

# "Gender Ideology": Science or fallacy? Dialogical reflections between a master's student and his advisor.

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**Abstract.** The primary objective of this article is to present international readers with some reflections on the Brazilian debate surrounding the term known as "gender ideology." These reflections emerge from dialogues between a master's student and his advisor, seeking to unveil whether the mentioned term has a scientific basis or is fallacious. The term in question carries various elements that deny human diversity, creating conservative arguments that challenge the foundations of sexual rights as an inseparable part of human rights. Despite being frequent in the discourse of conservative figures, the said term can assume various meanings depending on the interlocutor, necessitating a thorough exploration of the productions around the subject. The theoretical framework used in this article arises from a systematic search already conducted to develop some of the presented reflections. Initially, we provide a brief historical overview of the term "gender ideology," its arrival in Latin America, and its presence in the Brazilian political landscape. We draw on scientific productions and Brazilian educational legislative documents to demonstrate the impact that the term has on Brazilian public policies, resulting in the erasure of the category of sexuality and the term "gender" in various federal, state, and municipal documents. It has become evident that this term is intentionally amorphous, adapting its meaning to serve the goals of those who employ it. It serves as a rallying point to oppose progressive movements and policies, especially in the field of sexual rights and, within them, gender issues. Finally, we position Dialectical Historical Materialism as an epistemological framework capable of fostering change and offering possible avenues to combat negationist political tools stemming from this so-called "gender ideology."

**Keywords.** "Gender Ideology", Education, Brazilian Politics, Historical Dialectical Materialism; Sexual Rights as Human Rights.

## 1. Introduction

This article aims to share with international readers some reflections that have arisen from dialogues between a master's student and his advisor regarding a current debate in Brazil concerning a concept known as "gender ideology." This term originates from conservative sectors of Brazilian politics. The narrative associated with this concept carries a series of denialist markers regarding the richness of human diversity. This narrative has underpinned various political decisions and analyses of the socio-political context in Brazil, challenging sexual rights as an inseparable part of human rights. This narrative found strong support in recent federal policies in Brazil during the period from 2019 to 2022 under the government led by Mr. Jair Bolsonaro. It resulted in the removal of words

considered "dangerous" from mandatory legal documents in the Brazilian state, which guide the country's education system. These documents include the National Education Plan 2014-2024 and its various state and municipal counterparts. The removed terms include "gender ideology," "gender," "sexual orientation," among others.

Despite its frequent use, the term "gender ideology," employed by the conservative paradigm as something to be fought against, remains deliberately vague and adaptable, assuming various meanings depending on the speaker. This apparent ambiguity should not be interpreted as a lack of organization, planning, or intellectual rigor on the part of its users. On the contrary, it reflects a deliberate strategy to exploit the consequences of a dubious and negative term when used within the immense political landscape of Brazil, a country complex in its socio-

political formation, complexity also arising from its continental size. In simpler terms, representatives of conservatism feel the need to create and disseminate a non-existent monster, composed of terrifying untruths for common sense, in order to position themselves as the saviors of the nation and traditional families.

This text therefore appears as part of the ongoing research of a master's student who is building his dissertation and working on it in a dialogical proposal with his advisor, trying to contribute to unveiling whether this category "gender ideology", in the perspective in which it is being used, has scientific foundations or is a fallacy. Our text draws on the findings of a systematic search already carried out to develop some of the reflections presented here. To provide context, we will briefly outline a history of "gender ideology" in Latin America and its importance, while positioning Historical Dialectical Materialism as an epistemological framework capable of fostering change and offering possible ways to fight negationist political tools stemming from this so-called "gender ideology".

## 2. Method

The aforementioned master's research in education has its origins in the search for scientific knowledge already produced in postgraduate courses in Brazil on the multifaceted concept of "gender ideology" in Brazil. We used a methodological approach based on Dialectical Historical Materialism and, therefore, the dialectical method. It initially involved a survey of Brazilian legislative documents on education in the light of a thorough grounding in Marxist theory.

## 3. A historical and political context

In 1995, the Beijing Conference took place, notable for being a turning point in the global agenda of proposals for gender equality and women's empowerment. This conference solidified objectives and strategic actions aimed at promoting gender equality [1]. This triggered a reaction from many of the world's religious and conservative sectors, who felt that their hegemony was being threatened by the progressive front. The most striking example of this is the book published by then-Cardinal Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger, who questioned the notion that women were oppressed and claimed that women's liberation would be a subversion of "historical forms of sexuality" and would lead to a revolution against the biological foundations of humanity [2]. He continued his "argument" by stating that this would be an attempt by people to free themselves from nature by molding themselves according to their preferences, in the hope of becoming like God, considering that gender in this new approach - in his words - would be a violation of the biological bases created by Him [2].

In Latin America, an important moment for the dissemination of the term among religious groups was its presence at the Fifth General Conference of

the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Conference (CELAM) in 2007. The record of this meeting became known as the "Aparecida Document", where the notion that this proposed "gender ideology" would weaken family life is evident [3]. Three years later, Argentinian Jorge Scala published his book "La Ideología del Género. O el género como herramienta de poder" ("Gender Ideology: Or Gender as a Tool of Power"). In the text, the author argues that "gender ideology" is one of the most radical forms of ideology, representing a threat to human society itself. The author also states that this ideology serves as a political tool to alienate the masses in order to establish a new authoritarian model [4]. This demonstrates the conceptual inversion propagated in conservative discourses, which we will try to illustrate a little further below.

In Brazil specifically, several public figures are using this same discourse. Notably, many also from the Catholic Church, as the then cardinal-archbishop of São Paulo (Odilo P. Scherer) wrote in an "opinion" column for the newspaper O Estadão (one of Brazil's main newspapers) that the so-called "gender ideology" seeks to eliminate the concepts of man and woman. He goes further, stating that this ideology "could open a dangerous path to the legitimization of pedophilia, since pedophilic orientation could also be considered a type of gender" [5]. This demonstrates a total separation from current scientific knowledge. It seems to be a way of provoking a specific reaction from his followers, associating LGBTQIA+ communities with pedophilia, a concept that has been at the center of hate speech against these communities ever since. This type of discourse, once again, should not be understood as ignorance, but as a calculated move in search of specific results. These results, at least in Brazil, have materialized within the legislation itself in various governments in the Brazilian political system, as we have already reported.

The conservative front, which presents itself as fighting "gender ideology", has considerable influence in Brazilian politics and education in Brazil, with many important legal documents governing the country's education system having the term "gender" removed at municipal, state, and national level, as we have already pointed out. The National Education Plan (PNE), when revised for the 2014/2024 period, completely removed all references to the term "gender" [6].

Using a mapping conducted by Vianna and Bortolini [7], we can see as an example that, at state level, the state of Ceará has completely banned so-called "gender ideology" in education, and its use in any form and under any pretext. However, as we have reflected, the term appears to be an invention, a political discourse that is used to shape educational documents according to the interests of the national economic elite that forms part of, structures and sustains many of the political parties. According to the authors, the states of Goiás, Pernambuco and São Paulo followed the influence of the National

Education Plan (PNE), omitting any mention of the term "gender". In our previous studies, in a first analysis of the scientific production collected in a systematic database search on the production of theses and dissertations dealing with the topic of gender ideology in postgraduate programs in the country, many of them deal with the processes of building the education plans of the states of Amapá, Acre, Alagoas, Distrito Federal, Espírito Santo, Paraíba, Piauí, Paraná, Rio Grande do Norte, Rondônia, Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Sergipe and Tocantins, where there was partial use of the term "gender", addressing issues related to women's rights and respect between men and women, but many of them always maintaining cis-heteronormative standards. Finally, we would highlight the production found in the states of Amazonas, Bahia, Maranhão, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Pará and Roraima, which have expressed an understanding of the gender dimension within human rights, affirming its importance in the social function of education and providing support for public policies related to education at all levels, including initial and continuing teacher training. The victories achieved demonstrated by some of the productions analyzed from recent states should be celebrated, but not enough for us to lose sight of the ongoing struggle. These are just seven of the twenty-six states and one federal district. More than half of the country still omits the term "gender" or prohibits it in the form of a so-called "gender ideology" in its documents, demonstrating the overwhelming strength of the conservative and religious political sector in Brazil.

At the municipal level, it's a bit more challenging to track trends since Brazil has around 5,568 municipalities. Therefore, I will focus on the Municipal Education Plans of the main Brazilian capitals. In São Paulo, there is no mention of gender in municipal legislation, and the only reference to sexuality is in the context of domestic and sexual violence [8]. In Rio de Janeiro, the only mention of the term "gender" relates to school meals, as the term "gêneros alimentícios" is commonly used in Brazilian Portuguese legal language, more closely related to "genre." The only mention of sexuality in this plan is in the context of preventing sexual violence [9]. In Fortaleza, the capital of the only state that has completely banned references to so-called "gender ideology", the Municipal Education Plan includes several references to the term "gender". It even expresses a commitment to equality, stating that all people have the right to an equal education, regardless of their gender, social class, age, culture, or academic background [10]. This contradiction between the municipal document and the state plan highlights the differences that also exist between urban and rural areas in Brazil. As an example, in the middle of the 21st century, we note that the author of this text grew up in a municipality in the interior of the state of Santa Catarina that prohibits so-called "gender ideology", the term "gender" and even its synonyms [11].

We believe that some of our reflections already point to the strength that religious conservatism, allied to currents of political parties that are also conservative, has in Brazilian politics, using the term "gender ideology" to make their religious agendas political.

But we are always reflecting on how to confront, through the production of knowledge, all this force that dehumanizes the planet and naturalizes a single mode of production as the norm and in it a single standard mode of Being, a standard that places human diversity as an evil to be combated, which includes a perverse understanding of the sexuality dimension, a reductive understanding of human sexual rights, which comes as the axis of this so-called "gender ideology".

With this in mind, we will reflect below on some approaches to Historical Dialectical Materialism as an epistemological framework that strengthens us in the fight against such harmful political tools as "gender ideology".

#### **4. Unmasking fallacies, a materialist approach**

When we conduct research using a critical-dialectical method such as Historical Dialectical Materialism, we understand that scientific production takes place in dialectical movements between the researcher and the object in a given social historical context [12]. This is due to the fact that the first author and co-author have a strong relationship with the research object, as they live in Santa Catarina, a state in Brazil where the discourse on "gender ideology" is deeply present in everyday life, as it is governed by a Liberal Party. This understanding of the method and this paradigm to help us in our quest to map the scientific knowledge produced on the category of gender ideology, seeking to unveil it as science or as a fallacy, is certainly embedded in our studies of the philosophical and scientific production of Marx and Engels in the 19th century, seeking to interpret the world in a way that overcomes common sense and understands the movement of the world's phenomena. It stands in counterpoint to philosophical idealism. Therefore, we understand that our research object is part of the world, of concrete reality, so our commitment is to seek - based on the method - to overcome our own common sense, approaching the object in its real, dialectical movement. Dialectical materialism is therefore the "doctrine of development in its most complete form" and provides us with a "reflection of matter in eternal development" [13].

To achieve this level of comprehension of the object, we will follow the dialectical method, which seeks to investigate the genesis of the phenomenon and its relations with the historical moment that favored its emergence, its contradictions and its dialectical relations of interaction with the world. Carrying out this process allows us to glimpse an overcoming of these conditions on the horizon, altering the

characteristics of the phenomenon and giving rise to new contradictions [14].

In the light of these foundations, we are therefore investigating the genesis of the category called "gender ideology" and its reflexes in Brazilian education, expressed in the scientific knowledge produced about it in postgraduate programs in Brazil, stored in qualified databases. Carrying out this critical-reflective process set out in this text is already allowing us to glimpse possibilities on the horizon for overcoming the contradictions posed by the phenomenon. We can, for example, work on training education professionals to raise awareness of how to overcome this by rescuing critical thinking, which is currently quite dormant.

## 5. Conclusions

In this text, we have briefly traced the origins of the term "gender ideology" and its adoption by conservative groups in Brazil. It has become clear that this term is intentionally amorphous, adapting its meaning to suit the objectives of those who use it. It serves as a support point for opposing progressive movements and policies, especially in the field of sexual rights, including gender issues. As we have seen, the genesis of "gender ideology" itself emerged as a reaction to the progress of the global feminist movement. We can work, for example, with the support of the Marxist concepts of alienation, fetishism and ideology and unveil "gender ideology" as a product of these mechanisms, serving the interests of the ruling class to maintain order and exert ideological control over the working class.

But we must remember that in opposition to the efforts of the economic and political elite in Brazil, there are social movements establishing resistance. Social movements have been occupying political spaces and fighting to guarantee their rights. However, this will be a never-ending struggle if we don't manage to break with the mode of production that gives rise to all the forces of oppression against minorities and the working class as a whole. The capitalist mode of production is marginalizing, consisting of one class that is expropriated everything, and another that expropriates everything, and their contradictions are irreconcilable. That's why we need to have the dialectical overcoming of this mode of production on the horizon.

This is where Dialectical Historical Materialism becomes crucial. Through it, we can understand the contradictions that exist in the social phenomena of our time and, from this, discover the means to resolve them, to build something new. By studying phenomena such as discourses and scientific production on "gender ideology" through the lens of the dialectical method, we can discover ways to transcend them and move forward in the dialectical movement of the world, bringing us closer to a profound qualitative transformation of society.

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