, which is impossible in an oppressor-oppressed relationship.

In conclusion, both Bufalo and Tourinho emphasize that gender ideology is a recent term, developed by so-called religious fundamentalists.

It is inevitable to wonder if there would be a different stance if women were debating the issue. As I affirmed after reflecting upon the participation of women in institutional politics, without adopting an essentialist or biologicistic position, but considering that they “have different life experiences, they could bring this distinct contribution to the democratic arena” (Mano, 2016:8).

### **Some considerations**

Throughout this article, I have sought to present the main arguments that have been raised to consider if we are in fact confronting a new moral panic in contemporary Brazil, as expressed by cases such as the motion of repudiation against Simone de Beauvoir approved by the Campinas City Council in 2015, or if this moment of conservative ascension that we are

currently experiencing has at its core the same characteristics as those that have constantly challenged the rights of women and LGBTQIAs.

We are in a context in which, as Biroli affirms, “there is a rupture, even if only partial, in the correspondence between marriage, family and heterosexuality” (Biroli, 2018:122), which is “the result of the acts of social, feminist and LGBT movements, as well as jurists and other political actors” (Biroli, 2018:123). According to her,

Although affective relationships between people of the same sex aren’t exclusive to the contemporary world, the notion of a gay or lesbian family comes from the late twentieth century. It is related to changes in culture and legal norms, as well as to developments in reproductive technology that allow us to redefine parenthood, disconnecting it from sexual procreation of consanguinity (Biroli, 2018:123).

Furthermore, starting in the 2010s with the development of Web 2.0, we experienced a proliferation of first person feminist accounts, using social networks and street mobilizations, highlighted by the strong presence of transfeminists, young and black women (Ferreira, 2015; Mano, 2015). In 2015, the year in which the motion against Beauvoir was approved, there were two important events related to these movements: the Black Women’s March in Brasilia and the Feminist Spring, a movement against a law proposed by the former federal deputy Eduardo Cunha (MDB) to ban women who are victims of sexual violence from receiving contraception from the national healthcare system (Sistema Único de Saúde – SUS). This was in a context in which, for more than a decade, the president of Brazil had been a member of the Workers Party. Despite having run the executive branch in a contradictory manner, negotiating with conservative sectors that were in retreat after the adoption of progressive policies such as the School without Homophobia (Escola sem Homofobia) program, the party was historically associated with a feminist agenda and the fight for women’s and LGBTQIA’s rights.

It seems to me, therefore, that, confronted with a significant advance by persons oppressed by hierarchical social relations of gender, there was a strong reaction by those sectors who tremble at the phrase “One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman.” The argument employed by them remains the same as in other historical periods, that is: the preservation of the family as it is conceived in Christian doctrine, in which a woman is restricted to the role of reproductive female. However, it has a new guise, “gender ideology”, which uses a term developed by feminist thought in order to warp it, and which allies itself to a larger expanding global movement of the far right, in which gender becomes one of the pillars for social and political *fascistization* (Santos, 2016).

The repudiation of Beauvoir demonstrates how her thinking, which fixed itself within the feminist imagination as a symbol and reference for the struggle for women’s liberation, continues to have power. This is precisely why conservatives affirm it is so dangerous. In her novel *The Woman Destroyed*, Beauvoir shows us the difficult journey of a wife who, upon discovering the betrayal of her husband after two decades of marriage, watches her world fall apart. She dreads what awaits her. This is the feeling which dominates those who don’t understand the inexorable social transformation promoted by feminisms.

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