

Christian Trouble: The Catholic Church and the Subversion of Gender

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This article is part of our **Over the European Rainbow** feature.



— Pope Francis blesses the faithful. © Neneo

by **David Paternotte**

A few months ago, Pope Francis was declared 'Person of the Year' by *Time* magazine and chosen as the 'cover boy' of the late December issue (Chua-Eoan, Dias 2013). Since his election in March 2013, the media have repeatedly depicted Jorge Mario Bergoglio as a charismatic leader, who embraces poverty with conviction, likes soccer, and never misses a chance to tease. Facing major scandals in the Church, he is expected to undertake crucial reforms, including a decrease of the power of the Curia, and to bring the Catholic Church closer to the people. Embodying liberals' hopes, he is also portrayed as friendly toward women and sexual minorities. His statement regarding the acceptance of homosexuals, "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" (Donadio 2013), toured the world. The new pope, who ordered a vast survey of Catholic parishioners that covers sexual ethics, is also believed to take steps to change Church policy toward divorced people. This could happen during the extraordinary synod entitled "Pastoral Challenges of the Family in Context of Evangelisation" called in October 2014 in Rome.

This article does not attempt to vaticinate about the pope's plans for the future. As the French say, God's ways are inscrutable. Further, there is always a gap between a leader's opinions and his room to maneuver, especially when he is the pope. Skeptics often mention his past as archbishop of Buenos Aires and his opposition to same-sex marriage and other ethical reforms proposed by the Kirchner matrimony. They also claim that these reforms only deal with the pastorate, and that Pope Francis made clear he was not inclined to change Church doctrine on the matter. For these reasons, they consider these statements as attempts to both restore and modernize the image of the Church, especially in secularizing Catholic countries in Europe and Latin America. They also argue that the complexity of power games will necessarily hinder some of these reforms, and insist on the power of conservative prelates in his direct surroundings.

Instead of discussing the room for change, I would like to highlight the discrepancy between the Pope's recent statements and what is currently happening on the ground in a growing number of European countries. While current Russian backlash over sexual minority rights and its insertion into a global imperialistic project are widely discussed in international fora, events with connections to the Catholic Church seem to go unnoticed. Indeed, after numerous years of steady progress in terms of gender and sexual rights, both Western and Eastern Europe are facing new waves of resistance whose relations to the Church merit scrutiny. These mobilizations should not be merely regarded as recent occurrences of older forms of opposition, but display new discourses and forms of organization, attempts by established conservative actors to reach beyond their traditional circles and to connect with a wider audience.

Recent campaigns against same-sex marriage in France provide us with the most spectacular example. Since François Hollande was elected in May 2012, conservative actors have repeatedly taken to the streets to oppose not only marriage equality, but also sex education in public schools, the notion of gender itself, and sexual liberalism more broadly. Campaigners mounted an unprecedented wave of resistance against an incumbent French president, and amassed numerous policy and mobilization successes. They remained at the cen-

ter of both public and political spaces for almost two years, and organized some of the biggest demonstrations in recent decades. They also managed to significantly reduce the scope of the Same-sex Marriage Act, which does not include access to artificial insemination for lesbian couples or single women, and to stop debates on surrogacy, transgender rights or euthanasia. These mobilizations display the willingness of French conservative leaders to forge a new public image, and to build broader alliances, for which they use many references to Republicanism and French laïcité.

French protests are not an isolated phenomenon in Europe, and other examples of this conservative tide can be mentioned. Indeed, despite the development of both formal and informal European norms in favor of equality (Paternotte and Kollman 2013), LGBT rights suffered several setbacks in the region. The Slovak Parliament is mulling a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, Slovenia did not adopt same-sex marriage in 2009 due to conservative pressure, and the new family code, which would have expanded LGBT family rights, was rejected by referendum in 2012. Croatia also adopted a constitutional ban against same-sex marriage by referendum in 2013. The adoption of a civil partnership is at a standstill in Italy, while the French anti-gay marriage movement is being exported to Belgium. Abortion is also under growing attack (Heinen 2013). Demonstrations were recently held in Belgium, France, and Spain, and claims to restrict legal abortion are gaining more public visibility. In addition, Spain is on the brink of abolishing Zapatero's progressive abortion law and to return to the legal situation of the early 1980s. Finally, the development of gender studies as well as the concept of gender itself – that our social expectations based on biological sex are not innate but historically and socially contingent – and its inclusion in school programs have become the targets of conservative groups in France, Italy, Spain, Poland and Lithuania, provoking public debates and parliamentary discussions.

These events are not disconnected moments of resistance, and scholars have emphasized the constant presence of the Catholic Church. The national church hierarchy is sometimes leading the mobilization, as in Spain, Poland or Italy (Garbagnoli 2014). Campaigners may also belong to Catholic groups or be strongly connected to the Church, like in France (Tartakowsky 2013) and Slovenia (Kuhar 2013). Funding can finally come from the Church or from wider Catholic circles. More crucially, while targeting different issues (whose selection depends on national agendas), these events are also connected on an ideological level. They must be regarded as national manifestations of a transnational mobilization against what is called 'gender ideology'.

'Gender ideology', sometimes also called 'gender theory', does not designate the impressive amount of work by gender studies scholars in various fields and disciplines, but is a term created by the Catholic Church to oppose women's and LGBT rights activism as well as the scholarship deconstructing common – often naturalistic – assumptions about gender and sexuality (Fassin 2007; Case 2011). According to its detractors, this alleged 'ideology' inspires the aforementioned legal reforms, and, by negating sexual difference and gender complementarity, it constitutes a major threat for mankind (for some, it is even more dangerous than Marxism). The 'ideology' relies on the idea that a gender conspiracy developed both in international institutions (especially the United Nations and the European Union) and in some states, and assumes the existence of a single perspective on gender, which would be shared by scholars and activists alike. Ignoring and erasing the heated debates within gender and sexuality studies and the complex interplay between activism and the academy, it often identifies 'gender theory' with Judith Butler's work, and depicts the American philosopher as the inventor of gender and a dangerous intellectual terrorist (e.g., Trillo-Figueroa 2009; Montfort 2011; Peeters 2013).



— Credit: Annalisa Casini

As highlighted by Doris Buss (1998), the concept of gender ideology is not new, but appeared in the aftermath of the United Nations conferences of Cairo in 1994 and Beijing in 1995. At the time, the Church experienced the international recognition of sexual and reproductive rights as a major setback, and was looking for a global strategy to hinder further progress. This concept is therefore not only designed as an analytical tool but also – and probably more crucially – as a political weapon to propagate alternative ideas and to contest the cultural and political hegemony of 'post-modern gender.' It is an attempt by the Church and its allies to re-frame the debate. This strategy was further consolidated when the Pontifical Council for the Family published its *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* in 2003. The diffusion of the 'gender ideology' reframing strategy is not restricted to Europe; observers have also noticed its

presence in Africa and Latin America.

What is new, however, is its sudden salience in public and political discourses in Europe. While this concept was created almost 20 years ago, it only appeared in public debates over the past few years. Even in Spain, where the Catholic Church has vehemently combatted the socialist government between 2004 and 2011 and articulated similar arguments, this expression appeared as such only recently. One should also wonder about the ability of this concept to disguise its origins as a religious strategy and a conservative weapon. For instance, French Education Minister Vincent Peillon, a strong defender of secularism, repeatedly argued that French schools were not teaching 'gender theory', implying the existence of such a theory. This example demonstrates the success of the reframing strategy to impose the terms of the debate along conservative lines and to displace it from the field of science to one of public opinion. Finally, the sudden return of the Catholic Church as a public and political actor comes as a surprise in a highly secularized Europe. It stands in sharp contrast to the Pope's recent statements, and points toward discrepancies within some national churches or to more nuanced Catholic strategies that have been applauded by journalists and observers in recent months.

The diffusion of the 'gender ideology' frame highlights new challenges for gender and sexuality scholars. While the dynamics of rights expansion and equality movements in Europe have been widely studied, we know very little about counter-movements and resisters more broadly. We should also further reflect on the diffusion processes that are at play, and about how they are received domestically. Indeed, as emphasized, 'gender ideology' is not a new phenomenon but a transnational strategy that expands far beyond Europe. Why then has it become so prominent in Europe today? Moreover, why is it more successful in some countries like France than in other historically Catholic countries such as Belgium? These are some of the questions raised by this new wave of conservative resistance to gender equality. Scholars are beginning to answer these questions and several events will be held in the coming months, including the international conference "**Habemus Gender: Deconstruction of a Religious Counter-attack**" at the Université libre de Bruxelles.

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