

Pentecostals, Gender Ideology and the Peace Plebiscite: Colombia 2016

William Mauricio Beltrán ^{1,*} and Sian Creely ²

¹ Department of Sociology, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá D.C. 111321, Colombia

² Centre of Latin American Studies, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB3 9DP, UK; sec95@cam.ac.uk

* Correspondence: wmbeltranc@unal.edu.co

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Abstract: This article examines the role of the Pentecostal Evangelical movement in the success of the ‘No’ campaign in the Colombian peace plebiscite of 2 October 2016, where Colombians voted to reject the peace agreement which had been reached between the Colombian government and the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC). It discusses the reasons that motivated large sectors of the Evangelical electorate to oppose the agreement, paying particular attention to the success of the argument that the agreement was contaminated with what Pentecostals termed ‘gender ideology.’ In terms of methodology, the article draws on a variety of sources, including interviews, field observation and written sources both scholarly and popular, including press and Internet articles. We track how ‘gender’ comes to be shorthand for the host of social ills with which it was associated during the debates around the Colombian peace plebiscite through use of the term ‘gender ideology.’ We posit that it is the links between ‘gender’ modernity, colonialism and the development industry, its academic, value-neutral quality and its status as an isolated technical term that allow ‘gender’ to become a proxy for a wide range of social dissatisfactions. We conclude that the success of the ‘No’ campaign was possible due to the convergence of several sectors of society, particularly between the political right and a social movement which, inspired by religious values, opposed the recognition of LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) rights and the use of the term ‘gender’ in the agreements.

Keywords: Colombia; peace agreement; gender focus; gender ideology; Pentecostalism; LGBTI

1. Introduction

This article examines the role of the Pentecostal Evangelical movement in the success of the ‘No’ campaign in the Colombian peace plebiscite of 2nd October 2016, where Colombians voted to reject the peace agreement which had been reached between the Colombian government and the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) (‘the peace agreement’). The result of the plebiscite shocked many observers: not only because opinion polls prior to the vote predicted that the ‘Yes’ vote would win by a comfortable margin, but also because large sections of opinion, the majority of political parties and the government all supported the agreement which they saw as fundamental in putting an end to the armed conflict which had blighted Colombia’s recent history. The major opposition to the agreement was spearheaded by the Centro Democrático (Democratic Centre) party, led by former president Álvaro Uribe.

The Colombian press attributed a central role in the ‘No’ vote to Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Along with Basset (2018), we believe that the role played by Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in the result is one of several factors that explain the triumph of the No vote. However, in our opinion, the role of these churches should be considered decisive. This hypothesis is based on the observation that the ‘No’ vote won by a very slim margin, some 53,894 votes (0.43% of the valid votes

cast),¹ and in Senatorial elections which took place in 2018, the Evangelical and Pentecostal groups that led the opposition to the peace agreement (now grouped as the Colombia Justa Libres—Fair and Free Colombia—party and Senator Claudia Rodríguez de Castellanos) won almost half a million votes, using similar arguments to those used to oppose the peace agreement in 2016 in their campaign for the Senate (Velasco 2018, p. 237; García Segura 2017).²

This article discusses the reasons that motivated large sectors of the Evangelical electorate to oppose the agreement. Although Pentecostal leaders drew on many arguments to justify a ‘No’ vote, in this article we pay particular attention to those who saw the presence of ‘gender ideology’ in the agreement as objectionable.

It should be made clear that the authors consider it incorrect to talk about the presence of ‘gender ideology’ in the agreement. What was instead present was a ‘gender focus’: a differentiated gender perspective incorporated across all sections of the agreement which sought to recognize the specific and often overlooked ways that women and LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) people were affected by the conflict. Rather than a mere semantic difference between ‘gender ideology’ and ‘gender focus’, there is instead a struggle between two competing imaginaries of family and nationhood, which includes both local and global actors.

For this reason, we track how ‘gender’ comes to be shorthand for the host of social ills with which it was associated during the debates around the Colombian peace plebiscite through use of the term ‘gender ideology’. We posit that it is the links between ‘gender’ modernity, colonialism and the development industry, its academic, value-neutral quality and its status as an isolated technical term that allow ‘gender’ to become a proxy for a wide range of social dissatisfactions. ‘Gender’ is a value neutral term, which relies on a tacit understanding of the impermissibility of religious argumentation in political debate which does not hold true in Colombia where, as we will see, religious values played an important role in informing the debate around the plebiscite. As it travels from its original context in US feminism and academia (Scott 1988), ‘gender’, as an isolated technical term in the sense of Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999), accrues semantic noise which allows for its demonization via the phrase ‘gender ideology’.

2. Methodology and Interpretive Framework

In terms of methodology the study is based on qualitative, socio-historical research, and draws on the insights of Weberian comprehensive sociology (Weber 2001). In other words, we try to understand what motivated the Pentecostal actors who opposed the agreements: particularly the beliefs, values and interests that their opposition was based on. Thus, the main objective of our research is to understand the relationships between: (1) the interests of the Pentecostals who opposed the agreements; (2) the values that characterize Pentecostalism; (3) the feelings that ‘gender ideology’ arouses in Pentecostals; and (4) the political decision to oppose the agreements.

To this end, we are guided by questions such as: what do Pentecostals understand by ‘gender ideology’? How does ‘gender ideology’ relate to the moral principles of Pentecostalism with respect to family, sexuality and reproductive rights? Why does ‘gender ideology’ rouse such fear amongst Pentecostals? What interests lay behind the Pentecostal leaders who promoted opposition to the agreements? In what circumstances did the argument according to which the agreements promoted ‘gender ideology’ prosper?

The information analyzed in this article comes from a variety of sources, most notably: (1) coverage of the plebiscite in major domestic news outlets;³ (2) online sources, particularly the Youtube channels of Pentecostal leaders and pastors, Pentecostal megachurches and other religious

¹ The results of the vote were as follows: No: 6,431,376 votes (50.21%); Yes: 6,377,482 votos (49.78%); blank votes: 86,243; null votes: 170,946 (Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil 2016).

² In the 2018 Senatorial elections, the Colombia Justa Libres party took 463,521 votes, Senator Claudia Rodríguez de Castellanos 67,168, making a total of 540,689 votes (Consejo Nacional Electoral Colombia 2018).

³ See for example the newspapers: *El Espectador* <https://www.elespectador.com>; *El Tiempo* <https://www.eltiempo.com>; *Semana* magazine <https://www.semana.com>; and Internet sites: *La Silla Vacía* <https://lasillavacia.com>; and *Las 2Orillas* <https://www.las2orillas.co>.

organizations; (3) participant observations carried out during field visits to some of the megachurches which opposed the agreement during the period of political campaigning (August and September 2016); (4) interviews with pastors, public servants and activists who took part in the campaign process and peace negotiations.⁴ These semi-structured interviews were based around the guiding questions mentioned above, and sought to uncover the discursive, intellectual and emotional relationships that linked the peace agreements, ‘gender ideology’ and intangibles such as family, nation, peace and society in the eyes of our interviewees.

As is the case in comprehensive sociology, our data interpretation is geared towards the search for rational and empathic evidence that would allow us to explain the conduct of these actors (Weber 2014, p. 131). In other words, by means of data interpretation we tried to reconstruct the connections that actors establish between their interests, values, feelings and decisions (in this case, the Pentecostals’ decision to oppose the agreements). In this way we tried to establish that, from the actor’s perspective, their decisions obey a certain rationality that, in Weberian terms, is not exclusively instrumental (or means to an end), but rather is influenced by their convictions, traditions, feelings and states of mind (for types of action see: Weber 2014, pp. 149–54).

Given the difficulties in finding the opinion of a representative number of Pentecostals, we opted to focus on the opinions of the most influential leaders in this religious movement. In theoretical terms, this decision can be justified by the ideal types of authority developed by Max Weber—traditional, bureaucratic and charismatic (Weber 2014, pp. 334–77). In this case, previous work has established that, in Colombia as in the rest of Latin America, Pentecostal organizations structure themselves predominantly based on charismatic authority (Bastian 1997; Cepeda 2007; Beltrán 2013). In other words, bureaucratic processes and university qualifications are of lesser importance in the hierarchy of Pentecostal pastors. Rather, these pastors earn the trust of their followers by displaying extraordinary qualities (talent in oratory, power to cure illnesses and expel demons, prophetic faculties, among others). In the eyes of their believers, these talents (or charismas) are evidence that these leaders have been chosen by God, and are the genuine carriers of His message. In this way, the Pentecostal believer considers their pastor to be a ‘prophet’ who represents divine authority, in opposition to the Catholic priest who represents bureaucratic authority (on the distinction between priest and prophet see: (Weber 2014, pp. 547–66)). The influence of these charismatic leaders on their followers should not be underestimated. For example, in Pentecostal megachurches, religious leaders feel it is within their authority to orient the lives of their faithful in many dimensions (including family relationships, sexual conduct and even political decisions), and the faithful feel the moral obligation to follow this direction (Beltrán and Quiroga 2017; Bastidas 2015).

The actions and decisions of these charismatic leaders is analyzed here with recourse to Bourdieu’s concept of religious field (Bourdieu 1971). This perspective emphasizes the dynamics of rivalry of a variety of religious actors who compete for the appropriation of specific capital, in this case the legitimate religious authority over the faithful. In Colombia, Pentecostal charismatic leaders compete with Catholic priests (who base their authority on bureaucratic processes), and with indigenous shamans (who represent traditional authority) in a religious marketplace that, from the passing of the Constitution in 1991, tends towards free competition between suppliers of salvation. Actors that attain or maintain dominant positions in the field, such as Catholic priests or pastors of Pentecostal megachurches, tend to convert their religious capital (the authority they exercise over

⁴ Between November 2016 and April 2018 we interviewed leaders from the following religious organizations: Iglesia Apostólica Amor y Misericordia, Concilio de las Asambleas de Dios de Colombia, Iglesia Cristiana Manantial de Vida Eterna, Centro Mundial de Avivamiento, Iglesia Cristiana Carismática Tabernáculo de la Fe, Casa Sobre la Roca, Iglesia Pentecostal Unida de Colombia, Iglesia de Dios en Colombia, Movimiento Misionero Mundial, Denominación Bautista de Colombia, Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia, Iglesia Evangélica Luterana de Colombia, Iglesia Cristiana Wesleyana, Hermanos Menonitas de Colombia, Iglesia Colombiana Metodista Príncipe de Paz, El Lugar de Su Presencia and the Misión Carismática Internacional. In addition, our research included interviews with social activists for women’s and LGBTI rights from the NGOs Dejusticia and Catholics for the Right to Decide and civil servants from the Colombian Ministerio del Interior.

their faithful) into political capital. In other words, they use strategies to influence political decisions and electoral battles by using the loyalty of their followers. For this reason, it is not surprising that some Pentecostal leaders present themselves as candidates for election, or come to clientelist agreements where the votes of their faithful are exchanged for privileges or bureaucratic posts (Cepeda 2007; Beltrán and Quiroga 2017; Velasco 2018). In spite of the dominant character of these dynamics in the field, these agents may construct alliances in order to combat common enemies, notably actors that promote secularity, atheism and ‘gender ideology’, and in this way, according to Pentecostals, promote immorality and social decline (Rodríguez Vargas 2017).

3. Literature Review

It should be clear that our focus is not the role of Evangelicals and Pentecostals in the peace process, rather, we try to understand the role of this religious movement in the triumph of the ‘No’ campaign in the plebiscite. There are still relatively few studies in the field of social science that provide analysis of the results of the peace plebiscite. This said, several studies have already identified ‘gender ideology’ as a strategy of the ‘No’ campaign, and recognize that Evangelicals and Pentecostals played a central role in the opposition to the peace agreements (Rodríguez Rondón 2017; Rodríguez Vargas 2017; Serrano Amaya 2017, 2018; Velasco 2018; Basset 2018). However, none of these studies makes the role of Evangelicals and Pentecostals and their deployment of the term ‘gender ideology’ in the rejection of the peace agreement the central focus of research. Though certainly aware of the international spread of the term ‘gender ideology’, these studies have not examined the Colombian backlash to gender politics alongside the positioning of ‘gender’ in dynamics of neoliberal globalization and the development industry, something this study aims to rectify.

Many explanations have been put forward for the unlikely triumph of the ‘No’ vote. Matanock and García-Sánchez (2017) analyze political elites, taking the view that the polarization between Uribe and Santos polarized, in turn, the Colombian public between those who opposed the agreement and those who supported it, something which had an important effect on the result. Posada-Carbó (2017) attributes the triumph of the ‘No’ to the resistance of broad sectors of the population to accepting an agreement which offered judicial concessions to former combatants for the FARC as part of a program of transitional justice. For this reason, the agreements implied a pact of impunity in the eyes of many citizens. To this we must add the strong opposition felt by many Colombians to allowing former guerrilleros to take part in politics without appearing in court, something which the agreements permitted.

García and Chicaíza (2018) emphasize the similarities between the triumph of the ‘No’ vote, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, all of which took place in 2016. They point to the strategic use of social media and the prevalence of ‘fake news’ in the three campaigns, which created fractious and emotionally charged debates. Gómez-Suárez (2016) and Jimeno (2017) focus on the deeper emotional factors that mobilized the electorate. Gómez-Suárez argues that the results of the plebiscite were affected by the enduring popularity of Uribe and the hostility towards Santos in large sectors of the population. Gómez-Suárez and Jimeno point to the ability of the ‘No’ campaign to shift public debate away from the content of the agreements instead create a campaign which centered on emotions. To do so, they argued that, for example, if the agreements were passed, the country would slide towards communist-atheist dictatorship and as such, freedom of religion would be restricted and Colombia’s socio-economic situation would deteriorate to the level of Venezuela.

These studies share many of our findings. For example, the Pentecostal leaders of the ‘No’ campaign also played on the emotions of the faithful, particularly by stoking panic around the idea that the institution of the family was in danger and that the agreements put Colombia at risk of ‘homosexual colonization.’ Arguments such as these are summed up in the formula that links the peace agreements with ‘gender ideology’. What’s more, some of the Pentecostal pastors that were central to the ‘No’ campaign used social media to spread fake news. In fact, ‘gender ideology’ itself was defined as a kind of fake news in itself by one of our subjects, given its scaremongering nature,

superficial understanding of feminist and queer theory, and misrepresentation of the gender focus in the agreements.

Lastly, it should not pass without comment that studies that analyze the results of the plebiscite in relation to geography show that the 'No' vote was predominant in medium-sized cities and in "the popular classes of major cities". Rural and border areas, which were the hardest hit by armed conflict, voted mostly in favor of the agreements (Basset 2018, p. 245; Liendo and Maves Braithwaite 2018; Jiménez 2016). Though this fact cannot fully account for the phenomenon these authors have identified, it should be noted that it is precisely the 'popular classes' in large cities where the Pentecostal megachurches who led the opposition to the agreements have flourished.

4. The Gender Focus in the Agreement

According to Humberto De la Calle (2016), the government's chief negotiator in Havana, the 'gender focus' was included in the agreement in order to incorporate a differential treatment which would consider the particular ways the conflict had affected women and the LGBTI community, and would thereby offer proper restitution for these groups.

For women, the conflict had 'an enormous impact', since women were 'direct victims of serious crimes', including sexual violence (De la Calle 2016) as well as forced displacement. Thus, the agreement sought to take these situations into account. Furthermore, since women were less likely to hold land titles, the agreement offered special conditions so that women could gain legal ownership of their land. According to De la Calle (2016), the agreement is "committed to ensuring that the reparation process works for women, as well as establishing tools and policies that mitigate, and in the long term eliminate, the historic discrimination that women have suffered".

LGBTI people were also affected disproportionately by the conflict, which exacerbated the conditions of exclusion and discrimination to which the LGBTI community in Colombia has historically been subjected (Semana 2016c). In the regions where the conflict took place, armed groups were able to enforce parallel social orders which amplified the hegemonic gender order, discriminating against sexual minorities and sanctioning those who didn't conform to sexual or gender norms (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2015, p. 129). This left the LGBTI population at an increased risk of abuse and violence (including sexual violence) as well as forced displacement.

The conflict also severely impeded political organizing on the part of LGBTI groups, and facilitated or promoted the assassination of prominent LGBTI activists such as Rolando Pérez, Wanda Fox or Álvaro Miguel Rivera. Thus, in vast swathes of Colombia the political representation of the LGBTI community was severely restricted.

The State is not free from blame, as it too has historically been a major perpetrator of violence against the LGBTI community, has failed to recognize the rights of this population and has been an obstacle to their full political participation (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2015, p. 130).

For these reasons, the gender focus in the agreement allowed for the recognition of inequalities in political participation for women and the LGBTI community and provided mechanisms for closing this gap. Furthermore, it considered the consequences of sexual violence and other crimes, such as forced displacement, which affect these groups (Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2016a). As such, the gender focus in the agreement represented a milestone in gender equality and LGBTI rights.

5. Towards a Definition of 'Gender Ideology'

Use of the term 'gender ideology' dates back to the actions of the Vatican in relation to the UN Conferences of 1994 in Cairo and 1995 in Beijing (Cornejo-Valle and Pichardo 2017, p. 8). In the preparatory documents, the conference organizers used the term 'gender' to mean "awareness of the difference between masculine and feminine as different from anatomical sex" and called on governments to "integrate gender perspective in legislation, public policies, programs and projects" (United Nations 1995).

The Vatican reacted against this initiative, and was well aware of the implications that a gender perspective entailed, such as the idea that heterosexuality was not the only option, a move away from patriarchal family structures and the spread of feminism. For these reasons, it mobilized its power in

the UN against these reforms. Documents such as Pope John Paul II's Letter to Women (John 1995) attempt to depict the church as true defenders of women's concerns and feminists as unrepresentative of other women (Cornejo-Valle and Pichardo 2017, p. 8). The Vatican also used arguments rooted in anti-colonialism to oppose 'gender', claiming that it was 'foreign' to non-Western countries and that the UN would impose a "Western type of household" (Franco 1998, p. 282).

The term 'gender ideology' subsequently spread to Latin America through the Catholic Church, where it began to be used by Evangelical Protestants (Vaggione 2011, p. 14). From the mid-90s, conservative sections of the Catholic Church spread panic about the perverse consequences that advances in women's and LGBTI rights would have for families and society. Thus, what started as a coordinated action by the Vatican quickly became an international movement which has since spread to the Americas, and has united actors from inside and outside the Catholic Church (Butler 2006).

For Rodríguez Rondón, 'gender ideology' is not imposed or imported by the church to each of the countries in which it is used, rather it is "produced in different places" and "appropriated by religious and non-religious agents" (Rodríguez Rondón 2017, p. 30). This perspective links the use of 'gender ideology' to feelings of nationalism, since it promotes the idea that use of the term 'gender' is linked to a neocolonialist project led by the UN and other international organizations. The term is linked to a kind of international conspiracy which brings together academics, world leaders, international organizations and feminist/LGBTI activists. By recourse to the term 'gender ideology', conservative actors can present themselves as defenders of a national, natural order.

At present, the expression 'gender ideology' is widely used internationally, and is a vague term which is difficult to define. For some it is an "empty signifier", whose strength lies in the fact that its content varies with its usage. For this reason, it would be better to define it by what it does, rather than what it means (Rodríguez Rondón 2017, p. 132). In general terms, it is used as a political tool to contest the (perceived or real) rise of any discourse or initiative that promotes women's and LGBTI rights. It is not uncommon for 'gender ideology' to be used to create moral panic, since those who use the term associate advances in policies of gender equality with social decomposition and decline. By use of an apparently secular term, religious actors can make incursions into debates around sexuality and women's rights. In other words, use of the phrase 'gender ideology' helps its users to question the recognition of women's and LGBTI rights without resorting to openly sexist or homophobic language which is prohibited by law in many countries, Colombia included. It also helps people to frame a certain political position without immediate recourse to religious language.

Placing 'gender' next to 'ideology' serves to tinge gender studies with connotations of falsehood and propaganda. In this way it separates gender from the sphere of academic knowledge and places it in the realm of beliefs and ideas. This allows users of the term 'gender ideology' to denigrate advances in the fields of feminist and queer scholarship (Bracke and Paternotte 2016, p. 144). In this context, 'ideology' is used in the Marxist sense to mean a conscious strategy to influence opinion by means of language (Cornejo-Valle and Pichardo 2017, p. 6).

In informational material, 'gender ideology', is presented as "a closed thought system like nazism or communism" (Cejas n.d.; Vivos org 2016). Attaching 'gender' to 'ideology' creates a polarization which allows a much broader range of actors than feminist, LGBTI or queer theorists and activists to be tarred with the gender brush. It divides into an 'us' and 'them', creating an inferior, degenerate and dangerous Other. In Colombia, 'gender ideology' presents atheists, communists, homosexuals, feminists and supporters of the peace process as equivalent and as enemies of the state, a claim that we will return to later (Rodríguez Rondón 2017, p. 133).

As a result of their work on Central and Eastern Europe, Grzebalska et al. (2017) have termed gender a "symbolic glue", an umbrella phrase which sums up a broad range of dissatisfactions with the social and economic order, from the increased importance of identity politics in relation to material issues, the increased influence of international organizations and the global economy on domestic politics, increased economic instability and precarization and the detachment of political and economic elites from the rest of the population. In this sense, 'gender ideology' allows disparate actors to be lumped together in expressions of social discontent.

The global success of ‘gender ideology’ in mobilizing conservatives against reforms which pursue gender equality or the inclusion and recognition of the rights of sexual minorities is testament to its effectiveness as a political tool. In recent years, in Latin America alone, many political mobilizations have made use of the term ‘gender ideology’. To name just a few examples, between 2016 and 2018 in Peru and Brazil, an opposition to ‘gender ideology’ was used by conservative religious sectors to oppose the reforms which sought the inclusion of a gender perspective in education policy (Serrano Amaya 2018, p. 121; Mariz 2018). What’s more, in 2018, the fight against ‘gender ideology’ was part of the electoral strategy that allowed Fabricio Alvarado to win the first round of presidential elections in Costa Rica (Murillo 2018) and Jair Bolsonaro to become President of Brazil (Borges 2018). Viveros Vigoya and Rodríguez Rondón have identified its use “in electoral politics to discredit and bring down leaders, as an emotional foundation for projects of nationhood and citizenship, to legitimate projects of death in the midst of war and to challenge peace agreement with a guerrilla organization” (Viveros Vigoya and Rodríguez Rondón 2017, p. 121).

6. Gender Ideology: The Colombian Case

‘Gender ideology’ came to the forefront of the Colombian public consciousness in a series of mass protests which took place on 10th August 2016 in major Colombian cities. The protests were against the use of a new manual for sex education in primary schools called ‘Ambientes escolares libres de discriminación’ (‘School environments free from discrimination’) (Albarracín 2016; Vélez 2016a).

The manuals were designed in response to sentence T.478 of 2015 of the Colombian Constitutional Court, in which the Court tried to establish the responsibility of the high school Gimnasio el Castillo for the suicide of homosexual teenager Sergio Urrego. In this sentence, the Constitutional Court acknowledged faults in the Colombian school system which created situations of intolerance and discrimination on the basis of “sexual orientation” and “gender identity”. For this reason, the Court required the Colombian Ministry of Education to implement measures that would “incentivize and strengthen the school community and the exercise of students’ human, sexual and reproductive rights” (Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2015, p. 86). In response to this mandate, the Ministry of Education designed the aforementioned manual, which aimed to reduce discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual diversity in school environments. The publication of the manual, just two months before the plebiscite, was objected to by thousands of citizens who took to the streets in protest.

The Pentecostal regional representative Ángela Hernández was one of the leaders of these protests. She argued that the manual incentivized homosexuality (Semana 2016b), and that “the Ministry of Education was promoting an LGBTI colonization in schools” through the manual (Prieto and León 2016). Other protestors accused the then Minister of Education, Gina Parody, an out lesbian, of using her ‘governmental position to influence classrooms with her ideas on gender’ (El Tiempo 2016).

As well as Pentecostals, the protests included representatives from the most conservative strands of Catholicism, led by former state prosecutor Alejandro Ordóñez. He stated that “On the pretext of obeying a sentence and a law, a manual is being used to indoctrinate our children into gender ideology” and that, through these types of actions, Minister Parody was contributing to “dissolving the family” and “corrupting children” (El Tiempo 2016).

On this occasion, those who mobilized against ‘gender ideology’ mobilized ‘in defense of the family’, traditional ‘values’ and against, ‘homosexual colonization’. In this sense, it became clear that a large sector of the Colombian population (which is still majority Christian, be it Catholic or Pentecostal)⁵ feels threatened by the steps the state has taken towards recognizing LGBTI rights, and expressed its distaste at initiatives that sought to alleviate the discrimination and stigmatization that these communities have suffered. In Colombia, advances in the legal recognition of LGBTI rights

⁵ Around 90% of the Colombian population belong to a Christian denomination, the most prominent being Catholicism and Pentecostalism (Pew Research Center 2014, p. 14).

have been possible thanks to judgements from the Constitutional Court,⁶ since the Colombian Congress has held back from legislating on these issues due to the significant political costs involved.

The day after the protests on 10th August 2016, the President of the Republic met with Catholic leaders to announce his decision not to use the manual, stating that, “Neither the Ministry of Education, nor the National Government has implemented or promoted, nor will it promote, so-called gender ideology” (El Tiempo 2016).

The underlying reasons for which Ordóñez and Uribe opposed the peace agreement lie outside the focus of this article. However, the inclusion of the gender focus, or of ‘gender ideology’, as they termed it during the campaign period in the run up to the plebiscite, had not been part of the arguments used by those that opposed the agreement during the more than four years of peace negotiations between the government and the FARC. They only appeared, and became central, after the protests on 10th August. Thus, it seems accurate to assert that the leaders of the ‘No’ campaign were well aware of the power of the term ‘gender ideology’ in mobilizing large numbers of people, especially when the phrase is linked to policies that recognize or promote the rights of LGBTI people.

In other words, former public prosecutor Ordóñez and former president Uribe saw in the mass protests a potential source of votes which, if instrumentalized, could generate huge gains for the ‘No’ campaign. To this end, they made use of social networks and new information technologies, which they used to insist that the agreement was ‘contaminated’ by ‘gender ideology’, and that this represented a threat to the family and a danger to children. For example, in a video uploaded to YouTube, Ordóñez stated that through the agreement, “the government and the FARC are trying to make gender ideology a constitutional norm” (Ordóñez Maldonado 2016).

A considerable number of pastors and Pentecostal leaders (by and large sympathetic to Uribe’s political project) joined the campaign to discredit the agreement, and insist that it promoted ‘gender ideology’. For example, the Pentecostal pastor Eduardo Cañas, a well known figure in Colombia, in a sermon uploaded to YouTube, stated: “gender identity, gender perspective and gender ideology are the same” (Mcm yumbo 2016). With this argument, he urged the congregation to vote against the peace agreement. Other Pentecostal leaders who opposed the agreement used similar tactics on social media (mainly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube), where their followers number in the thousands (Gómez-Suárez 2016, pp. 65–66; Prieto and León 2016).

7. Pentecostal Churches and the Plebiscite

In Colombia around 13–16% of the population is Protestant, the vast majority Pentecostals (Beltrán 2012, p. 210; Pew Research Center 2014, p. 14), but, as in the rest of Latin America, this is a fragmented religious group. In other words, the Protestant population is made up of a wide variety of organizations which, as well as doctrinal and liturgical differences, diverge along political lines. As such, the internal dynamic of Protestantism can be analyzed by recourse to Bourdieu’s concept of ‘religious field’ (Bourdieu 1971). This means that the variety of Protestant organizations that exist in Colombia do not necessarily maintain relationships based on cooperation and reciprocal recognition. Rather, they maintain ‘fights’ to define the correct doctrine, the true path to salvation, and fights ‘for souls’ (Cepeda 2007; Beltrán 2013).

Some Protestant denominations were in favor of the agreement and supported the ‘Yes’ campaign. Chief amongst these were the historical Protestant churches. According to Moreno, pastor and rector at the Baptist University of Colombia, “... churches such as the Lutheran, Colombian Presbyterian, Menonite, Baptist and the Association of Caribbean Evangelical Churches [...] have supported the work towards peace for more than 25 years...” and they sided with the ‘Yes’ campaign in the referendum (Moreno 2016). However, Colombian historical Protestantism has very limited membership, of around 0.4% of the national population (Beltrán 2012, p. 210). The peace agreement was also supported by a handful of Pentecostal leaders, some of whom head up mass religious

⁶ Since 2007 the Constitutional Court has recognized the property rights of same sex couples (sentences C-075 and C-811), and in 2016 it made same sex marriages legal (Sentence SU 214).

organizations.⁷ For all of them, the argument according to which the agreement were contaminated with ‘gender ideology’ was untrue.⁸

Within Evangelical Protestantism, opposition to the agreement was led by pastors from some of the most powerful Pentecostal megachurches. These megachurches are generally found in large cities and are very common within Pentecostalism. They have huge congregations, significant financial clout, a solid material infrastructure (which includes auditoriums, printing presses, schools...) and mass media presence (radio stations and television programs).⁹

The main figures in the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements who played a prominent role in the ‘No’ campaign include: (1) Cesar and Claudia Castellanos (of the Misión Carismática Internacional which has churches in major cities all over the country); (2) pastor Eduardo Cañas (from Manantial de Vida Eterna in Bogotá); (3) pastor Jorge Trujillo (from Centro Cristiano Casa del Reino in Bogotá); (4) pastor John Milton Rodríguez (from the Misión Paz a las Naciones en Cali); (5) pastor Miguel Arrázola (from the Ríos de Vida church in Cartagena and Barranquilla); (6) pastor Marco Fidel Ramírez (also a City Councillor in Bogotá, self-proclaimed ‘Councillor for the family’); (7) Ángela Hernández (representative in the regional government of Santander). At the time of the plebiscite all of the above publicly declared their alignment with the political project of Álvaro Uribe (Vélez 2016a; Vélez and Prieto 2016a, 2016b; Prieto and León 2016; Semana 2016b; Serrano 2016; El Espectador 2016c).

The majority of the aforementioned Pentecostal leaders already had experience in electoral politics in Colombia, and those that didn’t had at least displayed interest in the field. On the other hand, all of the above were capable of influencing the rest of the Pentecostal population in Colombia. As has happened across Latin America, in Colombia since the end of the 80s it has become more and more common for Pentecostal leaders to use their religious authority to promote their political interests or convictions from the pulpit (Helmsdorff 1996; Duque Daza 2010; Beltrán and Quiroga 2017; Velasco 2018). In their role as professional politicians, it is reasonable to suppose that these religious leaders didn’t only oppose the peace agreement due to their convictions, but also for strategic electoral reasons, as was confirmed after the plebiscite, particularly in the elections to Congress in 2018.

It is difficult to define the extent to which these leaders were able to sway the vote of their faithful. Pentecostals, like other citizens, have diverse interests (based on ethnicity, social class, professional, party, regional... etc.) and there are many factors that can influence their political decisions, including the influence of clientelist dynamics that operate in Colombia (which can go as far as vote buying). All of these dynamics can affect the decision that Pentecostals take when it comes to voting (Ortega 2010). However, the best evidence to support the claim that pastors mobilized the vote of their congregations, at least to some extent, lies in the impossibility of determining a source of votes for these leaders that isn’t their congregations. What’s more, it has been widely documented by research in the field that, during political campaign seasons, some of the aforementioned megachurches become stages for political proselytizing, putting their organizational infrastructure at the service of campaign machinery and drawing on their experience of religious proselytizing (Cepeda 2007; Bastidas 2015; Beltrán and Quiroga 2017). Field visits to some of the megachurches during the plebiscite campaign confirmed first hand that pulpits were used for political proselytizing.

⁷ Some of the main leaders of Pentecostal megachurches who supported the ‘No’ campaign include: Darío Silva (pastor of Casa Sobre la Roca), Ricardo Rodríguez (pastor of the Centro Mundial de Avivamiento), José Satirio Dos Santos (pastor of the Centro Cristiano de Cúcuta), Jimmy Chamorro (former senator and leader of the Cruzada Estudiantil y Profesional de Colombia, and Iglesia de Dios Ministerial de Jesucristo Internacional (which supports/funds the political party Mira) (Moreno 2016; Vélez and Prieto 2016a, 2016b). Information on all of these organizations can be found online, including on the organizations’ web, YouTube and Facebook pages.

⁸ See, for example, the official announcement of the Pentecostal Centro Cristiano de Cúcuta (Iglesia Centro Cristiano 2016).

⁹ For more information on megachurches in Colombia see: (Beltrán 2013, pp. 227–60).

As a consequence of the political campaign against the agreement led by Uribe, Ordóñez and other influential members of the Pentecostal movement, a considerable part of the Pentecostal leadership concluded that the LGBTI community was using “the agreement as a platform to promote their political projects”. This was interpreted as “a threat to the existence of the family” (Moreno 2016). In a letter sent to the President of the Republic, representatives of the Evangelical Confederation of Colombia (CEDECOL) (a confederation that includes many of the Pentecostal and Evangelical organizations that operate in the country) stated their opposition to the use of the word ‘gender’ in the agreement, since the term:

was being used subtly and intentionally as a tool by means of which the Colombian institutional framework and idiosyncrasy is being modified, thereby distorting the original intention of the defense and promotion of women’s rights, putting the institution of the family at risk (Cedecol 2016).¹⁰

By use of the Weberian tool of ideal types or pure types, we present a theoretical model that encompasses the reasons given by the Pentecostal pastors interviewed to justify their opposition to the recognition of the rights of the LGBTI population (for example, their opposition to the legalization of same-sex marriage, or their opposition to adoption for same-sex couples):¹¹ (1) many passages in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, condemn homosexuality and transvestism (in their words ‘for a man to use women’s clothing or vice versa’). (2) A person is homosexual, or LGBTI, because they have voluntarily ‘decided to go against God’ and ‘the natural order that He established for the family’. (3) For that reason, being homosexual ‘is a sin’. (4) The natural order for sexuality and the family is described in the Bible, which sets out that marriage ‘should be exclusively between a man and a woman’. (5) The unnatural character of marriage for same sex couples is confirmed by the fact that they cannot procreate. (6) God can ‘forgive the homosexual’ if they sincerely repent, which would mean recognizing their sin and deciding not to return to the sexual practices condemned by the Bible. (7) A homosexual may find it difficult to abandon their sexual practices because they are ‘under the influence of demons’. In these cases as well, ‘God can free them from the demon that possesses them’. (8) For this reason, homosexuals are understood by some pastors to have an illness which ‘God can cure’. (9) Whether it is the product of sin or as a victim of demonic possession, an LGBTI person is ‘unclean,’ as termed in the Old Testament. This means that they can ‘contaminate or infect’ others with ‘their illness’. (10) To the extent that they believe that God can ‘free the homosexual’ they do not believe it possible that a ‘true believer’, a ‘born again Christian’, could engage in homosexual practices or belong to the LGBTI community.

In general terms, a large part of the Pentecostal leadership associates ‘gender ideology’ with a doctrine that naturalizes and promotes homosexuality and that, for this reason, allows ‘homosexual

¹⁰ It should be pointed out that not all of the religious organizations that are part of CEDECOL share the opinions or political positions of the leaders and spokespeople of the confederation. This diversity of opinion became particularly visible regarding the role that Protestants should play around the plebiscite (Moreno 2016).

¹¹ Pure types are abstractions that privilege the explanatory capacity and internal coherence of the model. In their construction, some empirical data is selected and exaggerated whilst other data is omitted. The empirical manifestations do not coincide exactly with the theoretical model, nevertheless this constitutes a useful tool to compare, measure and simplify the innumerable empirical expressions of the phenomenon under study (Weber 2001, pp. 39–101). To develop the ideal type we followed a hermeneutic-deductive method. In three rounds of interviews, the actors themselves contributed to decanting (selecting and refining) the arguments included in the final version of the model, and contributed to orienting and validating the interpretation that was made of the interviews. The consistency of the ideal type presented here is not based purely on empirical, rational and hermeneutic evidence, but also on its internal coherence (absence of contradiction) and on the coherence it maintains with information from other sources used in the research, for example, the opinions of pastors or Pentecostal leaders expressed in sermons or public declarations. Furthermore, the consistency of the model is confirmed by its heuristic value, that is to say, its usefulness as a tool in order to understand the statements and conducts of Pentecostals with respect to the LGBTI population.

contagion'. On their view, the fact that schools teach that 'no one should feel guilty or ashamed of their sexual orientation' is equivalent to inciting children to become homosexual. In this way, the pure type we have elucidated offers tools for the interpretation of the statements of some pastors for whom the passing of a peace agreement corrupted by 'gender ideology' would imply advancing the "homosexualization" of millions of Colombians (El Espectador 2016a).

As will be explained further on, gender policies have connotations that go far beyond the empowerment of women and the LGBTI community. This said, the majority of the pastors' opinions express a deep-seated homophobia. When interviewed, one pastor stated that the idea of two men together 'is disgusting' and that homosexuality, as well as being 'corrupt' itself, 'corrupts others'. Other pastors took a more moderate view. For example, one stated that he, like many Christians, wasn't 'against a particular sexual conduct [such as homosexuality or transsexuality]', but rather was against the 'promotion' of this conduct. However, opposing the visibility of the LGBTI community and the advancement of their rights does itself constitute a form of discrimination against LGBTI people.

It's necessary to reiterate the fact that not all leaders or sectors of Colombian Protestantism share these opinions. Pastors from historical protestant churches (such as Menonite, Lutheran or Presbyterian, for example) would struggle to identify with them. What's more, we should bear in mind that some Protestant congregations promote gender equality and rights for the LGBTI community. To give an example, the movement Redconciliarte, led by the Methodist Pastor Jhon Botia Miranda, encourages LGBTI Christians to express their faith publicly and mobilize in defense of their rights.

8. 'Gender Ideology' as an International Project

As has been mentioned, anti-gender activists have associated their discourse with the promotion of national identity, and many of their arguments depict 'gender ideology' as a foreign imposition, or a new kind of 'ideological colonization'. The idea was also present in the debates around the peace agreement, where some actors states that this colonization could be observed in the foreign influence on academic institutions, and in the initiatives of international agencies such as the UN or OECD to promote the implementation of specific public policies in return for economic aid.

The resistance to the UN or OECD comes from a mistrust in foreign interference in domestic politics. These international agencies play an increasingly important role in the global economic system, and are considered by some actors to be a threat to national sovereignty, particularly in formerly colonized countries. President Santos's moves towards having Colombia become a member of the OECD (a decision that was passed in May 2018) raised suspicions amongst certain groups who were concerned about the potential consequences of this decision, particularly around the concessions the government would have to make in order to be accepted into the organization. On the other hand, the fact that the UN played an important role in the promotion of the aforementioned sexual education manuals and the inclusion of the gender focus in public policy created mistrust of the organization amongst the Pentecostal leadership.

According to the arguments of the anti-gender movement, the gender focus, feminism and LGBTI rights are foreign, whilst the traditional ('natural') family is indigenous and expresses specifically Colombian values, a position which occludes the long and complex colonial history of family and (hetero)sexuality (Traina 2016; Ramírez 2016). Some arguments against the peace agreement claimed there was an international conspiracy which sought to impose a 'new world order' and to promote a kind of gender totalitarianism or 'homosexual dictatorship' (a totalitarianism comparable to Nazism or Soviet Communism), which such diverse organizations as the UN, OECD and the FARC were said to be a part of (Sanelias 2016; Viveros Vigoya 2017, p. 233; Cejas n.d.). Amongst Pentecostals, one of the main proponents of this kind of arguments was pastor Marco Fidel Ramírez and his son Esteban Ramírez (Iglesia Cristiana Manantial 2016; Ramírez 2016).

From our perspective, there is no evidence that would support the idea of an international conspiracy which promotes 'gender ideology', as was claimed by some figures in the 'No' campaign. However, it is well known that gender policies have gained increasing importance in international

politics. These policies are understood by some to be representative of a depoliticization in favor of a technicalization of women's issues and of a move from grassroots movements to policy-focused outcomes (Thayer 2000, p. 220). The concept of 'gender', understood as a rejection of the biological determinism of sex and referring to the socially constructed nature of sex distinctions, emerged from the context of US feminism and academia (Scott 1988) and has strong links with international organizations such as the UN and with development policies. For this reason, the term 'gender' is linked to the NGO-ization of Latin American feminism, an increased role of organizations such as the UN, IMF and World Bank in international politics, and the term has been criticized as being technocratic, linked to the professionalization of feminism and the development industry (Millán 2016, p. 7; Thayer 2000, p. 220).

What's more, we cannot overlook the role that gender and sexuality have played (and continue to play) in colonial and neocolonial practices (Spivak 1988; Bracke 2012, p. 241). Western feminism has been used as a rationale for 'civilizing' missions, and a new wave of scholarship has shed light on the way that feminism and movements for sexual diversity have become entangled in neocolonialist discourses (Bracke 2012; Puar 2007; Massad 2007). Thus, although the gender focus was not imposed on Colombia from without, since the implementation of policies and laws incorporating a gender focus have been the fruit of domestic political organizing, one cannot deny that the term 'gender' is linked to international politics and its connotations go beyond the mere empowerment of women and the LGBTI population. For this reason, as has already been mentioned, it is not enough to state that the rejection of the gender focus in the agreement is merely the result of homophobia. To do so would be to overlook the historic role of (Western) feminism and of (hetero)sexuality in colonial projects. For this reason, although an anti-colonial discourse was not mentioned explicitly by the 'No' campaign, part of the campaign's success lay in its capacity to tap into these anxieties.

Somewhat ironically, the anti-gender religious movement, whilst denouncing the foreign origin of the gender focus and the LGBTI and feminist movements, is itself part of an international network of religious organizing. It makes use of another imported concept to promote its political project: 'gender ideology'. Furthermore, those who used the argument of 'gender ideology' in order to oppose the agreement attribute feminism and the LGBTI movement an agency and political power of which the movements themselves could barely dream.

9. The Post-Plebiscite

Since the government apparatus was put behind the 'Yes' campaign in the plebiscite, the triumph of the 'No' vote was considered "a miracle" by the Pentecostal leaders who opposed the agreement (Serrano 2016).

In the weeks after the plebiscite, the President of the Republic met several times with Pentecostal leaders to hear their concerns around the agreement (Semana 2016a). The head negotiators of the FARC did the same, receiving a number of Pentecostal leaders in Havana. Furthermore, Pentecostals rebuked the government since they were not explicitly mentioned as victims in the agreement, nor were they included in the negotiations in Havana (Semana 2016b; El Espectador 2016b).

After several meetings, CEDECOL and the Pentecostal leaders who had led the 'No' campaign put forward 44 changes to the agreement to be renegotiated with the FARC. The following paragraph contains several of these changes, mentioned by pastor and former president of CEDECOL, Héctor Pardo:

1. The family: Pastors request that the agreement adopt a concept of the family "understood as defined in the Constitution: that is to say, the union of a man and a woman" [...]
3. Pastors request that the right of families to educate their children in line with their beliefs and principles be respected [...]
4. Freedom of religion and anti-stigmatization: Pardo affirms that the peace agreement puts religious freedom in doubt. This is because [the agreement] talks about forbidding discrimination and this could be understood to mean prohibiting churches from opposing, for example, gay marriage.

[...] 7. Gender ideology: it is proposed that the expressions “diverse gender identity” and “diverse sexual orientation” be eliminated from the document [...] (Semana 2016a).

As is well known, the government lost no time in gathering together these concerns, some of which were included in the new agreement which was signed by the government and the FARC on 24th November 2016 in the Colón Theater and was subsequently ratified by Congress. The new agreement mentions the family as a “fundamental nucleus of society”, recognizes Evangelical and Pentecostal churches as victims of the conflict and has amongst its aims “satisfying the right to freedom of religion” (Vélez 2016b). However, the new agreement was received by some Pentecostal leaders from the ‘No’ campaign with skepticism. Some stated that the changes were purely formal and that keeping “the gender focus [in the agreement] means leaving the door open for gender ideology”. For this reason, they insisted that, instead of including a gender focus in the agreement, they should simply promote women’s rights (Vélez 2016b).

It must be pointed out that not all anti-gender movements are anti-feminist. The international religious right as well as Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Colombia, save a few exceptions, have welcomed feminist gains such as a woman’s right to vote or work outside the home. This comes with caveats, however, as many actors stress that, although women have the right to work outside the home, children thrive best when looked after at home by their mothers (Buss and Herman 2003, p. 6). Although the terms vary from actor to actor, anti-gender activists distinguish between ‘equality feminism’ and ‘gender feminism’. ‘Equality feminism’ is associated with the achievements mentioned above, and is generally accepted or at least tolerated by a majority of Christian belief. ‘Gender feminism’ on the other hand, which promotes the idea that all gender roles are socially constructed, is the object of resistance by Pentecostals and other conservative Christian movements (Cejas n.d.). The work of Christina Hoff Sommers is often cited when making this distinction (see, for example, Hoff Sommers 1994).

10. By Way of Conclusions

During the campaign around the plebiscite, political actors, including religious leaders, mobilized the Pentecostal vote against the agreement. The most powerful argument to gain the support of a large part of this sector of the population came in the affirmation that the agreement was tainted with ‘gender ideology’ and, for this reason, was a threat to children and to the family.

Some Pentecostal actors involved in electoral politics used these arguments to position themselves politically with a view to the Congressional elections in 2018. These include Senator Claudia Rodríguez de Castellanos, and the heads of the Colombia Justa Libres party, whose genesis was related to the triumph of the ‘No’ in the plebiscite. In 2018 the party won three seats in the Senate and one in the House of Representatives.

In this respect, it should also be recognized that in Colombia, urbanization, part of a process of violence modernization, as well as the forced displacement unleashed by the armed conflict, separated thousands of families and broke down the community structures and networks of solidarity. Against this backdrop, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches created spaces for reconstruction of the social fabric and community life (see, for example, Ríos 2002; Borda Carulla 2007). For this reason, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that these churches are welcomed by large parts of society when they declare themselves the genuine defenders of the family, and by proxy, of community and social stability.

The triumph of the ‘No’ vote boosted the moralizing project of Pentecostal politicians. Although doctrinal issues divide Colombian Pentecostalism, a defense of sexual mores and the traditional family, as well as a rejection of abortion, are positions shared by all strands and they are a source of solidarity for this religious movement (Beltrán 2013, p. 253; Beltrán and Quiroga 2017, p. 206). This conservative Christian agenda has been termed “moralistic populism” by Garzón Vallejo. According to him, in the most conservative sectors of Christianity, “politics is reduced to the most sensitive questions of individual morality, even to those of sexual morality. The underlying reason for this is that moral values should be the basis of laws and public policy” (Garzón Vallejo 2017). This moralist populism considers it legitimate for the State to stratify citizens in accordance with their sexual

preferences, thereby perpetuating a social order where there are ‘decent citizens’ and ‘other’ citizens who, because of their ‘immoral conduct’ and their sexual preferences, deserve fewer protections and fewer guarantees of citizenship (Serrano Amaya 2018, p. 131). In other words, moralist populism legitimizes a social order where members of the LGBTI population are treated as second class citizens.

This view is shared by, for example, LGBTI activist Germán Humberto Rincón who stated, “Yes, they named us in the agreement, but they belittled us. Better said, they won and we lost, because churches were given too much space and they became the political prize for 2018” [...] “The people that threatened us [now] feel more legitimate. That is very dangerous” (Vélez 2016b).

This moralistic populism has allowed for the consolidation of an unprecedented ecumenism capable of bringing together fundamentalist Pentecostals and integralist Catholics. These sectors, as well as sharing the same moral positions, believe that religious institutions should have a prominent role in the public sphere as a means to safeguarding traditional values and protecting society from moral decline (Spadaro and Figueroa 2017). In this way, reference to ‘gender ideology’ allowed movements that were previously opposed to one another in the religious field to come together in opposition to the sexual education manuals and against the peace agreement.

Moral populism also explains the warm reception of the political project of former President Uribe in Pentecostal and conservative Christian circles (Beltrán and Quiroga 2017). As several observers have pointed out (Rincón 2016), Uribe has been best able to take electoral advantage of the relevance and vitality of these traditional values in large sectors of Colombian society.

In this way, one possible interpretation of events points to the idea that the association of the agreement with ‘gender ideology’ was an opportunistic strategy on the part of Conservative sectors and the Colombian right in order to instrumentalize the vote of the conservative Christian population, thereby ensuring the triumph of the ‘No’ vote. In this way they could position themselves politically for the 2018 elections, an objective they eventually fulfilled.

However, this interpretation doesn’t give the social movements behind the protests on 10th August the agency they deserve. The marches were the result of a confluence of many sectors, including leaders of Catholic organizations, Evangelical pastors, teachers’ organizations, professional politicians and parents associations, amongst others, that expressed a broad range of concerns. For example, through these protests parents called for their rights to educate their children in line with their own values, positioning themselves against state intervention in the private sphere. In spite of the diversity of its members, in this group the sentiment prevails that the Constitutional Court has acted with ‘tyranny’ in recognizing LGBTI rights and has ‘imposed’ a legal order upon them which runs contrary to their moral principles. Instead of denying or minimizing the agency of this social movement, it should perhaps be considered a new actor on the Colombian political playing field, operating as a ‘vigilant public’ which mobilizes in defense of traditional morals (Serrano Amaya 2017, p. 155; Serrano Amaya 2018, p. 122).

For this reason, another possible reading of events could lead us to affirm that the political movement which sprang into the public sphere with the protests on 10th August also used the plebiscite to show its rejection and opposition to the recognition of LGBTI rights.

During the 10th August protests, as well as throughout the ‘No’ campaign, this religious sector was able to spread the idea that the gender focus and sexual education in schools was a threat to freedom of religion, and was able to position this topic as pivotal in the renegotiation of the agreement with the government. Thus, in the final version of the agreement, religious minorities were classified as victims of the conflict and were considered to be in the same position of vulnerability as other minorities, including the LGBTI population (Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2016b, pp. 126, 131, 189).

This said, instead of talking about a conscious strategy on the part of these sectors to promote the ‘No’ campaign, it might be considered more appropriate to see in these events a confluence of interests whereby conservative Christians, as well as the political right, found benefits in the triumph of the ‘No’ campaign (Viveros Vigoya 2017, p. 233).

Several questions remain: Why does ‘gender ideology’ work better as an anti-feminist or anti-LGBTI discourse in some places rather than others? What is it about ‘gender’ specifically that allows it to act as a proxy for these broader dissatisfactions?

Here we might draw on the hypothesis of Bourdieu and Wacquant, that rather than systematic theories or over-arching world views, it is isolated technical terms such as ‘gender’ that can function as political codewords since they encapsulate a whole philosophy of the individual and of social organization (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, p. 42). ‘Gender’, for example, can be viewed as a shorthand for a whole host of rights, including increased female independence and the acceptance of homosexuality. Moreover, gender is prototypical of the academic, value neutral language used by the left. This demonstrates a certain complacency with secularity, relies on a tacit understanding of the separation between church and state and the impermissibility of religious argumentation in political debate which does not hold true to the reality of Latin America. In this way, conservative Christians are able to use ‘gender ideology’ to secularize their political discourse in order to uphold a social order based on Christian values (Serrano Amaya 2018, p. 131).

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