

“THE CATEGORY WOMAN IS NO LONGER OF USE FOR THE FEMINIST CAUSE”

• *Interview with Sonia Correa* •

By Laura Daudén and Maria A.C. Brant

“I have many issues with the category ‘woman.’ It was with this critical reservation that the Brazilian researcher Sonia Correa, founder of some of the most important organisations in the fight for sexual and reproductive rights in Brazil, such as SOS-Body, agreed to be interviewed for SUR 24.

For Correa, currently the director of Sexual Policy Watch (SPW), a project based at the Brazilian organisation ABIA (National AIDS Policy Watch), the theme of the publication should go beyond the model of two sexes, separating the feminine from the feminine body. “It is always important to go back to [Judith] Butler, to the first pages of Gender Trouble, where she discusses the idea of the ‘woman’ as a cultural, ideological and philosophical construction. It is a representational fiction,” she affirmed.

She proceeded to explain how the feminist movement has worked during at least the past 40 years to detach feminism from the exclusive experience of women. Citing Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler and Anne Sterling, fundamental references for understanding the debate, Correa discussed the “conservative restoration” around the world and its impact in concrete debates, such as the case of the referendum in Colombia, where the population, in a narrow majority, rejected the peace accord between the government and the FARC.

The fluidity with which she navigates through these themes comes from her vast experience as a researcher, as well as from her active participation and militancy in spaces like the commission of specialists that designed the Principals of Yogyakarta in 2006, which included directives for the

application of the international norms for human rights as they relate to sexual orientation and gender identity, or the Cairo Conference about Population and Development in 1995.

Correa's often pioneering contributions to international forums also overflow in her critical analyses of the role of emerging countries in the global debate on sexual and reproductive rights.

• • •

Conectas Human Rights • The theme of the next edition of SUR is “women and human rights”. It will have a segment with profiles of women who work in this area and we would like to include you.

Sonia Correa • I am so uncomfortable talking about “women and human rights”, because my perspective on work in this field is not an essentialist perspective, it is not a perspective of identity politics. I have tried precisely to make moves in the field of feminism, in the field of human rights, to destabilise this rigid category and for many years I have not spoken as a woman. I have many issues with the category “woman”.

Conectas • There are a series of questions that are not considered in a magazine about “women and human rights”, like for example LGBT rights, which we think is a broader discussion that deserves a separate edition.

S. C. • The problem is separating. Because when you separate, you add fuel to the fire of identity politics: there is “woman” on one side and, on the other side, “gender”, which is wrongly used as a synonym for woman, used as a *proxy* for identities that escape the dominant norms. Given the state of the fight against “gender ideology” in Brazil and in many other countries, reiterating this separation is politically very problematic. A effective transnational articulation was put in place to systematically attack ideological fantasies. Created by the the north-American religious right in the 1990s and later elevated by the Vatican, it works to attack the concept of gender. I will speak more about this later.

A large anti-gender “block” begins to solidify in that moment, which articulates diverse religious forces and also some secular ones, as in the case of France, aiming to block and deconstruct, in an articulated and integrated way, all of the transformations that are taking place in the field of gender and sexuality. It is an agenda that attacks sexual education, trans rights, the idea of new family structures and gender identity. In this troubling context, we must remain critical of political attachments to the category woman that do not recognise its instability and contingency. Today, even more so than twenty years ago, it is crucial to speak about gender and sexuality as plastic, unstable constructions that are articulated together and also distinguished from one another.

Conectas • You mentioned that for many years you have not spoken using the term women's rights. Why not?

S. C. • Theoretically and politically, for many years I have not thought of the feminist perspective as a perspective attached to the body and to the experience of women or to a feminist essence. I would say that, possibly since the beginning of my training, for as long as I have been exposed to feminist thinking, this has always been a tension. I read Beauvoir very early: the idea that you are not born a woman, that a woman is a construction, more specifically a cultural, ideological and philosophical construction. I started to dialogue in the field of contemporary sexuality studies very early. In the early 1980s, when SOS Corpo¹ was just getting started, we translated the 1975 article by Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex.” This is one of the original, fundamental texts in the field we call contemporary sexuality theory. After that we translated the classic text “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” by Joan Scott.

Along with the anthropological texts by Rosaldo, Lamphere and Ortner, these are the first moments of feminist theory after the 1960s. They made cracks in the conceptions of the woman as a discrete subject with an ontology radically different from the masculine ontology – this construction is especially profound and rooted in what the historian Thomas Laqueur named the model of two sexes. In his studies about representations of biomedicine in the transition to modernity, Laqueur shows how this transition represented, a strong shift in the markers of difference between masculine and feminine in the western world. Until the 17th century, following the aristotelian conception, the feminine was represented as an imperfect masculine, the woman was a smaller “man” whose sexual organs had been internalised. A woman as *another* radically different than the masculine is a characteristically modern construction. With this comes the capital M man of the enlightenment – white, bourgeois, manly, warrior, coloniser – and his opposite, the woman, unstable, impregnated with sexual fluids, creature of the penumbras world of private life, where men go to recuperate their energies for the battles of the public sphere and wars. The other figures of this pantheon are the effeminate man, the pederast, the deviant and the prostitute, sometimes constructed as a nymphomaniac.

Contemporary theories about gender and sexuality, beginning with Beauvoir’s proposition that you are not born a woman, will gradually destabilise this framework. In 1975, Rubin begins her argument saying that Marxism is not sufficient to understand what happens with women – it can explain what happens to women in capitalism, but it does not explain the constitutive difference between masculine and feminine that is present in all cultures and societies and marked by inequality, violence and coercion. One of the Rubin’s examples is the bound feet of Chinese women, which cannot be explained by capitalism. From there, she enters into dialogue with [Claude] Lévi-Strauss and with psychoanalysis – [Sigmund] Freud, Anna Freud, Lamp de Groult and [Jacques] Lacan – looking for understanding of how culture domesticates subjects so that they fit in the molds of masculine and feminine.

I am speaking here about theories, about texts that were published 40 years ago. That is almost half of a century. It is intriguing and worrying that, after so many years have passed, we have not yet been able to incorporate these conceptual ruptures into feminist human rights work. They not only interrogate why women are or are not in politics, or how much women earn in

the job market, or the state of reproductive autonomy for women, or the control of sexuality, but also consider the socio-cultural genealogies of masculine and feminine. As I said before, all of these themes are very relevant, but the theoretical production of the past 40 years can help us understand that these inequalities and problems are symptoms of the ways the systems of sex and gender organise themselves and organise the logic of society.

On the first page of the book “Problems with Gender”, for example, [Judith] Butler says that one of the problems with feminism is that it attached its trajectory and political condition to the figure of the woman, which is a representational fiction. From there, she develops the idea that it is not just the dualistic conception that maintained the binary, that thought of sex as an essential material base upon which culture added layers that produce the masculine and the feminine in their inequality and conceptions. Butler shows that the very notion of sex – and she certainly does not do this alone, but does so thinking with [Michel] Foucault and other authors like Monique de Wittig and the psychoanalyst Joan Rivière – is a constructed idea. Sex is also a social convention, and sex as we understand it as a universal instinct, is fundamentally a 19th century, western construction, anchored in Darwinian conceptions of evolution and the sexual reproduction of species. It is always important to remember that other cultures have other conceptions of sexuality and gender. The theoretic courses that Butler, Foucault and other authors in this field take are complex. It is not possible to translate adequately in an interview. But I am still going to try to translate Butler in a few words, even if I run the risk of simplifying her theoretic contribution. According to Butler, sex and gender seem natural because they are reiterated repeatedly in discourses and institutional and cultural practices: naming, the insistence on anatomical differences, the laws, the separation of spaces and functions. Or, as Bourdieu wrote in his classic work, *Masculine Domination*, the traces in the ways of thinking, in words, in spaces, in objects and in ways of seeing and experiencing the body and corporeality. Butler uses the figure of the *drag queen*, of the travesti or the trans person as a philosophical figure that destabilises these natural constructions.

At another moment she – and maybe more specifically the biologist Anne Fausto Sterling, another fundamental author – reveals that sex is produced before a person even comes into the world. Culture attributes sex and gender to embryo before birth. This happened even before the development of visualisation technologies that make markers of sex and gender even more automatic and accentuated. The visualisation of anatomy immediately produces the mark of a profound sexual difference of a subject, even in cases where this person who will be born could, at some point in his or her life, perceive his or her desire, constitution, expression and way of being as radically different than the sexual difference that was attributed at birth.

It has long been insufficient to think of feminism as exclusively women’s or having a reference in the experience of women’s bodies. If what determined whether or not one could be a feminist were the possession of a natural vagina, it would not be called feminism, it would be called *vaginism*. This is a joke that I have made for a long time, but it is very relevant today because there is a battle going on in the field of sexual politics.

There are sectors of feminists that have a radically essentialist, fundamentalist position, that affirm that trans-women do not exist, that they are a mere product of capitalist patriarchy. A true woman needs to have a vagina and feminine sexual organs and if she doesn't, she cannot dress as a woman and cannot use the women's restroom.

For these reasons, some time ago I started to use the formulation gender and sexuality human rights.

Conectas • How do you think that feminism could incorporate this non-essentialist vision and at the same time work on specific questions, such as the representation of women in politics and income equality?

S. C. • Contemporary sex and gender theory permits us to think about the construction of the masculine and the feminine as issues that are modal in the formation of social and institutional structures. Critical theory destabilises this order, interrogating the meanings of the social and legal norms that sustain it and its impacts on inequality and on selective inclusion and exclusion.

The dominant culture throws trans people, and especially trans women, into a place of extreme rejection. This is what explains for example the fact that Brazil is the country that assassinates the highest number of trans people in the world today. Of course, this cannot be separated from Brazilian structural violence, which has massive proportions, but the characteristics of the assassinations of trans people, which are often barbaric and attention-grabbing, is an expression of the limits of human rights, of the way the sex-gender system works.

These limits should not be seen as related only to trans identity, but also as a lethal effect of the normative violence of the binary logic of the sex/gender system, which also anchors gender violence in the most classical sense of violence against women. This is why it is important not to think of these two grave expressions of normative violence as belonging to closed worlds. Assassinations of trans people and of women are part of the same *assemblage*, of the same discursive scaffolding, that appears in the norms, in the law, in the institutions, in the way that education produces people. And this should not be a surprise. 20 years ago, the forces that wanted to keep these antiquated structures intact made gender their principal aim of attack.

Looking at the question from the point of view of human rights involves conceptual and semantic challenges. To discuss gender and sexuality within human rights requires a questioning of the essentialism that still characterises the conceptions and language of human rights. In other words, it requires that we leave behind the equality-inequality of the sexes recorded in the Universal Declaration, which denotes the biologic binary: masculine/feminine, man/woman. It is a good idea to take the path indicated by the Principles of Yogyakarta, that do not only challenge this binary but also address violations that have their base in sexual orientation and gender identity, without ever mentioning “woman” or any of the other identity categories that fall into the conventional network

of the rights of minorities: gays, lesbians, trans, etc. It is necessary to look for ways to “say rights” that escape the thin covering of language propagated by the machines that produce discrete identities in gender and sexuality.

Conectas • How do you see the fight against what is known as gender ideology today?

S. C. • This is not just about today, this fight has a twenty-year history. First off, it is a transnational phenomenon. Today we see serious discussions, many with disastrous effects, such as the case of the Colombian referendum. Evidently, I think it is an exaggeration to attribute the result of the referendum in Colombia [about the peace accord with the FARC] to attacks on gender ideology, especially because 60% of the population abstained. In any case, there was a mobilisation specifically of evangelicals and the conservative Catholic Church against gender ideology just before the vote.

In July, the SPW asked Frank Hernandez, one of our partners in Colombia, to write about the sexual policy situation in Colombia and its relationship to the debate about peace and the end of the conflict. He wrote in July and, the following month, the forces against gender ideology were in the streets, filling the streets of Bogotá and other Colombian cities. He wrote a *post scriptum* interpreting what was happening and showing that it was not an accident and that what was happening had direct ties to the negotiations, because the people behind the mobilisations against gender ideology were the same people against the Havana accord. Just after that, we saw that the role of evangelical actors and the evangelical vote, principally, were key in determining the result of the referendum. There was a more “pedestrian,” but no less important, factor, which is the fact that the Secretary of Education, who is a lesbian, was transferred to the coordination team of the campaign for the referendum. These forces directly attacked her. Some political analysts consider this an error. But no matter your perspective, any analysis that can be made about the surprising result of the referendum in Colombia does not veer far from the attack made on “gender ideology”. This campaign has been in course in the Colombian context for the past fifteen years due to the strong presence of actors and thinkers of the constitutionalist catholic or catholic constitutionalist movement.]

Ives Gandra, Hélio Bicudo and Janaína Paschoal, people linked to this chain of intellectual production, have a very strong presence in Colombia, just as they have in Brazil. This is not a new construction and as I said before, it started in the preparation for Beijing. In Cairo, the term “gender” was recorded in a text negotiated by the Member States. Before this, it had been used in UN agency research, but it had not been used in an official text. Just after this, there was a direct attack on the term made in the preparations for Beijing, in March of 1995.

I have told this story many times, but it needs to be told and retold so that people can understand the course of the “war against gender”. In 1995, during the process of preparing for the Beijing Conference, Dale O’Leary, a leader of the North American religious right and representative of the National Research Association, created the thesis of “gender ideology”.

During the preparatory meeting in March of that year, these right wing religious groups distributed a pamphlet to the official delegates, especially to those from the countries of the Global South, that distorted the article by the feminist biologist Anne Fausto Sterling about the *continuum* of gender and intersexuality and affirmed that when using the term gender the feminists were defending the existence of five sexes.

The anthropologist Mara Viveros, who just wrote an article about the attack on the “gender ideology” for SPW, reminds us that the next step was an article published in 2001 in Costa Rica, by Jutta Burggraf, a theologian at the Spanish University of Navarra, which is administered by Opus Dei. Since then, the article “¿Qué quiere decir género?” (“What does gender mean?”) has been replicated throughout Latin America. In that same year, in a letter from the Vatican to the North American Bishops, Joseph Ratzinger affirmed that “the collaboration among men and women in the Church and in the world should be based on the premise of their difference.” In 2004, another letter about the collaboration of men and women was sent to all of the bishops on the planet. The Vatican directly attacks gender theory, without using the term:

This theory of the human person, destined to promote perspectives of women's equality through the liberation of biological determinism, has inspired, in truth, ideologies that, for example, put the family in its natural two-parent structure at risk, making homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equal, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality.

Today this conservative, backwards intellectual production, whose objective is to contain the process of critical destabilisation adopted by the feminists and the LGBT movements, is now rooted in the countries. It is a battle, and here in Brazil we are almost losing, as is the case in Mexico, in Colombia, in Spain, in Poland, in Italy, in France, in Croatia, in Hungary. In any place where there was any destabilisation, even if it was small compared to gender and sexuality, you have a battle in course. And it is not an accident, it is a very well planned strategy that has many resources and a strong institutional infrastructure. Conservative Catholic thinkers perceived, in the 1990s, the potentially destabilising impact of these theories and fought back with all of their resources, mobilising and spreading this debate in the most persistent and continued form. This is the state of the gender wars in 2016.

Conectas • Last year we had a series of protests against new conservative initiatives in this realm, principally in the legislature. In this context, what do you think should be the strategies and priorities of the feminist movement, especially in Brazil?

S. C. • There are no easy responses to difficult questions and problems. I cannot respond to this question in a consistent way. I can chart challenges and tasks. In Brazil and around the world, our biggest challenge is to understand the broad, structural character of the questions of gender and sexuality, so that we can go beyond the logic of identity politics that has characterised the field. Women are on one side defending their rights, LGBTs on

the other, women who fight for abortion go to one side and those that work with violence oftentimes do not even mention the topic of abortion. There are the brutal tensions that I mentioned among groups of feminists and trans activists and these and other groups are against prostitution and because of that do not support the demands of sex workers...

In part, these divisions result from the fact that we were all more or less captured by the machines of identity production, one of which is the state. The logic of governmentality of state aparati is compartmentalisation. It is a *divide et impera* dynamic, characteristic of postcolonial states. In other words, governing the differences in population groups: white, indigenous, black, other foreigners. This is the deep postcolonial trait of our postcolonial state machines. But the market also drives a logic of differentiation. Above all, around the production of digital visibility and in the dynamic of an economy that is strongly rooted in consumerism.

We were truly captured. On our side, gender and sexual politics during the last years were fundamentally formed around an identity logic. While the adversaries adopted a common strategy based on a broad, structural vision of what they understand as the end of times: the destabilising of the natural order. The attack on “gender ideology” casts a net to contain many things at the same time: sexual education, transformation of family structures, abortion, sexual orientation, gender identity and even the premise of equality for men and women.

I think that to keep this regression at bay, we have to reconstitute the fabric of what I call a *politics of friendship*. Our field is full of conflicts, the majority of which are produced by an adherence to sexual essentialism or to the logic of the power machinery. I think that overcoming this identity crisis is absolutely fundamental. And I think that in the conditions we are experiencing in Brazil today, which I think will persist for a long time, there is no other way out if not through the construction of spaces and means of resistance.

The truth is, this is a global challenge, right? Especially after the Trump’s victory, the words I have most often read are fascism and resistance. Trump’s victory is not isolated or an exception, but it should be situated within the chain of regressive political events, which started with the collapse of the Arab Spring in 2013, followed by the election of BJP in India and of ultra conservative governments in Hungary and Poland, the parliamentary coup in Brazil, the election of a president in the Philippines that, just after coming into office, started an open campaign of extrajudicial executions, Brexit, the state of exception in Turkey, the failure of the referendum in Colombia and an eternalized Ortega dynasty in Nicaragua.

We live in extraordinarily dark times and this news needs to be spread to the four corners of the earth. We have to be prepared for the worst. Philip Alston, in a conference at the LSE in December, said that these are the most uncertain and difficult times he has experienced in his long career defending human rights.

Conectas • Could you give examples of groups and organisations that are resisting in interesting ways internationally, nationally or in alliances?

S. C. • I think that there are some examples of resisting everywhere. In the United Nations not so much, because there, unfortunately, human rights are characterised by the identity logic. A deconstruction has started, but it is still moving very slowly. Let us turn to the example of Latin America. Throughout the last period, we watched left-leaning governments in Brazil, Argentina and El Salvador adhere to the LGBT fight for basic rights, including to marriage equality, to the detriment to the fight for the right to have a safe abortion. The exceptions are Uruguay and Mexico City. In the other countries, “pinkwashing” *a la latina* prevailed: we are modern, we support the rights of LGBT people, but when it comes to abortion, we turn the reins over to the conservative sectors. This is the *divide et impera* logic of the states, but we do not see these ruptures being openly debated in the social movements. Everything indicates that the conservative wave will force us to reestablish connections and shared demands.

As I said before, there is a strong tendency in human rights policy to shift debates and demands toward an identity logic. In India, where there is a theoretical and political tradition that is critical of the Western identity-based laws and categories, there was an important rupture during discussions around Article 377 of the Penal Code, called the Sodomy Law. However, I recently heard that there has been a resurgence of fragmentation. Overall, the results of the American election show us that the distance between politics of recognition – gender, race, and ethnicity, and of redistribution in terms of class, precariousness, and economic insecurity – can be politically fatal. This reveals another huge challenge, which is to rebuild bridges or, in other words, amplify political networks in friendship.

Conectas • In an article published in SUR 20, you question the capacity of the emerging countries, of BRICS and IBAS, to promote a progressive agenda about sexual and reproductive rights. Do you still make that evaluation?

S. C. • Today the situation is more grim than it was three years ago. At that time, I already had many doubts about this fantasy that the emergence of the South would allow for the construction of a virtuous platform and allow us to go further in debates about gender and sexuality, overcoming the North-South traps in which they have been stuck for a long time. In the 1990s, we watched bargaining games stall the debates on gender and sexuality in the UN. More recently, this tangle became even more perverse, as human rights in the field of gender and sexuality were used as a justification of “imperialist” interventions, protecting the rights of women in Iraq and Afghanistan and suspending aid to protect LGBT rights, for example, and to close down some borders, as is the case of the test of homophobia that migrants from the south must pass if they want to live in Europe.

At the Brics Summit in Fortaleza, in 2014, when language about gender and reproductive rights was included in the final document, feminists could have felt some fear. But the game changed quickly just after the summit, with the strong movements for democratic contraction in Brazil and India, the authoritarian rejuvenation in China and a troubled political process in South Africa. The emergency became about China again, and also about

economic interests. Just after Dilma’s impeachment in August, before the meeting of the G20, the Chinese government published a full page article in the *Folha de São Paulo*. The first paragraph clarified that the relationship between China and Brazil is not a relationship between governments, but rather it is a long-term structural and strategic cooperation. In other words, it is defined by the capitalists interests of the *pais tropical* and of the Middle Kingdom. At least they started to play a clean game, doing away with illusions.

But none of this even matters after 9 November. Today, we are faced with the potentially nefarious effects of North American foreign policy under Trump, which is already coming into view with the harassment of China and which tends toward a volatile and risky relationship with Russia (Russia has been the contriver and China the top dog of the BRICS). Though we will have to wait until the beginning of 2017 to better trace this turbulent cartography, I have a strong suspicion that, just as the era of renewed human rights that started in 1989 seems to be coming to an end, the emergence of the South as we know it, may also have its days numbered.

NOTES

1 • Sonia was one of the founders of the Brazilian feminist non-governmental organization SOS Corpo - Feminist Institute for Democracy.



“This journal is published under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License”