UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Illiberal Insecurities:
Distrust and Post-Truth Populism in Anti-Gender Movements in Mexico

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Anthropology

by

Annie K. Wilkinson

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Kristin Peterson, Chair
Professor Nancy Postero
Associate Professor Lilith Mahmud

2022

DEDICATION

For Hongo, Bubble, and بُـومَـة
and the beautiful and more just world we are creating together.
The debate is settled. Magic *is* real.
I know so because I have you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADF: Alliance Defending Freedom

AMLO: Andrés Manuel López Obrador, President of the Republic of Mexico (2018-2024)

C-Fam: Center for Family & Human Rights

CP: Con Participación

CPAC: Conservative Political Action Conference

CSO: civil society organization

CSW: Commission on the Status of Women

FNF: Frente Nacional por la Familia (National Front for the Family)

IMF: International Monetary Fund

LGBT/LGBTIQ: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and/or queer

MORENA: Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (National Regeneration Movement)

NAFTA: North American Free Trade Agreement

NGO: non-governmental organization

NOM: Nuevo Orden Mundial (New World Order)

OAS: Organization of American States

PAN: Partido de Acción Nacional (National Action Party)

PES: Partido Encuentro Social (Social Encounter Party)

PNV: Political Network for Values

PRI: Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party)

SoA: School of the Americas

UN: United Nations

UNPF: Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia (National Parents Union)

WCF: World Congress of Families

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Of the many challenges and pleasures of producing a dissertation, acknowledgements are by far the greatest of both. *Challenging* because words are such an inadequate means to express the heartfelt gratitude that I feel towards so many who played roles large and small to bring this dissertation into being. *Challenging* because it is impossible to name all those along the way whose labor, insights, encouragement, and moral, material, and financial support deserve my thanks and recognition. Yet trying to do both of things justice is absolutely my greatest pleasure.

This is my dissertation, but it is very much not only *my* dissertation. Muck like how our bodies are a chimera of our own cells and those of other individuals and as many non-human companion species' cells as human ones, this body of work is similarly made up of the collective ideas, questions, and experiences, shared fears, attachments, anger, aspirations, and vested hopes and sacrifices of both my own and many others. There are so many who have invested their time, resources, and trust in me and in this dissertation and who hold a stake in my completing it, including my mentors, teachers, family, friends, colleagues, funders, institutions, interlocutors, those whose lives are shaped by the phenomena I analyze in this work, and –located as I am in a public university, whatever that means anymore– the public. For however much we reproduce the illusion of single authorship, knowledge production is always a collective endeavor, the product of mutual exchange, and for all. The present work is no exception.

This work is just that—*work*, the product of intellectual, emotional, and physical labor. As a parent and caregiver of young children who joined me in this venture right at its start and early along the way, my labor –every hour of it– on this dissertation depended entirely upon and corresponds directly to the caregiving labor of others. And so it is with you that I begin because in the most literal way, this dissertation would not exist without you. I thank the cadre of amazing caregivers and teachers who kept my children safe, loved, cared for, and learning while I did all the

things that went into producing this work, including at the present moment. The immense value of your labor was briefly exposed to the world and recognized for what it is during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is nothing less than what makes the world go round, and I hope the world does not forget it again. I will never take it for granted. My deepest thanks to Jian, Nasreen, Yasmin, Veronica, Sana, Ana, Sra. Charito, Mr. B, and quite a few others who were there for us when and how it mattered most.

Thank you, Layla, Noor, and Zeina for all that you have done to make this work possible. I have asked so incredibly much of you in so many ways, from the trivial to the gigantic, and you have all done so much to accommodate me through these many demands and trials with such grace, even when it is has been incredibly difficult or kept us apart. What I have learned and accomplished over the past seven years is because of you. I hope that this small contribution pays forward the gift of your years of generosity and support. And a special thank you to Noor and Layla for the gift of keeping me curious, keeping me honest, and keeping me on my toes. Every single one of your endless questions is a treasure that makes me think more deeply. Like, why are there corn kernels in my bed this morning? Why is a booby trap called that? If I'm seven already, then why can't I drive the car? And, why would some people think we shouldn't be a family? Don't ever stop asking questions, you beautiful souls.

My deepest thanks to Professor Kristin Peterson, my dissertation advisor, for your wisdom and guidance every step of the way, from designing my research to securing funding for it, navigating, pivoting, and persisting through fieldwork, and of course writing it and finishing it. Thank you for your generosity of time, support, and your will to put up with me for so many years. I extend my most heartfelt thanks to my dissertation committee members, Professors Nancy Postero and Lilith Mahmud, and to its honorary member, Professor Jennifer Terry, whom I hereby declare godmother of my dissertation. I have learned so much from each of you and hold profound respect for you all as scholars, thinkers, writers, and colleagues. Thank you for the immense amount of time

and support you have all dedicated to seeing this project, and me, through. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have had the privilege of being your student both in the classroom and in the dissertation. What I have learned from you will always be with me, but it isn't meant for me to hold on to but to pay forward, and I will.

There's nothing like writing a dissertation while the world is falling apart to remind you that there is no pleasure without pain. Somehow, I got lucky enough to have Katie Cox and Liz Clark Rubio to make it not only tolerable but pleasurable. I would not have finished or survived this dissertation without you. You are the best writing companions a dissertator could ask for. Thank you for your commiseration, your company, your feedback, your brilliance, and your insight, and for being my first responders to all the many things that come up when writing a dissertation. You've fielded them all, and you have my eternal gratitude, affection, and respect. As the last of the pack, I hereby declare the "Get" in Get It Done graduated to "Got." We got it done, y'all, and you two made it all so worth it.

My thinking, learning, and writing here and elsewhere has been influenced and supported by the guidance, feedback, exchange, and mentorship of many other colleagues and friends (so often both) to whom I extend my gratitude. I thank scholars and professors Valerie Olson, Tom Boellstorff, Angela Jenks, Eleana Kim, Emily Thuma, Gisela Zaremberg, Connie Tabbush, Rachel Sieder, Aída Hernandez Castillo, Gaby Arguedas, Nitzan Shoshan, Srimati Basu, Shari Jacobson, and Ryan Thoreson for their intellectual contributions to my learning and writing. I also thank Sana Sadiq, Lydia Dixon, Natali Valdez, Taylor Nelms, Justin Perez, Jessica Slattery, Kaitlyn Rebach, Febi Ramadhan, and Tarek Moustafa Mohamed for your camaraderie and mentorship, sometimes mutual, and for all that I have learned from you about navigating this PhD. Thank you to our PhD Mama Collective for your company, commiseration, co-authorship, and support: Anna Kamanzi, Angela Okune, Liz Clark Rubio, and Shannon Bae.

Thank you to my PhD cohort at UC Irvine for your early feedback in the development of my project; my Fulbright fieldwork cohort at COMEXUS, especially Erin Hamilton, for your accompaniment in our fieldwork together; my post-field seminar cohort, Kyrstin Mallon Andrews, Evan Conaway, Forest Haven, Sandy Wenger, and Oviya Govindan, for getting me off on the right foot in the writing; and to the Center for US-Mexico Studies (USMEX) at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) for helping me land at the end. I also thank seminar participants and audiences in a variety of venues where I have presented this work for their feedback and input, including at CIESAS, the University of Cincinnati, USMEX at UCSD, the Gender & Sexuality Studies Departments at UCI and Rutgers University, Working Title participants at the Anthropology Department at UCI, students at Wellesley College, Cal State Long Beach, and UCI, and audiences at the Latin American Studies Association, Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology, and the American Anthropological Association.

This is just the latest of many sedimentary layers. I recognize and thank those who have shaped my intellectual, political, and educational past who helped me lay the foundation for the present work, including my cherished late friend and mentor Susana Wappenstein, my master's cohort and professors at FLACSO-Ecuador, especially Mercedes Prieto and the many rich exchanges with the fierce and brilliant Virginia Villamediana, my generous lifelong mentors and friends Elisabeth Jay Friedman and Amy Lind, and my undergraduate advisor Terry Karl. Erika Guevara Rosas, you opened all the doors starting with having faith in me at the very beginning, and you just keep opening them. And to my parents for prioritizing and ensuring my access to an education.

Thank you also to those at AFA Writes, especially María Lis Biaocchi, and to those who joined me for so many online writing sessions through a pandemic, no less, and to my neighbor and friend, Kalki, for hosting so much of my writing at Addis, the world's best café, somehow miraculously located right here in my same town, and the perch from where I write these words and submit this dissertation. Last but far, far from least, my most special of thank you's to Zeina,

Susanna, Nadine, Atef, Erika, Julie, Emma Bean, Stephanie, and the many neighbors, family, and friends not named here who became the world's best cheering squad at the very end. You beautiful people inspire me. Thanks especially to you, Julie, for being the custodian of the light at the end of the tunnel and holding it steadfast so I could see it always and reach it. The stars in the universe don't just align like this to have granted me such an amazing opportunity to have known and learned from you all listed here, so I really must have done something truly special in a past life. I was for sure a mushroom.

I thank Taylor & Francis for permission to include Chapter Three of my dissertation, portions of which were originally published in "Gender as Death Threat to the Family: How the 'Security Frame' Shapes Anti-Gender Activism in Mexico" in the International Feminist Journal of Politics 23, no. 4 (August 8, 2021): 535–57, available at https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1957974. Portions of Chapter Two were originally published by SAGE in "'Gender Ideology' as Modular Discourse: A Transatlantic Survey of Activism against Gender" in The Handbook of Global Sexualities, edited by Ryan Thoreson, Zowie Davy, Ana Cristina Santos, Chiara Bertone, and Saskia Wieringa, 2020. A section of Chapter One originally appeared in Wilkinson, Annie. "Reckoning with 'Humanising Fascists' and Other Requisites of an Anthropology of the Far Right." Social Anthropology 29, no. 2 (May 2021), available at https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.13058, published by Wiley on behalf of the European Association of Social Anthropologists.

Financial and/or institutional support for research and writing represented in this dissertation was provided by the School of Social Sciences, the Humanities Center, and Initiative to End Family Violence at the University of California, Irvine; National Science Foundation (NSF) Grant BCS-1849749; Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research; United States Fulbright Commission; P.E.O.; the Institute for Citizens & Scholars (C&S); and the US-Mexico Studies Center at the University of California, San Diego.

I extend a special thanks to my fellow humans at Wenner Gren, P.E.O., and C&S for their compassionate recognition and support of my dual roles as a scholar and caregiver and the flexibility they extended to ensure that I could pay for childcare while I conducted fieldwork and wrote my dissertation. Without that, this dissertation would not exist. Thank you for your leadership. I hope that the greater "we" will continue to pursue all the means at our disposal to ensure that care work and intellectual and political work are compatible so that those who care for others can both benefit from and contribute to our collective pursuit of knowledge production and to political life. We sure have a lot of both kinds of work to do. Thanks for making it possible for me to be here. I have made a small donation to the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) (who works for the respect, recognition, and rights of the nearly 2.5 million nannies, housecleaners, and home care workers in the United States) in honor of all of you whom I have recognized in these acknowledgements. Let's get this revolution started.

VITA
Annie K. Wilkinson

2006	B.A. in Human Biology, Stanford University
2012	M.A. in Social Science, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales
2017	Initiative to End Family Violence Graduate Research Fellow, University of California, Irvine
2018	Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Fellow, United States Fulbright Commission and the Comisión México Estados Unidos para el Intercambio Educativo y Cultural (US-Mexico Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange) (COMEXUS)
2018	Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research Dissertation Research Fellow
2019	M.A. in Anthropology, University of California, Irvine
2019	National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant Awardee
2020	Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellow, Institute for Citizens & Scholars (formerly Woodrow Wilson Foundation)
2020	P.E.O. Scholar
2020	Women's Studies Dissertation Fellow, Institute for Citizens & Scholars (formerly Woodrow Wilson Foundation)
2021	LGBTQ+ Studies Summer Dissertation Fellow, Humanities Center, University of California, Irvine
2021	Center for US-Mexican Studies Predoctoral Fellow, University of California, San Diego
2021	Association for Feminist Anthropology Dissertation Fellow
2022-21	Teaching Associate, School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine
2015-22	Teaching Assistant, School of Social Sciences & School of Humanities, University of California, Irvine
2022	Ph.D. in Anthropology, University of California, Irvine

FIELDS OF STUDY

Sociocultural Anthropology
Feminist, Gender, & Sexuality Studies
Latin American Studies

SELECT PUBLICATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Articles

2021 "Gender as death threat to the family: how the "security frame" shapes anti-gender activism in Mexico," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 23:4, 535-557, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2021.1957974

2021 "Rooting Out the Weeds that Bind: Disemboweling the Devil after 2020," *Feminist Anthropology,* 2:2, DOI: 10.1002/fea2.12069

Books

2013 *Sin sanidad, no hay santidad: las prácticas reparativas en Ecuador* [Cleanliness is Holiness: Sexual Conversion Practices in Ecuador]. FLACSO Ecuador. (Reprinted 2019)

Peer-Reviewed Book Chapters

2020 "La Revolución Ciudadana de Ecuador (2007-2017). Una década perdida para los derechos de las mujeres y la igualdad de género," in *Género, sexualidad e izquierdas latinoamericanas: el reclamo de derechos durante la marea rosa*, edited by Elisabeth J. Friedman, Felicitas Rossi, and Constanza Tabbush. CLACSO.

2019 "Ecuador's Citizen Revolution (2007-2017): A Lost Decade for Women's Rights and Gender Equality," in *Seeking Rights from the Left: Gender, Sexuality, and the Latin American Pink Tide*, edited by Elisabeth J. Friedman, Durham: Duke University Press

Edited Book Chapters

2020 "'Gender Ideology' as Modular Discourse: A Transatlantic Survey of Anti-Gender Campaigns," in *The Handbook of Global Sexualities*, edited by Ryan Thoreson, Zowie Davy, Ana Cristina Santos, Chiara Bertone, and Saskia Wieringa. SAGE Press

2020 "Hasta que cambies: disciplina y castigo en las prácticas de deshomosexualización en los centros de rehabilitación en Ecuador" [Until You Change: Discipline and Punishment in Dehomosexualization Practices in Rehabilitation Centers in Ecuador], in *Derechos sexuales y derechos reproductivos en Ecuador: disputas y cuentas pendientes*, edited by Goetschel, Ana María, Gioconda Herrera, and Mercedes Prieto, Quito: FLACSO Ecuador / Planned Parenthood Global / Abya-Yala. https://doi.org/10.46546/20201savia

Commentaries

2021 "Reckoning with 'Humanizing Fascists' and Other Requisites of an Anthropology of the Far Right." *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*. Forum on the New Right, edited by Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.13058

Public Scholarship

2017 "Latin America's Gender Ideology Explosion." *Association for Queer Anthropology Section News*, March 21, 2017. Available at: http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2017/03/21/latin-americas-gender-ideology-explosion/

2015 "Until You Change: Dehomosexualization the Ecuadorian Way," *North American Congress on Latin America Online Journal*, March 25. Available at: https://nacla.org/news/2015/03/25/until-you-change-%E2%80%9Cdehomosexualization%E2%80%9D-ecuadorian-way

2015 "Change is Possible: Sexual Conversions and Imperial Aspirations in the Americas." *North American Congress on Latin America Online Journal*, March 25. Available at:https://nacla.org/news/2015/03/30/change-possible-sexual-conversions-and-imperial-aspirations-americas

2015 "Who the Rainbow Tide Leaves Out," *North American Congress on Latin America Report on the Americas*, Winter Edition.

SELECT PRESENTATIONS

Invited Talks and Seminars

2021 Illiberal In/securities: Distrust, Disinformation, and Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theorizing in Mexico, Public seminar for the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, Dec 1.

2021 Feminist Ethnographic Methods for Studying Anti-Feminism & the Right, Invited informal talk, Wellesley College, May 3.

2021 Gender as Conspiracy: Epistemic Insecurity and the Work of Doubt in Anti-Gender Organizing in Mexico, Public seminar for the Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies, University of California, Irvine, Feb 6.

2020 Anti-Gender Organizing in Latin America's (Re)Turn to the Right, Public talk for Charles Phelps Taft Research Center, University of Cincinnati, Nov 12.

2020 Anti-LGBT Organizing and the Feminist Methodology of Deep Listening, Invited guest lecture, Wellesley College, Sept 14.

2019 Asegurando la familia: Activismo anti-género en Mexico (Securing the Family: Anti-Gender Activism in Mexico), Seminar for the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores de Antropología Social (CIESAS, Center for Higher Research and Study of Social Anthropology, CIESAS), Mexico City, March 19.

Panels Organized

2021 (Re)working the Truth Within, Around, & Against Democracy. American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Nov 20.

Roundtable Presenter

2021 Laboring from Home: Reflections on the Tolls of Reproductive Labor and the Way Forward, American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Nov 19.

2021 Health and Reproductive Rights in the Americas: From Political Reprisal to the Politics of the Pandemic, Latin American Studies Association Annual Meeting, May 2021.

Papers Presented

2021 "Democratizing the Family" is a Global Scam: Plotting Conspiracy Theories in Anti-Gender/Feminist Activism in Mexico," American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Baltimore, Nov 20.

2021 Gender as Death Threat to the Family: Unpacking the Security Frame in Mexican Anti-Gender Activism, National Women's Studies Association Annual Conference, Oct 15.

2021 Deshacer el género para no deshacernos a nosotros: la condición de la inseguridad ontológica en el activismo anti-género en México [Undoing gender so we don't undo ourselves: ontological insecurity in anti-gender activism in Mexico], presented on panel Desafíos para la igualdad: violencia política y fundamentalismos en América Latina (Challenges for equality: political violence and fundamentalisms in Latin America), Latin American Studies Association, May 2021.

2020 Gender as Death Threat to the Family: How the Security Frame Shapes Anti-Gender Activism in Mexico, paper presented on panel Retrocesos en derechos reproductivos en EE. UU y América Latina: Victorias del neoconservadurismo político-religioso (Setbacks in Reproductive Rights in the United States and Latin America: Victories of Politico-Religious Neoconservatism), Latin American Studies Association Annual Conference, Virtual Conference, May 13-16.

2019 Methodological, Ethical, and Theoretical Reflections in a Study of Transnational Anti-Gender Activism in Mexico, paper presented on panel The Contours of Conservatism: Ethnographic Approaches to Shifting Political Climates, American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Vancouver, Canada, Nov 20-24.

2019 How "Gender Ideology" Became the Greatest Threat to the Family: Transnational Anti-Gender Activism in Mexico, Midwest Association for Latin American Studies Annual Conference, University of Illinois Springfield, Oct 10-12.

2019 Securing the Family: Securitization Narratives and Nested Empty Signifiers in Anti-Gender Advocacy in Mexico, Conferencia Feminismos y Conservadurismos (Feminisms and Conservatisms), FLACSO-Mexico, Mexico City, Sept 19-20.

2018 Shifting conceptualizations of gender, family, and violence: an examination of the Mexican pro-family movement, Initiative to End Family Violence Colloquium, University of California Irvine, May 22.

2017 Deconstructing the "Anti-LGBT Backlash" in Latin America: Gender Ideology, Global Conservatism, and the Rise of the Pro-Family Movement, American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Washington DC, Dec 1.

2017 Deconstructing the Anti-LGBT Backlash: A Preliminary Analysis of Gender Ideology from Colombia to Mexico, Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology, Antigua, Guatemala, April 7.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Illiberal Insecurities:
Distrust and Post-Truth Populism in Anti-Gender Movements in Mexico

by
Ann Kathryn Wilkinson
Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology
University of California, Irvine, 2022
Professor Kristin Peterson, Chair

This dissertation ethnographically examines the rise of the transnational right-wing anti-gender (anti-feminist) movement in Mexico and its role in mobilizing support for illiberal populist politics in Mexico, Latin America, and elsewhere. Drawing on four years of research with Mexico's leading anti-gender ("profamily") activists, including one year of ethnographic research in Mexico City and extensive online research, I examine the sociocultural dynamics and truth politics in the unfolding dispute over *gender* in the context of interrelated social, political, and economic crises in the context of interrelated crises of security and democracy in late (neo)liberalism.

As I trace the rise of anti-gender advocacy in Mexico and how activists cast gender as a threat to the natural (hierarchical) social order, including the traditional "natural family," I scale my analysis of illiberal gender politics across three interrelated registers of in/security: *existential, epistemic, and ontological*. Each of the chapters probes the affective sentiments and anxieties ("*dudas*") that correspond to these *illiberal insecurities* as they manifest in the discourses and practices of Mexico's profamily activist community, including and especially in their appeals to security and in widely circulating conspiracy theories. As anti-gender activists frame *gender* as an existential threat to oneself, the family, and the nation, they both draw on and deepen *dudas* about survival, both in literal terms and in terms of one's way of life. As they raise doubts that gender is what it seems, they both draw on and deepen *epistemic insecurity*, that is, uncertainty and *dudas* about who to trust and how to know what's real. As they draw attention to the transformational consequences of implementing a gender perspective for destabilizing traditional power hierarchies

–something which they have quite right– they draw on and deepen *dudas* about identity, who one is, and about status and security in the social order, which I refer to as *ontological insecurity*.

I focus particular analytical attention on understanding the mechanisms through which anti-gender activists both draw on and stoke distrust as a key political resource. Furthermore, I draw on ethnographic analysis presented here of the dynamics of rising illiberal sentiments and the politics of truth and in/security that shape them to draw insight into the broader implications of anti-gender movements for liberal democracy, the feminist political projects that stake their claims within its terms, and the transnational right-wing coalition building to oppose them. I also advocate for the ethical imperative of an anthropology of "studying through" political differences that uses the tools of ethnography to build "empathy bridges" that can scale the "empathy wall" between "us" and "them," especially in times like ours of intensified pernicious polarization.

Chapter 1. Introduction: Guadalupe's Doubts: Illiberal Insecurities in Precarious Times

Introduction

Less than two weeks after the historic inauguration of self-identified leftist President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO), I received a prophetic revelation from Mexico's patron saint and beloved national symbol, the Virgen de Guadalupe. The message arrived on December 12, 2018, the day she is venerated across Mexico every year. She appeared to me from within the WhatsApp chat that my Mexican *profamilia* interlocutors had invited me to join. Speaking urgently through a computerized voice, she warned that something catastrophic was about to befall Mexico—a comprehensive moral, social, political, and economic collapse. Her cataclysmic tone echoed the sense of impending doom and paranoia that I had registered among many of my interlocutors, *profamilia* activists in Mexico City, in the lead up and the immediate aftermath of AMLO's inauguration. They regarded AMLO himself with distrust and his promises to resolve Mexico's intractable problems of inequality, insecurity, and corruption with the suspicion that they were simply *not what they seemed*. "Tengo *dudas* [doubts, especially worries]," they would tell me, including that AMLO's putatively socialist platform and, in their estimation, his ineptitude, would curtail Mexico's economic growth, curb civil liberties, and run the nation into the ground politically and economically. Some hailed the then unfolding political-economic collapse of Venezuela as both the spectacular and spectral outcome they feared.

Underlying these *dudas* was deep concern as revealed by Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint, that AMLO was about to unleash *gender ideology* on Mexico. *Gender ideology*, a profamily and anti-feminist pejorative term for the assertion that gender is socially constructed, had come to broadly signal feminist demands, LGBT rights, and progressive political agendas more broadly in ways that I will extensively explore in this dissertation. Such a thing, Guadalupe implied, would induce the

fundamental and irrevocable destruction of the Mexican family and the nation built upon it. As with the hundreds of similar videos and memes with conspiratorial themes that I would encounter during my fieldwork, the Virgen's message was unattributed, leaving its origins uncertain and its source without context.

Perhaps it *was* divine intervention. Who could know it *wasn't*? Afterall, there was no way to disprove the prophecy or its divine origins. After being forwarded dozens of times and coursing through online profamily social networks across Mexico City, across the country, and, across the world, whose voice did the message even represent? Guadalupe's doubts affirmed widespread anxieties that this historic political shift spelled catastrophe, yet the unanswered questions she provoked—*what*, *when*, *how*, and even *why*—only raised more uncertainty. Guadalupe may have voiced widely held *dudas*, but this didn't alleviate collective epistemic insecurity. Rather, it reinforced and amplified these insecurities

Guadalupe's prophecy foretold what my research would come to reveal: that the palpable affective throughline animating anti-gender activism in Mexico was *distrust*. Distrust was a forcefield, a measure, a correlate, an expression, and, of course, a resource at the disposal of those who seek to harness its productive capacities and instrumentalize it as a political tool. This distrust manifests as a reflexive stance of generalized suspicion, in *dudas* about everything (West and Sanders 2003). *Dudas* about what and who to believe (*epistemic insecurity*), how to know who we are anymore (*ontological insecurity*), and whether we have any agency or safety in a world submerged in rapid change, deepening precarity, and profound crisis (*existential security*) emerged as recurrent themes, a common denominator interwoven throughout the discourse, actions, and experiences of anti-gender campaigners and supporters. I call these phenomena collectively *illiberal insecurities*. These are not just inert outcomes. They are productive —they do the *work of doubt*.

Theorizing Illiberal Insecurities

Illiberal insecurities refer, in one sense, to the phenomenology of profound insecurities across multiple registers and domains of life that work through fear and doubt to channel support for illiberal sentiments, the object of ethnographic study in this dissertation. But also, in a second sense, illiberal insecurities refer to the risk that these illiberal sentiments pose in the context of (ostensible) secular liberal democracies, like Mexico. Irrespective of whether we have actually ever achieved such a thing or whether it is even achievable or inherently flawed or impossible, secular liberal democracy is a set of ideals in crisis, contested by evolving authoritarianisms, right-wing populisms, protofascist politics, and the emergence of illiberal democracies from within the world's liberal democracies themselves (Boyer 2016b; Mahmud 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Plattner 2019; Graeber 2013). This comes with profound implications for feminist projects for justice, including gender justice.

I find that in the context of anti-gender activism in Mexico, illiberal insecurities are both conditioned by and serve to reinforce *illiberal sentiments*, by which I mean affective attachments to the ideological view that difference trumps or precludes equality and to the procedural view that insecurity justifies exception to liberal democratic norms. These views correspond to the dual manifestations of contemporary illiberalisms as distinguished by Kauth and King (2020): ideological struggle on the one hand (ideological illiberalism) and opposition to procedural democratic norms (disruptive illiberalism) on the other. If liberal democracy is to uphold equality over, or despite, difference and to protect minorities through safeguards against authoritarianism, at least in aspirational terms, illiberal sentiments reverse these.

The Work of Doubt

A primary means through which anti-gender activism inflames illiberal sentiments in Mexico is through inducing and reinforcing distrustful polarizing discourses of us vs. them (a central feature

of fascism, right-wing populism, and conspiracy theorizing) as well as through activating a fear-based politics. Both do what I call *the work of doubt*, in which distrust serves as both the means and the ends. Discourses of fear, suspicion, and distrust are certainly not the only to animate anti-gender activism. These pulsated through the profamily community alongside other discourses –of love, hope, and justice, for instance. I have chosen to focus my analysis in this dissertation, however, on the former because of their productive power to do the *work of doubt*. It is the latter –anxiety over the future and distrust of the "other"– that Guadalupe conjured in her warning. These are the animating sentiments that emerged repeatedly throughout my fieldwork as powerful, overriding, and revelatory of the micropolitics and quotidian mechanisms through which *illiberal insecurities* are cultivated. As I would come to see, Guadalupe's prophecy and the many anti-gender conspiracy theories like it, perform *the work of doubt* that channels the productive power of distrust in ways that both feed from and exacerbate *epistemic, ontological, and existential insecurities*.

These illiberal insecurities, I contend in this dissertation, are not simply the inevitable byproducts of historical and political processes, though they arise in part through these; but they are active rather than inert, as productive of those conditions as they are produced in, by, and through them, and therefore political resources. Whether conceived as affective states or political formations, these various manifestations are interdependent and mutually reinforcing across registers of insecurity. While the chapters of the dissertation explore each of these in more depth, they appear in various forms across the entirety of the dissertation, different in degree rather than kind. *Existential insecurities* are activated by a politics of fear, as analyzed in more depth in Chapter 3; *epistemic insecurities* are activated by post-truth populisms (Harsin 2018), especially conspiracy theories and other discourses of doubt, analyzed in most depth in Chapters 4, 5, and 6; and *ontological insecurities* are activated through polarizing discourses that invoke –and stoke– suspicion of "the "Other," which emerges most evidently in the stories presented in Chapter 6 and the Conclusion. Here I introduce each of these in more depth.

Existential Insecurity

Existential insecurity here refers on the one hand to fears of lost, compromised, or threatened sovereignty now or in the future over one's body, family, or nation —whether real or imagined. Existential insecurity is about borders, material or symbolic, and the threat of their penetration and violation, leaving one vulnerable to annihilation. One register of existential insecurity is *the body*, the sovereignty of which manifests through physical safety. It is perceived threatened by the raging security crisis facing Mexico that has resulted in the deaths of more than two hundred thousand and the disappearances of more than 100,000 as of May 2022, a quarter of them in just the last two years.

A second register is *the family*, the sovereignty of which manifests through the legal concept and social norm of *patria potestad*, the recognition of the rights and responsibilities of parents or guardians over their children, including their care, upbringing, and education. It is a negotiated boundary between the sovereignty of parents over their minor children and all other competing authorities, including the state, an institution derived from colonial heteropatriarchal interpretations of familial authority originally endowed to male heads of household. It is perceived threatened by political proposals to "democratize the family," as Mexico's former Interior Minister Olga Sanchez Cordero proposed in 2018, that would recognize the rights of minors to aspects of self-determination, including bodily autonomy, self-determination over identity, and access to information, including comprehensive sexuality education.

A third register is *the nation*, the sovereignty of which manifests of course literally through national security administered by the state security apparatus, but more importantly through struggles over who is part of the nation and who defines it. As a political, economic, and cultural entity, it is perceived threatened by enemies both foreign and domestic, from "foreign ideas" like *gender ideology*, to the ideations of other nations, to supranational institutions and authority itself, whether the Interamerican System, including the Organization of American States (OAS) and the

Pact of San Jose, or global including the United Nations. Taken together, existential insecurity is the affective state of fear of the comprehensive loss of a way of life, including lost hegemony, whether via the perceived loss of sovereignty over one's body, family, or nation. As the term sovereignty implies, existential insecurity is centrally about power, the power not just to exist, but to determine the conditions, relational or otherwise, of that existence.

Epistemic Insecurity

By epistemic insecurity, I mean not just the erosion of one's conviction in a particular belief or distrust of an official account, but something even more insidious: the abrogation of trust in any account at all, or confidence in knowing *how to know* what is real. It is manifest in an affective stance of paralysis, resignation, and/or persistent suspicion in relation to "truth" and a diminished sense that a shared reality exists or is possible. These provide the ideal conditions for slippage into both conspiracy theorizing and the us/them duality that forms the structural basis of both populism, especially right-wing populism, and fascist politics (Stanley 2020; Mudde 2017). Generalized epistemic insecurity does not only hinder feminist and sexual rights movements seeking to legitimize and advance the rights of women and sexual minorities. Such diminished social capacity to agree upon the shared terms of political reality challenges a fundamental assumption (or point of departure) that underpins liberal democratic discourse itself—in particular, that political debate proceeds from shared terms of reality—or an *official* account.

Epistemic insecurity in anti-gender activism manifests in a variety of forms of what Harsin (2018), called "post-truth populism" in his study of the first largescale anti-gender mobilizations led by La Manif Pour Tous in France in 2013. In his analysis of their online discourse and practices, Harsin identified five components that characterize the "post-truth" aspects of their activism, including fake people, the active expression and encouragement of distrust, emotional appeals, rumor bombs, and backlashes. While all these populist and post-truth features also arose in my own

ethnographic study of Mexican anti-gender activism, the primary mode of epistemic insecurity I registered as both ubiquitous and significant is anti-gender conspiracy theories, a form widely found in anti-gender activism and right-wing populist organizing more generally (Marchlewska et al. 2019). As such, I dedicate a significant portion of the dissertation analyzing them and their relationship to epistemic insecurity.

On the one hand, Mexican anti-gender conspiracy theories address themselves to epistemic insecurities by offering a platform to air disenchantments with neoliberal multiculturalism (Hale 2002) and/or anxieties about waning hegemonies. On the other, their increasing circulation works to exacerbate the epistemic insecurities that undergird support for illiberal positions and sentiments. In other words, the relationship between anti-gender conspiracy theories and epistemic insecurity is *not quite what it seems*. Rather than viewing doubt as the underlying stimulus that *elicits* conspiracy theorizing, I argue that doubt is also its pernicious product. Rather than something that induces arrest or paralysis in its absence, I theorize how the work of doubt entails more than a byproduct or response to epistemic insecurity; it also exacerbates epistemic insecurity by rendering truth itself as something never attainable, discernable, or knowable, even while it makes claims to truth.

Conspiracy theories can offer definitive answers and concrete explanations that may seem to settle *dudas* and resolve the uncertainties that plague our ability to apprehend the modern political realities and power relationships that shape our world (West and Sanders 2003; D. Fassin 2021). But the relationship between conspiracy theorizing and epistemic insecurity is neither as simple nor unidirectional as it may seem. While conspiracy theories may assuage *dudas*, they also deepen, cultivate, and reinforce them, creating a positive feedback loop that inflames epistemic insecurity even while it purports to alleviate it through the projection of certainty in alternative accounts. It seems obvious that conspiracy theories (cor)respond to a felt sense of doubt; after all, as counterclaims to official accounts, they –by definition– cast doubt. Conspiracy theories may seem

like a cure for doubt, in other words, but they are also their symptom, whether deliberately "manufactured" (Oreskes and Conway 2011) or its unintentional byproduct. Doubt here, is not quite what it seems. That doubt is not only a stimulus for but also a product of conspiracy theories is hidden in the plain sight.

The widespread evisceration of trust along with high perceptions of pervasive corruption and opaque power brokering in Mexico, as I will explore in later chapters, work together to facilitate the reception and uptake of conspiratorial narratives, providing frameworks for making sense of uneven and complex political developments and social change processes (West and Sanders 2003). Rather than simply an irrational oversimplification of reality, conspiratorial narratives like gender ideology discourse, offer alternative attempts to understand the complex social and political forces that act on and shape our environments and daily lives. For a conspiracy to be sustained, its premise must have some "sense" in it or bear some "truth" to find resonance. The more sense it makes of the world—as composite empty signifiers are capable of doing—the more credibility it garners. A conspiracy can appear even more true if it validates the struggles or the victimhood of its adherents, as researchers of conspiracies and right-wing political formations have consistently found (Kimmel 2013; Hochschild 2016). Anti-gender conspiracy theories can provide a comprehensive framework for making sense of Mexico's perceived moral decay, its widespread violence and insecurity, and generational shifts where little we thought we knew seems certain anymore, that is, the experience of epistemic insecurity. Moreover, anti-gender conspiracy theories feed into existential and ontological insecurities as well in that the common premise of anti-gender conspiracy theories invariably positions Mexico as the victim of a foreign imposition, posits one's physical, cultural, or familial existence as endangered, and validates profamily activists' sense of lost hegemony, leaning heavily on or converging with the 'us vs. them' framework of populist and fascist politics (Stanley 2020).

Conspiracy theories may offer easy explanations for seemingly dubious and inexplicable phenomena—like gender—but their overgeneralization of what is unknown plants doubts and sows distrust in any and all knowledge claims at all. As a key facet and source of misinformation (or disinformation, when circulated purposefully to mislead), anti-gender conspiracy theories exacerbate generalized epistemic uncertainty. Ultimately, examining how contestations over the meaning and politics of gender play out in Mexican profamily activism offers insights into how epistemic insecurity —a lack of certainty or shared consensus about how to discern reality— can channel support to illiberal positions and sentiments. Stated otherwise, performing the work of doubt—whether inadvertently or instrumentalized for this purpose— anti-gender conspiracy theories erode trust in the legitimacy and even possibility of equality, casting them as sinister schemes of dispossession and rejecting liberal democracy's claims to the possibility of shared power and the commensurability of difference and equality.

Ontological Insecurity

Ontological insecurity refers to a sense of lost or imperiled identity. This is manifest in an affective sense of disorientation about who or what one is *anymore*, which as implied, tends to be reactive state of a lost sense of identity or of one's place in the social order rather than about identity development. Ontological insecurity, here, implies the loss or the threat of loss —lost hegemony, lost status, a disrupted orientation of the self in relation to the social landmarks that one has used to understand or define oneself or to justify one's position in a given social order (i.e hierarchy). Ontological insecurity rubs up against existential insecurity in that what is at stake is the *self* itself. Any threat of undermining the parameters for how the self is constituted in relation to others, that is, one's subjectivity, amounts to an existential threat of annihilation itself. Subjectivity is mediated between self-determination (i.e. subjectification, as in how one identifies oneself with their gender)

and forces outside the self (i.e. objectification, as in what gender categories are made available and how others impose them).

Perceived threats to the ontological security of the self are relational and so depend upon one's positionality within a given social order in a given time and place. The dominant ideology of *profamilias* in Mexico, as I explore in this dissertation, naturalizes the supremacy of a racialized heteropatriarchal social order within a logic of universalism. It is directly contradicted and controverted by multiculturalism (i.e. pluralism), relativism, and postmodern interpretations of race and gender that posit that these social categories are flexible and contingent social constructions rather fixed and immanent truths. In other words, if I am a "man" in a world of "men and women," but a man is no longer what I thought it was, then who am *I*? And *who* is "we" anymore?

With the right rhetorical framing, difference *itself* can be made out as threatening; and so when social and political polarization (i.e. difference) is accentuated, emphasized, exaggerated, as with and the populist framing of us vs. them, so is a sense of ontological insecurity. This logic forms the basis of protofascist politics that manifests in the fear of replacement, a recurring underlying theme of many of the discourses I analyze in this dissertation. In this logic, if the Self and the Other are conceived as mutually exclusive, then the existence of the Other itself represents the threat of annihilation. "Gender," as one of the most fundamental ontological markers in modernity society, challenges not the order of the social order but the very legitimacy of a fixed social order (and hierarchy) in the first place. In a word.

The Specter of Illiberal Democracy

By illiberal insecurities, I also mean a statement about the insecurity of liberal democracy itself. Taken together, illiberal insecurities are rooted in *dudas* that the promises of the liberal democratic order –at least, in Mexico since the ostensible "transition to democracy" and integration in/of the

global economy in 1990s—are failing or have failed to maintain the security, sovereignty, and integrity of the body, the family, and the nation. They both express and inflame doubts about the limitations and capacity of liberal democracies to guarantee justice or adjudicate in polarized societies (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019) –all under the spectral embrace of its currently most rivalrous contender– "illiberal democracy." The assemblage of interrelated sociopolitical phenomena of which these trends are part has been explored under many names: the transnational or global Right (Durham and Power 2010; Buss and Herman 2003; Corredor 2019; Altman and Symons 2016; Bob 2012); neo-nationalism (Gingrich and Banks 2006); neofascism (D. R. Holmes 2000; Stanley 2020); the resurgence of right-wing populism or radicalism (Brock 2019; Carter 2018); illiberal democracy (Berezin 2009; Gusterson 2017; Plattner 2019; Mudde 2021); rising authoritarianism (Grewal 2020; Norris and Inglehart 2019); late (neo)liberalism (Boyer 2016a; Comaroff 2011; Povinelli 2016); the New Right or new social conservatism (Cooper 2017; Abrahamsen et al. 2020); and the crisis of democracy (Graeber 2013; Merkel 2014; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). While they may present as local (i.e. national) formations, viewing them as only such obscures precisely one of their most remarkable traits, that these formations exceed any one nation.

Under conditions of deepening precarity, persistent inequality, and festering democratic deficits, including a severe crisis security and human rights crisis, in which *existence*, *truth*, and even *identity* are all perceived to be insecure and under threat, the ideal of liberal democracy itself falls further into precarity, suspicion, and distrust. There may not have ever been consensus on the terms of liberal democracy, but it is, empirically speaking, currently in freefall. The decline of democratic conditions comes at a great cost to feminist political projects that have staked their claims within the universal human rights frameworks underpinned by faith in the international liberal order. While profamily activists and movements are not monolithic and are internally politically and otherwise diverse, including with respect to their stance on the if, how, and why of

liberal democracy, the profamily activism that I analyze ethnographically in Mexico, like elsewhere, conditions the overall deterioration of democratic conditions through the hyperactivation of illiberal politics.

Whether activated through a politics of fear, post-truth populisms, or polarizing discourses, these illiberal sentiments pose a risk to channel sympathies and identification with a common rival of liberal democracy on offer these days: *ideological illiberalism,* manifest in the conviction that difference and equality are irreconcilable and a derivative belief in different rights for different groups; and *disruptive illiberalism*, in the belief that a perceived violation of the liberal order (including sovereignty) authorizes a state of justified exception to other liberal norms, including the suspension of secular democratic processes and deinstitutionalization (Mancini and Palazzo 2021; Kauth and King 2020). Being confronted with the perceived prospect of being left out, left behind, or losing power or status, as scholars of right-wing movements and of extremism have consistently found, tends to support the rationalization and appeal of right-wing movements and ideologies (Hochschild 2016; Kimmel 2013; Holbraad and Pedersen 2013). These are illiberal sentiments, and my aim in what follows in this dissertation is ethnographically unravel how they work in and through anti-gender activism in Mexico.

Ethnographic Research in Mexico's Profamily Activist Community

I conducted fieldwork for the dissertation between 2016 and 2021, including preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2017 in Mexico and in attendance at the Sex and Gender Conference in Madrid, Spain, and 12 months of in situ ethnographic research among Mexico's pro-family community in 2018 and 2019. In person fieldwork took place primarily in and around Mexico City, the hub of national pro-family organizing, but through online fieldwork via Zoom, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, I also studied Mexican profamily activism across Mexico, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This afforded a broader opportunity to study Mexican profamily

activism as a transnational phenomenon, contextualized within broader trends and networks comprising the United States, Latin America, and Europe.

Methods included participant observation, interviews, informal surveys, and social media analysis of the pro-family activist community, which comprised both Evangelical and Catholic national pro-family leaders; second-tier leadership, whom I refer to as "organizers"; and "active followers," made up primarily of devout men and women from both Evangelical and Catholic communities who consistently participated in events and campaigns outside leadership roles. These pro-family activists conducted their work in the context of increasingly professionalized and internationally networked pro-family non-governmental organizations (NGOs) while drawing support and participation from their respective religious communities. While Mexico's profamily movement is officially decentralized and made up of many different actors, large and small, in 2016, the Frente Nacional por la Familia (FNF; National Front for the Family) emerged as a national leader in the profamily movement. The history of the FNF's emergence is detailed in the work of América Vera Balanzario (2018) and Garma, Ramírez, and Corpus (2018)as well as throughout this dissertation. I analyze its rise, its discourses and practices, and its impact on the movement in more detail in Chapter 3.

While technically ecumenical, FNF is in practice dominated overwhelming by Catholic individuals and organizations and works closely with the Catholic Church. FNF launched in 2016 with a profamily manifesto and national profamily demonstrations and eventually constituted itself as a national umbrella organization under the leadership of Rodrigo Iván Cortés. FNF's original leadership consisted of the Mexico City based national organization Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia (National Parents Union); Con Participación based in Monterrey but with an extensive online presence around Mexico; Red Familia based in Mexico City, another of Mexico's established profamily organizations with an active national and international presence; and Con Familia, founded in Monterrey but now based in Mexico City. In 2017, FNF pushed out Con Familia, when its

leader, Juan Dabdoub, known for his firebrand approach became too much of a political liability for FNF after he covered the mouth of a young female protestor with this hand. In 2018, convinced that FNF was not taking a strong enough stand against the incoming AMLO administration, Dabdoub and others founded a coalition to rival FNF, called Coalición Sumas (Sumas Coalition), but without the close, institutional ties to the Catholic Church and the conservative political party, the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN; National Action Party), that FNF enjoys, it has never emerged from the fringe of the movement.

While FNF had originally tried to build a coalition with the evangelical profamily movement, through the Unión Nacional Cristiana and the incipient, unofficially evangelical political party Partido Encuentro Social (PES; Social Encounter Party), these early efforts ended mostly in disaccord. This was due at least in part two factors: first, PES' decision to join in an electoral coalition with the new left-wing party MORENA (Movimiento Regeneración Nacional; the National Regeneration Movement) during AMLO's bid for the presidency in 2018. The Catholic dominated wing of the movement viewed this move as selling out and regarded PES as compromised and untrustworthy; and second, because of the caution of evangelicals who sought independence and to avoid being dominated and overshadowed by the much larger and more powerful Catholic profamily constituency. However, renewed efforts to build a national profamily coalition were more successful in 2020 under the leadership of evangelical profamily leader Aaron Lara, whose regional organization, the Iberoamerican Congress on Life and Family had been making steady inroads into the Organization of American States (OAS) and forging a formidable regional profamily constituency. Since 2020, FNF and Lara's national Mexican profamily organization, Iniciativa Ciudadana, have successfully united the Catholic and evangelical wings to lead an allied Mexico's profamily movement.

Between 2018–2019, I attended meetings and events of these and other profamily organizations, including a FNF board meeting. I focused my research on three professional national

pro-family organizations based in Mexico City. The first of these is the Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia (National Parents Union), a national NGO with a strong ties and historical affiliations with the Catholic Church that has worked closely with parents to advocate for over a century for traditional social policies and a long-standing mainstay of the Right in Mexico. UNPF maintains chapters all over Mexico and close ties to Mexico's conservative and powerful business community, most especially through its close ties with Confederación Patronal de la República Mexicana (COPARMEX; Employer Confederation of the Mexican Republic). The director of UNPF throughout my fieldwork was a former PAN representative and was serving as the Vice President of the Executive Board of the FNF. UNPF holds events, public talks, and regular press conferences and lobby efforts and has led efforts to block the incorporation of the gender perspective, i.e. *gender ideology*, in educational materials and curricula.

The second is the Mexico City chapter of Dilo Bien, a national interfaith prolife, profamily youth network led predominantly by young professionals. As part of the youth pro-life movement, FNF organizes service work, social activities, and workshops; networks with other prolife, profamily youth around Mexico and the region; liaises with and lobbies political representatives; and builds the capacity of youth to advocate for prolife and profamily policies. Though its main focus is on prolife activism, Dilo Bien was among the first to raise the issue of *gender ideology* in Mexico. It is closely connected to FNF –its Mexico City chapter leader was named as a youth spokesperson for FNF, and she also received training from global profamily powerhouse CitizenGO in fundraising and organizing. I attended Dilo Bien's monthly social events, attended their workshops including a field trip to a local prolife pregnancy crisis clinic, accompanied them to the marches they attended, and participated in their service activities, like street cleanups and material outreach to unhoused children.

A third organization I spent significant time with is the Mexico-based chapter of an international evangelical pro-family network, Movimiento ProVidaProFamilia. The international

network is most active in Latin America and is led by José Linares, an active member of the Peruvian profamily movement and former advisor to United States President Donald Trump on behalf of profamily evangelicals. While two Catholics attended sometimes, this group consisted mainly of Pentecostals, neo-Pentecostals, and other evangelicals, including a few mainline Protestants. I attended their weekly meetings at an evangelical bookstore café, their lobbying meetings with legislators, and their events, including their annual parliamentary Day of the Family forum, public conferences, and their induction ceremony for new members, all of whom were older men, during José Linares visit to Mexico.

In total, I attended more than 50 public events, meetings, and social gatherings in Mexico City and surrounding Mexican states, including conferences, direct actions, youth retreats, marches, parliamentary forums, press conferences, and "*gender ideology* talks" – persuasive public presentations that lay out the pro-family case against gender ideology, a staple of both Catholic and Evangelical anti-gender organizing. I also conducted 50 formal or informal interviews with: national leaders (all of whom are men), intermediate leadership (many of whom are women), and active followers. Profamily organizers and supporters represented a diverse range of gender, age, class, political party, and religious backgrounds. But they also revealed clear patterns within anti-gender activism's base around Mexico City, which largely drew support from: upper middle class, middle aged, white/mestizo, practicing Catholic adults; students and young alums of conservative Catholic universities (often connected to these populations); and whole evangelical congregations, most often adults from middle- and working-class backgrounds.

Leadership over the national profamily movement is dominated by an exclusive circle of Catholic men who exercise a degree of gatekeeping power over the rest of the movement with access to the sponsorship and support of the conservative PAN party, Catholic Church leaders, and wealthy business sectors. These alliances ensure them significant mobilizing power; intellectual, infrastructural, and financial resources; international networking access; and participation and

influence in the political process. While this group generally directed agenda- and strategy-setting at the national level, rapidly growing evangelical competitors and some smaller Catholic and interfaith efforts engage by sometimes entering tepid, utilitarian coalitions with this predominant group, while other times contesting or undermining their dominance, or by working in parallel. Except for a couple individuals who described themselves as aligned with AMLO's (stated) political economic stance against poverty, inequality, and neoliberalism, all profamily organizations fell within the Mexican Right and nearly all active leaders, organizers, or followers identified themselves as "conservative."

In addition to participant observation with these groups, I administered three informal evaluation surveys in conjunction with the organizers of public "gender ideology talks" that reached over 100 audience members and organizers themselves with questions about their demographics, their perspectives on *gender ideology*, and their reactions to these "*gender ideology* talks." The purpose of these surveys was to generate qualitative data for triangulation, to inform interview questions, and to guide follow up conversations with interlocutors about their interpretations of the data and what questions they themselves had, as well as to offer a neutral means to engage in participant observation with my interlocutors. I also took an online "course" on "gender ideology" offered by FNF and collected and analyzed social media interviews, videos, links, articles, reports, memes, and messages publicly generated and/or shared with me by profamily activists between 2016 and 2022.

In this dissertation, I envisage an expansive approach to feminist activist ethnography that incorporates anti-feminism as a pertinent category for analysis (Avishai, Gerber, and Randles 2013; Craven 2013; Davis and Craven 2016). Drawing inspiration from groundbreaking anthropological works of similar genre (in particular Ginsburg 1989; S. F. Harding 2001; Erzen 2006; Hochschild 2016; Shoshan 2016; Bjork-James 2021), I seek to leverage ethnography's unique capacity for combining deep listening with sociological analysis to understand the conceptualizations and

heartfelt concerns that drive profamily/anti-gender advocacy beyond narrow popular interpretations of motives as rooted solely or primarily in hateful animus, ignorance, or primordial fear.

Studying an often maligned and poorly understood group revives anthropology's critical tradition of forging understanding across difference and illuminating common stakes and interests where insurmountable political difference appears to preside, employing "nuance as an anthropological responsibility" and an imperative for contemporary feminist anthropology "in times of democratic collapse" (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2021). In other words, I approach this dissertation as an "empathy bridge" (Hochschild 2016) —something not to be conflated with moral or cultural relativism— that seeks to better understand the "deep stories" (2016) underpinning *illiberal insecurities*, exacerbating polarization, eroding trust, and precipitating democratic decline across local and transnational scales, with widespread consequences. Deep stories can only be found and heard through deep listening, and to do so is the commitment I have made in the research and writing to interlocutors and readers alike.

Outline of the Dissertation

The resurgence of a globally coordinated anti-gender countermovement against feminism, LGBT rights, and gender itself –one of feminist anthropology's core analytical concepts– raises pressing questions of theoretical significance about how crisis and rapid social change are reshaping global politics, the lives of women, non-binary, and LGBTQ people, and democratic conditions, and methodological and political ones about how to respectively understand and respond to these trends (Corredor 2019; Biroli 2016; Runyan and Zalewski In Review; Corrêa, Paternotte, and Kuhar 2018). This dissertation engages these questions of theoretical, methodological, and political concern within feminist anthropology in two primary ways. First, in its interrogation of current efforts to re-biologize and re-essentialize gender and derivative inequalities of women and non-

gender/sexually conforming individuals, it revisits foundational questions in feminist anthropology about the nature of truth—and specifically truth claims about nature, culture, and their relationship (Rosaldo 1974; Sacks 1974; Rubin, 1975; Ortner 1997; D. J. Haraway 2003; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995; Rubin 1993; D. Haraway 1988).

Second, this dissertation addresses fundamental questions about not just how gendered power works but about the fundamental power of the idea or concept of *gender* itself –as a social construct and a core analytical category– by analyzing contestations over its meaning and the stakes of those debates for liberal democracy more broadly. In closely examining present manifestations of transnationally organized opposition to gender theory, it takes stock of the intellectual and political projects of gender one quarter century after its institutionalization in academic institutions and international governance. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary intersectional, decolonial, and anti-racist feminist anthropological work that seeks to understand its imbrication with/in other system of power –white supremacy, nationalism, colonialism, capitalism, to name a few– to illuminate how these systems are being reconfigured into what I have called *illiberal insecurities* that are taking shape across the world today (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Bjork-James 2020; Harvey 2010; Robinson 2000; Lugones 2010; Boyer 2016b).

This dissertation answers the following research questions: What is fueling the emergence and popular appeal of anti-gender movements in Mexico? How and why do political contestations over equality, sovereignty, and liberal democracy manifest in disputes over gender? And how and why does opposition to gender serve as connective tissue for the broader spread of illiberal sentiments and right-wing populist movements across the region?

Chapter Two, *The Post-Truth About Gender: Gender Ideology As Modular Discourse And Weaponized Narrative*, provides a theoretical and historical framework for understanding the rise of anti-gender activism globally, in Latin America, and in Mexico. After introducing the concept of *gender ideology* as a transnational modular discourse, a form of post-truth populism, and as a

weaponized narrative, the chapter traces how anti-gender activism emerged as a conservative counter-movement in response to the United Nations Population and Women's Conferences of the 1990s; how it transformed into a novel right-wing populist movement in the 2000s in Europe; and how it later exploded onto the political scene in Mexico and across Latin America in 2016.

Chapter Three, *Gender As Death Threat to the Family: How the "Security Frame" Shapes Anti-Gender Activism in Mexico*, examines how anti-gender leaders in Mexico draw on security and strategy expertise to animate a politics of fear around "gender ideology." It offers an ethnographic and frame analysis of how Mexican anti-gender campaigners have leveraged Mexico's twin crises of corruption and security to cast gender ideology strategically as a security issue through a "security frame." It explores how formal security expertise and a deepening security culture shape the framing strategies of anti-gender campaigners who effectively weaponize gender ideology as a tool of culture war. I analyze two discursive strategies that make the security frame both cohesive and compelling: One the one hand, the "nested empty signifier" of the *culture of death* renders gender ideology a credible death threat to the family by bringing security and gender politics into a common, cohesive security master frame. On the other, a logic of securitization constructs gender ideology as a potent, virulent, and imminent existential threat to the family that directs efforts to secure the family. As it analyzes how anti-gender activists have developed and deployed the security frame in Mexico, the chapter offers not just contextualized insight into how anti-gender campaigns have been articulated and sustained there, but also how anti-gender campaigns might mobilize widespread insecurities across Latin American contexts to advance illiberal political projects that impede broader discussions about institutional and democratic deficits.

Chapter Four, *Plotting the Mexican Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theory*, provides a genealogy of anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico. Taking a 2018 conspiracy theory alleging that AMLO's 2018 inauguration was an Illuminati plot as an exemplar, I historicize the rise of anti-gender conspiracy theories like this one in Mexico after 2016 and explore the historical contingencies that

enabled their popularity among profamily activists. I identify and explore four conditions that enabled the proliferation of anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico: (i) the presence of conspiracy theorizing in Mexico as a long-standing mode of politics; (ii) earlier forms of anti-gender organizing, including in Mexico; (iii) the growth and diffusion of a transnational profamily movement; and (iv) the rise of social media. I conclude the chapter with a brief analysis of the role that anti-gender conspiracy theories have played in forging alliances between nationalist-populist groups across national borders.

In Chapter Five, *Syncretic Doubts: Reading Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theories Across,* I disentangle and historicize four overlapping genealogies of anti-gender conspiracy theories circulating in Mexico's profamily community, analyzing them as syncretic discursive formations that recombine elements both from one other and from history in ways that make them distinctly Mexican. These include anti-gender conspiracies focused on population control, the New World Order, spiritual warfare, and cultural Marxism. Reading these anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico "across" and analyzing their commonalities and differences, this chapter reveals both the diversity and patterns of anxieties held by their believers, particularly among those who imagine proposals to alter the normative social and economic order as a threat to their political hegemony, social status, and/or economic power.

In Chapter Six, *The Deep Story of Distrust: Reading Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theories Down*, I read anti-gender conspiracy theories "down," that is, I mine them interpretatively for their meaning as social texts to probe their "deep story" (Hochschild 2016) and to analyze what they express politically and affectively. Rather than evaluate their truth value, I read between the(se) lines, approaching anti-gender conspiracy theories as social texts that convey deeper social and affective meaning. In other words, I aim not to assess whether they are *truthful* but to analyze in what ways they are *meaningful* to or for those who consume and perpetuate them. I find that anti-gender conspiracy theories tell a subtextual story about distrust and suspicion accumulated through

decades of facing economic and political crisis, profound insecurity and inequality, and widespread corruption. Reading anti-gender conspiracy theories from this perspective reveals a story not only about gender but also one about democratic deficits in the ruins of late neoliberalism.

In Chapter Seven, *Conclusion*, I briefly revisit my analysis of *gender ideology* across these different registers of security —physical, epistemic, and ontological— and their relationship to the rise of illiberalism more generally, reflecting on how and why contestations over the meaning of gender have become one of their defining features. I conclude by making a case for an anthropology of "studying through" political dissonance to advance a nascent anthropology of the Right and to navigate the political polarization and distrust that forms one of the defining impasses of our time.

CHAPTER 2. The Post-Truth About Gender: *Gender Ideology* As Modular Discourse And Weaponized Narrative

Introduction: Defining *Gender Ideology*

In October 2018, Victor Madrigal-Borloz, the United Nations (UN) Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, made an unprecedented argument before the General Assembly: the imposition of gender norms violates human rights law. Madrigal-Borloz drew upon decades of scholars" and activists" critiques of the idea that biological sex determines gender identity according to a fixed and universal formula, arguing that this view impedes one's right to self-determination. "The notion that there is a gender norm, from which certain gender identities "vary" or "depart"," he avowed in the report, "is based on a series of preconceptions that must be challenged if all humankind is to enjoy human rights" (Victor Madrigal-Borloz 2018). Though intellectually contested since its earliest articulations, the concept of gender – understood as an historically and culturally contingent social construct distinct from sex and as a mode of power relations – has become the target of organized and highly focused opposition since the early 2010s.

Anti-gender campaigners exemplified this invigorated opposition a few months later when they rebutted Madrigal-Borloz's arguments at a side event of the UN annual Commission on the Status of Women gathering titled *Gender Equality and Gender Ideology: Protecting Women and Girls*. There they presented an alternative vision of gender as an "ideology" that threatens women and girls, individual liberties, and whole families and nations. Hosting this debate over gender is not new for the UN, which has served as a primary site of sparring over contrasting visions of gender for a quarter of a century. What sets the past decade of anti-gender campaigning apart from earlier iterations is its transmogrification into a series of transnational popular movements resisting the popularized concept of *gender ideology* that are both coordinated across borders and adapted to local contexts.

Anti-gender campaigns globally, particularly in Europe and the Americas, vary in the subtleties of their rhetoric, the specificity of their political aims, the details of their geographies and social make up, and their repertoires of action. Nonetheless, they share some common roots and characteristics as transnational, traditionalist, frequently aligned with conservative and/or right-wing populist political parties and constituencies, and united in insisting that gender is a false political ideology that denies the "biological reality" of human sex. They target sexual and reproductive rights, especially abortion, the legitimacy of LGBT rights in all forms, and especially comprehensive sexuality education among youth and gender studies in higher education and typically frame themselves as the righteous defenders of family, nation, and especially women and children. Though the particularities of their framing strategies vary by national context, anti-gender movements across contexts often distort and/or coopt feminist, scientific, secular, academic, human rights, anti-discrimination, and other social justice discourses to claim persecution as victims of hate speech or discrimination; to position themselves as the true defenders of women and womanhood (Corredor 2021) (in which they often overlap and ally with anti-trans feminists[1] and right-wing women[2]); or to couch their causes in secular terms, for which they turn especially to scientific and human rights claims to argue for the rights of the "natural" or "traditional" family, free speech, and religious freedom.

[1] While they have existed since –and trace their roots to essentialist feminists like Sheila Jeffreys writing since the 1970s– in recent years a small but growing movement of self-proclaimed "gender critical feminists" has allied with profamily movements to oppose *gender ideology.* Like profamily/anti-gender movements, they embrace a biologically deterministic and essentialist definition of gender as rooted in binary biological sex and reject the legitimacy of transgender identities. They are pejoratively referred by mainstream feminists as TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) and constitute a fast-spreading trend across Latin America, including in Mexico.

[2] The participation and alliance of some women's movements with right-wing movements that often adhere to and advocate a heteropatriarchal order is now a well-studied phenomenon, including in Latin America, the literature on which has not only informed this dissertation (for example Dworkin 1987; Blee 1991; Bacchetta and Power 2002; González-Rivera and Kampwirth 2001; Deckman 2016; Grewal 2006; Gottlieb and Berthezene 2018; Mahmud 2013) but from which it also departs in its study not of gendered subjects in right-wing movements per se but of discourses about *gender* itself as object (following for example Spierings et al. 2015; Basu and Takenaka 2018; Ackerly et al. 2019).

Wherever they are deployed, campaigns against *gender ideology* both shape and are themselves contoured by larger political formations, trends, and debates, playing a major role in the growth and spread of global movements opposing a cluster of issues, including abortion, transgender rights, same-sex marriage, comprehensive sexuality education, immigration, integration, neoliberal reforms, gender studies, and the term gender itself. An analysis across contexts evidences how *gender ideology* is deployed as an "empty signifier" (Mayer and Sauer 2017) capable of cohering such a diverse set of issues across disparate histories and geographies. This discursive plasticity across transnational contexts, a trait Weiss and Bosia (2017) have described as a feature of "modular discourse," is key to the explosive spread and success of campaigns against *gender ideology* globally.

This chapter analyzes how *gender ideology* as a form of transnational modular discourse both indexes and supports the expansion of anti-gender activism in Mexico by adaptably positioning anti-gender activism as both locally indigenized in Mexico and at the same time one that emplaces Mexico as a key site in an existential and unified transnational struggle. I begin with providing a theoretical context for understanding *gender ideology* as a discourse. I then summarize the intellectual and political origins of the concept of *gender ideology* in the 1990s and trace its transformation into a discursive object of transnational circulation and key component of popular movements in the 2010s across a diversity of social, geographical, and political landscapes, including in Latin America. In doing so, I explore how anti-gender movements do political work to cohere national sociopolitical conflicts with anti-gender discourses circulating transnationally. This discussion lays the groundwork for understanding how anti-gender-ideology activism exemplifies the processes through which modular discourses come to adapt and stand in for brooding social and political anxieties within particular contexts, in this case Mexico, and how they contribute to its popular spread.

Gender Ideology As Modular Discourse

The concept of *gender ideology* is meant to challenge established definitions of gender, reflecting the centrality of contests over meaning to political conflicts and movements (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998). Constituted from its beginnings as an epithetical exonym, *gender ideology* is commonly used by its opponents to refer to the idea that gender is a social construction completely disarticulated from one's biological sex. Yet what *gender ideology* means in practice is much more flexible, variable, and expansive, and its deployment has helped fuel a global countermovement broadly opposing a wide range of aims (Corredor 2019). The term *gender ideology* intrinsically rejects the legitimacy of the concept of gender in the intellectual field, while in political arenas it often serves as a metonym for a wide variety of political claims, including sexual and reproductive rights, gender equality, same-sex marriage, transgender rights (see, for example, Hasson, 2016; Ritchie, 2016), and gender studies (see, for example, Amendt, 2016; Tuininga, 2016). Critics of the term view it as a political discursive formation that at best misapprehends contemporary social scientific theories of gender and at worst constitutes an oppositional strategy against gender equality, bound up in new forms of right-wing populism (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

Scholars seeking to understand the ways discourses forge social identities, shape belief systems, and incite political action have analyzed how they refract distinctly – sometimes even in contradictory ways – through varying histories and geographies. One approach to explaining how similar discourses can produce varying effects is Ernesto Laclau's theorization of empty signifiers, whose indeterminate meanings are shaped through political processes set within relations of power (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1996). Empty signifiers take on meanings through their deployment in particular political projects, and it is this flexible mode of determination that allows them to cohere seemingly disparate issues into a common framework, link particular and universal interests, and identify and propel whole social movements irrespective of content (Wullweber, 2015). These are precisely the qualities that some scholars highlight in their analyses of *gender*

ideology as an empty signifier (Mayer and Sauer, 2017) or as a unifying "symbolic glue" (Kováts and Põim, 2015).

Gender ideology has not just shown itself to be highly flexible but also modular – a key feature of its success. The potential of *gender ideology* discourse to recombine disparate issues and recast them through a cohesive conceptual lens makes it highly portable across a wide range of contexts. Precisely noting that *gender ideology* discourse can be "repackaged for any country context," Gillian Kane highlights this point, noting that "the abstractness of *gender ideology* is what makes it so effective in the global marketplace of ideas" (2018: 4). Drawing from their analysis of political homophobias worldwide, Weiss and Bosia (2017) refer to malleable discursive formations with this trait as "modular discourses" that are at once political, modular, and transnational phenomena. It is the very plasticity of the concept of *gender ideology* that qualifies it as a modular discourse, adaptable to suit various – even contradictory – political ends. This also requires that any understanding of the term must be developed through a contextualized analysis of how it has emerged and been deployed.

Similarities in political homophobias emerging in disparate contexts around the global require us to analyze homophobia as more than merely a "pre-existing constraint or backdrop" (Weiss and Bosia, 2017). First, the strength of LGBT activism seems to be a poor correlate to manifestations of political homophobias. Political homophobias have emerged in contexts where LGBT rights activism is nonexistent or weak or they have preceded the growth of that activism – what Murray calls "spectral sexuality" (Murray, 2009) – as in Egypt, Uganda, or Barbados, but also in cases where such activism was already quite strong, as in Brazil or Costa Rica. Second, private homophobic views as in "deep-rooted, perhaps religiously inflected sentiment[s]" do not necessarily equate with homophobia as an organized, purposive political force capable of structuring experiences and expressions of sexuality. In some cases, they may even vary independently of one another (Boellstorff, 2004). This suggests that manifestations of homophobic

modular discourse cannot be understood as reflexive responses to actual demands of local LGBT activists or of pre-existing – even commonly held – private sentiments, but rather that they indicate larger transnational processes at work. Consequentially, we must analyze the concept of *gender ideology* not just as an oppositional response but also as an intrinsically transnational phenomenon (Weiss and Bosia, 2017; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Korolczuk, 2014).

The flexibility of modular discourses and their lack of a fixed signifier mean that they both generate and are rather impervious to contradictions. Because they are not necessarily coherent or partisan but rather adaptable political tools, they can be harnessed to either facilitate or oppose neoliberal capital or be strategically mobilized by those on the left as well as right. This can even occur simultaneously, in ways that seem contradictory or even diametrically opposed. This quality allows political homophobia and pinkwashing to operate simultaneously, for example, in the case of the ostensibly leftist governments of Latin America's Pink Tide[3] (Larracoechea Bohigas, 2018; Wilkinson, 2019). Amy Lind (2017) captures this in the case of Ecuador, where former President Rafael Correa disparaged *gender ideology* as a danger to the family while simultaneously positioning Ecuador as a pro-LGBT exemplar on the international stage. Drawing on this example, she notes that new forms of homophobia and transphobia have emerged at "the nexus of homophobic and homopositive discourses … sometimes through and as a result of competing transnational discourses of sexual deviation" on the one hand and of "sexual modernization" on the other (129). The polarizing, dual oppositional structure of anti-*gender* activism reflects its centrality to the global polarization over "LGBT rights" (Thoreson, 2014) in what Altman and Symons (2016) have dubbed the global "queer wars" – waged not only through the supposed figure of the "gay international" (Massad, 2008) but now also by its counterpart, the "conservative international" (Altman and Symons, 2016), a moniker applicable to anti-gender activists working

[3] The Pink Tide refers to a wave of self-identified leftist governments that came to power in Latin America in the 2000s.

transnationally, including many of those in and from Mexico whose biographies and activism I explore in this dissertation.

The patterned differences and similarities exhibited by modular discourses rely then not only upon local political contexts and histories but also upon the availability of discursive resources circulating transnationally. Weiss and Bosia (2017) point to two emergent trends that shape transnational political homophobias and constitute primary contextual factors supporting the rise of anti-*gender ideology* activism: first, the growth and increased coordination of transnational religious networks, and second, the emergence of new forms of transphobia. In the United States, both trends can be seen in the example of the once formidable United States-based National Organization for Marriage (NOM) after national recognition of same sex marriage in 2015 eliminated its reason for existing. Far from the certain demise predicted by some (Stern 2014), NOM transitioned seamlessly into a driver of anti-transgender activism that bore the mark of national debates (for example, campaigning against gender-inclusive bathroom bills) as well as transnational ones (for example, being among the first to amplify anti-gender-ideology rhetoric in the United States). In 2016, its president Brian Brown helped launch the International Organization for the Family to join the ranks of organizations poised to coordinate and grow the global pro-family movement, offering one example of how anti-gender movements have adapted and evolved to the circumstances of an evolving transnational political landscape.

While the present study clearly demonstrates the relevance of both trends, the emergence of a strong focus against transgender rights in recent years as a frequent motivator and component of anti-gender ideology is particularly striking. While much of the anti-gay political activity that preceded global anti-gender campaigns framed homosexuality and same-sex marriage along with gays and lesbians as primary threats, more recent anti-gender ideology campaigns reframe transgender identities and the idea of gender itself as their primary concerns. The infamous Free Speech Bus, which was organized by Spanish profamily organization CitizenGO to tour Spain in

2016 before being brought to the US to tour the East Coast and then by ConFamilia to Mexico in 2017, exemplifies this emphsis. While the messages plastered on the side of the bright orange buses have varied by context, they are variations of the original, which directly countered the public awareness campaign of a support group for transgender children. It read: "Boys have penises. Girls have vulvas. Don't let them fool you. If you were born a man, you're a man. If you're a woman, you will continue to be one." Anything else is dangerous and false *gender ideology*, they asserted in their accompanying rallies and press conferences. Their attention-seeking campaign sought to intentionally provoke outrage and then, when the anticipated accusations of hate speech came, they claimed that their free speech rights were being violated and that the truth was being censored. Not only does this example show how anti-gender discourse is modular, as the message was adapted to resonate best in each context, it also reveals how modular anti-gender movement tactics, strategies, and repertoires of action are as well.

Finally, while its highly visible spread to and through mass popular mobilizations in the 2010s makes anti-gender activism appear new, resistance to gender is in fact as old as the concept of gender itself (Herman, 1998; Friedman, 2003; Korolczuk, 2017). Though it claims itself to be a critique of gender theory, it misapprehends much of gender theory by taking "the question of ontology" as its point of departure rather than how it is produced and mobilized to constitute other social and political phenomena, including relations of power (Butler and Weed 2011, 3). In other words, critics of *gender ideology* often engage the question of *what is gender?* – an impossible question if the premise is that gender "is" nothing in advance of its production (2011, 4) – rather than *what does gender do*?, even while their concerns are most often articulated in terms of the latter.

In other words, a conflict often presented and engaged as a debate over essentialism versus constructivism can perhaps be better understood as an abstraction or foil for debates over the "geopolitical repercussions of [gender's] circulation" (2011, 3), including the various agitations and

tensions generated by transnational feminist activism and a related global movement for LGBT rights (R. R. Thoreson 2014). This "persistent and irresolvable dilemma" gives rise to phantasmic efforts to settle the question of what a man or woman may be, which take "numerous historical forms with powerful effects within social and political life" (Butler and Weed 2011: 5). In part because gender has never been singularly defined or consistently employed, this in turn reveals the "co-optability of gender and sexual equity projects by non-progressive groups" (2011, 8). Anti-*gender ideology* activism as a mode of modular discourse is one particularly potent and popular such form.

Gender ideology's remarkable malleability as a modular discourse is key to understanding the powerful role it has played in supporting the development of new forms of right-wing populism spreading across Europe and Latin America. While analysis in specific contexts helps to explain the rapid emergence and mass appeal of popular anti-gender movements in a particular context, a broader analysis views them as bound up in larger processes of political and social change, as in new global Right's efforts to construct what Korolczuk and Graff (2018) argue is a new (illiberal) universalism that reverses traditional right-wing backing of neoliberal globalization, enabling instead its critique. Whether a critique of neoliberal capitalism or an effort to preserve it from the threat of socialism; a response to the failures of liberalism and the welfare state or a backlash to the perceived erasures of multiculturalism; or a grasp for certainty amidst significant and rapid social, economic, and conceptual shifts, what the present case reveals is the striking capacity of *gender ideology* discourse to channel and focalize all these universal existential, epistemic, and ontological insecurities seemingly across any context and to serve as a unifying force across contexts experiencing growing polarization and populism on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond.

Whence Anti-Gender Activism?

While they are only recently the subject of mass popular movements, coordinated action against *gender ideology* (sometimes also referred to as "gender theory" or "genderism") emerged a quarter of a century ago in response to women's rights activism at UN Conference on Population in Cairo in 1994 and the Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995[4]. At the 1994 Cairo conference, the influx of women's rights activists and their new degree of transnational organizational prowess was felt as they successfully reoriented the dominant population "control" paradigm to a focus instead on women's rights and in particular their "sexual and reproductive rights" (Friedman, 2003). Forming the largest of the NGO caucuses, women's health advocates worked before and during conference proceedings to cultivate new alliances with population control NGOs to promote what they called the "Cairo Consensus."

Despite some internal dissent and overt opposition from the Vatican, the final conference document contained much of their proposed language, explicitly naming "gender equality," women's freedom from violence, and women's control over their own fertility as indispensable to population and development programming. They aimed not simply to gain inclusion of the word "gender" but rather to secure substantive changes that would advance women's rights goals. This marked the first time that the term "gender" appeared in a UN document and "gender equality" came to constitute a central pillar of international human rights and development discourse. Elisabeth Friedman (2003) has called this successful process at the UN conferences of the 1990s[5]

4 Women's rights organizing at the 1994 Cairo and 1995 Beijing conferences built upon their earlier preparations and participation in the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro, in which they framed women's rights as central to sustainable development, and the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights at Vienna, in which they insisted on "regendering" human rights by pointing out that women's rights are human rights and reframing issues like violence against women as public not private issues that fall within the purview of state obligations (Friedman, 2003).

the "gendering of the agenda', noting that it both created new opportunities to advance "women's rights as human rights" but also provoked an organized conservative coalitional response.

As soon as feminists launched their efforts to "gender the agenda," a counter-movement emerged to oppose these efforts, launching a "framing war" centered around women's rights and the term "gender" itself (Franco, 1998; Friedman, 2003). In response to the visible advances made by women's rights activists at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna the year before, a coalition of conservative groups led by the Vatican emerged in full force at the Cairo conference. During the third preparatory conference, they argued that gender and specific recommendations sought by women's rights activists, like abortion, constituted threats to national and religious values and what they defined as the natural or traditional family. Emerging from coordinated counter-mobilization at Cairo, conservatives focused on the United Nations, drawing upon the powerful, well-organized, and well-resourced infrastructure of the Christian Right in the United States that had taken root over the past two decades (Diamond 1995; 2000; Harding 2001).

Responding to transnational feminists unprecedented coordination across borders and successful NGO-driven organizing efforts (Alvarez 2000), this conservative counter-movement made the United Nations a new key battleground of pro-family, anti-abortion, and anti-gender advocacy. Borrowing from the successful repertoire of action of feminist activists, they launched their own preparatory meetings, petitions, newsletters, caucuses, and leafleting of delegates (Friedman, 2003). They founded transnational NGOs focused on advocacy at the United Nations, like the International Federation for the Family and Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam) – organizations now at the forefront of anti-gender campaigning – and organized their own international congresses, for example, the World Congress of Families (WCF), first held in Prague in 1997 and Geneva in 1999. They also formed unprecedented institutional alliances to jointly oppose the language and commitments pursued by feminists – including the use of "gender" – forged between both the Catholic Church and conservative evangelical sectors (Centurión 2018) and

between countries with strong Catholic and Islamic leadership, which feminists dubbed the "Unholy Alliance" (Friedman, 2003).

Opposing – and perhaps evidencing – the centrality of gender as an emergent and hegemonic paradigm in international human rights and development in the lead up to the Beijing conference, this conservative countermovement took central aim at the language of *gender*. In the preparatory process, the Vatican objected to the term *gender*, used in the document to differentiate biological sex from socially and culturally constructed roles. The President of the American Episcopal Conference, Oscar Rodriguez, for example, insisted that proponents of the term *gender* intended "to force society to accept five types of gender: masculine, feminine, lesbian, homosexual and transsexual" (Franco 1998, 292). In the final preparatory conference, Honduras requested that the term "gender" be placed in brackets until its definition could be agreed upon and the word "sex" was used in Spanish-language drafts. However, neither term evaded controversy. At the Beijing conference itself, some Spanish-speaking participants refused to debate the document until the stand-in word "sex" was removed. Ultimately, the term *gender* remained in the document, but the dilemma continued to derail debates throughout the conference. The dispute was also reflected afterwards in the dozens of reservations lodged by countries with conservative representatives on paragraphs containing language deemed contrary to traditional or religious understandings of family and gender relations.

In response to the controversy, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) appointed a contact group to draft a resolution of clarification that would later be appended to the Beijing Program of Action. In their statement, the authors argued that the term *gender* had been commonly used and understood in other UN forums and conferences and that there was "no indication that any new meanings or connotation of the term, different from accepted prior usage, was intended in the Platform for Action," and as such they "reaffirmed that the word 'gender' as used in the Platform for Action was intended to be interpreted and understood as it was in

ordinary, generally accepted usage" (United Nations Informal Contact Group on Gender, 1995, quoted in Scott, 1999) . Scholar Joan Scott has pointed out that the striking lack of definition of the term in this statement, while perhaps providing a strategic defense against the Vatican-led attacks, could not "settle controversy by denying that it exists"; did little to address the concerns of those who felt *gender* constitutes a threat to traditional heteropatriarchal orders; failed to acknowledge that the term was relatively recent; and left the term – and the larger controversies which it stood in for – vulnerable in that its unnamed referent was left to the whims of common usage and thus debate (J. W. Scott 1999; also discussed in Weed 2011).

The emergence of *gender ideology* as an empty signifier capitalizes on the lack of clarity over what *gender* has ever signified (Runyan and Zalewski In Review). The vagueness of the definition of *gender* in applied contexts like the United Nations and its intellectual confusion within academic deployments (Butler and Weed 2011) left *gender* an ill-defined term subject to a multiplicity of interpretations. Key opponents of abortion and LGBT or sexual rights alleged that the concept of gender aimed to displace and destroy the traditional family and natural order of society based on indisputable biological truths, including the fundamental difference and complementarity of women and men. Some went a step further, arguing that the "natural family" not only formed the basis of "society', but also of Western civilization itself, a racialized concept that linked anti-gender positions to much larger ideological positions around European and Christian superiority and vulnerability.

As a key example of the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2010), legal scholar Mary Anne Case analyzed the "invention of complementary" to probe how a small group of intellectuals linked to the Vatican developed and promoted a string of expositions staking out arguments against gender (Case 2016a). Among them was the influential book *The Gender Agenda* by Catholic writer Dale O'Leary in 1997. O'Leary argued that the concept of *gender* constituted a deliberate political strategy implemented by international feminists to remake society in what

others have come to call "social engineering." According to O'Leary, the basis of society is the natural family, which in turn rests upon biologically and socially complementary roles for men and women; the destabilization or denial of these roles would thus inevitably lead to the destruction not only of the family but also society itself. One key feature of this emergent rhetoric – with the Vatican in the lead – was the appropriation of increasingly vernacular liberal language, such as discourses of feminism, human rights, and gender, that created and exploited a general popular confusion and resignified liberal rhetoric. Commentator Gillian Kane called this strategy "Vatican gaslighting" (Kane 2018, 2).

While this opposition was formidable, its ability to gain significant purchase in the human rights system was limited in the 2000s. Meanwhile, both feminist and sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) advocates continued to build on the groundwork laid in the 1990s and to close its gaps throughout the 2000s. They generated a series of resolutions, proposals, and landmark documents, such as the Yogyakarta Principles in 2006, that sought to further clarify and expand sexual, reproductive, and gender-based rights in the UN and international human rights system and beyond. In particular, activists around the world worked to rather successfully construct, expand, and implement the notion of "LGBT rights" (R. R. Thoreson 2014). Local, national, and regional legal systems around the world began to follow suit with same-sex partnership recognition, anti-discrimination provisions, and gender identity laws.

As the 2000s wore on, the incipient transnational pro-family movement tracked and countered these trends as it continued to grow, forming linkages with conservative governments; expanding its networks beyond the United States and Canada to Eastern and Western Europe, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa through organizations like the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) and the World Congress of Families; and learning and borrowing among national level contests. Up until the 2010s, these counter-maneuvers had manifested primarily through NGO legal advocacy and intellectual productions with relatively limited circulation. NGOs conducted direct legal

advocacy with governments or international governmental bodies, often sharing strategies, rhetoric, and resources, for example, through organizations like ADF (Kaoma 2009), who helped spread pre-emptive same-sex marriage bans to countries where this was not even being discussed. In some cases, these actions produced local sex panics and backlash, as in the infamous case of Scott Lively in Uganda,[6] or were able to mobilize significant but short-lived mobilizations, as in NOM's marches against same-sex marriage in the United States.

In a key shift beginning in the 2010s and particularly in Europe, anti-gender traditionalists and right-wing populists that had been gaining momentum in the region fused to produce a third facet and phase of anti-gender campaigning – the rapid rise of popular anti-gender movements (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). In this decade, anti-gender campaigning exploded all over Europe, ignited by the 2013 anti-*gender ideology* and same-sex marriage mobilizations led by Manif Pour Tous in the historical seat of secular liberal democracy –France– with the support and backing of the Catholic Church (E. Fassin 2016; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou 2017; Harsin 2018; Downing 2018; Perreau 2016). These popular campaigns were made possible by the convergence of several factors, including effective harnessing of the emerging tools of social media and its recently exponentially expanded penetration; the expansion, institutionalization, and coordination of transnational profamily organizing; and a broader context of uncertainty, insecurity, and distrust, which I explore throughout this dissertation.

Some of the key international actors proactively spreading *gender ideology* discourse and activism throughout both the physical and online world include: CitizenGO, the global arm of Hazte Oír, the global conservative platform based in Spain that has received strategic training from conservative profamily organizations in the United States, has provided strategic and infrastructural support to help local organizations mobilize tens of thousands of followers,

[6] Scott Lively is an American evangelical whose conference presentations and other actions in Uganda helped facilitate the proposal of a draconian bill in the Ugandan parliament that sought to criminalize same-sex acts and spurred an uptick in anti-LGBT rhetoric and violence.

including through a permanent presence in Mexico. I attended CitizenGO's 2017 Sex and Gender Conference in Madrid, the first international conference on *gender ideology* and which brought together the leading voices of the global profamily/anti-gender movement from Europe, the United States, and across Latin America, including Juan Dabdoub of Mexico's ConFamilia. In fact, Mexico's participation in the conference was outsized; of the 43 sponsoring organizations from more than a dozen countries spanning the Atlantic, seven came from Mexico. Mexico's wealthy business community, one interviewee later explained to me, ensures the profamily movement in Mexico is well funded, making them an important source of resources and support not only for the Mexican profamily movement but around the region and the world as well.

Another key actor driving the global profamily space with deep connections to the Mexican profamily movement is the Political Network for Values (PNV) which brings together profamily politicians and political actors predominantly in the Americas and Europe. As of writing, PNV is co-led by Hungarian presidential successor to Victor Orbán (as of 2022), Katalin Novák, who is hosting United States Republicans' premier annual conference the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2022 and Mexican profamily leader as well as Mexico's Rodrigo Iván Cortés, president of the Frente Nacional por la Familia's (FNF). Other influential profamily/anti-gender actors on the global stage with a strong presence in Mexico include the Alliance Defending Freedom with a global network supplying coordinated behind the scenes legal and strategic expertise to profamily organizations around the world with representation in Mexico and, of course, the Vatican itself.

While it does not maintain a fixed presence in Mexico or Latin America, the World Congress on Families, which launched on the heels of the 1995 Beijing Conference continues to provide biannual opportunities for profamily leaders worldwide to forge strategic international alliances among civil society organizations (CSOs) and between CSOs and sympathetic politicians in attendance or in the host city and to set common agendas and share strategies. WCF's president is Brian Brown who led the anti-same sex marriage movement in the United States, and among those

who have addressed the Congress include the former President of Hungary, Victor Orbán, who regularly invokes *gender ideology* discourse, supported the banning of gender studies in his country in 2018, and makes near daily reference to the threat of infiltration by secret agents of George Soros, among whose strategies, he claims, is promoting *transgenderism* in order to reduce and eventually eliminate native Hungarians (Storey-Nagy 2021).

The Latin American *Gender Ideology* Explosion

Gender ideology entered mainstream political discourse in Latin America a few years after it reached wide circulation in Europe, explosively entering the mainstream in 2016. While the "explosion" in anti-gender activism took many by surprise in a region often perceived to be experiencing a "Rainbow Tide" – a term playing off the so-called Pink Tide of the 2000s and referencing a wave of pro-LGBT legislation in parts of the region, anti-gender political work has existed in the region for as long as it has in Europe and the United States. Profamily advocates from across Latin American also attended the Cairo and Beijing conferences in the 1990s and have played active roles in the development of transnational profamily activism since that decade. It was Latin Americans linked to the Vatican, after all, who motioned in opposition to the word "gender" at Beijing, and many current anti-gender movement leaders in Latin America, like Juan Dabdoub of Mexico's ConFamilia, got their start at the Cairo Conference.

More active anti-gender campaigns emerged at least as early as 2011. For example, a campaign organized by the Catholic Church began that year in Paraguay, a context which acted as a "lab for anti-gender ideas," especially through the active interventions of global anti-gender leader Alliance for Defending Freedom (ADF) (Cariboni n.d.), taking aim against sexuality education. By 2013, even ostensibly-leftist populist Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa denounced the "dangerous *gender ideology*" as a threat to the family in a national address, even while the administration was actively engaged in what I and others have previously analyzed as pinkwashing

(Wilkinson 2019). Anti-gender campaigns quickly spread to nearly every country across the region, and by 2015 well-coordinated advocates from across the region jointly introduced the fight against *gender ideology* at the Organization of American States (OAS).

It was in the latter half of 2016 when the region experienced the popular *gender ideology* explosion that quickly spread across the region. The turn came with both surprising speed and impact, making *gender ideology* a common household phrase in many parts of the region, including in Mexico. Anti-gender activism in that year mobilized thousands to the streets across the region and helped to defeat federal legislation to legalize same-sex marriage in Mexico, and by 2018, *gender ideology* had become a linchpin issue in multiple presidential elections that year. Since then campaigns against gender ideology have become central drivers in political efforts. These range from the forced resignation of pro-LGBT Education Ministers in Costa Rica and Colombia to the defeat of Colombia's Peace Accord referendum (Serrano 2017), where opponents of the Peace Accords gender-inclusive language framed a vote for peace as a vote against the family (Corredor 2021). They have also facilitated significant electoral advancements as in Brazil (Miskolci 2018) resulting in flipping the presidency to right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro, and nearly doing so in Costa Rica (Arguedas Ramírez 2018), where Fabricio Alvarado narrowly lost the election after a platform that centered opposition to gender ideology launched him from obscurity to frontrunner status.

Their efforts also led to successful bans on including *gender ideology* in textbooks in 2017 in Paraguay and nearly so in Guatemala in 2022 where the National Assembly passed the Protection of Life and Family bill with overwhelming support. It too would have also banned "teaching gender ideology," but was vetoed by the country's conservative, profamily president, presumably in response to international pressure. Anti-gender campaigns have also generated more than 200 legislative proposals in Brazil to restrict discussing LGBT issues in schools (Human Rights Watch 2022), a coordinated strategy rolled out by profamily advocates in the United States as well in the

form of dozens of bills that have swept the country that would ban discussion of LGBT topics in elementary schools, like that in Florida passed in May 2022.[7]

In addition to being part of a larger transnational anti-gender movement, anti-gender activism in Latin America has also been built upon earlier and well-established national and regional pro-life movements; fierce attachment to the widely shared Latin American notion of *patria potestad*, or patriarchal sovereignty over the family; outrage over pervasive high-level corruption scandals across the region; discontent with the perceived failures of the region's "21st Century Socialism', with special reference to the sharp deterioration of Venezuela; and ardent support for Latin American sovereignty, including a shared history of subjection and resistance to disastrous neoliberal policies imposed by multilateral institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, a topic I explore in more depth in Chapter 5.[8] Anti-gender-ideology activism in Latin America has also particularly targeted parents, as evidenced by the popularity of the campaign #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas (#Don'tMessWithMyKids). It has also helped propel a wave of conservative political movements into power as part of a (re)turn to the Right across the region, much like that seen in Europe.

In Latin America, key actors leading efforts to popularize, cultivate support for, and advance anti-gender movements in the region include CitizenGO with a permanent staff in Mexico; the Iberoamerican Congress on Life and Family, started by Mexican evangelical Aaron Lara which brings together evangelicals and more recently Catholics too from Spain and Latin America to share and coordinate strategies to promote profamily policies and movements across both national contexts and at the Organization of American States (OAS). The region's most popularized referenced figure on *gender ideology* is Argentine

[7] In the US, opponents of such measures have called them "don't say gay" laws.

[8] Latin America has a long history of generating political economic critique, for example, dependency or underdevelopment theory (Gunder Frank 1966) as well as some of the most powerful popular social movements resisting neoliberalism (Strawn 2009).

intellectual, Agustín Laje, whose critique and political project is encapsulated in his book *The Black Book of the New Left: Gender Ideology or Cultural Subversion,* co-authored with Nicolás Márquez. The book outlines the authors' intellectual and political genealogy of *gender ideology* and their arguments against it. Their tireless book tours across Latin America have reached tens of thousands, and videos of their talks have reached tens of thousands more, quickly making their book a handbook of anti-gender campaigns across the region.

That popular anti-gender activism has exploded in the two world regions, Europe, and Latin America, that have been most successful in advancing legal commitments to LGBT rights and gender equality, at least at the regional level and even if unevenly, suggests that these emergent formations constitute an anti-feminist or anti-gender backlash, or countermovement as others have argued. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these popular movements are novel only in form but not in content. Thus, they might more accurately be described as a latest iteration of a longstanding backlash, countermovement, or counter-offensive (Corredor 2019; Arguedas Ramírez, Gabriela and Morgan, Lynn M. 2017). But also, as Paternotte and Kuhar (2017) argue in the case of Europe, and which I would argue applies to Latin America as well, anti-gender activism has become a key feature of and a consequential variable in emerging forms of right-wing populism across the region. *Gender ideology* discourse, though inherently a transnational phenomenon with profound similarities across contexts, is understood and deployed distinctly —and does different political work— in distinct national contexts. Thus, an analysis of anti-gender activism in Mexico enables not only a better understanding of how *gender ideology* discourse circulates transnationally through a contextualized case study, but also, how Mexicans experience and make meaning out of the profound social change, political crises, and insecurities that characterize its past three decades.

The Roots & Emergence of Anti-Gender Advocacy in Mexico

Politicized opposition to gender is neither novel nor unique to Mexico; but it has shifted form. A large body of scholarship has addressed the historical and fundamental relationship between religion and politics, especially conservative politics, that has characterized Latin American societies. Studies have focused on the conceptual and institutional linkages between family, church, and nation that are central to the region's varying forms of national Catholicism and more recently the rise of political Evangelicalism (Garma, Ramírez, and Corpus 2018). Political work specifically targeting gender began in Mexico immediately following the emergence of a conservative countermovement opposing the adoption of the term *gender* in the United Nations conferences of the 1990s (Elisabeth Jay Friedman 2003).

While anti-gender debates and developments developed in Mexico in the aftermath throughout the late 1990s and into the 2000s, the circulation of these arguments and political work on gender remained relatively confined to elite Catholic and allied academic circles within the Catholic Church and Anahuac and Panamericana Universities, a history which I detail further in Chapter 3. This began to change as the prolife and profamily movements mobilized in response to advancements in women's and LGBT rights. As is the case across the Latin American region, anti-gender activism in Mexico builds upon the infrastructure of earlier anti-abortion activism, which has a much longer trajectory in Latin America and has historically relied on the resources and social and political infrastructure of the Catholic Church. Anti-abortion activism in Mexico had begun in the late seventies (1978) in response to the first proposal in Mexico to decriminalize abortion on the heels of the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in the United States in 1973. To oppose this and any other attempt to decriminalize abortion in Mexico, activists founded the Pro-Life Committee, a Mexico-City based para-organization of the Catholic Church and off-shoot of the global anti-abortion organization, Human Life International. With little to defend, since

abortion was already criminalized in Mexico and no initiative was likely to change that in the Mexican context, Pro-Life Committee carried out small-scale activism undertaken primarily in the capital, Mexico City.

Shattering perceptions that the criminalization of abortion in Mexico was a law of the land that could be taken for granted, feminist organizers successfully decriminalized first trimester abortions in Mexico City in 2007. This ignited a more active and diversified anti-abortion movement (Singer 2022). A broader pool of organizers sought to strategically expand the reach and participation of the public in anti-abortion efforts (i.e. citizen participation) and to preempt the spread of decriminalization efforts in the states through local efforts that have successfully sought to constitutionally introduce, affirm, or strengthen abortion bans and/or to define life as beginning at conception at the state level (Reuterswärd 2021). Similarly, while a handful of organizations like the national pro-life, pro-family organization Red Familia have long made known their opposition to same-sex partnership recognition in forums both public and private, it was not until same-sex marriage was legalized in Mexico City in 2015 that a more formal pro-family movement took root in Mexico, building on surging anti-abortion organizing, especially in offensive efforts that sought to preempt any similar developments outside the capital city.

However, in 2016, anti-gender organizing erupted in a novel form as part of a regional wave of popular campaigns. The trigger in Mexico came when President Enrique Peña Nieto abruptly announced a five-point gender equality proposal in May 2016 that included the federal legalization of same-sex marriage. As the upcoming 2018 elections loomed closer, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) had seen approval for both his administration and his long-standing party, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), collapsing under outrage over Mexico's escalating security and corruption crises. Widespread discontent was reflected in both historically low national approval ratings and harsh reprimands from the international community for the human rights crisis in the country, especially after the mishandling of a case of 43 murdered students that

had gained international notoriety. The move took many by surprise on both sides of the issue, who perceived the move as a political calculation in the face of his cratering domestic support and sharp international criticism. It would be an easy political calculation ahead of key elections the following year; it enjoyed strong support from the important power base of Mexico City, where same-sex marriage was already legal, and came at little political cost since it would only speed up what was already inevitable after a favorable federal Supreme Court ruling the year had already required states to align with its ruling legalizing same-sex marriage.

But the gamble backfired. Independent pro-family groups seized the opportunity to join forces in a coordinated response to stoke popular backlash to the proposal. Channeling unprecedented outrage over corruption and general disapproval of homosexuality in Mexico into much more than just a rebuke of Peña Nieto and his Institutional Revolutionary Party, the pro-family groups instigated a full-blown "moral panic" over gender ideology (Careaga-Pérez 2017). Drawing on expertise that their leaders had gained in preceding years and on organizing strategies from elsewhere, such as the Manif Pour Tous model, pro-family organizations galvanized into action. Achieving a new level of coordination, they founded a well-organized and permanent umbrella coalition and coordinating body, Frente Nacional por la Familia (FNF, The National Front for the Family), to defend the traditional family against same-sex marriage, abortion, and *gender ideology*. With the help of CitizenGO, FNF organized nationwide protests in September 2016 that took direct aim against the Nieto proposal and its "imposition of *gender ideology*." The demonstrations gathered hundreds of thousands of protesters in sixteen cities across Mexico, much like those that had taken place across Europe and only a month earlier in Colombia, capturing not only national but international attention.

Pro-family advocates began to circulate viral videos educating viewers about the dangers of *gender ideology*, including translated Manif Pour Tous videos. Another widely circulated video produced by ViVoz claimed that *gender ideology* constituted the imposition of totalitarianism akin

to Nazism and an international strategy backed by the United Nations, World Bank, and IMF to reduce and control the Mexican population and its resources. The video indirectly referenced the decades old Mexican population program Small Families Live Better as the origin of this effort, linking *gender ideology* to both the widely opposed issue of abortion and to multilateral financial organizations deeply despised and distrusted in the region. Their actions launched *gender ideology* into mainstream political discourse and transformed it into a common household term for many Mexicans seemingly overnight.

Its organizers hailed the march as a corrective reminder to the Peña Nieto administration that much of the Mexican population remains deeply conservative, while many who marched perceived the proposal as a cheap and offensive attempt to salvage Peña Nieto and the PRI's image and to distract from their massive failures in terms of insecurity, impunity, and corruption. Ultimately, the series of events had the opposite effect of its purported intentions. The Senate rejected Peña Nieto's same sex-marriage proposal in November the same year, and the PRI was pummeled in the 2017 elections. Moreover, it provoked an ongoing and well-coordinated movement that continues to grow and consolidate a profamily constituency and political power. In the end, profamily organizers skillfully seized a platform to not only pit LGBT rights against the traditional Mexican family –Mexico's most cherished institution, they claimed– but also to frame them as a distraction and therefore an impediment to the vital issues of corruption and security.

The 2018 elections, however, showed that even these concerns were not enough to overcome Mexicans' enthusiasm for the most promising anti-corruption candidate —anti-establishment leftist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). Not only had he mostly avoided the controversial topics of abortion and LGBT rights during his campaign, his MORENA party had also forged an unprecedented alliance with a small, new conservative evangelical party based upon economic policy, moves that ultimately split the socially conservative vote. AMLO's 2018 landslide victory took Mexico in a different political direction than much of the rest of the

region; however, much like the Costa Rican case, the election of AMLO and the evident support for abortion and LGBT rights among many of the party's newly elected members only served as a catalyst for anti-gender organizing in hyper-polarized Mexico.

They didn't know it then, but they had little to worry about, at least from AMLO himself. Within his first month, AMLO published and distributed 10 million copies of a revised version of the national Cartilla Moral (Moral Constitution). The document outlined voluntary guidance on ethics, values, and morals for citizens as an effort to restore the moral and cultural values that AMLO believed had been lost during the preceding neoliberal period. Based upon the original Cartilla Moral written by public intellectual Alfonso Reyes in 1944, AMLO's version reads like a national plan of action but with a dutifully moralizing bent and the profamily influence of PES, the evangelical party that had joined his electoral coalition and whom he invited to contribute to the document. In addition to referencing basic tenets of Mexico's liberal democracy, like respect for the law, duty, trust, and truth, the document glorifies and centers a love of family and of nation, with no reference to the plurality of those institutions.

Furthermore, as though straight from one of the many *gender ideology* talks I had attended, AMLO's Cartilla Moral asserted the moral value of inviolable Truth, which, it stated "cannot be undone with lies and which sometimes contradicts our interests or our desires. Our respect of the truth is, at the same time, the highest moral quality" (Reyes and Luis Martínez 1992, 26). Some profamily activists interpreted this to imply support for their firm stance on the hard "truth" about gender —that the world is comprised only of men and women, that you are one or the other at birth, and that this can never be chosen or changed, no matter how much one's desires may conflict with that Truth. A frequent joke that I was told more times than I can count conveyed this point: "I may wish that I were a giraffe (or the joke teller's favored animal of the day), but no matter how much I might want it to be true or possible, that doesn't make it true." Am I a giraffe? came the punchline.

The facetious rhetorical question was intended to expose as "fact" that we are born with a sexed body and a corresponding gender given either by God or by nature, and no matter how much we may wish it were otherwise, our sex and gender will always be an inescapable and immutable Truth. This Truth was so central to profamily organizing that in response to the controversies stirring over gender, the Congregation for Catholic Education at the Vatican published a treatise in 2019 reaffirming the view that sex is Truth. The message was in the title: "Male and Female He Created Them" (CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION 2019). Even if the Cartilla Moral's phrasing did not directly imply such an imputed rejection of *gender ideology*, its overall moralizing tone and extol of the family reinforced profamily claims to the vested interest and justified role for the state in promoting the family for economic, moral, social, and political restoration and progress, including in adjudicating between the truth and the post-truth about gender.

The Work of Doubt: Il/liberal Realities

In the remainder of this chapter, I introduce and contrast two ethnographic presentations and examine two modes in which the work of doubt unfolds in popular anti-gender activism in Mexico, which I will further unpack and analyze throughout the rest of the chapters of the dissertation. The first example observes how FNF, a more established and institutionalized profamily organization that seeks to capture state power, brought gender ideology to popular audiences through a frame war and a politics of fear, an analysis I deepen in Chapter 3's exploration of the deployment of strategic security framing. The second observes how its rival, Coalición Sumas, whose relationship to state power was more conflicted in its regard of the state less as a resource to be instrumentalized and more an object of permanent suspicion. Sumas tended to galvanize popular support through sensational conspiracy theorizing, including rumors that the more establishment FNF itself was in cahoots with the Illuminati. I explore these dynamics in more depth in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

When I arrived in Mexico City in 2018, I landed in the middle of a national controversy over a proposal to "democratize the family." As I observed my profamily interlocutors launch fierce and frantic opposition to these proposals, two prevalent forms of opposition discourse emerged. In considering these two forms, I became interested in probing the truth politics of these two styles of profamily political discourse to explore how they work to undermine feminist political struggles that legitimize their equality-based rights claims within the aspirational terms of liberal democracy, even while they hold this in tension with feminist and/or leftist critiques of the limitations of those very same liberal democracies. Though clearly related and overlapping, the two modes tended to predominate in different settings. On the one hand, profamily leaders registered their official opposition by engaging in a public framing war that pushed on but remained within the authorized bounds of conventional liberal rational political discourse. Their reframing engaged the content of their feminist opponents' discourse about the family to tell a *different* story about it, offering a very different take on the more or less common grounds of a shared reality. On the other hand, the conspiracy theories that pervaded less official profamily channels, particularly on social media, didn't just tell a *different* story; they claimed to offer *the rest* of the story, the untold back story, the *real* story. In framing their feminist opposition as not just wrong but misleading and deceitful, this discursive style rejected the premise of a common ground, putting forth not a competing *take* on a *shared* reality, but a *competing reality* entirely.

The profamily movement had just lost its bid to prevent the 2018 election of AMLO. They believed that their worst fears were materializing when just weeks after the election, AMLO's newly announced Secretary of the Interior and well-known feminist, Olga Sanchez Cordero, published a proposal to "the democratize the family." By this, she meant transforming stereotypical gender roles in the family; affirming that children are not the property of the family but are rights-bearing subjects, including among other things, inferable access to sexual and reproductive rights and education; recognizing the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of the family; and

ensuring that elders are respected and cared for. If we want to secure Mexico's future for our children, fulfill our obligations as a democracy, and win the war against the violence debilitating Mexico, we must democratize the family, she argued.

In response, profamily activists launched a national counter campaign, in which they hoped to wrangle back interpretive power over both "gender" and "democracy" from their progressive and feminist opponents. They argued that Sanchez Cordero's proposal wouldn't *democratize* the family; it would *destroy* the family. Though the profamily movement's 2016 mass street protests had turned *gender ideology* into a household term overnight, many of those whom the profamily movement sought to reach —everyday devout folks— still didn't know what this vague but dangerous *gender ideology* controversy was about, what it would do, or who was behind it. Profamily leaders targeted these audiences with carefully crafted counter-frames.

"*Democratize the family*!?" Mexico's foremost profamily leader, Rodrigo Iván Cortés, told a packed room of 500 parishioners in 2018 in a talk that he would replicate across the country. *This was just another political scam as part of a globally coordinated agenda by "powerful interests" to impose "gender ideology" on everyday Mexicans. It was a cynical attempt to impose the "culture of death" on Mexico. Sanchez Cordero was obsessed with death*, he said, *and pushing a comprehensive agenda of death on society that supported access to abortion (which kills children), legalizing marijuana (which kills adults), and euthanasia (which kills elders). Further, this intrusion of the state in the private realm of the family would only exacerbate Mexico's spiraling violence by hastening the devaluation of life that formed the very root of Mexico's problems of insecurity and organized crime. And if MORENA (AMLO's party) were to succeed with this agenda of death, we would see cadavers piling up in the streets. In short*, he argued, as he reframed the problem and its solution, *we don't need to* democratize *the family to save Mexico; we need to* secure *and* fortify *the traditional Mexican family.*

This was a fairly standard social movement framing war. Sanchez Cordero proposed to protect children and secure their future; her opponents declared she was putting their future at risk and that she was attacking parents' rights over their children so that the state could gain access to them. She wrote that her proposal would reduce violence; they contended that she would stoke it. She advocated making the family more just; they asserted that she would destroy the family. She urged taking responsibility for the care of the elderly and people with disabilities; they argued that she proposed to "eliminate" them. She declared her support for disenfranchised women and children; they claimed to represent the *real* interests of women and children. She aspired to fulfill and strengthen democracy; they argued that she was violating and undermining democracy. And so on and so forth.

The goal of their counter-framing campaign was to reframe the problem and the normative role of the family vis a vis the state, and to redirect support to their proposed policy positions instead, pushing the view that a democracy (at least the neoliberal one they imagined) that is obligated to care for its people must support and reinforce strong families (read: traditional heteropatriarchal) for a strong nation. The family was the solution for everything —for the violence, the country's future, and for Mexican democracy. As a strategy waged at the level of reality construction, this public-facing mobilizing frame cautiously navigated the norms prescribed by conventional liberal political debate. Though its exaggerated fearmongering severely strained the bounds of these conventions, it conformed to them, engaging and rebutting opposing proposals by contesting the formulation of the problem and emphasizing the negative outcomes of their policy proposals.

Though he strongly implied malfeasance and raised *questions* and *doubts* about the legitimacy of his opponent, this leader carefully withheld explicit accusations of collusion or conspiracy and could therefore maintain plausible deniability of responsibility for any. Though this rhetoric was framed as an explanation and as a warning about the dangers of gender ideology, it

raised more questions for audiences than it answered. What audiences were so often left wondering after presentations like these was: *Why? Why, if this is so obviously wrong, would they do this to us, to Mexico?* These questions, which emerged from audience members almost without fail after the many *gender ideology* talks I attended, tugged at the seams of the reality that audiences could imagine they shared with their feminist opponents. If it was so obviously wrong-headed and as outright dangerous as their moral leaders claimed, then what were the real motives behind their actions? Whose interests did they represent? There was something left unsaid.

These strategically raised questions did not yield answers that were both satisfying and intelligible within the allowable terms of official liberal political discourse. But, as I would eventually come to learn in my fieldwork, another adjacent –perhaps even interdependent– form of discourse filled the gap to meet this manufactured demand for simplistic answers and clear explanations: conspiracy theories, and lots of them. But these conspiracy theories didn't just rebut or reframe policy positions; they reframed the *whole debate* as illegitimate, faked, and/or staged. And unlike the framing war, these *un*authorized narratives were not easily publicly accessible. Only after months of spending time with profamily supporters and becoming familiar with the less visible and official channels where they were exchanged —from hallway conversations to social media networks— did I eventually learn that conspiracy theories about "gender ideology" saturated the backchannels of profamily discourse, circulating widely and constantly on WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook.

Anti-gender conspiracy theories cast feminists like Sanchez Cordero variously as an agent of the Illuminati or perhaps of the Devil, or as an accomplice of the "international LGBT lobby," or as a puppet of anti-globalist conspiracy theorists' most popular boogeyman, George Soros, or perhaps Bill Gates, or the United Nations, and as engaged in a plot to impose socialism or population control or the New World Order on Mexico. There were endless variations, and I explore them in more depth in Chapter 4. Though it was treated as an open secret that this is what was *really* going on,

these “truths” were what Michael Barkun (2016) calls “stigmatized knowledge” —unauthorized and fruitless or even imprudent to utter publicly where they would invariably be publicly denied.

As counter-narratives and alternative truths, these unofficial discourses depend upon official “truths” to differentiate themselves. Unconstrained by the legitimizing expectations of liberal rational discourse, these anti-gender conspiracy theories can do what liberal truth regimes can’t: freely attribute nefarious intent, name actors and motives, explain what is only publicly insinuated, and elaborate on what is typically left vague in official discourse. In other words, they fill in the gaps and tell the rest of the story. But to tell the *rest* of the story depends on the beginning of the story as its point of departure. This is the function that the (barely) authorized framing war plays in making possible this proliferation of conspiracy theories. Like a call and response, a politics of fear sets the table and raises the questions; conspiracy theories offer a conjectural feast and smorgasbord of answers.

In this instance, they narrativized and made meaningful sense out of the urgency to defend the Mexican family by situating the controversy within the existential and epic terms of a righteous and global power struggle, one that sympathetically cast profamily supporters, the family, Mexico, and democracy itself as its endangered victims. In their affective dimension, they tapped into popular disenchantment with elite power and corruption, rationalizing these grievance politics by offering theories of *causation* that appealed to common sense and theories of *power* that spoke to a shared sense of powerlessness. Unaccountable to the expectations of nuance, evidence, and cohesive reason that at least govern in an aspirational sense what liberal truths can be, conspiracy theories instead supplied what was in demand: powerful, appealing, all-consuming, simple, black and white, and personalized truths. They marshalled enough facts and fictions to offer the illusion of realism. They were impervious to external critiques of their many internal contradictions, implausible theories of power, or inaccuracies. And they implicitly assigned their followers the role

of righteous victim ("us) and relegated political opponents to the role of dishonest and illegitimate conspirators ("them").

Most importantly, the work of doubt that these conspiracy theories performed served not only to deny that there was a shared reality with political opponents; but also, it is doubtful of the possibility that there *could* be such a thing. By claiming to offer the back story, the true story, the legitimate story, in claiming to represent the *real*, they assert that their political opponents' reality is unreal and untrue, and that the grounds from which they speak or make claims are therefore illegitimate. After all, by referring to gender as *gender ideology*, anti-gender campaigners signal their rejection of its entire premise and its very legitimacy, bracketing it as a "false ideology" that is in fact not "real." And if gender is not "real," but a manipulation attempt, then it is not a legitimate basis for policy proposals. This dynamic derives in part from the very logic of the conspiracy theory itself, which assumes that conspirators conceal their true intentions, rests upon a split reality —a real one, and a fabricated one. The real is assigned to the conspiracy's victims, while the conspirator's reality can only ever be fake. It is not just that conspiracy theories *disincentive* seeking shared ground with political opponents. It is that shared ground is illegible within most conspiracy theories. The liberal assumption of a good faith debate based upon a reasonably shared account of the real is literally not possible.

There are additional implications of these dynamics. Feminist and LGBT activists who have little social interaction with their political opponents in polarized Mexico are often unaware of these conspiracy theories. I was reminded of this after watching a national debate between profamily leader Rodrigo Iván Cortés and a leading feminist Assemblywoman. Exasperated in her attempts to respond to him, I later learned in an interview with her that she was unaware of the term *gender ideology*, let alone how profamily supporters might perceive her politics and her agenda. When feminist activists assume that they are engaging profamily political opponents in good faith debates unaware that they have been cast into a narrative and their actions interpreted

according to this split reality, they are ill-equipped to respond effectively and often end up unwittingly reinforcing their opponents' suspicions. Filtered through a conspiracy theory, their affirmative claims are taken as diversions from their real intentions, and defensive ones are interpreted as the telltale denial of a coverup. The more they defensively talk about the gender perspective to legitimize their political projects and to convince their opponents of its merits, the more they delegitimize themselves in their opponents' eyes.

As they navigate what is and is not authorized by conventional liberal political discourse, anti-gender leaders toe the line of performative conventional liberal restraint in public fora, while many profamily supporters complement this discourse through pervasive conspiracy theorizing in ways that flout liberal truth regimes entirely. Anti-gender conspiracy theories that lie outside official discourse not only provide alternate explanations but also alternate realities.

The profamily movement's discursive politics of truth, and particularly the conspiratorial currents that underlie and drive much of the rationalization and support for these movements, ultimately push back on and undermine the liberal truth regimes from which liberal democracy proceeds, namely a shared and "faithful account of the real" as Donna Haraway (D. Haraway 1988)puts it. While feminist critiques of objectivity, like Haraway's, have also obviously pushed back on liberal truth regimes, reminding us that all knowledge is partial, what concerns me here is how anti-gender activists and their supporters navigate and ultimately undermine the conventions of liberal political discourse in ways that imperil feminists' ability to legitimize their political projects. Anti-gender activists weaponize and instrumentalize truth itself aiming not to win democratic debates but to undermine their legitimacy, and with them the liberal systems and processes upon which most feminist movements depend, however imperfectly, to legitimize their political projects and pursue their agendas. That gender is not real creates an impasse; an insurmountable split between the real and the unreal.

A variety of leftist and feminist critiques point out that liberal democracy is aspirational. Not only is it imperfect, they point out, it's also not something we have actually ever achieved. But it is nonetheless, even if contradictory, the legitimizing framework that feminist movements rely on to defend and legitimize their rights claims and to advance their movements. The conspiracy theories of profamily opponents slide into illiberal discourse. They are democratic in some ways in their populist claims to defend the interests of the people; but they are not liberal, and they do not conform to liberal rationalities or its insistence on this shared "faithful account of the real." What these truth politics rationalize, and what the profamily movement is advocating for instead, is more like what's been openly advocated for by Hungary's Victor Orbán and others by name: *illiberal* democracy: democracy (or majoritarian rule) but without the liberalism (including the protection of minority rights). This is a system that would not only exclude feminists but also preclude the legitimacy of women's and LGBT rights claims and their realities altogether, and which isn't really, many would argue, democracy at all.

CHAPTER 3. Gender As Death Threat to the Family: How the "Security Frame" Shapes Anti-Gender Activism in Mexico

Introduction

One explanation for the remarkable rise of anti-gender campaigns in Latin America emphasizes their popularization by right-wing forces that have come to power across the region on a platform that combines a critique of the failed welfare state with moral conservativism (Arguedas Ramírez 2018; Corrêa, Pecheny, and Careaga 2019). Another explanation points to the spectacular surge in political Evangelicalism as an influential political actor (Corrales 2020). The Mexican case, where Catholics still far outnumber Evangelicals and where a populist leftist party came to power on a welfare platform in 2018, can claim neither condition, yet Mexican pro-family[9] activists continue to sustain a robust anti-gender campaign. In this chapter, I draw on ethnographic data and social movement frame analysis to explore how Mexican pro-family activists have strategically articulated anti-gender advocacy through a security master frame, tapping into both strategic expertise and generalized anxieties to articulate a package of highly resonant frames in this context (Benford and Snow 2000). Through an analysis of how it evolved, how it works, and what it accomplishes, this chapter demonstrates how the "security frame" has become an adaptive and sustaining feature of anti-gender campaigning in Mexico by redirecting security concerns to moral debates over gender.

In the first section, I argue that rather than as an incidental or organic effect, the security frame in Mexican anti-gender activism should be understood as a strategic framing practice that is informed and shaped by the security expertise of its primary architects, which can be productively

[9] I distinguish between "anti-gender" as an etic term referring to a political position or tactic and the emic term "pro-family" to refer to an identity and movement. While I adopt "anti-gender" for consistency with its growing academic usage, my own interlocutors would not describe themselves with this term but instead as "pro-family" activists. They are the only ones in Mexico who are actively organizing campaigns against gender, and thus I often use both overlapping terms. However, it is important to recognize that they are not the only ones who hold hostile views toward gender. Furthermore, the pro-family platform includes issues beyond gender, and there are some individuals who identify as pro-family but disagree with anti-gender views.

understood through a frame analysis (Benford and Snow 2000). In the second and third sections, I examine the onset of popular anti-gender organizing in Mexico in 2016 and analyze how the security frame evolved between 2016 and 2019 from earlier framings into a primary frame for pro-family organizing against the backdrop of Mexico's twin crises of security and democracy. This includes an analysis of how pro-family leaders worked to "strategically fit" anti-gender frames to the Mexican context and how they bridged security frames with those of gender politics. I also review the diagnostic and attributional tasks that the security frame has fulfilled in anti-gender organizing (Benford and Snow 2000).

In the following sections, I identify and analyze two strategic discursive features of the security frame: first, the deployment of "nested empty signifiers," such as the *culture of death*, that do the work of cohering the security frame by articulating gender ideology as a security issue and link particular moral concerns to general, secular ones; and second, the use of a logic of securitization. In framing gender ideology as a death threat to the family that is virulent, potent, and imminent, securitization logic provides a vocabulary of motive to incite action on behalf of the family. However, in harnessing securitization logic to redirect anxieties and demands over security to perceived threats to the family, pro-family leaders also deflect attention from the actual threats to democracy – including those posed by their own project of illiberal exclusion.[10]

Framing Strategy As the Art of (Culture) War

Taking the microphone to address a September 2019 rally outside Mexico City, Rodrigo Iván Cortés, Mexico's most prominent and influential pro-family leader, opened by condemning Mexico's

[10] Though pro-family leaders' rhetoric tends to lay claim to and even defend the tenets of liberal democracy, appealing to human rights frameworks in particular, their political aspirations more accurately reflect the pursuit of "unequal allocation of rights and duties" that characterizes contemporary ideological illiberalism (Kauth and King 2021). For more in-depth analysis of the imbrication of anti-gender movements with support for illberalism, see Fassin (2020), Mancini and Palazzo (forthcoming), and Reuterswärd (2021).

intensifying security crisis. It was the three-year anniversary of the 2016 marches that he had spearheaded as a co-founder of the then newly launched National Front for the Family (FNF). While Cortés had called for the need to defend the family then too, the security crisis had since intensified exponentially, and Cortés' framing of gender ideology as a security issue kept pace. Anti-gender campaigners such as Cortés had made defending the family against both encroaching violence and encroaching gender ideology a single struggle fought on distinct terrains. Despite their condemnation of gender ideology as a form of "cultural Marxism," some pro-family voices, such as Argentine anti-gender social media personality Agustín Laje, regularly cited Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci's ideas on political strategy to argue this point. Securing the family from violence required a war of maneuver – a military response. But securing the family from gender ideology necessitated a war of position, fought not on a battlefield but through the long, gradual process of "gaining ground" through culture, education, and public opinion – a "culture war" with existential stakes.

In such a formula, strategic framing practices constitute a key tactical arena, for which expertise in the art of war is a highly relevant and portable resource for the "art of culture war." At the heart of the art of culture war lies a mastery of framing strategy – the active "generation of interpretive frames" that contend "at the level of reality construction" (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). As social movement scholars have pointed out, mobilizing interpretive power is central to political contestation itself (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998). Deciphering how illiberal actors are mounting a challenge to Latin America's "third wave of democracy," driven not by militaries this time but by bureaucratic technicalities or elections, often with popular support (Lagos 2018), requires understanding how they strategically marshal such interpretative power through the art of framing.

Not incidentally, several leading anti-gender campaign strategists, including Cortés and Laje, draw on strategy training and experience in the art of war that their feminist opponents do

not. Expertise in the art of war – that is, in security or strategy studies (Koliopoulos 2010) – is as useful for prevailing in cultural and political landscapes as it is in physical ones Military and political strategies come together in psychological operations (PsyOps), a subdiscipline designed to support military and intelligence operations by influencing individual and group emotions, motives, reasoning, and behavior. These political warfare tactics might combine persuasion with the projection of a credible threat to direct popular discontent towards opponents or seek to disrupt adversaries' capabilities. The United States (US) invested in developing modern PsyOps during the Cold War to support its covert anti-communist counterinsurgency objectives, especially in Latin America. With input from Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) personnel, field manuals written at the time taught persuasion tactics like framing the US as the anti-imperialist defender of freedom and democracy against foreign enemies (usually Marxists), counterintelligence tactics like infiltrating opponent groups, and "perception management" tactics like the use of front groups.3[11] Despite harsh criticisms that they facilitated human rights violations and justified illiberal and undemocratic means to manipulate popular support, including deception and intimidation (Gill 2004), such manuals were used to train security personnel throughout the 1980s and 1990s at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, known as the School of the Americas (SoA). The William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies at the National Defense University - where Laje and Cortés completed coursework- eventually replaced the SoA but retained some of its leadership and training manuals under renamed courses (Wallace and Houston 2002). Contemporary US PsyOps manuals promote their material on mass persuasion as relevant for business, public relations, and political strategy, in which PsyOps principles like perception management have long influenced "political marketing strategy."

[11] Though they may not have drawn inspiration from these particular manuals, the enduring legacy of these kinds of political tactics reverberate in contemporary anti-gender activism, in which I observed various kinds of frame flipping, infiltration of opponent groups, and creation of front-like groups.

One of Mexico's earliest anti-gender organizers explained this connection to me in early 2019, sharing that her earliest interest in studying military strategy was for its application in business. However, she commented that such study – for instance, learning how to think in terms of asset, capability, and threat analyses – also turned out to be useful for devising movement strategy and formulating messaging. She noted that it not only gave her a framework for understanding in geopolitical and tactical terms how and why gender ideology was being imposed on Mexico, but also how to persuade her audiences by mobilizing interpretive frames.

In his leadership of FNF, whose emergence I chronicle in the following section, Cortés is widely recognized both within and outside the pro-family activist community as playing the most influential role in devising and setting national pro-family movement strategy in Mexico, including framing strategy. While there are of course contesting visions on strategy and framing among pro-family activists, many defer to Cortés on how to engage in the art of (culture) war. Not incidentally, he draws on extensive security expertise and a long career as a political strategist, often in security-related roles, as well as a lifetime of Catholic education. Most recently, he has worked as a Professor of Catholic Philosophy and Family Studies at the Vatican-sponsored Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at Anahuac University, where he has taught courses based on Pope John Paul II's flagship conservative theology of the family, including a curriculum on gender ideology. However, Cortés began his career as a youth leader in the late 1990s within the conservative National Action Party (PAN), where he rose through the ranks, serving first as an advisor to the National Defense Commission, then as a local municipal commissioner, and later as a federal deputy serving on the National Defense Commission. Through a variety of leadership roles, he learned from and led aspects of PAN's political and campaign strategies, including with respect to foreign relations and security.

Cortés not only penned PAN's security strategy, but also Mexico's first-ever National Security Law. His expertise also draws on formal study of national security and intelligence at the

US' National Defense University, strategic intelligence at the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Advanced Study, and Israeli national security policy at Galilee College in Israel, where he was mentored by Israeli security experts at a residential kibbutz. Tasked with formulating the National Security Law, he modeled the country's security strategy on the national security policies of the US and Israel (Samra 2014). He praised Israel for its prestige, experience, and effectiveness in matters of security, comparing Israel's need for constant security preparedness, where it is an aspect of daily life, with Mexico's in the face of crime that is "more organized than municipalities," as he put it (Samra 2014). As Cortés suggested, strategy training is not only or even mostly about out-maneuvering opponents physically, but also about learning how to out-organize them. This involves learning how to study, respond to, pre-empt, and/or disrupt opponents' patterns of organization, recruitment, and communications as well as how to manipulate popular opinion and support, PsyOps skills that are highly relevant to political and framing strategy.

Israel, to which Cortés attributes inspiration for devising Mexico's security strategy, leads the world in innovating and integrating "information warfare" as a core component of its security operations, including through social media. Its efforts to set the parameters of the debate and control the narrative are encapsulated in the PsyOps tactics known as "hasbara" innovated by the Israeli security state. These seek to amplify some narratives while erasing or delegitimizing others through maneuvers such as reframing, distraction, manipulating perceptions, or inducing doubt. The hasbara approach is exemplified in its Brand Israel program, a campaign designed with input from US marketing executives and launched in 2005 to "re-brand" the country's image abroad and to deflect criticism of its military operations and occupation of Palestine (Schulman 2011). One such tactic deployed by the Israel security state in Mexico is the employment of an ambassador to the country's Evangelical and pro-family communities, who builds relationships with these groups and actively cultivates support for Israel among them.

Hasbara tactics can be understood as one variety of the "post-truth populism" that frequently characterizes anti-gender movements (Harsin 2018). Hasbara tactics reshape "truth" in its authors' image not only by rejecting the content of opponents' truth claims directly but also perhaps more impactfully by challenging their authority or legitimacy or even the possibility of objective truth itself. One critical former diplomat described hasbara as a strategic effort that seeks to pre-empt and delegitimize unauthorized ideas by (among other tactics)

> promot[ing] selective listening … to decrease the willingness of audiences to consider information linked to politically unacceptable viewpoints, individuals, and groups [including opponents] … The purpose is to constrict the demand for information, not its flow [as did] its precursors … propaganda and censorship ... [Instead, it] focuses on limiting the receptivity of audiences to information. (Freeman 2012)

These goals are accomplished in part through strategic framing processes that guide interpretations of events, amplifying some while precluding others (Benford and Snow 2000). *Gender ideology* is itself an example of this, in which the frame itself does the work of fixing its interpretation as a deliberately misleading falsehood while precluding alternative readings, effectively pre-emptively defining "gender" as illegitimate in any form, such as in gender studies or even gender-based violence. While hasbara and other PsyOps strategies are the products and practices of security state apparatuses rather than of social or political movements, in practice this is a meaningless distinction. Security training in the art of war is expedient for waging culture wars over ideas, meaning, interpretation, and narrative. The anti-gender security frame, carefully crafted and strategically adapted to its context, highlights the key role of skilled framing strategists in sustaining anti-gender activism in Mexico.

The Emergence of Anti-Gender Campaigns in Mexico

When profamily leaders ignited Mexico's anti-gender movement in 2016, the history of which I outlined in the previous chapter, they recognized the need for a national coordinating body to bring together the disparate groups that had been working relatively independently until that point.

Leading pro-family advocates founded a national coordinating body, Frente Nacional por la Familia (FNF, National Front for the Family) to organize a national-level campaign to oppose the Peña Nieto's proposal (Garma, Ramírez, and Corpus 2018; Vera Balanzario 2018). Claiming to represent more than 1,000 pro-family groups across the nation, spokesperson Cortés began speaking on the collective behalf of a national pro-family movement for the first time via FNF, calling attention to the allegedly grave threat posed by gender ideology, a concept that was unknown to most Mexicans.

Within months, FNF organized two massive mobilizations that attracted national and international attention and brought tens of thousands onto the streets in 110 cities to oppose gender ideology and Peña Nieto's proposal, turning gender ideology into a household term overnight. While the Catholic leadership officially distanced the Church from FNF's confrontational strategy, FNF's message was derived from that produced by the Vatican; and while significant Evangelical turnout grabbed attention and contributed to the popular swell, FNF's ability to produce these spectacular and unprecedented mobilizations rested on the indispensable mobilizing power of Catholic clergy who were successful in urging their parishioners to participate. FNF publicly attributed the eventual defeat of the same-sex marriage proposal to its mobilizing efforts. With chapters in most states, FNF declared itself a permanent national movement to "defend the family" and represent Mexico's newly visible pro-family constituency. Former conservative politician, security expert, and Vatican-supported family studies professor Cortés was elected to lead FNF going forward.

While FNF had declared the family in need of *defense*, this early form of the security frame was neither specific nor developed, and it was not unique to Mexican pro-family advocacy. At first, FNF[412] adapted several other familiar diagnostic frames to denounce gender ideology. These

[12] While other actors using alternative frames also exist, with Evangelical pro-family leaders in particular a growing presence, I have focused this analysis on FNF because of its widely recognized, outsized role (consistent with my ethnographic observations) in dominating pro-family movement strategy in Mexico in general and for popularizing the security frame in particular (Garma, Ramírez, and Corpus 2018).

included framing it as a violation of children's rights, arguing that it deprived children of their right to a mother and a father, resulting in poor outcomes and elevated risk of abuse (Mundo Catolico 2016). Another frame claimed that it was an issue of parental rights to educate their children (Magaña 2016b). In the lead-up to the 2016 mobilizations, Cortés and other leaders made increasing use of another frame that is ubiquitous in transnational anti-gender campaigns, the anti-colonial frame, which depicts gender as an imposition on sovereignty (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). FNF drew on Pope Francis' widely cited 2015 assertions that gender theory constituted "ideological colonization" because international financial institutions were making assistance contingent on nations' adoption of teaching "gender theory" to children (Holdren 2015).

FNF strategically fitted this frame to the Mexican context, accusing Peña Nieto of acquiescing to neo-colonial pressures to advance sexual rights in exchange for a loan from the International Monetary Fund. Cortés framed gender ideology as yet another form of corruption and abuse of power, enlisting widespread disaffection with Peña Nieto as a reason to oppose his proposal. He claimed, for example, that "the president does not represent us [Mexican families]," accusing him of selling out Mexico to neo-imperial, foreign interests (Magaña 2016b). Employing a parallel frame derived from 1990s Catholic intellectuals like Dale O'Leary, Cortés also labeled Peña Nieto's proposed reforms as imposing "social engineering" against the will of the Mexican people (Magaña 2016a). In both cases, FNF framed itself as the authentic representative and protector of Mexican families from a corrupt elite within and outside Mexico.

As Benford and Snow (2000) remind us, frames are not static but rather continuously constituted, reproduced, transformed, and even replaced through ongoing and dynamic social movement processes, including in response to changes in material conditions. While none of these frames would disappear, over the years ahead, as the pro-family movement gained experience, the security crisis spiraled. The 2018 election centered concerns over security, and in response pro-

family framing strategies shifted, marked in particular by the development of the security master frame under Cortés' strategic leadership.

The Strategic Development of the Security Master Frame

After the culmination of its initial mobilizations, in 2017 FNF turned to promoting the pro-family agenda in the upcoming 2018 elections. With security and corruption ranking as top campaign issues and violence continuing to escalate, FNF responded to these strategic and contextual shifts by reframing pro-family and anti-gender activism in terms of security. The inception of Mexico's drug war in 2006 had ignited a period of extreme violence, fueled by the Mexican government's militarized response to drug cartel activity as part of the Mérida Initiative, its $3 billion bilateral security agreement with the US since 2008. After several years of slow decline, there was a sharp uptick in violence in 2015, ushering in the most violent period yet and shaping not only the 2018 campaign landscape, but also pro-family strategy. As FNF organized its first anti-gender mobilizations in 2016, homicide rates began to spike (Rodríguez Luna, Vargas, and Quintanar 2016) and continued to climb steadily, reaching the highest rate ever recorded in 2017 and again in 2018 and 2019 (INEGI 2019b).

Femicides, which had doubled between 2012 and 2016, also continued to increase significantly every year, with a jump of 145 percent registered between 2015 and 2019 (SESNSP 2020). Political violence also soared, resulting in the murder of 132 political candidates around the country in the lead-up to the 2018 elections (Diaz and Campisi 2018). By the end of 2019, the security crisis had reached staggering proportions, with more than 200,000 people killed and more than 70,000 disappeared (Benitez 2020), a figure that has now reached over 100,000. Moreover, the previously contained drug cartel violence began spilling into new territory, including formerly "safe" locations such as Mexico City, eroding Mexicans' sense of subjective security (Rodríguez Luna, Vargas, and Quintanar 2016). For example, official survey data show sharp annual increases

since 2016 in the percentage of Mexicans who responded that they felt unsafe in Mexico, reaching a high of 80 percent in 2019 (INEGI 2019a). Furthermore, an increasing percentage of Mexicans identified security as their top concern – more than two-thirds by 2019 (INEGI 2019a).

At the same time, a growing culture of impunity and corruption had significantly corroded an already low level of confidence in democracy and public institutions, especially following high-profile allegations of government complicity in and cover-up of incidents of violence, such as in the case of 43 missing students in Ayotzinapa in 2014. As Mexico climbed into the top tier of countries internally perceived as most corrupt (Transparency International 2018), reported trust in government sank to among the lowest rates in the world and continued to decline (Pew Research Center 2017a). By 2017, 93 percent of Mexicans responded that they were "unsatisfied" with how democracy was working in the country, ranking at the bottom of all countries polled (Pew Research Center 2017b). On several occasions, pro-family organizers and supporters pointed out to me that the imposition of gender ideology in Mexico was an example *par excellence* of the way in which corrupt politics unfolded both within and toward Mexico.

The twin crises of democracy and security, along with poverty and inequality, captured the electorate's attention in the lead-up to the 2018 elections. As FNF lobbied to consolidate its new constituency into a "pro-family vote," its framing increasingly bridged pro-family and security concerns. For example, FNF included security for the family as one of its goals in its 2017 strategic plan, framing such security as basic to the pro-family platform. Con Participación, one of the five organizations that made up FNF's initial board of directors, circulated a meme in which gender ideology figured as a weapon that took aim at a representation of the "natural family" (a pro-family concept that defines the family as a man, a woman, and their children), aligning the physical and symbolic vulnerability of the family. While leftist populist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador promised to tackle the security crisis through a shift in focus to what he believed were its root causes – poverty and corruption, the other two pillars of his platform – FNF criticized this approach

as insufficient. FNF accused Obrador's National Regeneration Movement party of seeking to impose gender ideology on Mexico, framing it as a moral failure that threatened the security of the family.

By 2018, Cortés routinely conjoined family and security into a single frame in his regular gender ideology talks. His use of the security frame had become both ubiquitous and diagnostic. For example, he began suggesting that gender ideology played a role in the skyrocketing violence and that its socially corrosive properties intensified the security crisis itself. In one of his gender ideology talks that I attended in 2018, Cortés told audience members that by destabilizing families and the social fabric held together by the "natural family as the basic unit of society" – a global pro-family frame (Buss and Herman 2003) – gender ideology was partly to blame for the violence and death in Mexico. In the context of a severely escalating security crisis, this extension of the security frame cast gender ideology not only as a death threat to the family, but also to Mexico itself – a matter of national security. In other words, it framed security concerns as a pro-family issue and pro-family concerns as a security issue – which Mexicans had identified as their most pressing worry, one they rated as more than twice as concerning any other issue by 2019 (INEGI 2019a).

As the security crisis continued to intensify, the security frame had become ubiquitous in anti-gender activism. Indeed, an FNF rally that I attended in September 2019 would have been difficult for a passerby to distinguish from a security rally, as Cortés lingered on statistics and stories of recent violent crime. A core task of collective action frames is to provide an "interpretive function by simplifying and condensing aspects of 'the world'" and to "organize experience" with the aim of mobilizing meaning toward particular action (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). How, then, do pro-family leaders make these sometimes tenuous connections between gender ideology and security coherent and compelling for their audiences? In the following sections, I analyze two frame articulation strategies deployed by Mexican pro-family leaders through which the security frame performs this meaning-making work.

Nested Empty Signifiers: *Gender Ideology* + Security = The Culture of Death

As he addressed the crowd that morning in September 2019, Cortés offered a different frame compared with those that FNF had led with in 2016. He began by denouncing the escalation of "extortion, kidnapping, and killings of thousands of people that tear apart families" at the hands of organized criminals. Imbuing the linkage between gender ideology and security in Mexico with meaning, Cortés related Mexico's increased violence to recently renewed efforts to decriminalize abortion in Mexico. "We are here today," he continued, "to declare that Mexico does not need a culture of death, but a *culture of life* … and we must begin by protecting the family." The message was clear to those in the crowd of about 200 suburbanites holding signs denouncing abortion and gender ideology. First, defending the family is fundamental to solving the security crisis, and second, the security crisis and gender ideology are two sides of the same coin: the culture of death. The culture of death is a widely used "concept map" (Vaggione 2017) originally formulated by Pope John Paul II. It frames the natural family as the incarnation of the culture of life because of its presumed privileged role in biological and cultural reproduction, including that of faith and of the Church itself. In Cortés' extension of this frame, the culture of life – upon which the nation, family, and church all rest – is threatened with annihilation by two interrelated manifestations of the culture of death: physical violence and gender ideology.

The culture of death, expanded to include Mexico's security crisis as deployed here, is what I describe as a nested empty signifier. It is a frame extension strategy that articulates multiple empty signifiers through one another, producing a more complex, self-referential, and cohesive discursive construct. Some scholars examining the deployment of gender ideology discourse in a variety of contexts have theorized gender ideology as an exemplary instance of an empty signifier in political discourse (Mayer and Sauer 2017), while others have pointed out the same of "security" (Rodríguez Iglesias 2017). Lacking their own coherent and agreed-upon definitions, empty signifiers are made meaningful and coherent through the circumstances of their articulation. This hyper-flexibility and

imprecision means that these signifiers readily spread "modularly" across a wide range of contexts where they refract variably and sometimes even in contradictory ways through disparate histories and geographies (Weiss and Bosia 2017). As a result, they can be easily recombined and used to recast seemingly disparate issues, such as gender politics and security, through a common framework and conceptual lens much like a "symbolic glue" (Kováts and Põim 2015).

Their conduciveness to being used as discursive framing tools means that more important than what a given empty signifier *means* is what it *does*. By recombining and conjoining two distinct empty signifiers whose meanings reference each other, nested empty signifiers produce a composite construct that appears to ratify both the meanings attributed to its components as well as their relationship to one another into a cohesive, simplified master frame. This is the case with the culture of death, which mobilizes both security and anti-gender ideology discourses to nest them within the terms of the other, as well as within the terms of a particular cultural and political context. In other words, this nested empty signifier is not deployed in a vacuum; rather, it is articulated in contextualized ways that serve to organize and cohere fragmented social or political landscapes. Cortés deployed the culture of death within a growing "security culture" (Kumar 2017; Masco 2014) in which security has become a multivalent and normalized referent, a source of common identification through collective experience and shared vernacular, both a part of daily life and a way of framing and understanding other spheres of life (Bajc and De Lint 2013).

Thus, one accomplishment is to make this frame extension between the seemingly different universes of gender ideology and security both coherent and compelling. Because it is self-referential, it generates its own evidence and is indifferent to its own contradictions; and because it can explain both the security crisis and the invasion of gender ideology at once as part of the culture of death, it offers satisfying explanatory power while guiding audience interpretations and circumscribing receptivity to counterclaims. Hyper-flexible interpretations of gender articulated through security, itself a multivalent concept, enable making novel, meaningful associations that

organize and structure experiences and anxieties across intellectual and affective registers of insecurity (Schwell 2015), including ontological, moral, national, and existential.

This translational capacity across registers makes the security framing of gender ideology highly resonant in the context of Mexico's deepening security culture. On many occasions, pro-family activists pointed out to me that gender ideology's comprehensive implication in all these ways was proof that it was both dangerous and the root of most other problems, including the security problem. In another example, the culture of death helped to validate the gender ideology–security link for one organizer who explained to me that the parallels between the climbing homicide rates after 2006 and abortion rates after the decriminalization of abortion in Mexico City in 2007 (which he identified as gender ideology's first triumph in Mexico) were evidence that gender ideology played a role in increased violence in Mexico as a harbinger of the culture of death.

Another accomplishment is attributing blame for Mexico's insecurity to the opposition, which both delegitimizes it and cultivates a sense of in-group solidarity against a common enemy. Because gender ideology signifies the culture of death, which purportedly exists to extinguish the culture of life, incarnate in the Mexican family, gender ideology constitutes a *death threat to the family*. The larger existential war on the family, a long-running frame of pro-family activism (Buss and Herman 2003), is what is centrally at stake in the antagonism between the culture of life and the culture of death. Thus, juxtaposing the metaphorical war on the family with the security crisis in Mexico blurs the distinction between literal physical threats and figurative symbolic ones through the construction of a common enemy that requires a common defense. This rhetorical maneuver, which features frequently in anti-gender campaigns across contexts, creates a pervasive sense of existential threat (Mancini and Palazzo forthcoming). In this case, feminists (who promote gender ideology) and organized criminals (who fuel the security crisis) are deliberately conflated as enemies of the family. It is neither necessary nor credible to claim that feminists work directly with drug cartels. Rather, by virtue of their orchestrated efforts to destroy the family, feminists *are*

organized criminals because, as Cortés argued before his suburbanite crowd, they promote one of the worst forms of organized crime: gender ideology, including its most offensive derivative, abortion. The mere association as a common threat to the family does the work of delegitimizing feminists and their political claims. Consistent with this formulation, some pro-family activists cited incidents of vandalism at feminist marches to support their characterizations of feminist opponents as "dangerous and extremely violent," with some expressing fear of physical harm, not from criminals per se, but from feminists.

Finally, by framing a moral concern as a political and cultural one, this nested empty signifier of the culture of death accomplishes something else consequential. Articulating gender ideology as a matter of general security is a secularizing move that links, as empty signifiers do, particular and universal concerns. This is a claim to political legitimacy that attempts to bypass secular norms by obfuscating the moral stakes of particular religious worldviews. While enabling audiences to make associations and draw coherent meaning from their experiences and anxieties is one set of core frame tasks (Benford and Snow 2000), another is inciting action. A logic of securitization animates the security frame to motivate, direct, and justify such action.

The Securitization of the Family, or, How to Frame a Threat

Securitization can be understood as the "process of constructing a collective understanding of something as a particular kind of danger, an existential threat to state, society, or 'our way of life'" (Goldstein 2010, 492). To ask how an object such as the family becomes securitized is to ask who has the power to name something a security threat, under what circumstances, by whom it will be recognized, and what it does in the world. Securitization implies a particular temporal logic in that securitizing something means calling for pre-emptive action – security measures – that is justified by the imminence and credibility of the threat. Securitization scholars have found that when cultural phenomena become associated with a security threat – as in gender ideology as a *death*

threat to the family – security becomes a value that competes with other values, including claims to equality (Bajc and De Lint 2013).

This is a key feature of the right-wing "politics of fear," which relies on a link between perceived existential insecurity and reduced support for inclusionary politics (Wodak 2015). When security becomes a top priority, as it has in Mexico, security acts as a master frame, and an organizing principle against which social and political evaluations are made (Wodak 2015). Much like an empty signifier, nearly anything can be made an object for "strategic securitization" (Kinney 2013). The key to translating the nested empty signifier of the culture of death into a motivational framing is situating it within a logic of securitization that aggrandizes the asset (the family) and constructs the threat (gender ideology) as credible but also capable of being arrested. This provides a rationale for pre-emptive action while providing a "vocabulary of motive" (Benford and Snow 2000) in which the gender ideology threat is constructed as *potent* in that it is the gravest threat to the family in Mexico, disastrous in the scope of its consequences, and capable of achieving its aims; *virulent* in that it is already spreading rapidly; and *imminent* in that it is well underway *yet still capable of being stopped*, but only with coordinated, definitive, and swift action.

The portrayal of gender ideology as a potent threat did not just emanate from pro-family leaders at gender ideology talks. It was mirrored in the perceptions that organizers and active supporters expressed in conversations with me, with each other, and in survey responses. Pro-family organizers and active supporters widely described gender ideology as a threat that was highly organized and coordinated by actors who were "powerful" though not always visible, "deceitful," "dangerous," and "destructive," and who "want[ed] to hurt the family" and "trick people." In their descriptions, *gender ideology* was a plot "backed by "hidden" and "nefarious" interests that constituted a centrally "orchestrated strategy at the global level." These views echoed those of Cortés, who argued before an audience of parishioners in 2018 that "the culture of death is

a global agenda" waged against the family and backed by "powerful political interests," with gender ideology as its chief instrument.

Pro-family theories to explain gender ideology varied, but no matter the diagnosis, the basic underlying logic of gender ideology as an existential threat to the family did not. These theories, many of which have much longer histories that predate anti-gender activism (Buss and Herman 2003), variously explained gender ideology as an attempt by feminists to liberate women from the institutions of marriage and the family that they deemed oppressive; *lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender* activists trying to bypass families to indoctrinate children through state-sponsored education programs; global profiteers vying to replace the family with consumerism as the source of individual identity; wealthy countries trying to control the populations and resources of other countries; an effort to defeat Christianity or Western civilization (more common among Catholics who place theological emphasis on the family as the smallest church); or even as a prophesized attack on the family by the Devil that marked the beginning of the end times (typical of some Evangelical eschatological interpretations).

While the actors and motives in these explanations varied (and often overlapped), what was common to all these stories was the belief that their protagonists sought to destroy the family because in each case it was the one thing that stood in the way of achieving their aim – whether that was abolishing motherhood, unbridled profits, population control, indoctrinating children, dechristianization, or defeating God. As one organizer put it, they say that they just want their rights, but "we all know that what [gender ideology] is really about is an attack on the family" itself. No matter how it was explained, all paths led to the need to securitize the family from the potent threat of annihilation by gender ideology.

Gender ideology was also framed as a virulent threat that was already having a devastating effect on Mexico. I would often hear in the pro-family community that, just like the violence, gender ideology was spreading like cancer. A common argument in gender ideology talks after 2018 had

become not only that the family was a primary victim of the security crisis, but also that the moral and social decay of the family – the most important and enduring of all social institutions – was accelerating the security problem. For example, when he addressed 500 parishioners and community members outside Mexico City one October evening in 2018, Cortés shared his own threat analysis: if gender ideology were allowed to advance, it would deepen the moral disorientation that Mexico was already suffering – plainly evident in its skyrocketing rates of violence – and further exacerbate the violence and bloodshed. Neighbors killing neighbors, indiscriminate violence, and "streets filled with cadavers" will be its consequences, and we are already seeing the warning signs, he warned.

Again, these descriptions were reflected in those of pro-family organizers and supporters. When I asked them in surveys and conversations what would happen if gender ideology were to be fully realized in Mexico, many described a state of generalized terror that was vague but profound. Some described general "delirium," "social disorder and misery," or "depravity and more risk for society." Others emphasized more extreme consequences, including the total destruction of the family and a complete disintegration of society, which would bring about "much more death and violence" and "total chaos." In follow-up conversations, I probed organizers and supporters for more concrete descriptions of how this reality would look and how it would come about, which they answered with a variety of dystopic scenarios: a society that did not value the lives of others; one that lacked social solidarity and meaningful interpersonal relationships, in which everyone lived for the fulfillment of their individual desires and close bonds between family members were rare or non-existent; one in which romantic and sexual relationships were not enduring but serial, not meaningful but empty; one in which children did not respect or care for their parents and parents abandoned their children; a universal sense of loneliness and emptiness that would be consoled through meaningless consumption, including widespread use of drugs; and that we would be overrun with diseases of indulgence, not the least of them being AIDS. What greater proof was

needed that gender ideology was already well underway in Mexico than that the social ills it produces are *already* befalling the country, some asked rhetorically, pointing to these examples as evidence that gender ideology was on course to unravel Mexican society and the family entirely.

Most of the pro-family organizers and active supporters with whom I spoke felt that gender ideology also posed an imminent threat that was gaining force. When I asked them to consider the likelihood that these predicted scenarios would unfold if the gender ideology agenda were achieved in Mexico, they responded with a high degree of certainty. Nearly all indicated that the scenarios that they had imagined, including increased violence, were very likely to occur should gender ideology be realized. They often offered the security crisis both as evidence that this process was underway and as an omen of what gender ideology would bring. Because securitization logic draws on a temporality in which only pre-emptive action can prevent an otherwise inevitable future event, it makes urgent action imperative to prevent the catastrophic destruction of the securitized asset – in this case, the family and all that it symbolically represents.

Laje uses this logic in his frequent gender ideology talks in Mexico. Laje, who completed a counterterrorism course at the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies (2015), is one of the most adulated and widely cited voices against gender ideology in the Mexican pro-family community and Latin America more broadly. When addressing Mexican audiences, he routinely warns that gender ideology is coming to Mexico, noting first the "bad news" – that gender ideology has already begun to take root – but also the "good news" – that it is not yet as advanced as it is in other countries such as his native Argentina. This means that it is not too late to make a difference, for there is still time to eradicate it. However, it will require swift and urgent action, he affirms. In a final encouragement, Laje invokes the legacy of Mexico's bloody twentieth-century Cristero rebellion, in which defenders of the Catholic Church resisted the newly established liberal secular state, urging Mexicans to lead Latin America once again in the righteous war against gender

ideology. Its in-progress status in Mexico renders gender ideology credible enough to elicit fear but capable enough of being stopped to incite action.

Understanding the view that gender ideology constitutes a potent, virulent, and imminent threat to the family – and efforts to stoke and "manage" this perception – is key to comprehending what motivates and sustains anti-gender activism. This logic of securitization animates the security frame by supplying it with a compelling vocabulary of motive. This not only serves to incite action to secure the family and to justify a response by any means necessary (Ahmed 2004). It also redirects heartfelt anxieties over insecurity to gender ideology and its feminist protagonists as the focal threats – the internal enemies – facing Mexico instead. As a result, other interpretations of democratic deficits and their corollary demands are either deflected or deferred.

Conclusion

The twin crises of security and public confidence have provided fertile ground for the emergence of a robust and sustained anti-gender campaign in Mexico. Neither spontaneous nor incidental, this effect is cultivated through the skilled and responsive frame articulation strategies of anti-gender activists. Against the backdrop of a deepening security crisis, Mexican pro-family leaders trained in the art of culture war effectively weaponize gender ideology discourse as they articulate opposition to gender through a security master frame, mobilizing widely held security concerns against feminist political projects. They do not accomplish this through brute fearmongering but rather through more adroit forms of post-truth populist rhetoric and a subtler politics of fear. Anti-gender activists' discursive tactics make both intellectual appeals to common sense and affective appeals to Mexicans' widely held material anxieties as the country grapples with a very real and intensifying security crisis. The two features analyzed in this chapter facilitate the security frame's political work. The nested empty signifier of the culture of death brings security and gender politics into a common coherent framework, offering widely resonant interpretive frames that make gender

ideology make sense as a security issue. Securitization logic offers a vocabulary of motive to incite action and animate efforts to secure the family against the death threat of gender ideology.

However, the security frame also does something more. By framing security as a moral issue, pro-family activists redirect anxieties about and demands for security to moral concerns about gender and the family. By framing moral opposition to gender as a matter of secular and general concern, they use secular democratic norms as an alibi for legitimacy, even while they undermine such norms to promote illiberal positions of exclusion and obfuscate their stakes in securing particular religious social orders. The pro-family security frame not only plays a role in sustaining anti-gender campaigning; it also precludes broader discussions of institutional and democratic deficits, including the democratic rule of law, civil rights, and access to justice.

CHAPTER 4. Plotting the Mexican Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theory

Introduction

"These people are just a bunch of conspiracy theorists," Lucrecia said to me dismissively as she gestured to the dozens of zealous protestors led by Coalición Sumas at the *Monumento de la Madre* (Monument to Our Mother) in the heart of Mexico City. I was pleasantly surprised to see Lucrecia, a florist and a devout Catholic passionate about "the profamily cause" whom I had first met not long after AMLO's inauguration when we began attending the weekly meetings together of Movimiento ProVidaProFamilia, a Sumas' affiliated group. She was one of only two *profamilias* I had ever met who openly supported AMLO's new left-wing MORENA party rather than the more common affiliation held by *profamilias* with the conservative PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional) party, or occasionally the centrist PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). I hadn't seen or heard from her since she had abandoned the group months ago in protest over her moral and strategic disagreement with Sumas leaders' tactics. When Lucrecia had voiced disapproval of the DDoS attack against the National Assembly orchestrated by Juan Dabdoub, the FNF outcast who had founded Sumas as a rival group, he and other group members ridiculed and chastised her until she left.

Still, what surprised me more than her reappearance was her pejorative charge that they were *conspiracy theorists*. I had come to recognize over months of fieldwork that conspiracy theories about gender ideology pervaded certain enclaves of the profamily activist community, especially among those who felt sidelined by FNF's dominance of the profamily movement like those in Coalición Sumas. But this was the first time in over a year talking to more than 150 *profamilia* activists and followers that I had heard any of them label and reject the many stories they circulated about *gender ideology* as *conspiracy theories*.

As we caught up, I explained to Lucrecia that I had just rushed over to this Sumas event from observing the rally that FNF had organized City in Naucalpan on the outskirts of Mexico to commemorate the three-year anniversary of the profamily mobilizations that had ignited the anti-gender movement in Mexico. Sumas members had organized this competing rally across town at the same time as FNF's, seemingly with the intent to confuse FNF followers with a decoy event and poach followers from their rival. They even chose FNF's favored protest plaza, the Monumento de la Madre, a highly symbolic site of tribute to Mexican mothers and exaltation of motherhood that I had come to know well after observing so many FNF organized profamily actions.

The chaotic scene that unfolded in the plaza stood in stark contrast to the orderly and professionally coordinated rallies that FNF typically produced, like the one I had just left in Naucalpan. There, FNF gathered contact information from the congregants. Their leaders delivered carefully crafted speeches through a professional sound system about Mexico's aggravated insecurity and the urgency of defending and protecting the family to about one hundred middle-class suburbanites clad in crisp white shirts and the light blue bandanas that signaled prolife support and waving matching flags and posters. But at the Monumento de la Madre, where I had arrived just in time to catch the tail end of Coalición Sumas' rival event, Lucrecia and I observed as a cacophony of voices shouted over one another. Sumas leaders stepped up onto the ledge as they competed for the disorganized crowd's attention, announcing the media channels where they could be followed and issuing a litany of dire warnings about halting the degenerative progression of gender ideology and communist totalitarianism infiltrating Mexico under the AMLO administration.

These two competing events that morning did not just betray a stylistic difference in these two factions' repertoires of action. They also revealed a significant different in their rhetorical approach to truth claims. While FNF framed the problem and its solutions within the stylistic and logical conventions of liberal political discourse, with claims to rightful ownership of liberal truths, Coalition Sumas' followers, as Lucrecia had pointed out, largely flouted this liberal truth regime

entirely. Instead, they embraced and promoted an alternative discursive approach to the truth about gender ideology instead, one that filled in the blanks —with "last names and dates" as one Coalition Sumas leader once put it to me— that FNF's security-inflected rationales and vague politics of fear left unarticulated: anti-gender conspiracy theories.

Approaching this phenomenon of anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico as neither coincidental nor inconsequential, this chapter asks: where did anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico come from?[13] Though the proliferation of anti-gender conspiracy theories may appear to have come out of nowhere, a historicization of their emergence reveals what many conspiracy theories claim: it's not quite what it seems. In this chapter, I explain and historicize how anti-gender conspiracy theories came to be a pervasive feature of anti-gender activism. Anti-gender conspiracy theories are not just conspiracy theories *about* gender. By anti-gender conspiracy theories I mean various claims, sometimes complex and elaborate, that view the social constructionist view of gender as *itself* the illegitimate product and tactic of a vast transnational conspiracy. Those who promote them purport to expose "gender proponents"—namely feminists and LGBT activists—as trying to distort and cover up purposefully and nefariously what they believe is an undeniable and fundamental "truth" of human sexual difference: that is, that gender is naturally and divinely rooted in a fixed, immutable, and complementary biology of binary sex (Case 2016b). As described in Chapter 2, this conspiratorial view is already implied in the profamily term *gender ideology*, which qualifies gender as an unscientific "false ideology." Some enclaves of the pro-family activist community, especially those affiliated with the splinter group Coalición Sumas, did not just tend toward anti-gender conspiracy theories; their internal discourse and external communications were saturated with them.

As theories of both causation and of power, anti-gender conspiracy theories share a set of implicit assumptions common to conspiracy theories more broadly: (i) that everything is

[13] The following chapters will address the questions, respectively: What do they say? And what do they do?

connected; (ii) that history is not an accident, there are no coincidences, and meaning can always be found in human action and the events of history; and (iii) that things are not what they seem, and so we must look beneath the surface, including to detect the actions and intentions of conspirators (Knight 2020, qtd in Bligh 2020). I adapt these logics to my own analysis of anti-gender conspiracy theories in this chapter to highlight the affinities between conspiracy theorists' search for political truths and the academic pursuit of ethnographic ones.

In the first part of the chapter, I return to the first anti-gender conspiracy theory in Mexico that I encountered, which asserted that the 2018 presidential inauguration was a rite to impose *gender ideology* on Mexico as part of a grand transnational scheme. Next, I historicize the rise of anti-gender conspiracy theories like this one in Mexico after 2016, and I explore the historical contingencies that enabled their emergence and proliferation among profamily activists. Following the saying that *in history, there are no coincidences*, I argue that gender came to be popularly viewed as a transnational conspiracy (Marchlewska et al. 2019) by many Mexican anti-gender activists through the convergence of at least four necessary conditions of possibility: (i) historical political conspiracy theorizing in which conspiracy theories have predominated as a common and often legitimate mode of doing politics and which predates not only anti-gender organizing but even the conceptual emergence of 'gender' itself; (ii) earlier institutional iterations of anti-gender organizing, including in Mexico; (iii) the growth and diffusion of transnational profamily organizing; and (iv) the rise and dynamics of social media. In the next section, I argue that anti-gender conspiracy theories help us see how *everything is connected*, that is, that anti-gender conspiracy theories play a role in facilitating and cohering emergent transnational epistemic communities (both online and off) that connect nationalist-populist groups across national borders bonded together by common enemies, both external (i.e. supranational authorities) and within (i.e. feminists and progressives.)

Inaugurating Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theories on Stage

I had arrived to conduct fieldwork in Mexico in the summer of 2018 just after the historic election of leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. In the weeks leading up to his December 1 inauguration, I learned that whether they were affiliated with the conservative PAN, the centrist PRI, or the new evangelical party, PES (Partido Encuentro Social), and whether Catholic or evangelical, what all the *profamilias* I talked to had in common was deep concern that the election of an ostensibly leftist president would inevitably mean the advancement of *gender ideology*. When AMLO ignored LGBT and women's rights issues entirely in his inauguration speech, as he had done throughout his entire campaign, I was eager to get profamily activists' take on this omission.

Some were convinced it was still to come once AMLO took office, while others shifted their focus to AMLO's Governance Secretary Olga Sanchez Cordero and her recent proposal to "democratize the family," part of which entailed recognizing children as rights-bearing subjects with some state entitlements, including comprehensive sexuality education, as the real threat. But one explanation took me completely by surprise. Pieced together from the rounds it made on WhatsApp and in café discussions with profamily activists, it went something like this:

> *AMLO was in fact an agent in a global Illuminati-run plot to impose gender ideology on Mexico. His ceremony did not just inaugurate the incoming administration. Rather, there were clues to suggest that it also signaled the initiation of Mexico into the sphere of control of a secretive, global cabal that was working towards world domination. AMLO was actually an agent of a much more grandiose, planetary effort to destroy the Catholic Church and Western civilization itself carried out to impose communism and global totalitarian control. Imposing gender ideology was a core strategy and early step in this process, and AMLO's inauguration meant Mexico was falling. It was going the way of other countries like Argentina and Venezuela, where gender ideology had instigated a cultural collapse that ultimately induced an economic collapse that would in turn provide the justification for communism and totalitarianism. What AMLO's inauguration rite actually augured was the beginning of the end for Mexico.*

This conspiracy theory about AMLO's inauguration was the first of many about gender ideology that I would come to hear during my fieldwork, and it also inaugurated my own understanding of the driving forces animating conspiracy theories and the significant role they played in typically more fringe enclaves of anti-gender activism in Mexico. This understanding would slowly unfold over

months of conversations in churches, cafés, subway cars, the halls of the National Assembly, dining rooms, and WhatsApp chats.

There was a lot to unpack in this theory of the inauguration laid out by my interlocutors. First, how did they conclude that there was a global plot to impose gender ideology from the events of the Inauguration? What did gender have to do with communism? And how would adopting a "gender perspective" in policy end Western civilization? My interlocutors, who were eager to explain it to me, viewed my initial bewilderment as a familiar symptom of how effectively *gender ideology* conspirators concealed the truth from the masses, like me. They also found my reaction somewhat predictable given my provenance from what they viewed as an establishment university. Some also saw it as an opportunity to enlighten me and to convert my skepticism into belief in the conspiracy theory, not unlike when some of my evangelical interlocutors delivered me their testimony as part of the Great Commission[14] mandate prescribed by their faith.

Raul, a boisterous Pentecostal pastor who tended to dominate the conversation on the days he came around, was particularly eager to explain how and why it was that the events of the inauguration were not what they seemed. There was something more going here than met the eye, he insisted. Raul had sent the group grainy photographs of AMLO on the inauguration stage taken from an unknown source. Though matching footage suggests these were simply photographs taken of mainstream media coverage playback, their cropped context and zoomed in focus made them appear as if they had been taken from an infiltrator on stage physically close to the new president. This seeming clandestine proximity endowed the anonymous photographs with a sense of unauthorized insider knowledge. The photos had been circulating on social media, and Raul offered the group of *profamilias* his definitive interpretation of them over coffee in the evangelical bookstore café where I accompanied them in their weekly gatherings, much in the same way he

[14] The Great Commission is the obligation practiced by some Christian sects (particularly Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal) to spread the "good news" to others that Jesus Christ is our lord and savior and to induce this belief in others, sometimes referred to as "saving souls."

offered his biblical exegeses when it was his turn to preach. Leaning in along with the group, I too was eager to hear his interpretations of the evidence.

First, he pointed out:

> *AMLO had held the ceremony with his back to the National Cathedral, which signaled his antagonism towards the Catholic Church and his intent to suppress Christianity*.

Despite that Protestants and evangelicals have themselves historically fought for inclusion in the nation in the face of Catholic dominance, they have shared with Catholics a common concern for the defense of Christian hegemony. There was no mention on this particular day that AMLO in fact *identifies* as a devout Catholic and frequently invokes this identity to claim moral authority and Mexicanness. On other days however, when this fact was brought up, it was usually explained away with reference to the conviction held by many within this mostly evangelical group (as well as some Catholic *profamilias*) that the Catholic Church had already been infiltrated by *gender ideology*'s conspirators. Like with this particular theory, they frequently fingered the Freemasons and the Illuminati, a group that has figured in conspiracy theories about the Catholic Church and Mexican politics for decades across American and European contexts (Hofstadter 1964; Berlet 2002; Delgado 2003; Mahmud 2014).

Second, Raul continued as group members concurred and added to the analysis:

> *For the first time in Mexico's history—and at AMLO's invitation—indigenous peoples were invited on stage to perform a blessing ritual. This was a profane action to take at the foot of the National Cathedral, and it meant that AMLO had been corrupted by the forces of multiculturalism through various agents—including pagans and the LGBT lobby—who sought to destroy the family, the Mexican nation, and Christianity. They sought to undo 500 years of Western Civilization and Christianization in the Americas to hand the nation back over to indigenous peoples, the family to the LGBT lobby, and the church over to the devil. AMLO's collaboration with indigenous people and the LGBT lobby was just a front for this disingenuous deal with the devil. It was these noble institutions—the traditional Mexican family, church, and nation (all historically enmeshed in Mexico)—that stood in the crosshairs because these were*

what stood in the way of these actors achieving their visions, including AMLO's aims of imposing of socialism and totalitarian control.

In Raul's and the group's framing, the traditional Mexican family was the line of defense that stood in the way of AMLO's plan and thus constituted one of the primary targets of AMLO's MORENA party. This family was explicitly heteropatriarchal, nuclear, and exclusively rooted in Western Christian worldviews that refracted whiteness (with or without whites) and its accompanying definition of what my interlocutors considered traditional gender norms (Bjork-James 2020). The "traditional Mexican family," thus defined, was also central to national success and development, as a meme circulating around this time conveyed (Figure 1). Scapegoating indigenous peoples for Mexico's problems, the meme depicted *indigeneity not just as counter to the white Christian nuclear family upon which the Mexican nation rightfully rests but also as a threat to progress and to the patria (fatherland) itself*. The image reveals how ethnonationalist and Christian nationalist ideologies converge in defense of the nuclear family as the imagined cornerstone of both the Mexican nation and Western Civilization itself, just as it has in other contexts like the United States (Bjork-James 2020; Berkowitz 2003).

Figure 1. Meme Juxtaposing US & Mexico Inaugurations. This meme that circulated in 2018 juxtaposed an image of Donald Trump being inaugurated with his family and a Bible in 2017 and that of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador with indigenous peoples on stage in 2018, reading: Why are things going better in the US?

Raul's take on this was that:

> *AMLO's inclusion of the indigenous ritual signaled his intent to destroy the family and his ambitions to de-Christianize Mexico. Gender ideology was one of the primary tools that would unravel it all. It was effective because the LGBT lobby and feminists make it seem like it's about rights, but it's really an insidious way to unravel the family. By attacking the foundation of the Christian family—the sacred and complementary relationship between the two sexes as God had created them—gender ideology was the ideal cultural, political, and economic instrument to destroy the family and with it the nation and Western Civilization itself. Though gender ideology appeared to be novel, it should not be mistaken for a new phenomenon but seen for what it was—the latest tactic in a much longer, epic struggle that spanned both continents and Centuries.*

It was at this point that the most common audience question typically surfaced: "But who is behind all this, and why would they do this?" For Raul, who always had an answer for any question, it was clear who was behind all this: *the Illuminati's signature was hidden in plain sight.* Addressing these doubts as though it was obvious to anyone who had learned how to interpret their symbols, Raul continued to command the spotlight with confidence and ease, to explain that:

Among other symbols worn by AMLO that appeared in the ceremony, AMLO's use of the common indigenous symbol of the sun and its apparent framing at one point through a triangle—the unmistakable symbol of the Illuminati—were evidence that his presidency was part of the longstanding Illuminati-led plot to destroy Western civilization. The whole Inauguration, in fact, was a masonic ritual designed to give the message that in this epic battle for world domination the takeover of Mexico had begun.

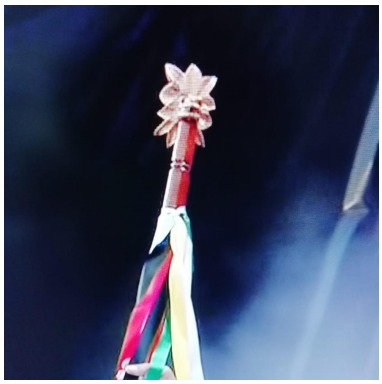

Figure 11. This close-up image of the alleged sun symbol on the staff used by Andres Manual Lopez Obrador in his ceremony circulated after the 2018 Inauguration as evidence for the claim that the event constituted an Illuminati-led

Raul's reading of the inauguration stage was not just an epistemic aberration, as his political opponents—whether feminists, LGBT activists, or MORENA supporters—tended to perceive them. Though he orated these charges of conspiracy with conviction backed by carefully curated evidence, his was not the story of epistemic certainty but uncertainty, of doubt. Raul's anti-gender conspiracy theory about the inauguration stage was the first of many I would encounter during my fieldwork, and though I did not realize it at the time, it set the stage for my research. As I would come to see, this theory exemplified many of the patterns that would emerge across the dozens of versions of anti-gender conspiracy theories that I would encounter in my research. And in analyzing them, I too would come to learn that studying anti-gender ideology conspiracy theories contained lessons hidden in plain sight, including the ethnographic revelations that they: (i) *are not quite what they seem* (in that they are not really novel); (ii) *cannot be explained as coincidence* (in that they are historically contingent); and (iii) *expose how everything is connected* (in that their patterns of circulation manifest the interconnections of the transnational profamily movement).

Things Are Not What They Seem: Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theories As New Old Stories

Anti-gender conspiracy theories like this one seemed to have come out of nowhere. Feminist and LGBT activists responded to the conspiratorial accusations against them about gender ideology with emergency meetings and their own alarmed op-eds about the "gender ideology conspiracy."[15] While this was the first anti-gender conspiracy theory that I encountered during my fieldwork, it was certainly not the last. In fact, over the course of my fieldwork I would document dozens of variations, which I characterize in the next chapter. But it certainly wasn't the first anti-gender conspiracy theory to circulate either. In fact, the explosion of rhetoric about gender ideology —and the conspiracy theories that so often accompanied them— had exploded in some profamily circles after the 2016 mobilizations. The endless flow of anti-gender conspiracy theories shares a set of common traits that define conspiratorial thinking. Like the inauguration conspiracy theory, these tended to: (i) be contradictory (as opposed to coherent); (ii) present not just healthy skepticism but overriding suspicion; (iii) assume nefarious intent; (iv) stem from the belief that something must be wrong; (v) cast believers of the theory as its persecuted victims; (vi) are immune to counter evidence; and (vii) tend to reinterpret randomness or coincidence as meaningful (Lewandowsky and Cook 2020).

The origins of these conspiratorial claims were almost never clear or known. They reverberated through the profamily social networks that I followed —*forwarded many times* as WhatsApp tagged them— and sometimes rehashed in offline spaces. Though their circulation reached mainstream channels—like my neighborhood WhatsApp group in central Mexico City—they tended to concentrate in the *profamilia* networks, both Catholic and evangelical, that were peripheral to the movement's inner circle dominated by Frente Nacional por la Familia. While some might identify and name the most outlandish of claims or obvious disinformation that circulated as

[15] See for example, "A conspiracy theory about sex and gender is being peddled around the world by the far right" in Quartz, November 3, 2016 (Campoy 2016).

"fake news," for them this did not discredit, contradict, or give reason to question the anti-gender conspiracy theory's underlying premise: that *gender ideology* was no coincidence but rather part of a nefarious plot. *Gender ideology* was the product of this growing global conspiracy, they argued, and it was also their proof of the conspiracy—inexplicable by any other means. They explained why the *gender ideology* menace had seemed to land rather suddenly and out of nowhere —and very much not coincidentally— on Mexican shores in recent years and rationalize why feminists and LGBT were not as they seemed—not the innocent human rights defenders they portrayed themselves as. But the emergence and rapid diffusion of these meaning-making anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico did not emerge from nowhere or out of nothing. They were not novel at all.

While they seem to have emerged on the scene out of nowhere —a historical coincidence— anti-gender conspiracy theories are neither novel nor unique to Mexico. In other words, the proliferation of highly detailed anti-gender conspiracy theories may be a relatively new phenomenon in Mexico, but anti-gender activism and conspiracy theorizing are decidedly not. Anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico are novel only in the sense that they are new versions of earlier conspiracy theories that have pervaded Mexican political culture for decades and even centuries. Like all conspiracy theories, which recycle and reuptake the same themes, anti-gender conspiracy theories are the latest sequelae of earlier plots both real and imagined, debunked and unresolved, that have formed a long-running and continuous feature of Mexican politics. Where widespread perceptions of political corruption, elite control, and a lack of political transparency or popular power have continuously prevailed, as in both Mexico's past and present, conspiracy theories, urban legends, rumors, and moral panics thrive.

Mexican history is replete with political conspiracy theorizing that reflects the concerns of both their time and place, that like in the civil war torn case of Algeria chronicled by Paul Silverstein (2002), has long offered a shared political culture across ethnic, ideological, geographic, and

sometimes even class lines in a time of intense conflict obscured by political and military opacity. The figure of the *robachicos*, or child trafficker, began circulating in Mexico during the Porfiriato period (1876-1911) and remains a source of both urban legend and moral panic today (Sosenski 2021). Conspiracy theories abounded during and after the period of the Mexican Revolution, often themed around the historical feud between secular liberals and Catholic conservatives that formed the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) (Fuentes 1999) and drove the Cristero Wars (1926-1929) that followed it. For example, conspiracy theories proliferated around the political assassination of post-revolutionary president Álvaro Óbregon, whose death would fundamentally shift the course of Mexican politics and history. C*ould it have been his friend turned archenemy, fellow former president Plutarco Elías Calles?* Despite the relative stability of the post-revolutionary period, pervasive conspiratorial and mythical beliefs fueled a surge in popular vigilantism (Kloppe-Santamaría 2020).

By mid-century, the Cold War Mexico ideologically polarized Mexico and pushed into a unique geopolitical position (Loaeza 1988). Mexican conspiracy theories increasingly narrativized Mexican vulnerability to foreign meddling and exploitation or interpreted hemispheric and global politics that interpolated Mexico into the contested political and economic global order. For example, rumors claiming that John F. Kennedy's assassination was orchestrated in Mexico City took off and continue to circulate sixty years later (Soltero 2021). Mexico served at once as a hub of local and exiled communist sympathizers and a key battleground in the United States-led covert anti-communist counter-insurgency operations, like Operation Condor (Gill 2004) that emphasized the enemy within, fueling a political culture of justified paranoia. This complex mix of leftist political agitation on the one hand and anti-communist panic on the other precipitated a surge of conspiratorial narratives on both sides. Conspiratorial paranoia about freemasons, communists, and anti-clericalism animated right-wing and traditionalists' responses to the communist totalitarian threat they perceived against the state, private property, the family, and the church

(Loaeza 1988). These were among the concerns that allegedly motivated the formation of El Yunque, the Catholic integralist secret society rumored to be behind much of Mexico's far-right influence in Mexican politics (Delgado 2003). Today, some members of the profamily movement who feel alienated by the monopolistic leadership and at odds with the Frente Nacional por la Familia (FNF) over what they view as an overly conciliatory stance believe that El Yunque is behind the alliance between the PAN, FNF, and the Catholic hierarchy.

Leftists, on the other hand, charged foreign powers of overt imperialism and covert influence, especially the United States, whose unparalleled influence in Mexican affairs through both soft and hard power provided context for theories both founded and embellished. One famed claim explained the disappearance of a mysterious island off the coast of Mexico, Isla Bermeja, which likely never existed, as the result of a secret CIA bombing campaign for the US to gain economic advantage over Mexico. Further, the authoritarianism, political repression and counter-insurgency efforts, and corruption of the governing PRI party (Institutional Revolutionary Party) created fertile ground for popular conspiracy theorizing, which authorities responded to with covert espionage (Walker 2013). This became especially true after the government's violent political repression against political opponents across Mexico following the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre and the two decade "dirty war" that followed and disappeared thousands of dissidents (Doyle 2003). Conspiratorial narratives captured themes of political scandal, from the involvement of authorities in political repression to the alleged assassinations of high-level political figures (Aviña 2016). Those alleging malfeasance in the death of PRI reformer Carlos Madrazo, for example, who died in an unlikely plane crash in 1969, became a famed conspiracy theory of national significance that continues to circulate today.

Conspiracy culture in Mexico continued to thrive into the periods of neoliberalization and transition to democracy of the 1980s and 1990s. Theories emerged that cast suspicion on the International Monetary Fund, accusing it of conspiring to ransack Mexico on behalf of wealthy

creditors, especially the United States, the primary sponsor of the IMF and the Washington Consensus. Some Mexicans fingered these powerful actors as being behind the country's devastating 1982 debt crisis. Meanwhile, books that some *profamilias* continue to share today, like a Spanish translation of Robert W. Lee's 1981 *The United Nations Conspiracy*, began circulating at this time that purported to expose international institutions like the United Nations of aspiring to impose global control under the New World Order (Senkman, Roniger, and Latin American Research Commons 2019; Delgado 2003).

Mexicans trained a conspiratorial lens onto national politics as well. Few Mexicans believed the official account of PRI presidential candidate Luis Colosio's 1994 political assassination, for example. Reopening the investigation, which was riddled with inconsistencies and sent one man to prison, is currently under consideration by the Lopez Obrador administration. With the rise of organized crime in the 1990s and 2000s and evidence of widespread collusion with authorities, including the spectacular capture and subsequent prison escapes of Mexico's leading drug kingpin "El Chapo" Guzmán, popular conspiracy theories incorporated themes of organized crime. As drug traffickers expand into human trafficking, the figure of the *robachico* took on renewed significance (Sosenski 2021). And the emergence of public health crises like the H1N1 pandemic that rocked Mexico in 2009 fueled conspiracy theories reconjuring themes of wealthy countries, especially the United States, and powerful companies fabricating viruses and vaccines (Smallman 2015)—conspiracy theories that would reemerge almost verbatim with the COVID-19 pandemic. Conspiratorial narratives that resurrected Cold War era fears about external population control efforts alleging that vaccines contained abortifacients (such as the tetanus vaccine) had already been circulated for decades, since at least the 1990s (González Ruiz 1998).

This brief history of Mexican conspiracy theories shows that, whether about blood libel, devil worship, *robachicos*, global economic plots, local political assassinations, or vaccines, conspiracy theories have long constituted an endemic and quotidian feature of popular Mexican

political discourse; reflect the widespread popular concerns and dynamics of their time, including over local and global inequities and distrust in political and economic elites both nationally and globally; and intermix justifiable suspicion of nefariousness and corruption based on real events with unverified accounts of the unexplained. The line between the facts of real conspiracies—from corruption scandals to political assassinations to collusion between police and organized crime—and the fictions of conspiracy theories that circulate about them appears blurry and unclear (Soltero 2021).

The themes that make up anti-gender conspiracy theories, whether about the Illuminati, population control, or the corruption of children, recall themes that far precede the controversy over gender itself as interpretive frames to incorporate new events and concerns. In other words, rather than theories newly generated from scratch, anti-gender conspiracy theories repackage and recombine much older themes, narratives, and elements of conspiracy theories that long predate the rise of anti-genderism in the 2000s and 2010s. Reflecting newly emergent widespread anxieties about shifting social norms and cultural expectations about gender and sexual politics, anti-gender conspiracy theories incorporate *gender ideology* as the new iteration or edge of established narratives. They are not novel; they are merely the latest version, revised to incorporate and interpret newly emergent political events, debates, and realities, like a global political movement advocating to radically reshape traditional ideas about gender and sexuality.

In History There Are No Coincidences: How Conspiracy Theories Popularized Anti-Gender Rhetoric

Anti-gender discourse is itself rooted in Vatican-developed profamily rhetoric originally devised to revindicate the Church and the family in the context of the world population concerns of the mid-20th Century, as explained in Chapter 2. But it did not arrive in Mexico in 2016, nor in the 2010s, as it might appear and is often assumed. The Catholic Church has explicitly promoted profamily

discourse in Mexico since at least the 1950s, when it began to reestablish a role in Mexican social life during the Cold War period that it had lost during the staunch anticlericalism of the post-revolutionary period, claiming a stake in fighting communism and for democracy (Loaeza 2005), staked of course in a traditional sexual moral politics (Cowan 2016; Terry 1999). It supported the lay Christian Family Movement (Movimiento Familiar Cristiano), for example, in which families of upper socioeconomic classes promoted the traditional reproductive family as the most valued and "basic unit of society" and key to Mexico's prosperity and actualization—much like the meme in Figure 1 presented earlier.

The development of anti-gender arguments began in the 1990s in Mexico, initially within small elite intellectual and theological circles influenced by the Vatican, among both Catholic leadership and affiliated universities (Careaga-Pérez 2017). The Vatican-led coalition, whose representatives had openly led efforts to block population policies and feminist positions at both conferences —and particularly in opposition to abortion— emerged from the 1994 and/or 1995 UN Conferences with what one profamily delegate identified as "valuable experience on how the battle is being fought, an international network, and the determination to fight the next battle in this long war" (O'Leary 1994). Energized Mexican delegates, too, returned with the concerns and new open mandate of the Vatican to oppose the advancement of sexual and reproductive rights at the United Nations. Some, like intellectuals at the Panamerican University, created study groups to analyze the conference documents and the emergent threat of "gender" and how it applied to Mexico. Others, like former FNF leader and founder of Coalición Sumas, Juan Dabdoub, founded new profamily organizations with the help of wealthy benefactors to engage in profamily advocacy in Mexico.

The Panamerican University and the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for Family and Marriage Sciences at Anahuac University provided particularly significant space and resources for the intellectual incubation, adaptation, production, and dissemination of this initial anti-gender

rhetoric and strategy in Mexico. In 1981, Pope John Paul II founded and sponsored the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for Marriage and Family at the Vatican to intervene in what he perceived to be the family in crisis in society. The Institute was mandated to develop his "theology of the body," which reiterated traditional interpretations of gender, sexuality, and family first outlined in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and later developed further with more explicit anti-abortion directives in his updated encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* in 1995 on the heels of the Cairo Conference on Population the year before. Soon after opening the Institute at the Vatican, he opened satellite branches in Washington DC in 1988 and in several locations in Mexico in 1992, as part of its eventual expansion into a global network now on six continents. In Mexico, the Family Institute was incorporated into the Catholic Anahuac University network, an affiliate of the Legionnaires of Christ, an order founded in 1941 in Mexico known for its conservatism, its tremendous wealth (with assets over $1 billion), its valuation by the Vatican for its financial contributions, and its service to and mutual sustenance from Mexico's economic elite and upper classes.

By the 2010s, the Family Institute's course included curriculum on countering *gender ideology* (some of which were taught by FNF president Rodrigo Ivan Cortes) and held regular events and conferences that provided a primary platform for the dissemination of anti-gender ideas, such as the Annual Family Week. The Institute's Director (as of 2020), Olivia Nuñez Orellana, has run delegate training programs for profamily youth and women to travel to United Nations events, in particular the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), for a decade and has attended the CSW since at least 2011 explicitly to lobby against *gender ideology* (AleDiener 2011). It was in these academic spaces that Catholic intellectual leaders adapted, developed, and began articulating both general and local anti-gender arguments in a process that developed significant local capacity. While Mexican institutions played a lead role in Latin America, similar processes developed in

parallel, especially in countries where the Vatican opened additional branches of the Family Institute, including Brazil and Spain.

Building on established traditionalist ideas particularly about the family, anti-gender rhetoric after the mid-1990s homed its focus on the concept of gender and explicitly cast it as inherently illegitimate or deceptive (as implied by the phrasing gender ideology), dangerous, morally corrupt, politically motivated, and as a sign or symptom of a broader and more ambitious political project. In the immediate aftermath of the 1994 and 1995 United Nations Conferences in Cairo and Beijing, Dale O'Leary's The Gender Agenda laid out an early framework for portraying gender as a deliberate conspiracy led by radical feminists against the Church and the family (O'Leary 1997; 1994). O'Leary's book brought the debate over gender from the Vatican to lay followers and laid the groundwork for conspiratorial interpretations of what she called the "true nature of the sexual agenda." With this, she strongly implied that the intentions behind feminists' gender framework were both nefarious and covert, elements easily taken up and further developed into popular conspiracy theories. These ideas would later be developed further by others, as I return to below.

Though anti-gender rhetoric was available in Mexico, it did not become popularized in the form of conspiracy theories until 2016. Small scale anti-abortion activism (i.e. without a national reach) began in the 1970s in Mexico with the founding of ProVida (ProLife), an organization that worked very closely with Catholic leadership and supported by Human Life International, a US-based pro-life organization working to build a transnational pro-life movement. In 2007, when Mexico City legalized abortion until 12 weeks and in 2015 when the Mexican Supreme Court ruled in favor of same sex marriage, profamily actors registered public opposition but their lack of coordination in civil society outside of the Catholic Church and educational institutions as well as a low social media presence meant that they did not initially have the mobilizing capacity to gain wider traction. While the lack of political opportunity and coordinated movement infrastructure

kept anti-genderism in relatively limited circulation, Mexican profamily activists had also spent the following decade rehearsing, refining, and testing their anti-gender rhetoric, learning from emerging anti-gender movements in other contexts, and building an online presence.

The political opportunity that lit the spark came in 2016 when the Peña Nieto administration made a set of bold sexual rights proposals, including federally legalizing same sex marriage, that took both proponents and opponents by surprise. Many Mexicans interpreted Peña Nieto's overture as a theatrical and politically expedient move—at best a non sequitur and at worst a deflection—to remediate his (and Mexico's) international reputation rather than to address Mexicans' intensifying grievances. These perceptions were easily channeled to confirm pre-existing sentiments and theories that viewed international elites and institutions as interfering in the political, economic, and cultural affairs of Mexico in ways that purported to benefit Mexico but actually exploited it, much like the unpopular structural adjustment policies imposed by the IMF in the previous decades. Profamily leaders came together to seize a national platform to stoke and rationalize righteous anger about political failures past and present and to channel this into a moral panic about "gender ideology." They argued to a receptive audience, drawing on the moral authority of Pope Francis, that gender ideology was *the latest form* of "cultural colonization" imposed on Mexico. The anti-gender premise that gender is *not what it seems* but the imposition of a false belief that intentionally obscures an underlying reality for purposes of political manipulation lent itself to seamless incorporation as a leading edge of political conspiracy theorizing in Mexico.

Especially relevant in Mexico and across Latin America was the *Black Book of the New Left* published in Mexico in 2017, which I address in greater depth in the subsequent chapter. Put forward as a rebuttal of Judith Butler, Agustín Laje's updates O'Leary's arguments about the gender agenda by radical feminists and draws on the ideas of unattributed conservative intellectuals like Jordan Peterson to squarely frame gender as part of a global leftist effort to impose socialism (i.e. cultural Marxism). The book offers a perverse genealogical reinterpretation of feminist and Marxist

theory and reads as a thinly veiled conspiracy theory fingering feminists and LGBT activists as it appropriates the form and format of academic production but eschews the latter's commitments to standards of evidence and to intellectual honesty and rigor. Laje's numerous book tours in Mexico between 2017 and 2020 sponsored by several different profamily leaders and his vast social media presence "explained" gender ideology in simple, commonsense terms and significantly contributed to popularizing anti-gender ideas in Mexico in squarely conspiratorial terms.

The conspiracy theory form not only offered a personalized explanation for the seemingly cosmopolitan and urban phenomenon of LGBT rights and initiatives for gender equality that many Mexicans, especially rural Mexicans, perceived as foreign to the presumed culturally Catholic nation. It also seemed to unimpeachably explain away the counterevidence posed by Mexican feminists and LGBT organizers by framing them as corrupted agents of the global plot (Lamas 2000; De la Dehesa 2010). By providing both a common, accessible explanation outside formally established channels (i.e. mainstream media or academia) and a vehicle to popularize anti-gender positions, their integration and subsequent circulation in the form of conspiracy theories helped move anti-gender rhetoric from the insular Catholic intellectual circles that had incubated these ideas in Mexico for two decades to a fast growing popular rallying cry among traditionalists and their followers, that is, from the "margins to the mainstream" (Barkun 2016).

Everything is Connected: Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theories as Transnational Connective Tissue

Rising political polarization, declining trust in government and/or democracy, ballooning insecurity, and growing economic anxieties made the conditions of possibility for the emergence of anti-gender conspiracy theories particularly ripe in Mexico, as addressed in Chapter 2. But the popularization of anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico also relies on another set of tandem but interrelated contextual factors: a rise in right-wing populism and the growth of transnational

profamily organizing (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Corrêa, Paternotte, and Kuhar 2018; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Abromeit et al. 2016; Durham and Power 2010; Kaplan and Weinberg 1998). On the one hand, the emergence of anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico is part of a larger trend of growing conspiracy theorizing in contexts of rising right-wing populism in contexts around the world. This is especially so in Europe and across the Western with/in the right-wing populist political parties and movements gaining ground on both sides of the Atlantic (Lewis, Boseley, and Duncan 2019; Lewis et al. 2019; Bergmann 2018; Marchlewska et al. 2019; Harsin 2018). On the other hand, the emergence of anti-gender conspiracy theories was made possible by the growth in transnational profamily organizing that had begun in the 1970s, accelerated with the coordinated response of profamily activists to the UN Conferences of the 1990s, and consolidated into a transnational profamily movement by the 2010s.

Here I explore two fundamental aspects of the relationship between these factors and the rise of anti-gender conspiracy theorizing: rhetorical and infrastructural. First, the long-standing and established linkage between populism—right-wing populism in particular—and conspiracy theorizing is facilitated by the structural rhetorical similarities between them. In activating historical resentments about past and ongoing perceived violations of political economic sovereignty, profamily activist rhetoric feeds into already circulating conspiracy theories' categorical split between the narrative's external enemies and its endangered victims. This characteristic divide between the elite as enemies and the people as their righteous victims and the affective appeal to identify with the latter are what makes conspiracy theories both popular *and* populist (Mudde 2017; Serrano 2017), while anti-gender conspiracy theories' emphasis on external enemies and appeals to sovereignty appear to ratify the nativist and nationalist concerns that often fuels right-wing populisms (Mudde 2021; Plattner 2019).

Indeed, the line between populism, defined by its fundamental opposition between the people and the powerful elite (Mudde 2017; 2021), and conspiracy theorizing, characterized by its

fundamental opposition between aggrieved victims and powerful evil-doers (usually elites), is thin and differentiated by little more than scale and assumptions of coordinated intent. Conspiracy theories contribute to constructing the common identity of "the people" upon which populism relies and provides explanations and rationales that explain the mechanics that give depth to its vagueness. And they mediate between and reconcile economic forms of populism—as in the belief that powerful socialists will take over Mexico and impoverish the middle classes and exacerbate believers' economic alienation— and sociocultural populisms—as in the belief that feminism will end traditional Western (i.e. Mexican) civilization and exacerbate their cultural alienation. Populist rhetoric, such as profamily leaders' reiterations that "powerful interests" lie behind promoting gender ideology in Mexico, which they portray as a foreign concept, endorses conspiracy theorists' suspicions about how the world works, the underlying theories of asymmetrical power invoked by conspiracy theories, and their belonging to a common aggrieved class (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Rising right-wing populisms across Europe and the Americas have provided the rhetorical conditions for anti-gender conspiracy theories to thrive and proliferate.

Second, conspiratorial beliefs about gender ideology travel through social and institutional networks facilitated by the steady growth of the transnational profamily movement. As described in Chapter 1, the global pro-family movement grew out of both American religious right organizing gone global in the 1990s (Kaoma 2009; Buss and Herman 2003; Wilkinson 2013) in conjunction with similar movement infrastructure budding in Europe, led especially by the Vatican after the Beijing Conference in 1995. These organizations strengthened their organizing and presence in Mexico in the 2010s and especially after 2015 as part of a global organizing strategy. Leading umbrella organizations like the International Organization for the Family launched in 2016 as an outgrowth of the World Congress on Families, itself established in 1997 to lead transnational profamily efforts on the heels of the UN Beijing conference. CitizenGO, the global arm of profamily organizer that launched in the 2010s in Spain, Hazte Oír, registered in Mexico in 2015 and

employed a full time representative to act as a liaison and international organizer. Around this time, Red Familia in Mexico, a long-standing Mexican profamily organization, appointed an international coordinator to connect Mexico's profamily movement to international efforts. The Iberoamerican Congress for Life and Family led by Mexican evangelical leader Aaron Lara launched in Mexico in 2017, since gaining membership in every country across the Americas, tremendous traction and attention at the Organization of American States, and a Washington DC office, established in 2021. The Political Network for Values, which connects profamily lawmakers across Europe and the Americas, was launched in 2015 with support and continued leadership of Mexico's profamily leader, Rodrigo Ivan Cortes. Frente Nacional por la Familia, founded in Mexico in 2016, launched fundraising efforts in the United States. Meanwhile, American organizations like ADF —a profamily legal organization already well-established in Mexico in coordination with offices around the world— and Family Watch International intensified their work with Mexican organizers.

Together, these organizations have built out the infrastructure of a global profamily movement and have launched Mexico into a leading role within Mexico and in the global movement, even though the Mexican movement has failed to secure equal momentum or electoral and policy victories that some of its counterparts elsewhere in the region have, such as Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador. They have proved effective in their efforts to build and connect a transnational (and especially transatlantic) profamily movement and to bridge this movement with the growing nationalist and/or nativist platforms of right-wing opposition movements in Europe, the United States, Latin America, and parts of Africa (particularly Kenya and Ghana) (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Wilkinson 2020), creating circuits for the coordination and sharing of resources, including strategic communications and, of course, conspiracy theories.

These two factors—transnationally trending right-wing populism and the growth and crystallization of a transnational profamily social and institutional network, organized both offline and online—fuel the spread of anti-gender conspiracy theories, both in Mexico and beyond. While

they are often couched in defensive nationalist terms, anti-gender conspiracy theories are inherently transnational both in their content and form. Like most anti-gender conspiracy theories, the inauguration story for example revolves around a transnationally orchestrated global plot to impose gender ideology on Mexico; incorporates and adapts elements and themes from multiple (typically right-wing populist) contexts around the world; and traverses rather instantaneously across international borders (Korolczuk 2014; Anić 2015). It is significant that while national borders are central to the content of most anti-gender conspiracy theories, they are almost irrelevant for their circulation.

One conspiracy theory I encountered in late 2020 on WhatsApp, for instance, claimed that SARS-CoV-2 vaccines were part of a mass sterilization campaign as part of the greater gender ideology effort. This particular theory originated in Argentina, was explained in video commentary by a profamily leader in Spain, and then picked up by a Mexican American profamily supporter living in the United States, before being reforwarded to profamily groups on WhatsApp both in Mexico and all over Latin America —all within the same day. As with other forms of misinformation, anti-gender conspiracy theories can travel around the world and back before the truth even gets its boots on, as the popular maxim goes. This example attests to the linchpin role that social media plays in facilitating and accelerating the transnational diffusion of conspiracy theories. But its role is not a deterministic factor. Conspiracy theories have been spreading transnationally for centuries, since at least the French Revolution. In fact, that expression about the lightning pace that lies can spread around the world versus the slow dissemination of the truth is not a new saying at all but rather more than three centuries itself (O'Toole 2014).

Another feature of conspiracy theories contributes to its transnational spread and contributes to solidifying an online transnational community and common identification among *profamilias*. Their transnational diffusion also relies on their common appeal and resonance across contexts. Conspiracy theories are not just conducive to constructing a common enemy within the

imagined community of the nation, but also between them. Threats framed as menacing a whole bloc -like post-socialist Eastern Europe or post-colonial Latin America- can serve as the basis for cultivating a shared identity across nations as well, based not on pertaining to the same nation, but on another kind of supra-national imagined community of persecuted traditionalists. This global imagined community of *profamilias* share not a national identity, but nonetheless a common sense that their national identity and traditions are threatened, whether by Western Europe, by Muslims, or by indigenous people often couched in terms of a common Christian ethnonationalism (Swami 2012; Busbridge, Moffitt, and Thorburn 2020). In this way, anti-gender conspiracy theories play a role in transnational profamily movement building by serving as connective tissue to bring disparate factions, including distinct nationalist currents, into a common transnational cause.

The conspiracy theory about the Mexican inauguration, for example, is decidedly a syncretic Mexicanized conspiracy theory[16] that defensively interprets and interpolates globally circulating conspiratorial narratives to explain ostensible machinations unfolding in and towards the imagined nation of Mexico. But it is at the same time also an iteration—a minor modification—of conspiracy theories that circulate every day on multiple continents about Illuminati plots to impose gender ideology, in places like the United States, Spain, Ecuador, or Argentina. In other words, their content may be reinterpreted and adapted to incorporate Mexican actors and cultural landmarks and to explain Mexican political events as the inauguration conspiracy theory did. But, as I further discuss in Chapter 4, they are transnational syncretic formations—devised neither entirely locally nor abroad and circulating not only in Mexico but also in other forms across Latin America and elsewhere.

These convergences are unsurprising. They follow established patterns in which conspiracy theories tend to merge, borrow from, and recycle elements from both other conspiracy theories and real-world events (Gerts et al. 2021). Where conspiracy theories underpin or organize meaning for

[16] I take this up again in the subsequent chapter.

political movements, such mergers between conspiracy theories can facilitate the merging of their followers and help forge new alliances between disparate groups who share a common victim narrative. The merging of conspiracy theories with distinct motivations can serve to facilitate the consolidation of their ardent followers into new composite political coalitions, a phenomenon seen recently in the convergence of QAnon conspiracy theorists with the "sovereign citizens movement" and other right-wing extremist groups in the wake of the 2021 US Inauguration (Neiwert 2021; Spocchia 2021) or among left wing anti-vaccine mothers, flat-earther online hobbyists, wealthy economic elite climate change denialists, anti-Semitic New World Order conspiracy theorists, and religious right-wing anti-gender conspiracy theorists. Conspiratorial anti-gender rhetoric has played this role, bringing nationalist anti-immigration and traditionalist anti-gender ideology elements into alliance in the Austrian case, for example, in a pattern that has repeated across much of Europe (Mayer and Sauer 2017). In the case of Mexico, conspiracy theories, including the inauguration theory, serve to conjoin Catholic and Protestant/evangelical groups —who are often rivals in Mexican political spaces— to see themselves as victims in common within in Mexico, motivating them to co-organize against the imposition of gender ideology. And anti-gender conspiracy theories serve as a primary connective tissue linking Mexican *profamilias* with their counterparts elsewhere, narrativizing them as part of a common, global struggle.

Conclusion

At least three historical conditions have converged to give rise to anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico: (i) endemic and historically rooted political conspiracy theorizing that predates not only the anti-gender views that emerged in the 1990s but also the early 20th Century conceptual emergence of 'gender'; (ii) the intellectual and institutional infrastructure of more than two decades of institutional anti-gender organizing in Mexico; and (iii) the convergence in the 2010s of a

consolidating transnational profamily movement, trending right-wing populisms, increasing conspiracy culture, and expanding facilitation of social media platforms.

Anti-gender conspiracy theories are *not what they seem*. Rather than a novel phenomenon that appeared to come out of nowhere, they are better conceptualized as a new iteration of political conspiracy theories that have long circulated in Mexico. As conspiracy theories tend to do, they have incorporated contemporary themes that reflect the emerging anxieties of those who hold them, including concerns over the changing cultural terms of gender and sexuality and their political, economic, and social implications. Anti-gender conspiracy theories are a new but predictable twist in a much older story.

In history, there are no coincidences, and anti-gender conspiracy theories are no exception. Their emergence is not coincidental, but historical, and better conceptualized as an evolving populist form of historically rooted opposition to gender—and leftist politics and the secular state more generally—in Mexico. Anti-gender conspiracy theories have played a role in popularizing anti-gender rhetoric in Mexico, translating the anti-gender discourse of Catholic elites into the (ironically) anti-elitist, populist anti-gender rhetoric of the streets.

Anti-gender conspiracy theories reveal that *everything is connected*. Rather than a phenomenon that is isolated to Mexico, Mexican anti-gender conspiracy theories are better conceptualized as uniquely local manifestations and adaptations of a global trend in conspiratorial beliefs about gender. By co-articulating the various and even contradictory economic and cultural interests into a perceived common struggle against a common enemy, anti-gender conspiracy theories act as discursive connective tissue —or symbolic glue (Kováts and Põim 2015)— for the coalitional merging between growing right-wing populist parties and their followers with (most often religious) traditionalists (i.e. new social conservatives) (Marchlewska et al. 2019; Corrêa, Paternotte, and Kuhar 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Cooper 2017).

Anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico reveal how *everything is connected* in another sense as well. Transnational in content and in form, they narrate Mexico's place in the global order and explain how people and events far away seem to determine and shape the everyday lives of Mexicans in ways that seem both beyond control and comprehension. And as they incorporate elements and themes from other contexts as they bounce around the globe, building a common identity among profamily movement followers across Europe, the Americas, and beyond, they make visible the significant infrastructure and reach achieved by transnational profamily movement and play an important role in building shared identities and solidifying both national and transnational *profamilia* imagined communities and movements.

Anti-gender conspiracy theories are not the only discursive form that *profamilia* rhetoric takes in Mexico, but it is a prevalent and consequential one. It's also one that has much to teach about how *profamilias* build identity and movements in Mexico on the everyday and micropolitical level. Just how entrenched conspiratorial approaches to gender ideology had become in Mexico became apparent to me in that conversation with Leticia at the *Monumento a la Madre* that September morning in 2019. For a moment, I wondered if Leticia had had a change of heart about her opposition to "gender ideology." I asked her if she had left the cause. She did not leave me in suspense for long. "No, of course I'm still in the cause," she smiled. "But these people think that AMLO is a Freemason and that gender ideology is an Illuminati plot and all sorts of silly things. So, they are blinded to what's really going on" —she paused, gesturing as if this were all so frustratingly obvious, before continuing— "that it's powerful people and wealthy countries who are imposing gender ideology on us to try to control our population!" Leticia rejected one conspiracy theory to embrace another. But to an ethnographer, dismissing this pervasive discursive feature of anti-gender activism and the attachments and social critiques that they might reveal would be to accept being blinded to "what's really going on." While this chapter has answered the question:

where do anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico come from, in the next chapter, I take up this question: what do they say?

CHAPTER 5. Syncretic Theories: Reading Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theories Across

Introduction

Ping! Not long after I had settled into my Mexico City apartment at the start of my fieldwork, I received a group message with a video from a neighbor in my local WhatsApp chat: "To all those young parents who think that the struggle against *gender ideology* is an exaggeration and who don't think that something like this could happen in Mexico, look at the perversion that they are imposing on the minds of the little children, damaging their psyches." I was just getting acquainted with my neighborhood WhatsApp group—a vital institution that many middle and upper class *colonias* [neighborhoods] in Mexico City rely on to share information about real time community news, events, and crime; circulate public service announcements, notices about missing persons, or warnings about the latest scams; inform on public works projects; facilitate crowdsourced fact checking and debunking of the barrage of misinformation on Mexican social media; and organize and support each other. My concerned neighbor's message arrived on the heels of complaints about illegal advertising posters being pasted all over the neighborhood. The video he shared depicted a preschool teacher leading a class in a popular children's song celebrating what makes a family and featured a montage of preschoolers engaged in a variety of playful activities. They weren't, however, singing the traditional version of the song about a mom and a dad, a brother and sister, and a grandma and grandpa, that many children living in Mexico, including my own, come home from preschool singing. Instead, the teacher, seemingly of Spanish origin, had adapted the popular song by adding "or two moms or two dads" to include—perversely, in this neighbor's view—possibilities for what makes a family beyond the singularly heteronormative.

She had reinvented, indeed corrupted, the family, the neighbor implied with his neighborhood alert. *The gender ideologues were coming for our children's minds and, like kidnappers or illegal advertisers, posed an invisible and external threat to neighborhood children, to the family, to*

the colonia, to Mexico. To those who shared his view, his concern over securing [traditional] gender and the family was logical and relevant for a group dedicated to neighborhood security. Before the moderators could jump in to shut down this particular offense to the "no politics" rule in the group guidelines, one *colonista* had already jumped in to wholeheartedly agree with the original poster, while another chided him instead: "Honestly, what offended me most [in the video] was to see the young girl ironing." "You need your own ultraright forum," ridiculed another, before yet another replied to assert more soberly that what stood to damage the country most was misinformation and ridiculous conspiracy theories like about how *gender ideology* is a global plot to impose population control on Mexico like the one referenced by the original poster[17].

Just two years after the profamily marches had launched *gender ideology* into the popular imagination and national conversation, this exchange reflects how the obscure concept of *gender ideology* had quickly become an everyday topic among general audiences as well as just how polarized as a public controversy it had become. Like the many audience members who responded to my surveys at profamily events and my concerned neighbor, some viewed *gender ideology* as among the greatest threats to Mexico. Others, like my dissenting neighbors, were more aligned with alarmed commentators—mostly feminists and allied progressives—who had written a flurry of national op-eds and exposés in the wake of 2016 seeking to explain to the blindsided masses[18] "What is 'Gender Ideology'" and to denounce it as "the far-right conspiracy that doesn't exist." How did those who viewed *gender ideology* as a neocolonial plot or credulous threat, whether cultural, political economic, or both, understand, explain, and substantiate their concerns? What is the underlying logic that renders equating an adapted children's song to a spate of neighborhood robberies, especially in a country facing unprecedented deadly gender-based violence against LGBT

[17] The kind of social pushback in the neighborhood was nonexistent in profamily communities, where this belief was common.

[18] Even so, not everyone had yet heard of *gender ideology*. I found myself introducing the concept to many, including both feminist and profamily-allied Assemblywomen whom I interviewed, just by asking questions about it.

people, seem a matter of rational common sense? Like my neighbors who piled on their derision of our mutual neighbor's concern, dissenters in the general public and scholars of conspiracy theories alike have sometimes also been quick to dismiss conspiracy theories—and with them the concerns of those who believe them—as irrational. It may be the case that the content of anti-gender conspiracy theories cannot be taken at face value within the terms of liberal truth regimes. But to dismiss them as matter of truth value alone is to take the false and totalizing binary between rational and irrational (Gould 2009) at face value instead and to overlook important social critiques and lived anxieties they may signify.

In this chapter, I disentangle and historicize four overlapping genealogies of anti-gender conspiracy theories circulating in Mexico's profamily community, understanding them as syncretic discursive formations that recombine elements not only from each other but from anxieties and histories that are neither wholly from within nor without—they are distinctly and syncretically Mexican. Reading these anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico "across"–that is, analyzing their commonalities and differences – in this chapter reveals both the diversity and patterns of anxieties held by their believers, particularly among those who imagine proposals to alter the normative social and economic order as a threat to their political hegemony, social status, and/or economic power. In the following chapter, I will read these theories "down" –that is, mining them interpretatively for their meaning as social texts– reveals the ways they index ongoing distrust that transcends both Mexico and the contemporary moment. Reading anti-gender conspiracy theories both down and across for what is hidden within them in plain sight reveals their rootedness in historical tensions that are foundational to Western modernity itself and as expressions of claims making before a contested future.

Reading Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theories Across: a Thematic Taxonomy

Anti-gender conspiracy theories, while novel as a phenomenon per se, are invariably built upon the substrata of pre-existing conspiratorial narratives, as addressed in Chapter 3. In line with conspiracy theories' defining tendency to finger a powerful persecutorial group and external enemy in a transnational context, anti-gender conspiracy theories tend to feature narratives about the pursuit of world domination or global control. This theme ran continuous across the dozens of versions of anti-gender conspiracy theories that I encountered in Mexico, which were patterned by four interconnected narrative emphases. I group these into four overlapping families that respectively revolve around the following central themes: (i) neocolonial political-economic control, especially via population control; (ii) New World Order theories that draw on anti-masonic, anti-Semitic, and/or anti-communist themes; (iii) spiritual warfare, including satanic worship and eschatological interpretations; and (iv) cultural Marxism. Oftentimes profamily advocates seamlessly adopted more than one of these narratives, moving fluidly from one to the other, even when they were mutually contradictory. This follows an observed pattern that those who believe in one conspiracy theory are likely to believe in others, even when they are contradictory (Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012). For instance, many of my interlocutors, though not all, also believe that climate change is a hoax, that the coronavirus vaccine sterilizes males as a covert means of population control, and that the 2020 US election was stolen.

In practice, this served to blur the boundaries between the distinctions I make below while positioning these conspiracy theories as a self-referential body in which the details of the conspiracy theory do not appear to contradict one another but rather appear to corroborate the underlying belief that there exists a conspiracy. This effect can also result from a common tendency believers have to expand the scope of a conspiracy theory in order to accommodate or explain away counterevidence (Krekó 2020), as seen in the way that believers of these conspiracy theories tend

to incorporate all these narratives together into a grand conglomerate conspiratorial narrative. While this makes it challenging—and almost arbitrary—to differentiate and disentangle the various overlapping threads that defy rigid distinctions, it also suggests that, in addition to historicizing and contextualizing them as I did in Chapter 3, understanding how their content is narratively and thematically patterned is important for understanding not only anti-gender activism's entanglement with conspiracy theorizing but also the rooted sentiments that drive its popular support.

Gender as a Neocolonial Tool of Population Control

The anti-gender conspiracy theory alluded to by my concerned neighbor pertains to a first and predominant group of anti-gender conspiracy theories that connects the dots one way between international political economic concerns, reproduction, sovereignty, gender, sexuality, the family, religion, and history: via accusations of population control. This family of conspiracy theories activates historically rooted and widely resonant anti-colonial and pro-sovereignty themes. By far the most common of the four major groups, variations of this group of theories view *gender ideology* as part of an effort by powerful and wealthy global actors to impose population control as part of a larger geopolitical, economic, and/or sociocultural agenda. This group of theories performs the important function of bridging anti-LGBT and anti-abortion concerns within the profamily community, a feature that contributes to its popularity among pre-existing anti-abortion constituencies. Conspiratorial beliefs about population control got a boost –particularly among Catholic followers– after Vatican opposition to the policy proposals proposed at the 1994 United Nations Population Conference in Cairo. It has since been elaborated on and disseminated in Mexico by organizations dedicated to this narrative, like Voz Pública, since the early 2000s, and variations of this theory have proliferated to reach broad popular circulation.

The population control narrative is the primary version of anti-gender conspiracy theories inflection promoted by, among others, devout Catholic, frequent speaker Guadalajaran Brenda del Río, a known figure among anti-abortion activists. Del Río had emerged as a presence in the anti-abortion movement from the Latin America-wide anti-abortion network Vida y Familia. One of the first organizations to lay the early infrastructure of Mexico's profamily, anti-abortion movement in the 2000s, Vida y Familia later expanded into chapters all over Mexico through the 2010s, helping to expand her reach nationally. I was familiar with her work, particularly her sensational (and controversial) efforts to organize public Catholic funerals and burials for aborted fetuses, when I first encountered her in the halls of the National Assembly. Our exchange was cut short when a legislator whom she had traveled to Mexico City to target as part of her anti-abortion lobbying efforts exited the auditorium. She quickly returned her attention mid-sentence to her efforts to distribute pamphlets about the "true motives" behind *gender ideology*. "Have you heard of NSM200?!" she yelled at the legislator, referencing a decades old US internal security memorandum that identified population growth as a security threat, as she shoved a manila folder of documents into his hands that would allegedly prove that *gender ideology* posed a threat to Mexico.

A few months after I lost sight of her in the frenzied crowd, she reemerged in my fieldwork with a video she produced titled "Learn how Mexico is being conspired against and how to defend this Catholic nation" (del Río 2019). The video, which reverberated across Mexico's profamily social networks in early 2019 ahead of an event she organized with Argentine anti-abortion leader Chinda Brandolino, exemplifies the anti-colonial population control version of anti-gender conspiracy theories. Her account explains the advancement of abortion "rights" and the encouragement of "vices" like LGBT rights as newer and more nefarious strategies to facilitate geopolitical domination and capitalist exploitation through their common cause of population control. Revisiting the

resonant historical linkages between Malthusianism[19], eugenics, population control, anti-colonialism, and the political economic exploitation of Latin America, she reinterprets them within present day concerns about global neoliberal capitalism, the expansion of sexual and reproductive rights, and the shifting geopolitical order.

Offering what sounds like a revisionist version of Eduardo Galeano's classic critique of the colonialist capitalist pillage of a continent in *Open Veins of Latin America,* del Río opens the video with an urgent exposé of the "real" interests behind recent efforts to expand sexual and reproductive rights (i.e. *gender ideology*) in Mexico: "Latin America and the Caribbean are under siege by powerful economic groups that, seeing the resources we have in Latin America, have decided to take over oil and natural gas, lithium, minerals and many other components that serve for its present and future development." She immediately accuses a wide variety of global elites of being part of a large-scale global conspiracy. In addition to later mentions of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, the Bilderberg group, George Soros, and the Rockefellers, these include "organizations such as the United Nations, such as the International Monetary Fund, such as the World Bank, such as Amnesty International … organizations like them [who] have their sights on our Latin American and Caribbean countries." Without distinction, she glosses these actors as "international power," an interchangeable web of global elites who are conspiring to impose LGBT rights and abortion (i.e. *gender ideology*) on developing countries as a form of population control.

Framing *gender ideology* as an existential pan-Latin American postcolonial struggle against an ongoing colonial project of capitalist domination from which Mexico must be defended and liberated, she asserts that: "Latin America is rising up, wants freedom for our own peoples. We have the right to self-determine and we do not want interference from the United Nations, the Bilderberg Club, and so many other organizations that buy the wills of our officials who, by betraying our

[19] In Essay on the Principle of Population (1798) Thomas Malthus argued that human population would exceed food production and lead to famine without intentional intervention to manage human population.

peoples, institutionalize the genocide of our children." This includes AMLO and the MORENA party, who –echoing the inauguration theory discussed in the previous chapter– she pegs as sharing in these "real" interests and serving as the conspiracy's complicit agents in Mexico. In del Río's view, these perceived efforts to expand sexual and reproductive rights in Mexico are part of a suite of policy interventions under the AMLO administration that comprise a more nefarious and encompassing strategy of population control by promoting destructive social vices, including not only *gender ideology* but also the decriminalization of marijuana and assisted suicide (i.e. *euthanasia*). She argues:

> Not only is Mexico receiving this international pressure, it is using our officials as its agents of change, trying to reduce our population with abortion, contraception, euthanasia and also with the use of drugs. […] Malthus said that vice also controlled the population. Have you ever wondered what the prescribed UN package includes? It includes the free use of drugs. So that by ruining public morale, having a people weakened in its principles, its values and also reduced in its population, they can then jump on us and subdue our peoples.

She continues to substantiate her claims by weaving together historical disillusionment with international financial institutions and their disastrous macroeconomic policies with a plot to facilitate capitalist exploitation through the coercive power of culture, for example through what she labels intentional efforts of "ideologization." This critique echoes that of the historical anti-colonial left in Latin America, directed primarily at US institutions like the Peace Corps[20] or US Area Studies like Latin American Studies with its strategic Cold War origins. Del Río's implicit claim to illuminate the obscure levers behind population-level exploitation and what she perceives as efforts to condition the widespread consent and/or acquiescence of the masses (i.e. false consciousness) typifies the theory of power assumed by the "*gender ideology* as neocolonial population control" collection of narratives.

Adjacent versions of this include Dale O'Leary's 1990s charge that global feminists and their allied governments sought to impose social engineering (popularized by Dale

[20] For example, Bolivia expelled US Peace Corps volunteers in 1971 and they were evacuated again in 2008 upon civil unrest that was met with the US by the threat of decertification, to which aid is linked.

O'Leary's The Gender Agenda in the 1990s), accusations of the promotion of vices to weaken the population, or that soft power has eclipsed hard power as the preferred strategy for global control in the post-Cold War period. They also emerge in the theory that their enemies (feminists) are engaged in a Gramscian[21] war of position in which they pursue their objectives through gaining control over the media, education, and cultural institutions rather than through the military force and coercion that enforced political economic exploitation in the region throughout the 20th Century. Del Río explains:

> When in ancient times a people, a group of power, wanted to take other homelands, other regions of the world for their benefit, well, they used weapons, the army, and if they were more numerous, they could subdue those peoples. Now what have they done? They don't need to kill us, they need to ideologize our young people and for that they are using university exchange youth. Here, for example, in Mexico, we have Argentines, we have Brazilians, we have Europeans who are mingling among our young people in the universities and thus ideologized, to be able to say Mexico, you have the right to kill your own children and also profit from this. Why? Because they themselves are associated with abortion clinics of international power like the PPF [Planned Parenthood Federation] in Mexico. It's called Mexfam.

It is economic interests backed by military power that underpin these efforts, she asserts. After first offering one explanation –that abortion providers promote the practice because they profit *directly* from service provision– she adds another and perhaps more sinister: that they profit *indirectly* by forging political economic arrangements, like Mexico's infamous maquiladoras, that make the population easier to control to facilitate capitalist extraction. Hers is a biopolitical critique on the one hand of the ways in which population policies are influenced by powerful supranational actors that in her view usurp the power of the family –and bound up with it, the nation— as the local locus of control to regulate matters as intimate as reproduction. On the other, she draws on the economistic critique of postcolonial and dependency theories to train her own historical anti-colonialist critique

[21] Many anti-gender activists frequently cite Gramsci by name. This argument reemerges as a central feature of the Cultural Marxism theory discussed below.

onto the failures of a quarter century of neoliberalism. She exposes it not as an effort in service of poverty alleviation but of poverty preservation, not in best interests of her nation but of transnational capital (i.e. globalists) aligned with the US and insured by its security state and military power (Harvey 2010; 2005). As she explains it:

> These international groups opt for population control to be able to achieve their economic goals of taking our resources, including setting up maquiladoras and paying for all their products at low cost. To achieve the following, according to Malthus: to preserve poverty in our regions. But with those international resources they could boost our economy! Haven't you asked yourself? So? Why spend on things that do not lift our peoples out of poverty?
>
> What else did Malthus say? That war could control the population of regions of the world. The Bilderberg Club even decides when wars have to be fought. Have you ever wondered why the blue helmets have not entered Venezuela? Precisely because they are reducing their population, because they have their sights set on their natural resources.

But she does not cast sole blame onto neoliberalism and militarism. She extends this critique to global governance feminism (or "neoliberal feminism") that has allied with and facilitated neoliberalism (Runyan and Zalewski In Review) and militarism –alliances that have been the target of many feminist critiques (Fraser 2020). Del Río imputes feminist efforts to expand sexual and reproductive rights at the global level as an expression of this neoliberal governmentality, theorizing their coalitional relationship as instrumental and conspiratorial— with the righteous majority cast as the common victim of their alliance. If not intended to lift Mexicans out of poverty, reasons del Río, then these efforts are intended to control and exploit the masses instead.

As such, del Río ends her video with the nationalist rally cry characteristic of right-wing populist, anti-globalist rhetoric:

> Enough of your interference. Enough of putting pressure on our peoples. Latin America and the Caribbean stands up and says no to you, International Power. Why? Because we are the inhabitants of this land, and we have the right to self-determine Latin America and the Caribbean. Wake up. Get up to defend your country.

She calls for the defense of the nation not from neoliberalism by name, but from what she views as its most corrosive expression –*gender ideology*, neoliberalism disguised as sexual and reproductive rights. This is not only a matter of national and regional defense, but an existential matter of survival for the Mexican (Catholic) ethnonation. *Gender ideology* (including abortion) is not a straightforward demand by excluded or marginalized populations for their rights, del Río implies, but constitutes a neocolonial attack on Mexico that justifies the need for a common regional defense against *gender ideology*.

* * *

Del Río's conspiracy theory builds on another widely disseminated version of this theory elaborated and popularized by Ecuadorian *profamilia* advocate Amparo Medina since at least 2011. In Medina's telling, as disseminated through her many conference appearances across the region as well as widely on social media, asserts that *gender ideology* should be understood as a neocolonial strategy of extractive capitalism led by the United Nations via the façade of sexual and reproductive rights. Led especially by the UNFPA, the aim of the UN, Medina claims, is to create a market for and profit from selling abortion services and contraceptives to poor countries, much like international financial institutions profited from creating markets for debt in poor countries through structural adjustment in the preceding decades.

Medina has been invited many times by del Río and others as a frequent speaker in Mexico since at least 2016 when she gave her talk "Gender Ideology and its Imposition in Mexico by the United Nations." I heard Medina speak in my first days in the field when Con Participación (CP) invited me to watch the live Facebook broadcast they had organized with Medina, in which she discussed her signature theory –that the United Nations was engaged in a profit-making scheme to force developing countries to pay large sums to buy contraceptives and abortion services under the guise of *gender ideology*— with CP's leader and my frequent conversation partner, Marcial Padilla.

In her talk, which CP rebroadcasted on its Facebook page on repeat for months, Medina claims that the United Nations induces women to abort to make money. They do his even though they "know" that abortion and contraceptives cause cancer and a long list of other negative side effects, profiting off women's bodies even as they destroy them.

Tuning in that night from my kitchen along with about fifty other followers of Con Participación (CP), including a large contingent of devout older women from different parts of Mexico who hardly ever missed a CP event, I listened to Medina give her live testimony from Ecuador about her "conversion" from an "advisor" to the UNFPA whose job it was to "destroy Catholics' faith" and "promote abortion" to a renewed life as an "ex-revolutionary" who now leads ProLife Action in Ecuador and leads campaigns *gender ideology* in Latin America. Although Ecuadorian investigative journalists found that Medina never worked for the UN or acted in any official capacity in the organization, this has rarely if ever been questioned by profamily organizations who invite or listen to her talks (Ecuador Chequea 2019). Her testimony, which I heard numerous times throughout my fieldwork, flaunched her to notoriety in profamily circles in Mexico and has enabled her to travel by invitation all over Latin America on speaking tours. She even testified before the Peruvian Congress in 2015 to denounce the UN for making a "business" out of abortion and contraception. Like del Río's, Medina's version of the conspiracy theory is an explicit critique of the capitalist commodification of Latin American women's bodies and, by extension, of the neocolonial capitalist exploitation of the Latin American region within the world system.

* * *

These same strands emerged again in yet another popular variation of the anti-colonial population control conspiracy theories alleging that Bill Gates is leading an intense effort to reduce the world's population, in part through his support of vaccines. While accusations like these have been

circulating for years, it was in the congressional offices of PAN along with an audience of about 200 profamily activists, PAN lawmakers, and legislative aides that I first heard this version. This event was one of nearly a dozen planned stops in the 2019 Derrumbando Mentiras (Breaking Down Lies [about *gender ideology*]) national speaking tour that FNF had organized in Mexico in conjunction with others. Having just attended the event in an auditorium of 1,200 in Toluca and a smaller venue of several hundred in Mexico City earlier in the week, this was the third time I was attending the event, but it was only then before this audience of conservative politicians that the speakers elaborated on this version of the population control conspiracy theory.

The tour had brought together some of the region's most iconic anti-*gender ideology* speakers, whom many of Mexico's *profamilias* followed closely, admired, and had seen speak several times: Brazilian anti-abortion activist and "ex-feminist" Sara Wynter, Argentine anti-*gender ideology* social media icon and author of Latin America's anti-*gender ideology* hand book The Black Book of the New Left, Agustín Laje, and Argentine anti-abortion celebrity and founder of Argentina's brand new anti-abortion Ola Celeste [22] (Light Blue Wave) political party, Chinda Brandolino. All the speakers had generated excitement within the *profamilia* youth groups I followed. Many of them had read Laje's book and were eager for a chance to hear him speak and to meet him. Meanwhile older members encouraged younger ones not to miss the chance to meet and hear Brandolino speak.

After Brandolino showed a graphic video of a late term abortion –a notorious hallmark of her talks— to lawmakers and profamily activists over breakfast, she moved on to screening a clip from a Ted Talk given by Bill Gates, Innovating to Zero, in which he addressed how we might tackle climate change. At the beginning of the talk, Gates presented the factors implicated in reducing

[22] The Light Blue Wave counters the feminist Green Wave that swept much of Latin America over the past decade. Driven especially by the Argentine feminist movement for secure safe, legal, and free access to abortion, feminists across the region, including Mexico, adopted its symbolic dark green kerchief. Pro-abortion activists in Argentina and across the region adopted a light blue kerchief and the slogan "Save both lives" in 2019 in counter-protest.

carbon emissions to net zero as climate scientists have pleaded: (1) population, (2) services per person, (3) energy per service, and (4) CO_2 emissions per unit of energy. He explained that either one of these factors or their combination must approximate zero to achieve net zero. Gates' purpose was to argue for investment in post-carbon energy innovations, option 4. Gates had arrived at this focus through the systematic elimination of the other three factors as viable targets for sufficient reductions –including population— given that we cannot eliminate human needs, that they require energy, or people. He began by ruling out population reductions as a sufficient strategy, noting that population growth is accelerating at a pace that will increase today's 6.8 billion to 9 billion. However, he added: "if we do a really great job on new vaccines, health care, reproductive health services— we could lower that [increase] *by*, perhaps, 10 or 15 percent… an *increase* of about 1.3" billion (Gates 2010 emphasis added).

Misinterpreting Gates' argument, which was presented in English, Brandolino paused to point this line out to the audience as evidence of Gates' involvement in a plan to reduce the world's population "*to* 10 to 15 percent" of current level, that is *to about one billion* people. She conjectured that he planned to pursue this through a massive and genocidal population control campaign featuring abortion that would eliminate billions of people. She ended the event with the affirmation that Mexicans must again put Mexico first, just as they had in the past –a reference to anti-colonial Independence movements and/or the anti-dictatorial Mexican Revolution— and to "not allow us to be governed by them" anymore but to safeguard Latin America's sovereignty. She then closed by leading the audience in the traditional national(ist) chant: "qué viva Mexico!" activating a sense among conservative legislators and party leaders of the urgency to defend the nation from abortion and *gender ideology* more broadly that seek to do harm to Mexico's population in the name of human rights and sustainable development.

When I caught up afterwards with Brandolino in the hallways of PAN headquarters to talk about her interpretation of the English language talk, she was receptive to the possibility that she

had misunderstood the statement as advocating for reducing the population "to" 10-15% instead of what Gates had said—reducing population growth rates "by" 10-15%, interpretations that differed on the scale of billions with vastly different implications. But, consistent with the findings of conspiracy theory scholars, the correction at the source of the misinformation after the event had no effect on an audience for whom the take away message was clear (Krekó 2020). Neither did it seem to have any effect on changing Brandolino's mind about what was still evidently clear: Gates is a leader in a global conspiracy of elites to impose population control on poor nations through abortion, and it must be resisted.

* * *

This conspiracy theory has indeed continued to circulate all over Latin America and beyond, merging with conspiracy theories about another long-running theme in conspiracy theories that has circulated in profamily circles in Mexico since at least the 1990s: vaccines. For example, one video originating on a self-produced Spanish show called The Immense Minority run by Fernando Paz, an outlet specializing in producing and a wide range of commentary and conspiracy theories about "globalism, *gender ideology*, feminism, demography, and climate change" circulated in early 2021 among some Mexican profamily groups. The video used the same brief video clip to imply that Bill Gates, like Malthus, was arguing for reduction of the population (not of growth rates) to save the world from carbon dioxide by targeting third world countries populations with abortion and contraceptives. Going further than Brandolino had, the narrator pointed to Gates' mention of vaccines and his comments elsewhere that good health care provision (i.e. reproductive health) is associated with reduced family size, as evidence of an alleged plot by Gates to reduce population size through vaccines, including through new COVID-19 vaccines. The video accuses Gates, who they associate with abortion provider Planned Parenthood, of engaging in an occult sterilization campaign through vaccines supported by his foundation in third world countries. In a misleading

explanation that resurrects and misreports earlier and mostly abandoned research into developing a vaccine to prevent human pregnancy, the narrator alleges that Gates has arranged for the insertion of human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG) hormones into vaccines that will create anti-hCG antibodies that will be activated upon implantation, attack the zygote, and "cause what seem like miscarriages but are actually induced abortions" (El Gato 2021).

While some profamily activists in Latin America have supported public health measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19 and support vaccination programs, including FNF in Mexico, others like Chinda Brandolino, have also spread anti-vaccine conspiracy theories that allege that Covid-19 vaccines are a population control conspiracy. Presenting quasi-professional websites that include real scientific studies misinterpreted to support their claims and video compilations of anti-vaccine health providers from all over the world raising the alarm, they allege that the United Nations is pushing Covid-19 vaccines through the World Health Organization to change the DNA in human testes to render the recipient infertile. Brandolino provoked mixed reactions of both support and harsh condemnation among profamily activists across the region when a video of her went viral in which she led a protest outside the Argentine Congress in late 2020 calling for the death of lawmakers who supported making vaccines mandatory. She accused vaccine campaigns of pursuing "forced sterilization," a charge that holds particular significance in a country and region in which forced sterilization has been used as a tool of dictatorship, war, and social control on populations across the region from Fujimori's Peru to Argentina's Dirty War to the eugenicist United States.

Gender as the Dawn of the New World Order

The theme of population control appears in another valence in this second broad group of conspiracy theories that center around *gender ideology* as a tool by a group of elites for world domination, as in not just control over population *growth* but control over the population *itself*. These converge under the umbrella of New World Order conspiracy theories. The many variations

within this family of conspiracy theories connect the dots between international political economic concerns, reproduction, sovereignty, gender, sexuality, the family, religion, and history another way. Many of them center on the Illuminati, as in the 2018 Inauguration theory I explored in Chapter 3, in which Raul narrates an Illuminati orchestrated plot to implement *gender ideology* as a means to take over Mexico and defeat the Catholic Church and Western civilization. Meanwhile, others feature the Freemasons more generally, communism, and the anti-Semitism that is an inextricable part of NOM conspiracy theories, often combining some or all these themes. These themes and actors reoccurred throughout my fieldwork as profamily activists integrated new events and information, like the Inauguration, into the broader conspiratorial framework they maintained for understanding and explaining *gender ideology*. These theories were frequently referenced, forwarded, and discussed in WhatsApp groups and in videos posted on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. But they also emerged in interviews and in debates among interlocutors over lunch or coffee or in the informal chatting that followed profamily activist meetings, with some elaborating on other's narratives and others contesting them, sometimes in boastful tones, other times in hushed tones.

One morning at a weekly profamily meeting, for example, as I sat just a few chairs down from those who had presented the conspiratorial exegesis of the 2018 Inauguration as an Illuminati ritual, Santos filled me in on some of the backstory. He leaned in and lowered his voice as he asked me: "Have you heard of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion?" I had, but I was unsure what the 1990s discursive invention of *gender ideology* had to do with this book —an early 19th Century fabricated text that purported to contain the secret meeting notes of Jewish leaders planning to seize global control and that had fueled more than a Century of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. I had met Santos personally through the Sumas Coalition, but I had first learned about him from the short profamily video messages that he was regularly producing and circulating at the time as he worked to gain followers for his prolife-profamily association. He was one of several individuals in the

profamily activist community who was competing to gain a large following on social media, in part by acting a source of news and revelatory information related to the profamily cause, though he had never managed to cultivate a substantial or lasting following beyond a few dozen people.

As we sat next to each other at the end of a long table in an evangelical café where ProVidaProFamilia held its weekly gathering, Santos elaborated on the relevance of the Protocols and the purpose of his visit to the group that day. He had come to seek support from the group for his plan to launch a new conservative political party that would serve as a counterpoint to the PAN, which had just lost to AMLO in the 2018 elections. He felt that PAN had not only lost the election but also its way politically and morally. Specifically, the party had not taken a hard lined enough position against *gender ideology* via abortion and same sex marriage and had hence betrayed its foundational profamily and prolife principles. He drew even more concern, however, as well as an explanation for this deviation, from his conviction that the party had been infiltrated by the "international left," led by an alliance of feminists and (free)masons. These were not new circumstances though, he explained; rather, this development was part of a long-running and continuous battle of good and evil with much earlier roots in the assault on the Catholic Church that dates to the French Revolution. It was in the movement against the monarchy and against the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Jacobin figures like Maximilien Robespierre[23], that today's authoritarian and anti-Catholic feminists and masons had emerged and in which the struggle we see today over *gender ideology* is rooted.

This is where the Protocols of the Elders of Zion came in, he told me, because it documents how these elements transformed into a global alliance seeking world domination—the New World

[23] Robespierre was one of the most well-known agitators of the French Revolution, a member of the Jacobin Club and Paris Commune, and advocate for liberal democracy, equality before the law, and against the monarchy and Catholic authority. He later presided over a period of extreme political violence before he was executed. The term Jacobins, to which he is chiefly associated, has through some flattening of historical events, come to be used to pejoratively reference radical left-wing revolutionary politics or violent Marxism, and in France connotes centralized authoritarianism and government interventionism in transforming society, a connotation like that of "social engineering" that circulates widely in profamily circles, particularly in the wake of Dale O'Leary's work.

Order. *Gender ideology* was just the latest of centuries old tactics to accomplish this, and it was part of an (ironic) alliance between global capitalists[24] and communists under the New World Order. George Soros, one of the most prominent figures behind *gender ideology*, had converted to Judaism, Santos continued, to wield economic power to lead this effort. The imagery of the many anti-Semitic memes that had passed through the Sumas WhatsApp group targeting George Soros flashed through my mind. "They" wanted to make perfect people and a perfect world[25], Santos went on. And this, he concluded, bringing me up to speed, is what had brought him here today with his renewed focus: to turn his association into a new political party that would be able to counter the infiltration of the PAN by George Soros and other global New World Order elites.

Sometimes delineated separately, sometimes in varying recombinations, and sometimes conglomerated all together at once, anti-Semitic and anti-masonic frames –what some simply referred to as "judeomasonería" [Jewish-masonery]— were just as often bound together with anti-communist frames. In its anti-communist inflections, New World Order theories were framed as an effort of communist renewal led variably or in combination by feminists, the LGBT lobby, masons, the China-Cuba-Venezuela tripartite with allies like Bolivia, Nicaragua, and of course AMLO and MORENA in Mexico, George Soros, the United States Democratic Party, the United Nations, Muslims, and others. These narratives resurrect 1950s narrativizations of communism as endangering Christianity (especially the Catholic Church, in Latin America); Western civilization (a proxy for neoliberal free-market capitalism with a limited role for the state); and civil liberties (a proxy for freedom from redistributive economics, regulation, and liberal minority protections).

In addition to the Inauguration conspiracy theory I analyzed in the previous chapter, Guadalajara's Cardinal Juan Sandoval Íñiguez's 2020 warning offers an example of the anti-communist frame of anti-gender conspiracy theories, interwoven as well with references to

[24] Which in this context also implies or implicates Jewish people.
[25] An apparent reference to eugenics.

population control theories. *Gender ideology*, he lamented, is "one of the biggest and most absurd aberrations and seeks to undo the identity of both the person and the family." "What's behind the federal government's promotion of *gender ideology*," he warned Catholic followers, is an attempt by MORENA to manipulate Mexicans and impose communism by "controlling ideas, education, and the economy." By nationalizing industries, taking over banking, and centralizing the economy, they are seeking to attempt to make everyone in the country economically equivalent while accumulating the nation's riches. This will enrich the government while bringing about mass impoverishment and misery to the people. By forcing through legislation that allows children to "choose the sex they want to have," *gender ideology* is not only an offense to God's creation, he continued, but moreover is a tool for this process of communizing the country by "impeding the perpetuation of the species as well as perverting the institution of the family by fomenting homosexuality." This will precipitate the losses of childhood, taking marriage seriously in society, and the production of "good" families.[26] Having achieved this outcome already in Cuba, China, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and having attempted to "communize" Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile, "now they are coming for us, trying to establish communism" here in Mexico, with *gender ideology* as a primary tool for this purpose.

Gender as the Battlefield of Spiritual Warfare

New World Order conspiracy theories are historically intertwined not only with anti-Semitism and anti-communism but also with millennialism—the conviction among some Christians that we are nearing the End Times, in which Jesus Christ will return to restore peace on Earth. A third and very closely related group of conspiracy theories that overlaps heavily with NOM theories connects the dots between international political economic concerns, reproduction, sovereignty, gender,

[26] This can be read as meaning moral (i.e. heteronormative), productive, devout, and free market supporting families.

sexuality, the family, religion, and history in yet another configuration, explaining *gender ideology* as a central battleground in epochal spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare narratives of anti-gender conspiracy theories manifest in two primary interrelated narrative inflections: those that implicitly place *gender ideology* within an eternal power struggle between Satan and God (or between Good and Evil) and those that read it as an explicit sign of the End Times.

In one of many examples of the first inflection, a Spanish-language video circulated in January 2021 in profamily WhatsApp groups that claimed that Celine Dion was one of many international stars colluding with the efforts of global elites to impose *gender ideology* as the New World Order, in this case through the "dissolution of [children's] natural gender identities" through her new gender-neutral, black and white children's clothing line. The video shows a 2018 video clip that Dion produced to launch the new children's line in which she breaks into a hospital nursery "in the night," stands between two rows of babies wrapped in blue and pink representing the traditional gender binary, and then blows black dust over the babies. This action of "black magic" transforms the babies' clothes into black and white onesies, including one printed with the words "New Order." This refers presumably to a gender-neutral order that is "liberated from traditional gender roles," as Dion puts it in her video.

The narrator accuses Dion of pushing a "hidden ideology" (i.e. *gender ideology*) onto children via clothing meant to "sexualize and indoctrinate them into the New World Order." She charges the clothing line and its Instagram posts with being full of symbolism of Satanic worship, death, sex trafficking, and pederasty. While the line indeed contains black skull motifs, which the narrator points out, the unidentified narrator also claims (but does not actually show viewers), that one little girl's T-shirt that reads "Ho!" as a reference to "prostitute" in English (i.e. whore). The actual line features a shirt that reads "No!" Another shirt, claims the narrator, conjures the Head of

Bamophet[27], a horned half-goat, half-human that has both male and female organs and that has come to be seen as a central figure in Satanic worship that demonstrates the Satanic origins of sex change— most likely a reference to one of the line's motifs that appears as the head of an alien with antennae. As the video concludes, the narrator reminds the viewer that these are literal references, not figurative ones, that have been confirmed by a certified exorcist from the Diocese of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Further, she concludes, it is "obvious that these growing gender-obsessed movements have their origins in Satanism …whose objective is obviously abuse, like the torture and destruction of human beings." Quoting the National Catholic Register, the narrator ends with the assertion that the "blurring of gender identities and deliberate uncertainty that it leads them to" is Satanic, for it is the "most natural thing in the world" to ask if a newborn baby is a boy or a girl, but to say that there is no difference is Satanic. "I" —the unidentified narrator confessed— "am convinced that the way in which this gender issue is spreading is demoniacal. It's *bad*. I don't even know how many genders[28] there are at this moment, but there are only two that were created by God[29]."

Anything else, as implied here, is the doing of Satan—the ultimate conspiratorial agent and figure who provides easy slippage into conspiracy theorizing. In the most common Christian eschatological tellings,[30] Satan is viewed as actively on Earth is to undermine the Church and its followers. Satan is the embodiment of evil who leverages power behind the scenes in unseen ways

[27] The Head of Baphomet was a deity first referenced in 1300s and was said to be worshipped by the Knights of the Templars. It later became incorporated into occult traditions and came to be associated with an image of the Sabbatic Goat that represents half human, half beast, half male, half female, and good and evil, an image that reoccurred throughout imagery in my fieldwork.

[28] This references the common accusation that the United Nations or Facebook have recognized over one hundred "genders," sometimes substantiated by a long list of identities that mix gender identity, sexual identity, and related terms or that include options from Facebook's earlier drop-down menu like "it's complicated."

[29] This phrasing derives from teachings of the Catholic Church, for example, in the recent publication in 2019 of "Man and Woman God Created Them."

[30] While they agree that End Times bring about the defeat of Satan by God, Christian eschatological views differ on their whether and how much Satan is presently exerting influence on Earth between amillennialist, postmillennialist, premillennialist, and dispensationalist views. According to that most commonly held by evangelical denominations, premillennialism, Satan is actively engaged in open deceit and evil influence, while Catholics and more traditional and institutionalized Protestant denominations tend to reject more literal interpretations of this view.

through others in pursuit of nefarious ends, who targets and corrupts the innocent including children, and who works to block or obscure the Truth. This assemblage provides easy slippage into conspiratorial tellings that narrate the Devil as the force behind *gender ideology* to bring about the New World Order –and in some tellings, the Apocalypse itself.

* * *

"Santos is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting titled 'The Battle for the End Times,'" read the invitation in the WhatsApp distribution group that Santos ran for his association, Young ProLifers-Mexico. Santos was gathering his followers together for a talk that would address how current events portend the nearing End Times and how, by uniting in faith and prayer, we could dispel the growing influence of Evil. There were recent concerning signs suggesting Lucifer's advance that Santos had recently shared. These included a recently found newborn child with 666 carved into its flesh who had been the victim of a Satanic ritual and the increasing presence of pedophiles lurking on social media to lure in children. The nearing of apocalypse was not something secret, he asserted. It had recently been revealed by Bill Gates himself, one of the most powerful leaders of NOM's agenda to destroy the family through *gender ideology* and abortion. Gates had just warned in early 2021 that the next pandemic would be ten times worse, urging us to prepare for it as we would an impending war. Santos interpolated Gates' reference to war into an eschatological narrative in which *gender ideology* emerges at the center of the apocalyptic spiritual warfare prophesized in Revelations.[31] His was a revelation that the End Times are near.

Eschatological End Times interpretations of *gender ideology* had come up dozens of times before in profamily circles and communications. They were raised and held by both Catholics and evangelicals, though most heavily emphasized by the latter, and often in reference to the NOM agenda to destroy the family. While they overlapped, Catholic interpretations often emphasized

[31] For example, the "war of the Heavens" (Revelations 12).

that destroying Christianity required targeting the family. In Catholic theology, the family is understood as the domestic church because it is the locus of the transmission and continuation of the faith. Evangelical interpretations, like that which David from the profamily prolife youth group had once walked me through with his Bible, often drew from passages from Revelations that prophesized that the family would be the last thing to be destroyed in the progression towards the End Times. In either version, it is destroying the family that is the necessary step to destroy Christianity and to install the New World Order. In this process, *gender ideology* as well as abortion were the primary tools and "task" to be fulfilled by the powerful individuals, families, and institutions that they had created or coopted for this purpose behind the scenes, whether the "Zionist foreigners" like the Rockefellers, the Rothschilds, and George Soros or the globalists and their allies, including Bill Gates, the United Nations, the IMF, the World Bank, the World Health Organization, Planned Parenthood, Amnesty International, etc, to accomplish it), or the communists.

Eschatological interpretations of *gender ideology* also arose in imagery and memes that profamily activists created and circulated, again most heavily among evangelical, Pentecostal, and neo-Pentecostals, a pattern that reflected the Catholic Church's general repudiation of literal millenarism[32]. These narratives arose among some *profamilias* who reframed AMLO's signature movement promise, the Fourth Transformation (4T), as the Apocalypse itself, for example. AMLO's 4T platform promised a paradigm shift away from the "long neoliberal nightmare," referring to his aspiration to bring about a fourth national transformation akin to the three defining paradigm shifts of Mexican history: Independence (1810), the Reform (1861) which established the secular

[32] While there was certainly significant overlap, Catholic followers tended to emphasize that the problem with *gender ideology* was that gay and lesbian and especially trans individuals were deceiving themselves by denying their God-given bodily nature and seeking to glorify and define themselves in their own image rather than in God's image, a false solution that would lead to apostasy (i.e. false religion). The Catholic Church disavows millenarism as another such deception itself, teaching against proclaiming or preaching when the Second Coming will arrive, which is likely why millenarist narratives tend to originate in and circulate more frequently in evangelical, Pentecostal, and neo-Pentecostal pockets.

liberal state, and the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Promoters of this theory built upon established associations of the New World Order that frame it as being the "Fourth Reich" that is meant to succeed the totalitarian Nazi regime's "Third Reich." The Third Reich, or "third age," was understood to be a millennium of rule that would succeed first the Roman Empire and second the German Empire, corresponding to the three ages of millennial eschatology. These millennialist inflections framed AMLO's 4T, and his ushering in of *gender ideology* among other degenerations, as the New World Order's "Fourth Reich" itself.

A particularly illustrative meme circulated just before AMLO's inauguration that depicted "the four horsemen of the AMLOcalypse"—a reference to the four horses of the Apocalypse as described in Revelations 6 who usher in the period of End Times known as the "tribulation." Against a backdrop of a burning Mexican flag and spilling blood, the image depicted the first horseman, who rides the white horse representing the initial conquest as "progressivism"; the second, who rides the red horse representing war as *gender ideology*; the third, who rides the black horse representing famine as "the migrant caravans[33]", and the fourth, who rides a pale horse representing Death as "abortion."

Figure 13. The 4 Horseman of the AMLO-calypse. This meme circulated in 2019 references "The 4 Horseman of the AMLO-calypse," which read from left to right "abortion, migrant caravans, gender ideology, and progressiveness. At the bottom right, dripping with blood, is the name of AMLO's political party, MORENA. Below it, the party slogan "The Hope of Mexico" is written, with the addition of an ironic question mark at the end to cast doubt on its meaning and recast the "hope" MORENA promises to usher in as the apocalypse instead.

[33] This is a reference to the groups of migrants travelling through Mexico fleeing Central America who numbers began swelling in 2018 and 2019, and who were regarded within the profamily activist community by some with compassion and by others with hostility and as a political, economic, and/or cultural threat to Mexico. One meme around the same time, for example, drew upon common antisemitic imagery to depict George Soros in a cartoon drawing with migrants passing through Mexico, along with the charge that George Soros was orchestrating the caravans to destabilize Mexico as part of the New World Order plot.

In narrativizations of *gender ideology* as the ultimate manifestation of prophesized spiritual warfare —the existential battle between good and evil— like this one, LGBT rights activists and feminists are cast as the Anti-Christ or as agents (sometimes unwittingly, Pastor Noah once generously reminded me) of Satan's plot to destroy Christianity. This is a multi-staged plan, explained another profamily advocate in a recent video posted on Viva Mexico in February 2021. Quoting from the Bible, he explained that the Devil controls the whole world, with *gender ideology* just one of the means through which this spiritual war is waged. The Devil works through education, for example, through corrupting sexuality education and through secular education, he argued. But it is politics that is his first and strongest weapon. *Gender ideology* is just the tip of the iceberg—one of many ideas that He "cracks open the heads of our youth and fills them with, along with Marxism, relativism, liberalism, and modernism."

Gender at the Root of Cultural Marxism

A final and increasingly popular cluster of anti-gender conspiracy theories explains *gender ideology* by recombining the elements of the previous theories above into yet another reconfiguration of connecting the dots between international political economic concerns, reproduction, sovereignty, gender, sexuality, the family, religion, and history: *gender ideology* as the central conflict in cultural Marxism. No one has surpassed the influence of Argentine social media personality Agustín Laje in popularizing the cultural Marxist theory of *gender ideology* in Mexico and across the region. Since 2017, Laje has spent years touring Latin America to promote his co-authored book, *The Black Book of the New Left: Gender Ideology or Cultural Subversion.* Laje began the book as a university student in political science and self-published it through his own think tank, The Center for Freedom and Responsibility Studies in 2017. Later that same year, it was sponsored for publication in Mexico by Juan Dabdoub's organization CONFAMILIA. Laje's book, public talks, and endless stream of social

media videos offer little innovation to earlier versions of the cultural Marxist conspiracy theory that emerged in the 1990s accusing the (mostly Jewish) intellectuals of the Frankfurt School of inciting an academic culture war to undermine Western Christian values, except that he translated and made these ideas widely available in Spanish and expertly reinterpreted and revised them to resonate with the Latin American context.

In his book, Laje lays out the argument that feminists devised *gender ideology* as a strategy to restore the radical Marxist revolution after the "end of history" and the definitive defeat of Marxist ideology it supposedly represented. Marxism, which was traditionally focused on class warfare between the proletariat and the bourgeoise and the eventuality of the former's communist revolution, had lost its traction with the rise of the middle class, according to the premise of cultural Marxism. As Marxism lost momentum, the new social movements of the 1960s, led by feminists, had to invent a new form of social conflict to provide fresh justification for the revolution. And so, Laje continues the line of argumentation, radical feminists invented the idea of *gender* to instigate sexual warfare between men and women to achieve communist revolution instead. And to subjugate the vast majority who ideologically oppose them and the momentum of nature itself, they must resort to totalitarian means. Laje's definition of *gender ideology*, which has since become the most routinely cited definition in Latin America, sums this up concisely defining *gender ideology* as: "an anti-scientific conjunction of ideas with authoritarian political aims that wrests human sexuality away from its [biological] nature to explain it exclusively in terms of culture." *These efforts have resulted in the divisive and destructive culture war over gender and sexual rights that we see now*, according to Laje, *which has its stakes in the continuation of Western civilization itself.*

Laje routinely packs auditoriums across Latin America and has amassed hundreds of thousands of You Tube followers with this message. The profamily activists in Mexico I accompanied in my research carried around his book and referenced it as an actual handbook, pulling it out of their handbags to back up a point in meetings at the café or in our conversations

together on the subway on the way home. Laje's work certainly takes the form scientific argumentation and is fitted with the trappings of academic theory but is full of inaccurate if not disingenuous misrepresentations of social and feminist theory and history. Laje recapitulates and adapts to the Latin American context arguments advanced about cultural Marxism since the 1990s by others. These include well-known Canadian right-wing psychologist and public intellectual Jordan Peterson, himself a revered and frequently referenced figure among several of Mexico's anti-gender leaders. Peterson's forceful opposition to communism and defense of the naturalization of capitalism, meritocracy, and inevitability of social hierarchies, including gender inequalities[34], is more widely known in English speaking Europe and North America where his arguments are widely popular among right-wing populists in those contexts and are increasingly influencing the mainstream. Laje contextualizes these arguments on the heels of precipitous decline of Latin America's Pink Tide and calamitous collapse in Venezuela to argue that first, *gender ideology* as a force to spread socialism in Latin America can be traced to the 1992 Rio de Janeiro regional United Nations Conference said to have launched the Pink Tide, and second, that decline and destruction is the inevitable result of *gender ideology* allowed to advance to its ultimate conclusion.

Of further relevance, Laje's work also contains many of the defining traits of a conspiracy theory and is constantly referenced by anti-gender advocates in the context of right-wing populist anti-gender movements as an authoritative source to buttress, back up, legitimize, or lend authority to other anti-*gender ideology* conspiracy theories in practice. In his writing and speaking engagements, which I have watched in person numerous times in both Spain and Mexico as well as many times virtually around the world, Laje creates an illusion of theoretical coherence and coordinated collusion that is compelling but untenable. Claiming to wrest back feminism from the radical hijackers who have perverted its "noble" origins, he accuses radical feminists of a common

[34] The most extreme expression of these ideas constitutes the tenets of emergent anti-liberal, anti-democratic, authoritarian "Dark Enlightenment" thought.

and self-destructive authoritarian project of Gramscian cultural subversion that seeks to "deconstruct" the "hetero-capitalist tradition" through overtaking educational, cultural, and political institutions. This is an effort that runs continuous from Simone de Beauvoir to Kate Millet to Shamulith Firestone to Judith Butler, he claims, as he flattens, oversimplifies, and/or ignores the differences and disagreements in these theorists' arguments and the distinct contexts and time periods in which they wrote.

Describing his overall project as one of "unmasking *gender ideology*" as the face of the New Left in Latin America, he opens his book by locating the origins of *gender ideology* in the region as a political project that began in Latin America in 1990 with Trotskyists like Ignacio Lula Da Silva who were regrouping in the region after the fall of communism in 1989. In 1990, Laje recounts, they founded the San Paulo Forum, which brought together Latin America's leftist leaders to rebrand communism as 21st Century Socialism instead, grouping together a progressive salad of ecological issues, indigenous issue, abortion, pedophilia, and "juridical guaranteeism[35]" under the "new banner" of *gender ideology*. Funded by "criminal rackets" like the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN; the National Liberation Army) and South America's
"then largest band of drug dealers," the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC; Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), Laje charged, this political circle would go on to orchestrate the rise of the Pink Tide in the region and the imposition of one of its destructive legacies: *gender ideology*. Scheming at this "Marxist conclave," they "fabricated a supplemental and parallel structure" that would cast *gender ideology* as the attractive "new face" of the New Left whose neo-communist project, they argued, would ultimately come to penetrate and dominate the Western collective consciousness (Laje and Márquez 2017, 15,275).

Weaving together disparate events that appear to be "external to one another, novel, and apparently unconnected" into a common frame of meaning, as conspiracy theories do, Laje notes

[35] This refers to the expansion of constitutional rights under Pink Tide governments like Ecuador and Bolivia.

that it was the auspicious year of 1992 that this project took off. That same year marked a "silent metamorphosis": the historic indigenous march in Bolivia marking the anniversary of "500 years of oppression"; the first gay pride march in Argentina, influenced by the publication of Judith Butler's paradigm shifting book Gender Trouble that same year, which served as the "Bible" of *gender ideology* movements; the emergence of the "ecological populist" idea of "ecological debt" that emerged out of the Rio Earth Summit that highlighted the responsibility of the high-consumption wealthy North towards the Global South; and the year Hugo Chavez gained notoriety and momentum through two failed coup attempts in Venezuela that would set the stage for his ultimate takeover seven years later; and the year that the USSR officially dissolved, leaving a political vacuum and opportunity for the New Left to seize upon (Laje and Márquez 2017, 16–17). Given that the old left's focus on agrarian reform, expropriation of the latifundios, the diversion of profits, and the seduction of class struggle now rang hollow in the Latin American imagination, argued Laje, this inflexion point marked the "reconversion and reinvention of the ideology that could no longer be expressed as the sickle and hammer" as old ideas with a new face: *gender ideology*.

Laje's revisionist ability to weave together disparate events and histories into a coherent narrative arc conjoins the politics of fear described in Chapter 2 and the conspiratorial narratives described in this one while seamlessly unifying anti-abortion and anti-LGBT rights positions into a common framework. One of the few speakers to be invited both by FNF and the Dabdoub and Sumas Coalition faction of the movement, Laje often left his audiences with a sense of awe and total conviction that indeed what they were observing in the world around them was a coordinated plan by radical feminists (who deserved their moniker as Feminazis (2017, 153)) and the "homosexualist (or LGBT) lobby." Whether they are simply misguided or perhaps more sinisterly power-hungry, Laje conveys to his audiences, they have been brewing for a long time, plotting to impose their nonsensical postmodern interpretation of the world on thinking, common folk like "us" who can see through the pretense of multiculturalism's ludicrous political correctness.

Despite differences of opinion, religion, gender, age, or central or peripheral position within the profamily movement, an adulatory and even fawning regard for Laje and his work held together retiree couples, high powered movement leaders, activist housewives, university students, young professionals, and even the young prolife LGBT activist (who was adamant that she was not part of the "LGBT lobby") and her mom who otherwise often stood as outliers in the movement. There were those among them who described feeling empowered by Laje's courage to give voice to their concerns as the "silent majority," as Laje commonly referred to them. Juan Dabdoub, who wrote the forward of the first 2017 edition in Mexico, quoted himself in stressing the importance of Laje's work, writing: "The most important battle in human history is happening right now, and it is not unfolding in the realm of weapons, politics, or economics, but rather in the realm of ideology… It is a battle of ideas" (Dabdoub qtd in Laje and Márquez 2017, 14). Laje, who masterfully frames himself and his audiences as the victims of feminist thought police, political correctness, and censorship, frames his work to expose gender as a false ideology as a matter primarily of free speech and individual freedom, building on the claim that the truth will set one free.

"To a friend," Laje began his dedication on the inside cover of my copy of his book after we chatted after another of his talks outside the auditorium of the Archdioceses of Mexico City. We found ourselves there with an audience of 500 after he had been de-platformed the night before from the Mexico City university where he had been scheduled to talk after hate speech complaints. He had gone to lengths to take advantage of the incident by widely disseminating his own videos in which he claimed that his free speech had been silenced by his opponents who sought to cover up the truth –a move that seemed to triple the event turnout overnight. I handed Laje my copy of his book. It was given to me by Juan Dabdoub from his own stack, taken from their place on a shelf just under a centrally framed image of the Virgin Mary centered in his office like an altar. "I hope that this book serves you," he writes, "at least to reconsider hegemonic arguments that are being

branded onto the collective subconscious. Because critique is always necessary and, at the end of the day, it sets us free[36]."

This is precisely the message and sentiment with which Laje concludes the introduction to his book, infused with much of the unapologetic brazenness for which he told me he admired the president of my own country at the time, Donald Trump. Describing himself as unintimidated and undeterred by the Left's self-declared "monopoly on correctness and goodwill," he concludes the Introduction to his book explaining defiantly that he wrote the book not to appease the Left but "precisely to challenge them" (Laje and Márquez 2017, 20). In other words, to raise *doubt* not only in feminism, but in feminists' interpretation of gender, gender equality, and liberal democracy. As he returned my copy of his book to me and we prepared to part ways, he repeated this last rebuke of liberal democracy: the problem with liberal democracy as we think of it, he said, is that it has allowed a minority —feminists— to wield tyranny over the majority, a clear indication that we must revert to the popular sovereignty of Republicanism instead in which the majority make the rules. That is, essentially what Victor Orbán has openly advocated for as "illiberal democracy"—the majority rule of democracy but without liberalism's minority protections (Mudde 2021; Kauth and King 2020; Plattner 2019). In that moment, I finally understood the enduring emphasis of Mexican anti-gender leaders on "proving" that they are the aggrieved and "silent majority."

Conclusion

Anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico refract the contradictions built into the Mexican nation —and who and what defines it— and reveal the continuous and unresolved status of contestations over Mexican modernity and identity. Characterizing the patterns that emerge from reading across anti-gender conspiracy theories recalls one of the fundamental and long-standing question in Latin

[36] Signed Agustín Laje, June 13, 2019

American (and Mexican) Studies about the nature of encounter between Western European civilization and indigenous Abya Yala. Interdisciplinary scholars have developed several frameworks for apprehending the unique, historical entanglements of cultural, religious, ethnic, artistic, and linguistic acculturation produced through these encounters over the last half millennium in the region. From indigenization to hybridity to creolization to syncretism to bricolage to mestizaje to interculturality, the affordances and limitations of these various frameworks for accounting for the many facets, power relations, and complexities that shape these entanglements have been thoroughly debated, critiqued, revised, and expanded elsewhere (for example Anzaldúa 2012; Stewart 1999; Boellstorff 2003; Mintz 1986; Said 1979). I will not reproduce or address those debates here, but what signaling this foundational question of encounter allows is a useful point of departure for situating anti-gender conspiracy theories within a longer history of encounter in Latin America. This encounter is one that is more complex than can be captured in presumptions of modernity as inevitable linear progress, the Conquest and (settler) colonialism as singular discrete events, or in binary understandings of the West and the Rest or Conquest and resistance that emerge as central tensions across the narratives presented above.

As narratives that synthesize age-old Euro-American scripts of about the existential imperilment of (white) Western Christian civilization and folk tellings of a Mexico embattled in a global neo-Conquest by the devil, feminists, communists, and/or globalists, we can productively approach anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico –like the Mexican profamily movement that circulates them— as syncretic formations that reflect ongoing efforts to understand, grapple with, and respond to a long history of cultural, political economic, social, and religious encounter and conflict. I invoke the concept of syncretism heuristically. Acknowledging that neither originates from some pure priori ideal type, the anti-gender conspiracy theories that are produced in the multiple encounters and exchanges between the global profamily movement and the Mexicans who circulate them are novel recombinations of and between local and global narratives, novel and

historical, that together produce unique and novel forms—the Mexican anti-gender conspiracy theory—that transform their own antecedents, as accounted for by syncretism. They synthesize, recombine, and re-narrate historical conspiracy theories about communism, Zionism, Satanism, colonialism, Conquest, feminism, and more.

The syncretic anti-gender conspiracy theory that alleged that the 2018 Inauguration of AMLO was a sign of the Illuminati-led masonic, demonic, feminist, communist take-over of Mexico serves as an example of this. That the theory offers an interpretation of the events of December 1, 2018, as they unfolded in Zócalo, or Constitution Plaza, one of Mexico's most important political spaces—and itself a symbol of Mexican syncretism—is relevant. Mexico comes together at Zócalo geographically, historically, culturally, and symbolically. Named for the 1812 Cadíz Constitution of Spain; bordered to the north by the Metropolitan Cathedral, a headquarters of the Catholic Church; lined along the east by the Presidential Palace, home of the head of the Mexican state and site of annual reprisal of the Grito de Dolores that ignited Mexican Independence; atop the Templo Mayor, that site of both Aztec triumph and conquest; site of fighting in the Mexican Revolution; and platform for the political expression of many of the defining moments in Mexican history and democracy, from the 1938 expropriation of the oil industry to the violently repressed socialist student movements of 1968 to the first entry of the gay pride parade in 1999, among many others, AMLO's choice to hold his inauguration ceremony in this nation-defining space was a powerfully symbolic act and an implicit message that the nation was being redefined. Syncretic anti-gender conspiracy theories recombine conspiracy theories from different times and different places to connect the dots between reoccurring themes of freedom, sovereignty, and security, producing their own kind of syncretic truths, that are neither true nor untrue. In the next chapter, I delve deeper into an analysis of what these syncretic truths mean through reading anti-gender conspiracies not across, but down, as implicit social critiques and social texts.

CHAPTER 6. The Deep Story of Distrust: Reading Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theories Down

Introduction

In the last chapter I read anti-gender conspiracy theories across, mapping the patterns of common elements they shared across their many variations. In this chapter, I read them down, mining anti-gender conspiracy theories interpretively to probe their "deep story" (Hochschild 2016), to harness a hermeneutics of suspicion to analyze what they express politically and affectively, and to surface the "resonance of unseen things" they invoke for some who engage them (Lepselter 2016). My aim is not to evaluate their truth value as rational constructs nor to assign them to either side of a binary dividing line between "true" or "false" –an exercise common in contemporary approaches to misinformation, with which conspiracy theories overlap (Hill and Roberts 2021). In many instances this is rendered impossible anyway by the inherent contradictions that tend to feature in anti-gender conspiracy theories. Instead, I read between the(se) lines, approaching anti-gender conspiracy theories as social texts that convey social and affective meaning. In other words, I aim not to assess whether they are *truthful* but to analyze in what ways they are *meaningful* to or for those who consume and perpetuate them.

Such an approach requires a series of epistemological acknowledgements. First, by definition, most conspiracy theories recombine fact with fiction such that the "truth" of a conspiracy theory is usually already partial. Second, the dividing line between the literal and the figurative in the context of conspiratorial belief is blurry. Invoking a conspiracy theory and believing it are two different things, and whether one believes a theory they are consuming or (re)producing is neither self-evident nor always knowable. Third, in a related sense, belief need not be fixed but can vary within an individual across time or even context. Nor is it so binary, with many likely occupying a position somewhere between belief and disbelief or in a state of what Susan Harding (2001, xii) calls "narrative belief," which lies "in the gap between conscious belief and willful unbelief." Much

like some invoke the Biblical story of David and Goliath as a historical fact and others as an allegorical fiction, many others reference it unsure or without claim as to whether they mean it literally or figuratively. Fourth, reading down for meaning does not avoid the complications of mining for truth. Meaning too can be multiple and evolving. Meaning indexes significance, either semantic or moral. And it is this latter sense that interests me: what's the *moral* of the story in anti-gender conspiracy theories?

With this in mind, an ethnographic emic approach to analyzing and interpreting the nuanced meanings anti-gender conspiracy theories enables moving beyond the confines of the true/false dichotomy and the distorting rational/irrational binary (Gould 2009) that often accompanies it in emerging efforts to study misinformation (Maan 2018). Anti-gender conspiracy theories certainly mislead, sometimes misinform, and can of course disinform. But rather than sort them into errant truths or aberrant fantasies, I approach their accounts of gender and global politics as a form of social commentary and critique. I am interested to uncover that which may be hidden in plain sight about the historical, social, political, and economic anxieties and distrust many of those who consume or perpetuate conspiracy theories identify with (Geertz 1973; D. Fassin 2021).[37]

In this chapter, I focus not on what differentiates anti-gender conspiracy theories in Mexico but instead on what they all have in common. Whether their content leans towards explanations of neocolonial population control, freemasons, the New World Order, cultural Marxism, or even spiritual warfare, the variations I explored in the last chapter, the concern they all share –their common "deep story"– is a collective perception of vulnerability either in the present or the imminent future to the domination by global political economic forces or class, who are often glossed simply as the "globalists." This deep story is often narrated through the idiom of the

[37] This is not to suggest that they act as passive or innocent vessels to merely express or contain widespread anxieties. They also serve to perpetuate those anxieties and distrust in ways that are consequential to both feminist and sexual rights movements and to democracy more broadly, a topic I take up in the following chapter.

imperiled "natural family" and the perceived dangers to or collateral damage suffered by this aspirational institution. The "natural family" is the primary site for the reproduction of gender and the naturalized division of labor; it is where productive and reproductive interests intersect, where biopolitics meet cultural politics. This is precisely why, as Melinda Cooper notes, a common interest in the family is what has brought free market neoliberals into alliance with social conservatives, at least in the United States (Cooper 2017). However, such alliances are often incomplete, exposing fault lines, just as they have exposed the rift within Mexico's profamily movement between support for the (ostensibly socialist) poverty alleviation ideals promised by AMLO and the (ostensibly) neoliberal policies he vowed to dismantle. Anti-gender conspiracy theories form part of the discursive terrain on which these debates unfold. In other words, while on the surface the moral of the story appears to be about gender –and it *is*– a reading down between the lines to probe the deeper story suggests that the struggle to define gender and its parameters is about more than wielding interpretive power, but political economic power.

Gender Ideology as a Weapon of the Globalists

On a spring evening in 2019, I traveled to Toluca, about an hour outside of Mexico City, to attend the Breaking Down Lies event organized by Frente Nacional por la Familia as part of a national speaker tour with some of the region's most prominent profamily speakers. I sat in the front row. Outside, local LGBT and feminist activists loudly protested the prolife and profamily message of the event, which had prevented the event's local organizer and FNF representative, Alejandra, from meeting me in a nearby café for an interview earlier in the afternoon. To my right was the doorway leading to the private room where I was escorted in through the back to join her and other FNF representatives to observe their press conference before the event commenced. To my left sat the husband of Marisol, a full-time prolife and profamily activist who was constantly on her phone administering FNF's social media accounts, from its live Facebook broadcasts to its dozen

WhatsApp broadcast groups, each of which serviced up to the limit of 256 subscribers, including me.

Behind me sat about 1,200 local participants, mostly middle-aged locals. They had been easy to mobilize, Alejandra later told me. When I asked her how she had managed to get so many people there on such short notice, she explained that FNF often works through local dioceses to encourage parishioners to attend. But it wasn't out of obligation that they were there, she insisted. This audience, she explained, had come because they were eager for opportunities to learn about and understand this whole *gender ideology* thing that they had been hearing so much about lately and to understand how they could intervene in their children's moral development as they grow up in a world that barely resembles their own upbringing. They had come partly out of curiosity –after all, everyone is talking about *gender ideology*, but few know what it really is– but mostly out of concern over the alienation they feel from their children and their helplessness and confusion over their children's sometimes outright rejection of their family values. I couldn't help but feel that in her intimate and poignant portrayal of their worries, Alejandra was describing her own experience; and indeed she added that this was a battle she herself sometimes felt she was losing with her own adolescent children. Marisol's husband later told me the same thing about their own adolescent children, despite their mother's strong prolife convictions and fulltime dedication to profamily activism. They felt it was almost out of their hands.

In front me, a podium and armchairs were arranged behind large block letter props at the edge of the stage that spelled FAMILIA (family), VIDA (life), and LIBERTAD (freedom). The night's line-up of speakers included Sara Wynter, a Brazilian self-described "ex-feminist" who now travels the region to give talks like this one. She delivered her sensational and always dubiously evolving testimony about her regret over having had an abortion, the alleged interpersonal abuse, neglect, and exploitation she had experienced at the hands of feminist activists, and her transformation into a born-again Christian, mother, wife of a military officer, and wholesome prolife activist. Following

her testimony, Agustín Laje delivered his characteristic genealogical interpretation of *gender ideology* as a desperately retooled ideological perversion derived from radical cultural Marxist feminists. He started with Simone de Beauvoir and progressed through Shamulith Firestone to Judith Butler, their images projected onto the screen behind him. These were the faces of those who are to blame for originating these ideas corrupting our youth, but it was powerful global interests behind the scenes that have taken it up as a tool in their quest for power.

Laje, widely recognized as a powerful speaker, was swarmed at the break with questions and requests for autographs. When asked where *gender ideology* comes from, he offered a version of his rehearsed theory[38]. To paraphrase, he explained that the situation we are seeing now is the expected result of when an ideology like that of gender, which is a "philosophical and scientific absurdity," becomes the object of state interest for its functional utility in regulating population growth and maintaining the global balance of power and is endowed with the political power of the state and the economic backing of international organizations. The defeated Left saw it as a means to reinvent and preserve itself, while the world's powerful elites saw it as a way to maintain the global balance of forces in their favor. And the way to make this palatable to sell to the developing world was by calling it human rights (specifically sexual and reproductive rights), multiculturalism, and diversity. *Gender ideology* has become a leading tool of the globalists to maintain power and for the Left to maintain skin in the game (Bermudez 2019).

It was the next speaker, Con Participación's leader and FNF board member, Marcial Padilla, who spoke of the consequences of these ideas on what was spelled out in front of him –the Mexican FAMILY– who grounded these abstract structural shifts in the everyday intimate daily realities of the audience. Padilla began with a juxtaposition of social indicators drawn from the federal data agency INEGI between 1985, the year of a disastrous earthquake that devastated Mexico, and the

[38] Paraphrased from Bermudez, Alejandro. *¿De Dónde Viene La Ideología de Género? Explicado En 5 Minutos - Agustín Laje*. MP4. Cara a Cara, 2019. https://youtu.be/dAaUhVTYfo0.

next major earthquake to devastate Mexico, in 2017. On screen, he showed images of the concrete destruction (literally and figuratively) wrought by each of the two earthquakes. Then, Padilla continued to paint a statistical picture of structural damage to Mexico of another kind over the intervening three decades: plummeting marriage rates, a tripling of cohabitation rates, skyrocketing divorce rates driven largely by women choosing to leave their male partners, a precipitous decline in births approaching replacement rate coupled with an aging population, and more births out of wedlock than with marriage.

Padilla repeated these indicators for the present State of Mexico, highlighting its particularly high 1700% increase in divorce over the past 30 years, with a clear conclusion for the local families in the audience: Your children are not marrying, and those who do are divorcing. They are not having babies and not creating families. But many are aborting, single, partnering with the same sex, and/or cohabitating and calling this a "family." The family, which Mexicans report to value most according to Padilla's (accurate) social survey data, is being destroyed through reinterpretation, he argued. The relevant question, he asked the audience rhetorically, is what is a family? We must, he answered, understand that family is defined by consanguinity and conjugality (with the added analogous filial bond presented by adoption) based upon natural reproductive sexuality. By presenting sex, gender, and sexuality as independent variables, Padilla argued, *gender ideology* ruptures the interdependence between love, sexuality, and reproduction that naturally reproduce these vertical and horizontal bonds that form society's durable lattice social structure. Though he did not explicitly complete the analogy, his suggestion was that, like the invisible force of an earthquake that can reduce structures to rubble, *gender ideology* is an akin invisible but powerful force causing the Mexican family and social structure to crumble.

Especially for those primed for its moral appeals, the moral of the story is that external forces have induced profound social, economic, and political shifts that have reshaped Mexican society and daily life over the past three decades, destroying not only what Mexicans have built (the

family, the nation, and their sovereignty) but also what they hold dear. These are significant social changes that nearly everyone in the audience can relate to, at both intimate and structural levels. Moreover, it channeled the audience's palpable anxieties over their perceived lack of power to mediate the impact of these profound structural changes on their children (and their relationship with them). And it both validated a sense of shared powerlessness that comes with contending against forces powerful enough to restructure society, family, and nation yet invisible and inaccessible, while offering a restorative sense of agency pointing to something concrete that can be named and resisted. In addition to presenting the audience with their *consequences*, the speakers also provided them with the *motive*—political, economic, and social domination, the *means* — *gender ideology*, and the *agent* –an alliance between feminists and powerful interests vaguely referred to as "the globalists."

After the event, the registered guests would be added to Marisol's FNF distribution list where they would be invited to continue to learn more through daily WhatsApp courses designed to help them "understand what *gender ideology* is, its expressions, its goals, its manipulations, and how in many countries it has turned into a real dictatorship with its political power," as the first course module put it, through a constant stream of messages reiterating and attempting to evidence these claims. As an active consumer of Mexican profamily social media, including as a participant in FNF's WhatsApp *gender ideology* course, I found myself in a virtual extension of the auditorium, bombarded again and again with videos, articles, memes, tweets, voice notes, event invitations, statements, research, and alarming messages all day, day in and day out, advancing the claim that *gender ideology* was threatening me and closing in, like this one from FNF training module L#50, January 2022:

> Various public and private international organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Health Organization (WHO) and multiple foundations, promote *gender ideology* and pressure governments to modify their public policies in exchange for access to international financial resources. We are facing the threat of the dictatorship of *gender ideology*, the most insidious and destructive social revolution, which seeks to

> configure a new model of society through legislative reforms, the media, and the national educational system.

I did not have to believe it literally or subscribe to a Christian worldview or indeed any explicit ideology to identify with the feelings these prospects invoked. As Susan Lepselter (2020, 134) put this while describing a context so utterly distinct and yet so "uncannily" similar, one need nothing more than "a specific orientation toward power, an inchoate sense of your own distance from its invisible source, and a feeling of things slipping away" into vast networks beyond one's control to feel the sensations of existential dread, overwhelm, and anxiety that these prospects induced. When combined with our cognitive bias to treat the familiar as more believable, this can easily produce an illusory truth effect, in which repetition makes something come to feel truer. To recreate this feeling as I continue to probe their deep story, I have dispersed throughout the remainder of this chapter a selection of social media messages drawn from my fieldwork that constantly reiterate this conspiratorial refrain, that *gender ideology* is a conspiratorial tool of the globalists.

Contextualizing the Anti-Colonial Critique: the Roots of Distrust

The popularization of the narrative of *gender ideology* as a colonial imposition began in Mexico after profamily activists began to amplify a 2015 comment by Pope Francis insisting that gender theory consisted of "ideological colonization," a theme echoed and amplified by major profamily groups like Family Watch International in its documentary the following year called *Cultural Imperialism* (2016). In a speech in Poland that year, Pope Francis denounced that international aid from organizations like the International Monetary Fund to

> " ❗ SOS *Gender ideology* has been *diluting like acid* the Christian foundations of the West. Never before like today has it been breaking with all the structures built for 2,000 years. *Do you want to protect your children and family?* We invite you to *watch and share this video.* Let's save our civilization. Share‼
>
> --Luciano broadcast to supporters, April 2019

poor countries included conditions requiring teaching "gender theory," a position that directly controverted the Catholic Church's teachings on sexual difference, addressed emblematically in Pope John Paul II's 1984 Theology of the Body and more recently in the Male and Female He Created Them published by the Congregation for Catholic Education (2019) and constituted an affront to poor nation's sovereignty.

During the earliest phases of profamily mobilizations in 2016 both before and after the marches, profamily activists like FNF spokesperson Rodrigo Ivan Cortes repeatedly cited Pope Francis on this point, widely amplifying the belief that *gender ideology* consisted of a purposeful effort to impose *gender ideology*. He argued that then President Enrique Pena Nieto, whose administration was both widely unpopular, ensnared in multiple corruption scandals, and rivaled in the upcoming election by Cortes conservative PAN party, was selling out Mexico's sovereignty in exchange for aid. Both the messenger and the nationalist stance made this narrative compelling and resonant, most especially among loyal Catholics and PANistas (i.e. PAN loyalists).

To audiences in Latin America, and especially in places like Mexico, Chile, and Argentina (the latter of which is Pope Francis' country of origin), this narrative recalled familiar themes in a region that harbors widespread resentment towards the IMF for its role in imposing consequential and sometimes devastating economic policies across the region. Mexico conceded to IMF austerity and currency devaluation measures to avoid a default in 1976 after unprecedented intervention and pressure from the US Treasury and Federal Reserve. The latter sought to avoid an international banking crisis and mitigate the impact on US banks, even though they reportedly did not think it would work (Kershaw 2018). Soon after, the 1982 debt crisis forced Mexico to default on its foreign debt and again devalue the peso, generating further losses. The IMF provided financial assistance to Mexico in exchange for imposing the Washington Consensus suite of neoliberal structural adjustment austerity measures.

Though Mexico was touted a decade later by its own government, the IMF, and the World Bank as a success story and a model for the region to follow, what Mexico had gained from fiscal stabilization was overshadowed by exorbitant and unevenly distributed social and economic costs in what would come to be called "the lost decade." These included exacerbated poverty, eroded quality of life for large sectors of the population, particularly those in rural areas and the urban poor, and intensified inequality (Equipo PUEBLO 1994). The state virtually abandoned the poor with drastic cuts to social services, while real wages declined and basic commodity prices rose, adding insult to injury after the losses of the 1982 debt crisis. Furthermore, devaluation, privatization, and deregulation enabled the transfer of public ownership to private ownership and the slow "trickle up" of wealth to further concentrate in the hands of economic elites. Rather than be reinvested for long-term growth that would alleviate poverty as promised, it accumulated in private holdings instead. By 1994, 20% of the population lived in extreme poverty while the number of billionaires had increased from 2 to 24, including Carlos Slim, owner of Teléfonos Mexico and the richest man in Mexico, who controlled assets that totaled more than the annual income of the poorest 17 million people combined (Heredia and Purcell 1995). Infant mortality in this period tripled (United Nations - World Population Prospects 2022).

These shifts induced by structural adjustment created a crisis of care that left women to pick up the slack vacated by the state and remains unresolved. Women across Latin America, including Mexico, stepped in to mitigate the retreat of the state (Lind 2005; Elfenbein 2019). In Mexico and beyond, these changes fundamentally altered intimate household gender and family dynamics (Benería 1992), forcing the reorganization of daily routines and the division of labor and exacerbating both poverty and gender inequality (Latapí 1995). Mexico's integration into the global economy in the 1990s, most notably through the

> We are facing the greatest threat to humanity of losing freedom completely because all countries, including Mexico, are controlled by a globalist power.
>
> --Forwarded in a *profamilia* WhatsApp Group, July 23, 2021

now succeeded North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), alongside its transition to democracy brought a complex mix of results. Immediately, the 1994 peso crisis, known as the Tequila Crisis, triggered another round of currency devaluations and threatened another debt default, which was staved off by a US bailout administered once again by the IMF.

In its first few years, NAFTA spurred a widespread relinquishment of family farms and small businesses predominantly in rural areas unable to compete and survive. An influx of foreign investment combined with a weak regulatory structure meant new jobs, increased productivity, and higher profit margins, but declining real wages and new opportunities for worker exploitation by large corporations. Combined with the peso crisis, these developments intensified both the poverty and inequality they were expected to alleviate, pushing millions into extreme poverty, while already high levels of migration swelled both internally (accelerating urbanization) and externally, predominantly to the United States. These shifts put further pressures on families and gender relations. Women who migrated for work in response to the demand for new cheap labor at the maquiladoras (Parrado and Zenteno 2001) or to perform paid (often reproductive) labor in wealthier countries facing their own crisis of care (like the United States) often left children behind in the care of still poorer women. Meanwhile, male migration also often left behind partners and children. By 2005, female heads of households had doubled from 1970 levels, growing to nearly a quarter of all households (INEGI 2005). Between 1995 and 1997, infant mortality spiked again, especially in areas where mothers were forced to seek work (Parrado and Zenteno 2001).

Soon after 2000, when GDP began to make some (still disappointingly slow) progress, poverty rates began to nudge downwards, migration flows began to reverse (a trend greatly influenced by the 2008 financial crisis in the US), and a small middle class gained some strength (particularly in terms of consumer spending power), insecurity began reaching crisis levels. Facing the growth (and later splintering and diversification) of transnational crime and pressure from its northern neighbor, Mexico militarized and scaled up its response in 2006 with US financial and

logistical support under the Mérida Initiative. The overall failure of the Mexican government to control organized crime has resulted in a human rights crisis and total failure of justice, with near total impunity for over 100,000 disappearances, over 200,000 deaths, the highest homicide rates ever recorded in the nation and among the highest in the world, mounting political assassinations and targeting of journalists, and exponential increases in lethal gender-based violence, including both femicides and killing of LGBT people, a situation I more closely examined in Chapter 2.

But as critics point out, despite bilateral security cooperation from the US, it is also US consumers who supply most of the demand for drugs from Mexico, US producers who supply nearly all the weapons used by organized criminals in Mexico, and US financial institutions who profit from its money laundering activities, permitted by insufficient regulation by the US (Mercille 2011). And so a more critical reading of US involvement in the War on Drugs, and a popular sentiment with some traction in Mexico, is that it has "served as a pretext to intervene in Mexican affairs and to protect US hegemonic projects such as NAFTA, rather than as a genuine attack on drug problems," as well as a tool to "repress dissent and popular opposition to neoliberal policies in Mexico" (Mercille 2011, 1637).

Not only has the Mexican government proven unable with its weak institutions, above all its judicial system, to effectively address the security situation, it has also been unwilling and even complicit in perpetuating it across multiple levels of government. For example, while in 2017 during Enrique Peña Nieto's administration the Mexican government used federal security funds to spy on political opponents, deploying Israeli Pegasus spyware allegedly acquired to fight drug cartels on journalists and civil society (Ahmed and Perlroth 2017). Between 2011 and 2016, the state of Veracruz' former governor, Javier Duarte de Ochoa, and collaborators allegedly embezzled nearly all the state's public funds allotted to address insecurity and failed to account for $2.6 billion in federal funds, all while overseeing rising poverty and debt and providing cover for a spate of

drug-related disappearances and killings that earned Veracruz the moniker "the state of terror" (Montalvo 2017; de Córdoba and Montes 2016).

Yet none of these –US complicity in supporting drug-trafficking in Mexico, the Mexican government spying on its citizens, or corrupt political elites colluding with organized crime– is without precedent or even uncommon. Through what Peter Dale Scott (P. D. Scott 2000) calls the "government-drug-symbiosis," US government intelligence agencies are known to have shielded drug-traffickers and their political allies in exchange for intelligence in Mexico throughout the 1980s, having played a role in the growth of illicit crime in Mexico. Enrique Peña Nieto's own PRI party has a long history of political repression and authoritarianism spanning the 20th Century, during which it maintained power through rampant voter fraud and oversaw Mexico's brutal Dirty War. One tool applied to maintaining both authoritarianism and corruption was the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (Federal Security Directorate) started in 1947 by President Miguel Alemán Valdés of the PRI with Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) support to act as a security agency tasked with safeguarding internal stability against subversive or terrorist threats.

Duarte, who faced justice in a rare conviction, is only one example of corrupt collusion between political elites and organized crime. There were many before him. For example, in 2008, Mexico's former senior anti-drug official was arrested for accepting a $500k bribe from drug traffickers in exchange for anti-drug operations intelligence. From 2000 to 2013, there were 71 press reports of corruption involving 41 out of a total of 63 governors over this period, of which 16 were investigated and only 5 found guilty (Amparo Casar 2016). And in the case that has become emblematic of the total reign of impunity and corruption in Mexico, federal police were implicated in the 2014 case of 43 students in Ayotzinapa, allegedly having handed them over to the drug gangs who murdered them. Federal police in Mexico are indeed notoriously corrupt; in 2019, a third of Mexicans admitted to having paid bribes, but of those who sought services from the police it was 52%, that is to say, more often than not (Transparency International 2019). But worse, in the

Ayotzinapa case, the federal government itself appears to have destroyed evidence, covered it up (after first denying it), and even used torture to extract forced confessions (Keith, Bior, and Intagliata 2022).

Over the last three decades the number of those living in poverty has declined only moderately, while living conditions have improved for some and deteriorated for many more. While income inequality has improved slightly, it is still extremely stark, with the top 10% earning around 30 times more than the bottom 10% and of that, the top 1% commanding around 50 times more (World Bank Group 2022). Wealth inequality remains firmly entrenched, with minimal state interventions—most notably through cash transfer programs—having largely failed to stem a continuous upward flow of wealth. The vast growth in Mexico's productive output extracted mainly from labor over the last thirty years has not been evenly distributed nor even benefited a large sector of the population, who remain a subordinated class in a subordinated economy. It has been largely squandered through fiscal mismanagement, siphoned off through corruption, or accumulated remotely as profit by national or international entities. While this is the Mexican story, the moral of the story, like every good parable, applies well beyond its borders.

> "I oppose the NGOs of the financial system that support and "encourage" abortion [because] these organizations, along with drug trafficking, are imperial tools of control of the peoples of the South, American Indians on these lands (which is what we are for "them"). *All this agenda is not a conspiracy theory plot.* They are plans of the globalist center of power for the periphery: for them we must take care of their natural resources and be few inhabitants and the young people ruined by drug use; in addition to a gigantic business for global banking. Shamelessly they tell us: that they project 1/3 less poor because of abortion. *Less poor NOT for improving their living conditions but for self-inflicted GENOCIDE.*"
>
> --Forwarded in a *profamilia* WhatsApp Group, Nov 5, 2019

Remote Control: *Gender ideology* as a Biopolitical Weapon

While trust in the Catholic Church remains high in Mexico, trust in international organizations, most especially the IMF, have suffered irreparable reputation damage, widely as representing a legacy of

harm, deceit, and representing powerful interests. Already by the end of the 1980s, being associated with the IMF was a "political liability" in Mexico, which Finance Minister Jesús Silva Herzog had learned in 1986 after he was cast out in part for defending an indefensible IMF (Pastor 1989, 79). The widespread anti-IMF sentiment of the time was memorialized in a Mexican newspaper cartoon, as described by Pastor Jr (1989) that depicted a working class, dying man hanging from scaffolding as a wealthy well-dressed man with a briefcase marked "IMF" takes the last of his money from his pocket.

Concerns about the role of international institutions in pushing population control in particular draw on decades-long controversies in Latin America, particularly in deeply Catholic and US adjacent Mexico, where associations between population control, immorality, and defense of the nation are by no means novel. Pope Pablo VI's 1968 encyclical Humanae Vitae, which clarified and widely disseminated the Catholic Church's position against all forms of birth control, intervened in larger global debates about population and environment, sustainable growth, and the institutionalization of both population policy and management. That same year, Paul and Anne Ehrlich published their seminal and controversial work, The Population Bomb, in which they predicted that alarming and unsustainable human population growth imminently threatened mass starvation. They argued that this required urgent action to curb population growth and advocated for neo-Malthusian policies that harnessed the tools of statecraft and foreign policy to impose controls and incentives to curb population growth. These included making abortion, contraception, and sexuality education widely available, and they expressed support for proposals to withhold aid from countries that refused to implement population control, threatening countries who failed to comply with this mandate with the punishment of starvation (Ehrlich 1969).

During the Cold War, the idea that accelerating human population growth constituted a problem or threat infused the United States national security and foreign policy concerns. These worries were driven to a great extent by the fear that increasing poverty due to population pressure, as put forward in the "population bomb" thesis, would serve as fertile breeding ground for communism. US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger identified population growth in poor countries, including Latin America, as a significant threat to US national interests and security and international stability. The concern also rose on the agenda of the United Nations, which held its first International Conference on Population in Bucharest and launched a World Population Plan in 1974, the same year Secretary Kissinger commissioned the iconic National Security Study Memorandum 200 (NSSM200) on the threat of population growth. The study concluded that population growth constituted a "grave new threat" to US and global security that was greater "than nuclear war" and devised a US strategy for global population growth which, coinciding with many of the findings and proposals of the UN plan, included aid for family planning and public education campaigns and acknowledged that abortion was being used as a means of fertility control in the world while stopping short of advocating for it. That same year, Mexico established its National Population Council (CONAPO) to administer national population policy, soon kicking off one of its first major national campaigns: Smaller Families Are Better.

> These social media and media tyrants [Google and other big tech companies] censor conservative, libertarian, and Christian voices, and favor left-wing causes, globalism, the LGTBIQ+ agenda, anti-male radical feminism and anti-family, abortion, Malthusianism to reduce population, and uncontrolled migration, the disappearance of borders and sovereign national states, and Islam as a battering ram against the Judeo-Christian culture and tradition of the West. WAKE UP! We are under attack against Western culture.
>
> --Oscar Garza Bello, excerpt from article forwarded to a *profamilia* WhatsApp Group, Dec 2020

The relationship between population, security, and development in Latin America must be understood within the larger context of the historical relationship between the United States and Mexico and with Latin America more broadly, in which the United States has sought or exerted

political and economic influence over the region for more than a Century, often in conjunction with and to the benefit of Latin American elites. The first half of the 20th Century was marked by direct military actions under the Monroe Doctrine that established Latin America as under the sphere of influence of the United States, a power differential that ran continuous throughout the "inter-American Cold War." This period was marked by dozens of covert interventions intended to stifle communism and preserve the US' sphere of influence and was exemplified by the iconic US-backed coup in Chile (Harmer 2011). Beginning in the 1980s and into the 21st Century, the Washington Consensus, which aligned US political economic interests and IMF policies, often with the support and input of Latin American elites, ushered in neoliberal globalization into the region.

While hopeful enthusiasm and expectations for NAFTA had run high among many Mexicans in the lead up to the free trade agreement with the US, expressions of resolute cynicism were also common especially among Mexico's already economically marginalized sectors, among whom it was an oft repeated refrain that NAFTA was meant to benefit big businessmen and the rich and by some that NAFTA was intended to, in the words of one teacher on the eve of its adoption, "promote the hegemony of the United States over … Mexico…including culture and everyday life" (quoted in Hellman 1993, 202). This sentiment was summed up by another teacher (quoted in Hellman 1993, 202) who said, "anything that the government is pushing automatically inspires distrust in me." In the 2000s, US drug war security policies that enforced a neoliberal political economic order in the hemisphere, a connection Dawn Paley (2014) has referred to as "drug war capitalism" that manifests in US-Mexico relations in the enmeshed security and political economic strategies of the multibillion dollar Mérida Initiative and NAFTA (Mercille 2011; Menchaca 2016).

What emerges in these patterns is a long history of suspicion and distrust about the intentions of wealth countries, and in particular the United States, and international organizations, including the IMF and the World Bank, and global elites, including those who benefit in Mexico. Kissinger in particular came to be widely criticized across the political spectrum in Latin America for his exposed role in inciting the CIA-backed overthrow of President Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973 at the height of anti-democratic US anti-communist interventions in Latin America and for supporting the installation of brutal dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet, to replace him (Rabe 2020). His reputation has played a role in the reception of Kissinger's involvement in population strategy as suspect and nefarious; and indeed, the two different policies towards Latin America share a common concern for stemming communism.

> The great globalist manipulation behind the gay movements or "gender" movements [is that they are] simple ways to divide and destroy the population that loses power with respect to the dictatorship of gender ideology.
>
> --Front for the Family Gender Ideology training class, June 1, 2021

How Deep Does the Rabbit Hole (or the Deep Story) Go?

There is still more to the story, and it is not a new one. Distrust is not merely a reflex but a resource that can be leveraged, a topic I explore more in the next chapter. Profamily activists and every other political actor to have ever engaged in populist politics knows this. While it may seem novel to accuse the IMF of playing a role in imposing *gender ideology* on Mexico, Mexican conservative and profamily political actors have in fact long used misinformation and the negative association with the IMF to delegitimize its feminist opponents' positions. Gonzalez Ruiz (1998, 293) documented this strategic use of the "genetic fallacy" by profamily leaders to delegitimize feminist politics by association with a conspiratorial IMF by the 1990s. For example, leading profamily organization Comité ProVida, pushed "sensationalist propaganda" that included what Gonzalez Ruiz (1998, 293)

described as: "the manipulation of old popular prejudices[39], namely about virginity, adultery and masturbation, and the maneuver of disqualifying any sexual education, family planning or AIDS prevention project by attributing it to the dark machinations of organizations such as the International Monetary Fund." Here, references to distrusted international financial organizations index widespread popular skepticism and downright hostility in Latin America, a region where historical critiques of underdevelopment as developed in the iconic ideas of dependency theory (Gunder Frank 1966) and extractive colonialism of world systems theory (Wallerstein 2011) are continuously tapped and renewed through populist discourse from across the political spectrum.

These build on a much earlier precedent that reveals just how rooted and established these conspiratorial narratives have been as a tactic of right-wing populism, as discussed in the previous chapter. González Ruiz (1998, 302) elaborates on an incident in 1995 in which the same mix of leaders and organizations that organized and attended the Breaking Down Lies speakers event at PAN headquarters –ProVida (the first prolife organization in Mexico), PAN party members, and my interlocutor organization Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia (UNPF)— planned together to denounce the Public Health Secretary and agency for "genocide" through allegations that they were "introducing" an "abortifacient" and sterilizing substance into the tetanus vaccine. As this incident suggests, conspiracy theories about population control draw on a longer history of skepticism about human created diseases, vaccine hesitancy, and suspicion of pharmaceuticals more generally, especially among vulnerable populations who have faced very real abuses, from African American communities in the United States after the Tuskegee affair to Sub-Saharan African populations who believed that AIDS was created by the CIA or denied that HIV causes AIDS.

[39] Today we would call this misinformation.

But populist discourses of vulnerability are not only used by or taken up by the vulnerable to rationalize skepticism of scientific expertise but are used strategically by political leaders to mobilize their base, including profamily constituencies. In this vein of population control conspiracy theories, US-based Population Research Institute (PRI) stands out for the lead role it has played in generating and promoting these conspiratorial beliefs. A close collaborator of FNF in Mexico, PRI has closely collaborated with profamily organizations across Latin America since the 1980s. It has played a prominent role in "debunking" claims about overpopulation, climate change, environmental concerns, and vaccine safety and more recently has led campaigns in the US and promoted them across the Americas to encourage prolife constituencies to reject Covid-19 vaccines that have been developed through human cell lines derived from aborted fetuses[40]. The latter issue was slated to be addressed in a conference in conjunction with anti-abortion site LifeSiteNews, which itself was banned from YouTube as of February 2021 for spreading misinformation and conspiratorial content about COVID-19, including the view that COVID-19 is a hoax and that SARS-CoV-2 was purposely fabricated in a Chinese laboratory, with possible support from Democrats in the US.

> Coronavirus is part of a global communist conspiracy, in which the World Health Organization's declaration of a health emergency is a "first step" in the "creation of a planetary communist solidarity" as part of "the globalist project" that was already underway with other "efficient tools," including "gender ideology," according to Brazil Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo. "Globalism is substituting socialism as the preparatory step towards communism" through the pandemic, which is "a tremendous opportunity to create a world order without nations and without liberties."
>
> --Télam article shared by M. in regional *profamilia* group, October 30, 2020

The allegations that PRI and its collaborators in Europe and Latin America have made that Christians face prosecution worldwide are often coupled with concerns that population is projected to grow in Muslim countries but to stagnate or decline in Christian-majority countries and regions,

[40] The prolife movement was also responsible for securing legislation in the United States to block the practice of engaging in vaccine research on the fetuses of pregnant women with scheduled abortions.

especially Europe but also Latin America. Meanwhile, their criticism of China, which they dub the "bully of Asia" and call out as one of the gravest human rights violators on the planet in part because of its population control measures both legal and extralegal, is often articulated alongside "anti-globalist" concerns about the decline in US economic and political power relative to China's ascendency and fears of a renewed communist threat. That these concerns –and those who voice them– are conjoined not only at PRI but across profamily networks in Mexico and the region into claims couched in pro-sovereignty and anti-colonialist frames that abortion and *gender ideology* are actually population control conspiracies against the (Christian) nation, suggest that the stakes of anti-gender campaigns are not only ethical or philosophical but geopolitical and economic.

Gender ideology As a Zombie Apocalypse: Resurrecting the "New" Globalist Threat

Like population control focused theories, New World Order inflected conspiracy theories reconfigure historical facts to tell a deep story about powerful global actors who use gender ideology to seek political and economic domination. In these conspiracy theories, *gender ideology* is cast as the strategic retooling and late-stage mechanism of cultural subversion in a decades or centuries long global struggle for this political economic power. As examined in more depth in the previous chapter, rather than a single narrative, New World Order conspiracy theories manifest as a constellation of conspiracy theories that often incorporate a recurring set of interchangeable themes within a common framework. Like a snowball, this narrative amalgamation has picked up, merged with, and accumulated heterogeneous elements over centuries that intermingle and recombine to become part of this larger

> "The Catholic Church is infiltrated by globalists, says Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano. He called this group the 'deep church' and explained that their goal is to demolish the papacy and secure power."
>
> --headline and byline in Spanish language edition of Epoch Times, circulated in regional *profamilia* networks, January 29, 2021

constellation of complex of conspiratorial narratives[41] that, though ever evolving and expanding, run continuous for centuries, dating at least to the popularization of conspiracy theories about the Illuminati in late 18th Century Europe. Conspiracy theories about the Illuminati —a society of late 18th Century Enlightenment intellectuals that was shut down by Bavarian authorities of the time but that was rumored to have continued as a secret society— played a role in fueling political actions during and after the French in Europe. At the time, accusations that the Illuminati had infiltrated the Freemasons to create a secret power elite to bring down monarchies and the Catholic Church spread across Europe and jumped the Atlantic to play a role in the American Revolution as well.

In the late 19th Century, these anti-Illuminati and anti-masonic conspiracy theories merged with anti-Semitic beliefs and rumors—particularly through the widely disseminated work of right-wing conspiracy theorists like Webster in Britain who wove them together in an extensive body of work and infused by the antisemitic Protocols of the Elders of Zion and related accusations that of a Jewish plot to control international banking and finance—to create a super-charged antisemitic, anti-masonic, and anti-Illuminati narratives that played a role in fueling Nazism in Europe. Meanwhile, in the inter-war period, science fiction writer and popular political philosopher H.G. Wells had published his treatise The New World Order arguing for a form of international government and universal rights. His work, which was referenced in the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights after WWII, became a reference point for the further convergence of these conspiracy theories with charges that global elites were conspiring to create a totalitarian one world government —the New World Order— birthing a new branch of conspiracy theories that purported that supranational and/or international organizations, most especially the

[41] These have also emerged in the US context in claims about the deep state and QAnon, as well as in contemporary militia movements, all of which converged in driving the Capitol riots of January 2021.

United Nations (or more recently the European Union), seek to dissolve or bypass national sovereignty in order to politically subordinate and economically dominate world populations.

As the Cold War raged on, this complex of narratives incorporated anti-communist elements often merged with spiritual warfare narratives that rationalized the Red Scare. Conspiracy theories about communist plots fueled McCarthyism in the United States and beyond its borders, particularly within its sphere of influence, the Western Hemisphere. This included incarnating the Lavender Scare, which cast suspicion on homosexuals as possible communist conspirators, not only in the United States but elsewhere in the hemisphere. Anti-communist conspiracies "both real and fake" (Bevins 2020) fueled and helped consolidate right-wing dictatorship across much of Latin America as part of a transnational network of right-wing activism that was at once political, economic, and cultural (Cowan 2016). For example, Argentina's dictatorship conjoined antisemitism and political homophobia with anti-communism in its claims to be fighting a "conspiracy against Civilization" (Finchelstein 2020) while the Brazilian right-wing incited moral panics about gender, sexuality, and the family alongside anti-communist panics, as it aided the United States in developing its anti-communist hemispheric Operation Condor and orchestrating the overthrow of Allende in Chile.

In response to three decades of global political and economic integration, predominantly under conditions of neoliberal capitalism that have attenuated if not largely ceded local economic control –and nowhere as much as in Mexico, the world's most liberalized economy– New World Order conspiracy theories have incorporated a new way of describing the plot for global domination as being led by "globalists." This includes any and all of its ever-expanding cast of global conspirators –communists, socialists, Satanists, global governance bodies (especially supranational ones), Jews, freemasons, the Illuminati, feminists (i.e. cultural Marxists), and now gender ideologues and the LGBT lobby, among many others. While the narrative has evolved to accommodate shifting world developments, the deep story remains stable across time and consistent with other forms of

anti-gender conspiracy theories: the stakes in the struggle over *gender ideology* are about no less than who controls access to the world's political and economic power.

Digging Into Distrust: The Deep Story of Anti-Gender Conspiracy Theories

There are two main conclusions I wish to draw from this very partial (as in both incomplete and curated) patchwork history of exploitative political and economic dynamics within and towards Mexico. The first is that, when contextualizing anti-gender conspiracy theories that emphasize deep distrust and resentment towards globalists (or global elites), whether misguided or not, the surface story that *gender ideology* is biopolitical weapon of powerful people who seek to dominate the world may seem irrational, but the deep story that the wealthy and powerful use all manner of means to maintain the subordination over populations appears quite rational. The details regarding who bears responsibility for these devastating political, economic, and social consequences –the US treasury, the CIA, the IMF, the World Bank, drug kingpins, major corporations, the PRI, Mexico's political elites, or its business class– is not very relevant when they are all perceived to be unimpugnable and colluding together to protect their collective interests. They are, in a felt sense, all the same. What does matter is that the vast majority of those who live out its consequences are not those who bear responsibility for them, nor do they exercise much choice or control over being subjected to them.

> "[AMLO] has left "his" 4T [4th Transformation platform to be] a mere pawn in the globalist agenda of the most cruel and petty foreign interests… abortion, euthanasia, gender ideology and drugs."
>
> --Rodrigo Ivan Cortes, President of the National Front for the Family to supporters, December 2019

From this perspective, what matters is that they are coordinating across borders, wielding immense power to influence who will be made to live or let die or reproduce, or at a more quotidian and intimate level, who will eat lunch that day, or see their kids, or extract their labor power that day, at a locus of power far removed from where their policies are felt at the household and

everyday level on behalf of interests that are also not local. In a conspiracy theory about international financial institutions colluding with powerful governments and local political elites (i.e. globalists) to impose their will for private gain or to maintain dominance, where does the truth of it start and end? How distinct, really, is a conspiracy theory asserting that the United States is executing covert pressure through international institutions to force fiscal policies on Mexico to protect its own financial interests than one asserting that it is executing covert pressure through international institutions to force social policies to suppress population on Mexico to protect its own security interests? Or between the claim that the US, with the backing of international institutions, is fostering Mexican dependency and profiting on it by turning them into consumers for the cheap corn its flooding the market with vs. turning them into clientelist consumers for subsidized contraception to keep population controllable all the while profiting off the same? What about when the United States did, at least in the past, identify population growth as a potential national security issue, did support policies to slow population growth at United Nations conferences, did sterilize Latina women, did pressure Mexico into fiscal policies to thwart an immigration wave it feared, and does use soft diplomacy to push for pro-LGBT policy?[42] Truth isn't modular; while reassembling partial truths in any recombination does not get us any closer to the truth (imaginary as it may be), it can certainly appear to. When the "truth" of the matter is undiscernible or unverifiable, what's left is trust. And trust is the resource most depleted among international institutions and any government (perceived to be) in alignment with them, and a resource that populations have more power to withhold than their labor. The deep story of the gender-ideology-as-a-tool-of-the-globalists conspiracy theory is not (just) a raw nationalist defense

[42] For example, raising the rainbow flag in its embassy, funding LGBT groups in Mexico, or raising the issue in diplomatic meetings. For example, US diplomacy likely played a significant role in the Guatemalan president's decision to veto a March 2022 bill that would have banned abortion, same-sex marriage, and teaching, essentially, *gender ideology* in schools.

of sovereignty that comes from nowhere but (also) a critique of global political economic power structures.

The second conclusion is that anti-gender conspiracy theories narrate a story about a deep crisis of care and "the family" –which I would replace with "caregivers"– under duress. Anti-gender conspiracy theorists bring liberal feminism and neoliberalism into a common frame, though they are not the first or only to do so. Nancy Fraser (2020) argues that liberal feminist demands for women's equality successfully "liberated" a new majority of women by facilitating their entry into the workforce over the past two generations, at least in the capitalist core of wealthy North Atlantic countries. But at the same time, neoliberal restructuring reduced the state's role in service provision and social welfare. This left the family, and particularly women within the new two-earner family norm, rather than the state, to absorb the excess productive and reproductive labor. If 19th Century liberal capitalism privatized reproductive labor, relegating it to the private sphere, and mid-20th Century state-managed capitalism socialized it, circumscribing it within the "family wage" instead, argues Fraser, then what contemporary finance capitalism has done is to commodify it. Those with sufficient means hire help, offloading this poorly paid reproductive labor onto even poorer women, often migrants, some of whom leave their own reproductive labor commitments to other, often even poorer women. As the crisis of care has unfolded in wealthier nations, some poorer nations have pinned their whole development strategy on sending women to perform reproductive labor abroad. While it has "liberated" some women, it has come at the cost of other women, has served to further cement gendered, racial, class, and national hierarchies, and greased the continuation of global neoliberal capitalism.

I return to the portrait sketched by Marcial Padilla in the Toluca auditorium that night in 2019. Though seldom discussed in these terms, what these social and economic shifts amount to is an ongoing crisis of care, in which families, and women in particular, are pressed between the need to perform income generating labor and reproductive care work. More than three decades of

neoliberal economic policies and ongoing austerity have pushed the social welfare responsibilities of the state onto the family, relying particularly on women's unpaid labor for viability. At the same time, Mexicans (along with Colombians) work longer hours, by far, than any other OECD country, due at least in part to unenforced labor laws and fears of unemployment (OECD 2022), while women perform three times as much housework and caretaking work as men, according to INMUJERES, Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (National Institute of Women) (Gurría 2020). Urbanization, which is the most important predictor of reduced birth rates because it offers women better access to effective contraception and educational and career opportunities and because having many children in expensive urban areas is disincentivized by its cost prohibition (Bricker and Ibbitson 2019), has reached 80% as of 2020, such that most women in Mexico live in urban areas (The World Bank 2022). Given the mix of negative economic constraints and availability of alternatives in the context of a crisis of care, Mexican women (especially urban women) are indeed, like their counterparts in wealthier economies, having fewer children, having them later (which also means fewer), marrying much less, and divorcing and cohabitating more.

One of the consequences of the crisis of care precipitated by neoliberalism, argues feminist scholar Sarah Clark Miller (2021), is not only "fewer babies and people who are less emotionally satisfied," but moral injury and the tearing apart at the "very fabric of our interdependence," which in turn jeopardizes the "institutions undergirded by cooperative sociality—the economy, political institutions, and ultimately aspects of culture … threatening the social contract itself." This is an unraveling, a social structure at risk of collapse, much like what Padilla described. The traditional family is changing, drastically and quickly. While one can either lament or celebrate the shifts and

> Dear leaders, it is time to activate ourselves against the Secretary of the Interior, Olga Sanchez Cordero, and in defense of our children and parental authority, as well as the sovereignty of Mexico in the face of the globalist agenda, the sovereignty of the states of the republic and of our families in the face of the authoritarian gender threat.
>
> --Rodrigo Ivan Cortes, President of the National Front for the Family to supporters, July 2020

changes he described in Mexican society and the Mexican family, they undeniably represent very significant and very rapid shifts that directly stem from but also generate impacts that are gendered and/or political economic. Traditionalists propose a return or preservation of the traditional family as the solution to this problem. But while traditional family structures may have served as one viable model to facilitate cooperative sociality, they are not the only, not necessary, and not the most equitable; and a plurality of more just and imaginative alternatives are available both within and outside of the state.

The "Mexican family" *is* struggling, though not because feminists seek to redefine it, as Padilla argues, but because it is a resource reserve of reproductive labor performed mostly by women that the whole nation, the class structure, and a productive economy rely on to subsidize the economy, to produce Mexico's most abundant resource and the basis of its productivity—labor, and to reproduce the nation. As Padilla's comments and the stream of conspiracy theories scattered throughout this chapter suggest, profamily advocates' investment in maintaining the "natural" or "traditional family" –which collapses as an idealized norm with the admission that "gender" is not a natural phenomenon at all– are not merely social interests but also political economic and geopolitical, for which women's reproductive labor is the invisible linchpin. The fate of "the family" is the important point of convergence that tenably unites nationalist populists on the one hand and (Christian) traditionalists on the other in shared opposition to the international liberal order, not only within national contexts like Mexico but also across them, as in across the region and the Atlantic.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have read anti-gender conspiracy theories down to probe their deep story. Theories that portray *gender ideology* as a tool of the globalists tell a story about gender, but the moral of the story is a deeper one: they are also stories of moral injury and of fear of either losing

more or of joining the surplus population in a global system where power and control, even over the most intimate aspects of life, appears to be ever more distant and subverted. Put differently, I have asked what needs might anti-gender conspiracy theories meet for those who consume them? Reading down can reveal the ways this phenomenon might not be as anti-social as is often portrayed, but perhaps can productive be understood as pro-social in that they service social needs, such as providing a means to grieve collective moral injury, air disappointments and register critiques over democratic or economic failures, foster purpose and meaningful community, and to replace feelings of powerlessness over the future into a sense of agency in history.

Intertwined through many anti-gender conspiracy theories is a moral line of critique trained on liberal social policies (i.e. abortion and LGBT rights) and another political economic one focused on preserving sovereign capitalist hierarchies from the agents of either socialism or excessive neoliberalism. While Western traditionalists have protested the demise of the traditional family for decades on moral grounds, contemporary crisis of social reproduction and its accompanying demographic shifts have provided them with the means to retool these as political economic arguments that attribute the corrosive conditions of neoliberalism and global finance capitalism to the transnational feminist pursuit of gender equality, that is *gender ideology*. Conspiracy theories can tell a deep story that is "true" even when the truth of what it says is nonsense. This observation matters when it comes to responding to conspiracy theories about gender or *gender ideology*. A reading of anti-gender conspiracy theories from critical feminist political economy recognizes in them a critique of the failures of an international (neo)liberal political economic order has so deeply eroded trust and altered the conditions of cooperative sociality that any approach to pursuing a gender just world is unlikely to gain traction without incorporating a more comprehensive, including political economic, approach to (re)building trust.

CHAPTER 7. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have ethnographically analyzed anti-gender activism in Mexico, including providing a contextual history of the movement, a study of its internal diversity, coalitional politics, and movement infrastructure, an ethnographic analysis of its strategies, discourses, practices, and an examination of the roles it has played in both Mexican politics and within transnational right-wing populist movements more broadly. In Chapters 2 and 3, I examined the various ways that Mexican anti-gender activists have adapted and weaponized *gender ideology* through both a persuasive form of post-truth populism and a strategic politics of fear. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I explored how some *profamilias* in Mexico have found relief, validation, empowerment, answers, belonging, or even social capital from partaking in anti-gender conspiracy theorizing. Anti-gender conspiracy theories themselves are sedimentary forms whose layers tell stories about both the past and the present, and places both near and far. I have also examined the ways in which Mexican anti-gender activism is deeply rooted in Mexican politics yet plays a leading role, regionally and globally, in building alliances between traditionalists and right-wing populists and with movements in contexts across the region and the spanning the Atlantic.

In explaining what is fueling the emergence and popular appeal of anti-gender movements in Mexico, I find that context matters —historically, geographically, and politically. Support for popular anti-gender movements, as explored in most depth in Chapter 6, bears the hallmarks of deep disenchantments with decades of economic stagnation, eroding living standards, failed democratic promises, the failure to remedy stark inequality, rampant corruption, and lost faith in democracy. In explaining how and why political contestations over equality, sovereignty, and liberal democracy manifest in disputes over gender, I find that distrust, fear, outrage, and resentment are easily dislodged and instrumentalized in such precarious political economic conditions in service of political agendas, an opportunity that traditionalists have harnessed in

service of long-standing political positions. Lastly, in explaining how and why opposition to gender serves as connective tissue for the broader spread of illiberal sentiments and right-wing populist movements across the region, I find that while the Mexican context is unique, these failures of liberal democracies are conditions that widely shared. Though they can exist anywhere, it is in these conditions where illiberal insecurities – existential, epistemic, ontological– flourish: Will "we" survive? Who can I trust? Who am I, and who do I get to be?

This brings me to one final point. There is one important through line that stands out across the illiberal insecurities that I have analyzed in these chapters: the persistent oppositional binary of "us vs. them". Nationalism, polarization, populism, conspiracy theorizing, and fascism are all structurally contingent upon this "us vs. them" framework and the fundamental and oppositional distinction it makes between the Self and Other. Nationalism sorts the "we" who belong and define the nation from its outsiders. Populism emphasizes the righteous deserving of "we the people" against their enemies, usually incarnate in establishment elite, often framed as corrupt. Conspiracy theories are invariably built around the "we" of the conspiracy's victims (the losers) and the "they" of its conspirators (the winners). Fascist politics are an extreme version of the "politics of us and them" (Stanley 2020). And polarization, too, is a social or political division into poles that are defined in relation to their differences from the other. As the ethnographic material throughout this dissertation suggests, all of these formations tend to reinforce one another, and emphasizing the categorical differences between "us" and "them," as anti-gender activists' typically right-wing populist strategies tend to do, serves to deepen suspicion and distrust of the "other" and vice versa.

Arlie Hochschild describes this kind of situation as an "empathy wall," an "obstacle to deep understanding of another person that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs" (2016, 6). She argues that an ethnographic approach to studying the far Right allows us in turn to "build the scaffolding of an empathy bridge" (2016, 2) and reminds us that empathy for the "other," no matter how repugnant they may seem (S. Harding 1991), does not

cloud our analysis; on the contrary, it constitutes its prerequisite. The present pervasiveness of the "us vs. them" framework –palpable throughout this ethnographic study of anti-gender activism in Mexico and beyond– affirms the importance of pursuing an anthropology of "studying through" political difference as I have sought to do in this work. Like an "empathy bridge," "studying through" seeks explicitly to break down the rigid "us vs. them" binary by insisting on a nuanced account of contextual realities and the complexity of individuals and circumstances. It is in my view an ethical imperative in these times of democratic decline, pernicious polarization, and deep distrust in a world so divided into "us" and "them" (McCoy and Somer 2019; Somer and McCoy 2019; Gaytan 2019; Altman and Symons 2016). While conditions of deep polarization and political contention may make the task of "studying through" political difference I propose here seem more difficult, they also make it more meaningful, valuable, and urgent for those with a stake in learning how to rebuild trust, to preserve democratic resilience, and avert the most corrosive impacts of intensified polarization and incited distrust.

Nonetheless, early in my own research with anti-gender activists in Mexico, I momentarily considered abandoning the project when a fellow anthropologist expressed reservations about its ethical possibility, emphasising her belief that "anthropology is about being in solidarity with those we study." My colleague's concern was not for my interlocutors but rather that I might in effect legitimise or advance their political agenda with my research. A similar worry underpinned the critiques that ethnographers Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco (2021) received after publishing their own ethnography of working class right-wing populist sympathizers in Brazil. Some readers, scholarly or otherwise, accused them of doing damage by "humanizing fascists." These concerns manifest elsewhere, too, like in statements by scholars insisting on a refusal to expend academic or emotional labour on trying to "understand" their perceived opposition. These critiques and stances, however, leave little room for the ethnographic study of the Right.

The premise of this concern reflects questions deeply embedded in the discipline on anthropology since the reflexive turn. The way we have answered them has tended to circumscribe the proper objects of anthropology in ways that can unintentionally limit us. In the 1980s, as Joel Robbins has argued, anthropology swapped its original object of the "savage slot" (Trouillot 1991) for the "suffering slot," the "subject living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression" (Robbins 2013). As this new way of distinguishing good subjects from bad ones displaced the old, the "suffering subject" became the subject deserving of empathy and anthropological attention from a discipline eager to remake itself not only by trying to create a more just anthropology but also trying to do justice with anthropology –noble goals, certainly. Suffering slot ethnography, as Robbins describes it, is "secure in its knowledge of good and evil and works toward achieving progress in the direction of its already widely accepted models of the good" (ibid: 456).

In practice, this formulation can lead to several problematic assumptions: for example, that by studying something we are necessarily aligning ourselves with it; that there can be an uncomplicated distinction between those who suffer and those who cause others to suffer (something Black feminist thinkers have interrogated for decades Crenshaw 1991); or that anthropological research confers legitimacy on the suffering of its subjects. It raises further questions: Must one's suffering be legible to anthropology a priori to be admitted as one of its proper subjects, or is the suffering subject that which is made legible via anthropology? Put slightly differently, are we using anthropology to make suffering legible, or are we using suffering to make anthropology legible? Are we framing our research design, perhaps without realizing, around a question of which subjects "deserve" our anthropological attention? And must we choose between "studying up" and "studying with"?

Anthropologists have long grappled with these difficult questions, and feminist, indigenous, and native anthropologists have written poignantly about them. Motivated by the "feminist ethical

imperative to study a community in whose projects [she] could be invested," Kim TallBear (2014, 5) proposed an alternative vision for anthropological research that goes beyond the post-reflexive turn paradigm of "studying with" to one of "standing with," a model rooted in the common ground of "share[d] goals and desires" (ibid: 1). While not a prescription, TallBear offers one valuable response to this problem. But what about when we cannot "stand with" the goals and desires of our research subjects? If political alignment or moral solidarity is the only ethical standpoint from which to do anthropological research, is an anthropology of the far Right (some of whose leaders have attempted to shut down anthropology departments in recent years (Goździak and Main 2018), even possible? How can anthropologists make sense of the widening political polarizations increasingly dividing much of the world if we only study one "side" of these oppositions? And what happens when those we study defy this specious binary categorisation of good vs. evil, deserving vs. undeserving subjects, or "horrendous fascists" vs. "vulnerable native" (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2021)? As Pinherio-Machado and Scalco put it, juxtaposing the properly suffering subject of the "good poor" with the Bolsonarist does-not-deserve-to-be-humanized "bad poor," what do we do when the enemy and oppressed are one and the same? Beyond the analytical limitations posed by essentialising the latter, Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco point to an even more pressing concern: How will refusing to "humanize fascists" help us account for how suffering is produced, how oppression is maintained, and the complexities of these emergent cultural and political phenomena?

This is neither an impasse nor an appeal to moral relativism. Entreaties and examples of "humanizing the enemy" in feminist anthropology of the Right, as in Faye Ginsberg's masterful ethnography *Contested Lives* (Ginsburg 1989) and Susan Harding's (2001) powerful demonstration that we can deeply understand others' beliefs without necessarily agreeing with or legitimising them, have an equally long history in anthropology. We should (re)turn to these as we strive to figure out how best to do justice both in and with anthropology in these times of democratic decline without ignoring, demonising, or refusing to "humanize fascists," even and especially those who

may persecute us or try to shut us down. But this does require moving away from a story about anthropology that is implied in imagining research design as a moral good to be alternately withheld or distributed among deserving subjects, a move which can open us up to more fully embrace and benefit from the potential of ethnography as an "empathy bridge" (Hochschild 2016) as Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco do in their insightful call for "nuance as a responsibility in times of democratic decline."

In this vein, this ethnographic study of right-wing populist anti-gender movements in Mexico takes Guadalupe's doubts seriously to explore with rigor, empathy, and nuance the *dudas* that she raises about power, identity, and political economy in ways that seek to go beyond simplistic theories of misrecognition (Hochschild 2016), backlash (Faludi 2006; Corrales 2020; Cupać and Ebetürk 2021; Paternotte 2020), or economistic or culturally reductionist narratives (Altman and Symons 2016). As an ethnography of distrust, it brings to view how social and political crisis, polarization, insecurity, and precarity come together in ways that appear to stoke the flames of the long slow burn of liberal democracy. While we may never have had such a thing, in the words of Astra Taylor (2019), we will sure miss it when it's gone.

References

Abrahamsen, Rita, Jean-François Drolet, Alexandra Gheciu, Karin Narita, Srdjan Vucetic, and Michael Williams. 2020. "Confronting the International Political Sociology of the New Right." *International Political Sociology* 14 (1): 94–107. https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olaa001.

Abromeit, John, Bridget María Chesterton, Gary Marotta, and York Norman, eds. 2016. *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Ackerly, Brooke A., Elisabeth Jay Friedman, Meenakshi Gopinath, and Marysia Zalewski. 2019. "Resisting Global Anti-Genderism with Global Feminist Research." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21 (2): 165–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1596386.

Ahmed, Azam, and Nicole Perlroth. 2017. "Using Texts as Lures, Government Spyware Targets Mexican Journalists and Their Families." *The New York Times*, June 19, 2017, sec. World. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/americas/mexico-spyware-anticrime.html.

AleDiener. 2011. "Entrevista a Olivia Núñez Orellana, Directora del Instituto Internacional de la Mujer – Informando y Formando Organización." *Informando: Medios que hace la diferencia* (blog). February 6, 2011. https://www.informandoyformando.org/entrevista-olivia-nunez-orellana-directora-del-instituto-internacional-de-la-mujer/.

Altman, Dennis, and Jonathan Symons. 2016. *Queer Wars: The New Global Polarization over Gay Rights*. http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=4455254.

Alvarez, Sonia E. 2000. "Translating the Global Effects of Transnational Organizing on Local Feminist Discourses and Practices in Latin America." *Meridians* 1 (1): 29–67.

Alvarez, Sonia E., Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, eds. 1998. *Cultures of Politics/Politics of Cultures: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.

Amendt, Gerhard. 2016. "Envy and Malevolence - the Shaky Foundation of Gender Studies - Www.Cuncti.Net." *Cuncti* (blog). May 20, 2016. https://www.cuncti.net/geschlechterdebatte/941-envy-and-malevolence-the-shaky-foundation-of-gender-studies.

Amparo Casar, María. 2016. "México: Anatomía de La Corrupción." Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad. https://imco.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016-Anatomia_Corrupcion_2-Documento.pdf.

Anić, Jadranka Rebeka. 2015. "Gender, Gender 'Ideology' and Cultural War: Local Consequences of a Global Idea – Croatian Example." *Feminist Theology* 24 (1): 7–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735015593434.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2012. *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4th ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

Arguedas Ramírez, Gabriela. 2018. "Ideología de género, fanatismo religioso y política electoral en Costa Rica." *Sxpolitics - Espanhol* (blog). November 23, 2018. https://sxpolitics.org/es/ideologia-de-genero-fanatismo-religioso-y-politica-electoral-en-costa-rica/4155.

Arguedas Ramírez, Gabriela and Morgan, Lynn M. 2017. "The Reproductive Rights Counteroffensive in Mexico and Central America." *Feminist Studies* 43 (2): 423. https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.43.2.0423.

Aviña, Alexander. 2016. "Mexico's Long Dirty War." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 48 (2): 144–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2016.1201271.

Avishai, Orit, Lynne Gerber, and Jennifer Randles. 2013. "The Feminist Ethnographer's Dilemma: Reconciling Progressive Research Agendas with Fieldwork Realities." Edited by Kent Sandstrom and Tara Opsal. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 42 (4): 394–426. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241612458955.

Bacchetta, P., and Margaret Power, eds. 2002. *Right-Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists around the World*. New York: Routledge.

Bajc, Vida, and Willem De Lint, eds. 2013. *Security and Everyday Life*. First issued in paperback. Routledge Advances in Criminology 10. New York: Routledge.

Barkun, Michael. 2016. "Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge:" *Diogenes*, October. https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192116669288.

Basu, Srimati, and Akiko Takenaka. 2018. "Feminist Politics and Activism in Reactionary Eras." *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* 2 (1). https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc.201801.

Benería, Lourdes. 1992. "The Mexican Debt Crisis: Restructuring the Economy and the Household." In *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty, and Women's Work*, edited by Lourdes Benería and Shelley Feldman. Boulder: Westview Press.

Benford, Robert D., and David A. Snow. 2000. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611–39.

Berezin, Mabel. 2009. *Illiberal Politics in Neoliberal Times: Culture, Security and Populism in the New Europe*. Cambridge Cultural Social Studies. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bergmann, Eirikur. 2018. *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation*. New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

Berkowitz, Bill. 2003. "'Cultural Marxism' Catching On." *Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report*, August 15, 2003. https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2003/cultural-marxism-catching.

Berlet, Chip. 2002. "Anti-Masonic Conspiracy Theories: A Narrative Form of Demonization and Scapegoating." *Heredom* 10: 243–75.

Bermudez, Alejandro. 2019. *¿De Dónde Viene La Ideología de Género? Explicado En 5 Minutos - Agustín Laje*. MP4. Cara a Cara. https://youtu.be/dAaUhVTYfo0.

Bevins, Vincent. 2020. "Where Conspiracy Reigns." *The Atlantic*, September 16, 2020. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/how-anti-communist-conspiracies-haunt-brazil/614665/.

Biroli, Flávia. 2016. "Political Violence against Women in Brazil: Expressions and definitions." *Revista Direito e Práxis* 7 (15): 557–89.

Bjork-James, Sophie. 2020. "White Sexual Politics: The Patriarchal Family in White Nationalism and the Religious Right." *Transforming Anthropology* 28 (1): 58–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/traa.12167.

———. 2021. *The Divine Institution: The Politics of White Evangelicalism's Focus on the Family*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Blee, Kathleen M. 1991. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Nachdr. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

Bligh, Annabel. n.d. "Introduction: What Is a Conspiracy Theory?" Expert Guide to Conspiracy Theories. Accessed October 23, 2020. http://theconversation.com/expert-guide-to-conspiracy-theories-introducing-a-new-podcast-series-133258.

Bob, Clifford. 2012. *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics*. Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Boellstorff, Tom. 2003. "Dubbing Culture: Indonesian Gay and Lesbi Subjectivities and Ethnography in an Already Globalized World." *American Ethnologist* 30 (2): 225–42. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2003.30.2.225.

———. 2004. "The Emergence of Political Homophobia in Indonesia: Masculinity and National Belonging." *Ethnos* 69 (4): 465–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184042000302308.

Boyer, Dominic. 2016a. "Introduction: Crisis of Liberalism." Society for Cultural Anthropology. 2016. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/introduction-crisis-of-liberalism.

———. 2016b. "Crisis of Liberalism." *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, Crisis of Liberalism, October. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/crisis-of-liberalism.

Bricker, Darrell Jay, and John Ibbitson. 2019. *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Brock, Maria. 2019. "The Roots of Right-Wing Populism in Central and Eastern Europe: At the Nexus of Neoliberalism and the Global Culture Wars." *Euro Crisis in the Press* (blog). November 8, 2019. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2019/11/08/the-roots-of-right-wing-populism-in-central-and-eastern-europe-at-the-nexus-of-neoliberalism-and-the-global-culture-wars/.

Busbridge, Rachel, Benjamin Moffitt, and Joshua Thorburn. 2020. "Cultural Marxism: Far-Right Conspiracy Theory in Australia's Culture Wars." *Social Identities* 26 (6): 722–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2020.1787822.

Buss, Doris, and Didi Herman. 2003. *Globalizing Family Values: The Christian Right in International Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Butler, Judith, and Elizabeth Weed. 2011. "Introduction." In *The Question of Gender: Joan W. Scott's Critical Feminism*, 1–8. 21st Century Studies, v. 4. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Campoy, Ana. 2016. "A Conspiracy Theory about Sex and Gender Is Being Peddled around the World by the Far Right." *Quartz*, November 2016. https://qz.com/807743/conservatives-have-created-a-fake-ideology-to-combat-the-global-movement-for-lgbti-rights/.

Careaga-Pérez, Gloria. 2017. "Moral Panic and Gender Ideology in Latin America." *Religion and Gender* 6 (2): 251. https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10174.

Cariboni, Diana. n.d. "How Paraguay Became a 'Lab for Anti-Rights Ideas.'" *OpenDemocracy*. Accessed May 17, 2022. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/how-paraguay-became-a-lab-for-anti-rights-ideas/.

Carter, Elisabeth. 2018. "Right-Wing Extremism/Radicalism: Reconstructing the Concept." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23 (2): 157–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2018.1451227.

Case, Mary Anne. 2016a. "The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Vatican's Anathematization of Gender." https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2740008.

———. 2016b. "The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Anathematization of Gender." *Religion and Gender* 6 (2): 155–72. https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10124.

Centurión, Jerónimo. 2018. *Genero Bajo Ataque [Gender Under Attack]*. Documentary. Consorcio Latinoamericano contra el Aborto Inseguro (CLACAI). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjJZQGjs9ck.

Clark Miller, Sarah. 2021. "Neoliberalism, Moral Precarity, and the Crisis of Care." In *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*, edited by Maurice Hamington and Michael A. Flower. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Comaroff, Jean. 2011. "Populism and Late Liberalism: A Special Affinity?" Edited by John L. Jackson and David Kyuman Kim. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 637 (1): 99–111. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716211406079.

Congregation for Catholic Education. 2019. *"Male and Female He Created Them": Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*. Vatican City: Congregation for Catholic Education of the Holy Catholic Church.

Cooper, Melinda. 2017. *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. New York: Zone Books.

Córdoba, José de, and Juan Montes. 2016. "Mexico Issues Arrest Warrant for Veracruz State Governor Javier Duarte." *WSJ*, October 19, 2016, sec. World. http://www.wsj.com/articles/mexico-issues-arrest-warrant-for-veracruz-state-governor-javier-duarte-1476905635.

Corrales, Javier. 2020. "The Expansion of LGBT Rights in Latin America and the Backlash." In *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics*, by Javier Corrales, edited by Michael J. Bosia, Sandra M. McEvoy, and Momin Rahman, 184–200. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190673741.013.14.

Corrêa, Sonia, David Paternotte, and Roman Kuhar. 2018. "The Globalisation of Anti-Gender Campaigns." *International Politics and Society*, May 31, 2018. https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/human-rights/article/show/the-globalisation-of-anti-gender-campaigns-2761/.

Corrêa, Sonia, Mario Pecheny, and Gloria Careaga. 2019. "Sexuality in Latin America: Politics at a Crossroad." In *SexPolitics: Trends & Tensions in the 21st Century*. Vol. 2. Sexuality Policy Watch-SPW.

Corredor, Elizabeth S. 2019. "Unpacking 'Gender Ideology' and the Global Right's Antigender Countermovement." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44 (3): 613–38. https://doi.org/10.1086/701171.

———. 2021. "On the Strategic Uses of Women's Rights: Backlash, Rights-Based Framing, and Anti-Gender Campaigns in Colombia's 2016 Peace Agreement." *Latin American Politics and Society*.

Cowan, Benjamin A. 2016. *Securing Sex: Morality and Repression in the Making of Cold War Brazil*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Craven, Christa, ed. 2013. *Feminist Activist Ethnography: Counterpoints to Neoliberalism in North America*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

Cupać, Jelena, and Irem Ebetürk. 2021. "No Backlash without Socialization: The Antifeminist NGOs and the United Nations." *Global Constitutionalism*.

Davis, Dána-Ain, and Christa Craven. 2016. *Feminist Ethnography: Thinking through Methodologies, Challenges, and Possibilities*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

De la Dehesa, Rafael. 2010. *Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil: Sexual Rights Movements in Emerging Democracies*. Durham [NC]: Duke University Press.

Deckman, Melissa M. 2016. *Tea Party Women: Mama Grizzlies, Grassroots Leaders, and the Changing Face of the American Right*. New York: New York University Press.

Delgado, Alvaro. 2003. *El Yunque: La Ultraderecha En El Poder*. 5. ed. Col. Chapultepec Morales, Miguel Hidalgo, México, D.F: Plaza Janés.

Diamond, Sara. 1995. *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*. Critical Perspectives. New York: Guilford Press.

———. 2000. *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right.* New York: Guilford.

Diaz, Andrea, and Jessica Campisi. 2018. "Mexico Goes to the Polls This Weekend. 132 Politicians Have Been Killed since Campaigning Began, per One Count." *CNN*, June 27, 2018. https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/27/americas/mexico-political-deaths-election-season-trnd/index.html.

Downing, Lisa. 2018. "The Body Politic: Gender, the Right Wing and 'Identity Category Violations.'" *French Cultural Studies* 29 (4): 367–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155818791075.

Doyle, Kate. 2003. "The Dawn of Mexico's Dirty War." The National Security Archive. 2003. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB105/index.htm.

Durham, Martin, and Margaret Power, eds. 2010. *New Perspectives on the Transnational Right*. Palgrave Macmillan Transnational History. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dworkin, Andrea. 1987. *Right-Wing Women*. New York: Putnam.

Ecuador Chequea. 2019. "¿Amparo Medina fue asesora de la ONU?" *Ecuador Chequea* (blog). January 11, 2019. http://www.ecuadorchequea.com/amparomedina-trabajo-onu-provida-aborto/.

Ehrlich, Paul. 1969. *The Population Bomb*. Baltimore Book.

El Gato. 2021. *Bill Gates y Control Poblacional*. El Gato.

Elfenbein, Rachel. 2019. *Engendering Revolution: Women, Unpaid Labor, and Maternalism in Bolivarian Venezuela*. First edition. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Equipo PUEBLO. 1994. "The Polarization of Mexican Society: A Grassroots View of World Bank Economic Adjustment Policies." The Development GAP and Equipo PUEBLO.

Erzen, Tanya. 2006. *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Faludi, Susan. 2006. *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*. 15th anniversary ed., 1st Three Rivers Press ed. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Family Watch International. 2016. *Cultural Imperialism*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWwRnbv2BOo. Accessed May 1, 2018.

Fassin, Didier. 2021. "Of Plots and Men: The Heuristics of Conspiracy Theories." *Current Anthropology* 62 (2): 128–37. https://doi.org/10.1086/713829.

Fassin, Eric. 2016. “Gender and the Problem of Universals: Catholic Mobilizations and Sexual Democracy in France.” *Religion and Gender* 6 (2): 173. https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10157.

Finchelstein, Federico. 2020. *A Brief History of Fascist Lies*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Franco, Jean. 1998. “Defrocking the Vatican: Feminism’s Secular Project.” In *Cultures of Politics/Politics of Cultures: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements*, edited by Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, 278–89. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.

Fraser, Nancy. 2020. *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. Radical Thinkers. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books.

Freeman Jr., Chas W. 2012. “Hasbara and the Control of Narrative as an Element of Strategy | Middle East Policy Council.” Presented at the Jubilee Conference of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Moscow, Russia. https://www.mepc.org/speeches/hasbara-and-control-narrative-element-strategy.

Friedman, Elisabeth Jay. 2003. “Gendering the Agenda: The Impact of the Transnational Women’s Rights Movement at the UN Conferences of the 1990s.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 26 (4): 313–31. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(03)00077-3.

Fuentes, Carlos. 1999. *The Buried Mirror Reflections on Spain and the New World*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Garma, Carlos, Rosario Ramírez, and Ariel Corpus, eds. 2018. *Familias, Iglesias y Estado Laico. Enfoques Antropológicos*. México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Iztapalapa.

Garma, Carlos, María del Rosario Ramírez, and Ariel Corpus. 2018. *Familias, iglesias y estado laico: enfoques antropológicos*. Universidad Autonoma Universitaria (UNAM).

Gates, Bill. 2010. *Innovating to Zero!* Ted Talk. Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/bill_gates_innovating_to_zero. Accessed April 22, 2019.

Gaytan, Victoria. 2019. “The High Cost of Polarization for Mexico’s Young Democracy.” *Global Americans*, May 16, 2019. https://theglobalamericans.org/2019/05/the-high-cost-of-polarization-for-mexicos-young-democracy/.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.” In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 3–32. New York: Basic books.

Gerts, Dax, Courtney D. Shelley, Nidhi Parikh, Travis Pitts, Chrysm Watson Ross, Geoffrey Fairchild, Nidia Yadria Vaquera Chavez, and Ashlynn R. Daughton. 2021. “‘Thought I’d Share First’ and Other Conspiracy Theory Tweets from the COVID-19 Infodemic: Exploratory Study.” *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* 7 (4): e26527. https://doi.org/10.2196/26527.

Gill, Lesley. 2004. *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas*. Duke University Press.

Gingrich, André, and Marcus Banks. 2006. *Neo-Nationalism in Europe and beyond: Perspectives from Social Anthropology*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Ginsburg, Faye D. 1989. *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goldstein, Daniel M. 2010. "Toward a Critical Anthropology of Security." *Current Anthropology* 51 (4): 487–517. https://doi.org/10.1086/655393.

González Ruiz, Edgar. 1998. "Conservidurismo y Sexualidad En México." In *Sexualidades En México: Algunas Aproximaciones Desde La Perspectiva de Las Ciencias Sociales*, edited by Ivonne Szasz and Susana Lerner, 1st ed. El Colegio de México. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhn0bgv.

González-Rivera, Victoria, and Karen Kampwirth, eds. 2001. *Radical Women in Latin America: Left and Right*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Gottlieb, Julie, and Clarisse Berthezene. 2018. *Rethinking Right-Wing Women Gender and the Conservative Party, 1880s to the Present*. Manchester Univ Pr.

Gould, Deborah B. 2009. *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act up's Fight against AIDS*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Goździak, Elżbieta M., and Izabella Main. 2018. "Erasing Polish Anthropology?" *Anthropology News* 59 (6). https://doi.org/10.1111/AN.1051.

Graeber, David. 2013. *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*. 1st ed. New York: Spiegel & Grau.

Grewal, Inderpal. 2006. "'Security Moms' in the Early Twentieth-Century United States: The Gender of Security in Neoliberalism." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34 (1/2): 25–39.

———. 2020. "Authoritarian Patriarchy and Its Populism." *English Studies in Africa* 63 (1): 179–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2020.1784554.

Gunder Frank, Andre. 1966. "The Development of Underdevelopment." *Monthly Review* 18 (4): 17. https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-018-04-1966-08_3.

Gurría, Angel. 2020. "Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women for Inclusive Growth in Mexico - OECD." Mexico City, January 9. https://www.oecd.org/about/secretary-general/gender-equality-and-empowerment-of-women-for-inclusive-growth-mexico-january-2020.htm.

Gusterson, Hugh. 2017. "From Brexit to Trump: Anthropology and the Rise of Nationalist Populism: From Brexit to Trump." *American Ethnologist* 44 (2): 209–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12469.

Hale, Charles R. 2002. "Does Multiculturalism Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34 (03). https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X02006521.

Haraway, Donna. 1988. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066.

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. 2003. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Paradigm 8. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Harding, Susan. 1991. “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other.” *Social Research* 58 (2): 373–93.

Harding, Susan Friend. 2001. *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*. 2nd printing, First paperb. printing. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Harmer, Tanya. 2011. *Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10502578.

Harsin, Jayson. 2018. “Post-Truth Populism: The French Anti-Gender Theory Movement and Cross-Cultural Similarities.” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 11 (1): 35–52. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcx017.

Harvey, David. 2005. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2010. *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism*. London: Profile.

Hasson, Mary Rice. 2016. “MercatorNet: Reality Check: Gender Diversity Is Driven by a Top-down Ideological Movement.” *MercatorNet* (blog). June 9, 2016. https://www.mercatornet.com/conjugality/view/transgender-triumph-time-for-a-reality-check/18203.

Hellman, Judith Adler. 1993. “Mexican Perceptions of Free Trade: Support and Opposition to NAFTA.” In *The Political Economy of North American Free Trade*, edited by Ricardo Grinspun and Maxwell A. Cameron, 193–204. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-13325-3_12.

Heredia, Carlos, and Mary Purcell. 1995. “Structural Adjustment in Mexico: The Root of the Crisis.” In *Structural Adjustment Programs at the Root of the Global Social Crisis*. The Development GAP for the Social Summit in Copenhagen. http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/40/003.html#Z1.

Herman, Didi. 1998. *The Antigay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10216920.

Hill, Seth J, and Margaret E Roberts. 2021. “Acquiescence Bias Inflates Estimates of Conspiratorial Beliefs and Political Misperceptions.” *Unpublished Paper*, October, 61.

Hobsbawm, Eric J., and Terence O. Ranger, eds. 2010. *The Invention of Tradition*. 19th pr. Canto. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: New Press.

Hofstadter, Richard. 1964. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964. https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.

Holbraad, Martin, and Morten Axel Pedersen, eds. 2013. *Times of Security: Ethnographies of Fear, Protest and the Future*. Routledge Studies in Anthropology 12. New York: Routledge.

Holdren, Alan. 2015. "Pope Francis Warns West Over 'Ideological Colonization.'" *National Catholic Register*, January 20, 2015. https://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/pope-francis-warns-west-over-ideological-colonization.

Holmes, Douglas R. 2000. *Integral Europe: Fast-Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neofascism*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Human Rights Watch. 2022. "'I Became Scared, This Was Their Goal': Efforts to Ban Gender and Sexuality Education in Brazil." Human Rights Watch. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/05/12/i-became-scared-was-their-goal/efforts-ban-gender-and-sexuality-education-brazil.

INEGI. 2019. *Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción Sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVIPE) 2019Principales Resultados*. Gobierno de la República Mexicana.

Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Geografía (INEGI). 2019. *Patrones y Tendencias de Los Homicidios En México Popular*. Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Geografía (INEGI). https://www.casede.org/index.php/biblioteca-casede-2-0/seguridad/seguridad-publica/436-patrones-y-tendencias-de-los-homicidios-en-mexico.

Kane, Gillian. 2018. "Right-Wing Europe's War on 'Gender Ideology.'" *The Public Eye*, no. Spring: 1–5.

Kaoma, Kapya. 2009. "Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S. Conservatives, African Churches, and Homophobia." Political Research Associates. Available at: http://www.politicalresearch.org/2009/12/01/globalizing-the-culture-wars-u-s-conservatives-african-churches-homophobia/#sthash.EByWjpj6.dpbs.

Kaplan, Jeffrey, and Leonard Weinberg. 1998. *The Emergence of a Euro-American Radical Right*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press.

Kauth, Jasper Theodor, and Desmond King. 2020. "Illiberalism." *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 61 (3): 365–405. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000181.

Keith, Tamara, Ayen Bior, and Christopher Intagliata. 2022. "7 Years Later, Parents of Missing Ayotzinapa Students Are Still Searching for Answers." *NPR*, February 3, 2022, sec. Media. https://www.npr.org/2022/02/03/1078030913/7-years-later-parents-of-missing-ayotzinapa-students-are-still-searching-for-ans.

Kershaw, Paul V. 2018. "Averting a Global Financial Crisis: The US, the IMF, and the Mexican Debt Crisis of 1976." *The International History Review* 40 (2): 292–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2017.1326966.

Kimmel, Michael S. 2013. *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*. New York: Nation Books.

Kinney, Edith. 2013. "Securitizing Sex, Bodies, and Borders: The Resonance of Human Security Frames in Thailand's 'War against Human Trafficking.'" In *Gender, Violence, and Human Security: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Aili Mari Tripp, Myra Marx Ferree, and Christina Ewig, 79–108. New York and London: NYU Press.

Kloppe-Santamaría, Gema. 2020. *In the Vortex of Violence: Lynching, Extralegal Justice, and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*. Violence in Latin American History 7. Oakland: University of California Press.

Koliopoulos, Constantinos. 2010. "Historical Approaches to Security/Strategic Studies." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. International Studies Association and Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.210.

Korolczuk, Elżbieta. 2014. "'The War on Gender' from a Transnational Perspective - Lessons for Feminist Strategising." Heinrich Boll Stiftung. https://pl.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2014/10/war_on_gender_korolczuk.pdf.

———. 2017. "The Vatican and the Birth of Anti-Gender Studies." *Religion and Gender* 6 (2): 293. https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10181.

Korolczuk, Elżbieta, and Agnieszka Graff. 2018. "Gender as 'Ebola from Brussels': The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43 (4): 797–821. https://doi.org/10.1086/696691.

Kováts, Eszter, and Maari Põim, eds. 2015. *Gender as Symbolic Glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe*. Bruxelles u.a.: Foundation for European Progressive Studies. http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/11382.pdf.

Krekó, Péter. 2020. "Countering Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation." In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Michael Butter, 242–56. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge.

Kuhar, Roman, and David Paternotte, eds. 2017. *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*. London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd.

Kumar, Deepa. 2017. "National Security Culture: Gender, Race and Class in the Production of Imperial Citizenship." *International Journal of Communication* 11 (0): 24.

Laclau, Ernesto. 1996. "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" In *Emancipation(s)*, 36–46. Radical Thinkers 19. London: Verso.

Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Laje, Agustín, and Nicolás Márquez. 2017. *El Libro Negro de La Nueva Izquierda: Ideología de Género y Subversión Cultural*. Centro de Estudios Libertad y Responsabilidad (LIBRE).

Lamas, Marta. 2000. “Género, Sexo y Diferenciación Sexual.” *Quiquilco* 7 (018): 1–24.

Larracoechea Bohigas, Edurne. 2018. “Nicaragua and Ortega’s ‘Second’ Revolution: ‘Restituting the Rights’ of Women and Sexual Diversity?” In *Seeking Rights from the Left; Gender, Sexuality, and the Latin American Pink Tide*, edited by Elisabeth J. Friedman, 235–68. Durham: Duke University Press.

Latapí, Agustín Escobar. 1995. “Crisis, Restructuring and Urban Poverty in Mexico.” *Environment and Urbanization* 7 (1): 20.

Lepselter, Susan. 2016. *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.7172850.

———. 2020. “The License: Poetics, Power, and the Uncanny.” In *E.T. Culture*, edited by Debbora Battaglia, 130–48. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822387015-005.

Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. First edition. New York: Crown.

Lewandowsky, Stephan, and John Cook. 2020. “The Conspiracy Theory Handbook.” *Available at Http://Sks.to/Conspiracy*, 12.

Lewis, Paul, Caelainn Barr, Seán Clarke, Antonio Voce, Pablo Gutiérrez, and Cath Levett. 2019. “Revealed: The Rise and Rise of Populist Rhetoric.” The Guardian. 2019. http://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2019/mar/06/revealed-the-rise-and-rise-of-populist-rhetoric.

Lewis, Paul, Sarah Boseley, and Pamela Duncan. 2019. “Revealed: Populists Far More Likely to Believe in Conspiracy Theories.” *The Guardian*, May 1, 2019, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/01/revealed-populists-more-likely-believe-conspiracy-theories-vaccines.

Lind, Amy. 2005. *Gendered Paradoxes: Women’s Movements, State Restructuring, and Global Development in Ecuador*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

———. 2017. “Sexual Politics and Constitutional Reform in Ecuador: From Neoliberalism to the Good Life.” In *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*, edited by Michael J Bosia and Meredith L Weiss.

Loaeza, Soledad. 1988. *Clases Medias y Política En México: La Querella Escolar, 1959-1963*. 1st ed. El Colegio de México. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv26d8pd.

———. 2005. “Mexico in the Fifties: Women and Church in Holy Alliance.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 33 (3/4): 138–60.

Lugones, María. 2010. “Toward a Decolonial Feminism.” *Hypatia* 25 (4): 742–59. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01137.x.

Maan, Ajit. 2018. *Narrative Warfare*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Magaña, María Isabel. 2016a. “Peña Nieto Amenaza: Impondrá La Ideología de Género En México Sin Importar Quién Se Oponga.” *Actuall* (blog). June 8, 2016. http://www.actuall.com/democracia/pena-nieto-asegura-impondra-ideologia-genero-sin-importar-quien-se-oponga/.

———. 2016b. “Rodrigo Cortés, a Actuall: ‘Peña Nieto no nos representa a las familias de México.’” *Actuall* (blog). September 12, 2016. https://www.actuall.com/entrevista/familia/rodrigo-cortes-actuall-pena-nieto-no-nos-representa-las-familias-mexico/.

Mahmud, Lilith. 2013. “The Profane Ethnographer: Fieldwork in a Secretive Organisation.” In *Organisational Anthropology: Doing Ethnography in and among Complex Organisations*, edited by Christina Garsten and Anette Nyqvist, 189–207. Anthropology, Culture and Society. London: New York: Pluto Press; Distributed in the United States of America exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan.

———. 2014. *The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters: Gender, Secrecy, and Fraternity in Italian Masonic Lodges*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.

———. 2019. “We Have Never Been Liberal: Occidentalist Myths and the Impending Fascist Apocalypse.” *Society for Cultural Anthropology*. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/we-have-never-been-liberal-occidentalist-myths-and-the-impending-fascist-apocalypse.

Mancini, Susanna, and Nausica Palazzo. 2021. “The Body of the Nation: Illiberalism and Gender.” In *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, edited by Stephen Holmes, András Sájo, and Renáta Uitz. S.l.: Routledge.

Marchlewska, Marta, Aleksandra Cichocka, Filip Łozowski, Paulina Górska, and Mikołaj Winiewski. 2019. “In Search of an Imaginary Enemy: Catholic Collective Narcissism and the Endorsement of Gender Conspiracy Beliefs.” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 159 (6): 766–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2019.1586637.

Masco, Joseph. 2014. *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Massad, Joseph Andoni, ed. 2008. *Desiring Arabs*. Paperback ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Mayer, Stefanie, and Birgit Sauer. 2017. “‘Gender Ideology’ in Austria – Coalitions around an Empty Signifier.” In *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, edited by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte. London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd.

McCoy, Jennifer, and Murat Somer. 2019. “Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 (1): 234–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782.

Menchaca, Martha. 2016. *The Politics of Dependency: US Reliance on Mexican Oil and Farm Labor*. First edition. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Mercille, Julien. 2011. “Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony? The Political Economy of the ‘War on Drugs’ in Mexico.” *Third World Quarterly* 32 (9): 1637–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.619881.

Merkel, Wolfgang. 2014. “Is There a Crisis of Democracy?” *Democratic Theory* 1 (2). https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2014.010202.

Mintz, Sidney W. 1986. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin Books.

Miskolci, Richard. 2018. “Exorcising a Ghost: The Interests Behind The War On ‘Gender Ideology.’” Translated by Jeffrey Hoff. *Cadernos Pagu*, no. 53 (June). https://doi.org/10.1590/18094449201800530002.

Montalvo, Tania. 2017. “Lo que dejó Duarte a Veracruz: récord en homicidios, fosas, deuda y más pobreza.” *Animal Político*, April 17, 2017. Available at: https://www.animalpolitico.com/2017/04/duarte-veracruz-violencia-deuda-fosas/.

Mudde, Cas. 2017. *Populism*. Edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy. Vol. 1. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.1.

———. 2021. “Populism in the Twenty-First Century: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism.” University of Pennsylvania: The Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy. https://amc.sas.upenn.edu/cas-mudde-populism-twenty-first-century.

Mundo Católico. 2016. *ENTREVISTA Rodrigo Iván Cortés*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTiXzQTGWcE. Accessed September 27, 2019.

Murray, David A. B., ed. 2009. *Homophobias: Lust and Loathing across Time and Space*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Neiwert, David. 2021. “An Antidemocratic Insurgency Takes Shape: Old Ideological Lines Vanish as QAnon, Militias Meld.” *Daily Kos*, February 5, 2021. https://www.dailykos.com/story/2021/2/5/2014262/-An-antidemocratic-insurgency-takes-shape-Old-ideological-lines-vanish-as-QAnon-militias-meld.

Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2019. *Cultural Backlash Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.

OECD. 2022. “Employment - Hours Worked - OECD Data.” 2022. http://data.oecd.org/emp/hours-worked.htm.

O’Leary, Dale. 1994. “Crises, Tidings & Revelations: Observations from Cairo.” *Crisis Magazine* (blog). November 1, 1994. http://www.crisismagazine.com/1994/observations-from-cairo.

———. 1997. *The Gender Agenda: Redefining Equality*. Lafayette, La: Vital Issues Press.

Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. 2011. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. Paperback edition. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1997. "So, Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" In *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. Beacon Press.

O'Toole, Garson. 2014. "A Lie Can Travel Halfway Around the World While the Truth Is Putting On Its Shoes – Quote Investigator." *Quote Investigator* (blog). July 13, 2014. https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/07/13/truth/.

Paley, Dawn. 2014. *Drug War Capitalism*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Parrado, Emilio A., and René M. Zenteno. 2001. "Economic Restructuring, Financial Crises, and Women's Work in Mexico." *Social Problems* 48 (4): 456–77. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2001.48.4.456.

Pastor, Manuel. 1989. "Latin America, the Debt Crisis, and the International Monetary Fund." *Latin American Perspectives* 16 (1): 33.

Paternotte, David. 2020. "Backlash: A Misleading Narrative." *Engenderings* (blog). March 30, 2020. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/03/30/backlash-a-misleading-narrative/.

Perreau, Bruno. 2016. *Queer Theory: The French Response*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Pew Research Center. 2017a. "Few Worldwide Have a Lot of Trust in Their Government." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog). October 12, 2017. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/10/16/many-unhappy-with-current-political-system/pg_2017-10-16_global-democracy_1-03/.

———. 2017b. "Middle East, Latin America Are Least Satisfied with Way Democracy Working." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog). October 12, 2017. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/10/16/many-unhappy-with-current-political-system/pg_2017-10-16_global-democracy_1-01/.

Pinheiro-Machado, Rosana, and Lucia Mury Scalco. 2021. "Humanizing Fascists?: Nuance as Anthropological Responsibility." *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*.

Plattner, Marc. 2019. "Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right." *Journal of Democracy* 30 (1): 5–19.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2016. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Rabe, Stephen G. 2020. *Kissinger and Latin America: Intervention, Human Rights, and Diplomacy*. Cornell University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvq2vwpw.

Reuterswärd, Camilla. 2021. “Pro-Life and Feminist Mobilization in the Struggle over Abortion in Mexico: Church Networks, Elite Alliances, and Partisan Context.” *Latin American Politics and Society* 63 (3): 21–45. https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2021.21.

Reyes, Alfonso, and José Luis Martínez. 1992. *Cartilla moral*. México: Secretaría de Educación Pública.

Río, Brenda del. 2019. *Que Viva México - Oficial on Facebook Watch*. Facebook video. Que Viva México - Oficial Facebook page. https://www.facebook.com/Que-Viva-México-Oficial-1224380374371744/videos/d41d8cd9/1914183825370819/. Accessed February 17, 2022.

Ritchie, John. 2016. “10 Reasons Against Transgender Ideology.” *TFP Student Action* (blog). July 30, 2016. https://www.tfpstudentaction.org/blog/10-reasons-why-transgenderism-is-the-familys-worst-enemy.

Robbins, Joel. 2013. “Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (3): 447–62. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12044.

Robinson, Cedric J. 2000. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press.

Rodríguez Iglesias, Ana Isabel. 2017. “(In)Security: From Thick Signifier to Empty Signifier.” *E-International Relations*, May. https://www.e-ir.info/2017/05/14/insecurity-from-thick-signifier-to-empty-signifier/.

Rodríguez Luna, Armando, Keyla Vargas, and Patricia Quintanar. 2016. *Atlas de la seguridad y la defensa de México 2016*. Edited by Raúl Benítez Manaut and Sergio Aguayo Quezada. México, D.F.: CASEDE, Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia.

Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist. 1974. “Women, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview.” In *Woman, Culture, and Society*, edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, 17–42. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Rubin, Gayle. 1975. “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.” In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna R. Reiter, 157–210. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Rubin, Gayle. 1993. “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the. Politics of Sexuality.” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, 8–44. London: Routledge.

Runyan, Anne, and Marysia Zalewski. In Review. “Whither Gender Theory?” *Global Constitutionalism*.

Sacks, Karen. 1974. “Engels Revisited: Women, the Organization of Production, and Private Property.” In *Women, Culture, and Society*, edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, 207–22. Stanford University Press.

Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.

Samra, May. 2014. "'La experiencia israelí me ayudó a formular la Ley de Seguridad Nacional en México': Jefe de Exteriores del PAN." *Enlace Judío México* (blog). April 3, 2014. https://www.enlacejudio.com/2014/04/03/entrevista-rodrigo-ivan-cortes/.

Schwell, Alexandra. 2015. "The Security-Fear Nexus: Some Theoretical and Methodological Explorations into a Missing Link." *Etnofoor* 27 (2): 95–112.

Scott, Joan Wallach. 1999. *Gender and the Politics of History*. Rev. ed. Gender and Culture. New York: Columbia University Press.

Scott, Peter Dale. 2000. "Washington and the Politics of Drugs." *Variant* 2 (11): 29.

Senkman, Leonardo, Luis Roniger, and Latin American Research Commons. 2019. *América Latina Tras Bambalinas: Teorías Conspirativas, Usos y Abusos*.

Serrano Amaya, José Fernando. 2017. "La Tormenta Perfecta: Ideología de Género y Articulación de Públicos." *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad (Rio de Janeiro)*, no. 27 (December): 149–71. https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-6487.sess.2017.27.09.a.

———. 2017. "La tormenta perfecta: Ideología de género y articulación de públicos." *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad - Revista Latinoamericana* 0 (27): 149–71.

SESNSP. 2020. "Información Sobre Violencia Contra Las Mujeres." Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SESNSP). Available at: https://drive.google.com/file/u/1/d/1wG6qya31zzz4m1YUgowZWSSH0z748HDt/view?usp=embed_facebook.

Shoshan, Nitzan. 2016. *The Management of Hate*. Princeton University Press.

Silverstein, Paul A. 2002. "An Excess of Truth: Violence, Conspiracy Theorizing and the Algerian Civil War." *Anthropological Quarterly* 75 (4): 643–74. https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2002.0068.

Singer, Elyse Ona. 2022. *Lawful Sins: Abortion Rights and Reproductive Governance in Mexico*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Smallman, Shawn. 2015. "Whom Do You Trust? Doubt and Conspiracy Theories in the 2009 Influenza Pandemic" 6 (2): 25.

Soltero, Gonzalo. 2021. *Conspiracy Narratives from South of the Border: Bad Hombres Do the Twist*. Conspiracy Theories. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge.

Somer, Murat, and Jennifer McCoy. 2019. "Transformations through Polarizations and Global Threats to Democracy." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 (1): 8–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818058.

Sosenski, Susana. 2021. *Robachicos: Historia Del Secuestro Infantil En México (1900-1960)*. Grano de Sal.

Spierings, Niels, Andrej Zaslove, Liza Mügge, and Sarah Lange. 2015. "Gender and Populist Radical-Right Politics: An Introduction." *Patterns of Prejudice* 49 (April): 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1023642.

Spocchia, Gino. 2021. "QAnon Pushes New Conspiracy Trump Will Be President Again on March 4." *The Independent*, January 26, 2021, sec. News. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/qanon-trump-march-sovereign-citizen-fbi-b1792830.html.

Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, Michael, and Josselin Tricou. 2017. "Resisting 'Gender Theory' in France: A Fulcrum for Religious Action in a Secular Society." In *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, edited by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte. London New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Stanley, Jason. 2020. *How Fascism Works: The Politics of US and Them*. Random House trade paperback edition. New York: Random House.

Stern, Mark Joseph. 2014. "The National Organization for Marriage Is Doomed to Collapse." *Slate* (blog). June 6, 2014. https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/06/the-national-organization-for-marriage-is-doomed-to-collapse.html.

Stewart, Charles. 1999. "Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture." *Diacritics* 29 (3): 40–62.

Storey-Nagy, Jessica. "Creating Truths in Orbán's Hungary." 2021. *Anthropology News* (blog). December 20, 2021. https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/creating-truths-in-orbans-hungary/.

Strawn, Kelley D. 2009. "Contemporary Research on Social Movements and Protest in Latin America: Promoting Democracy, Resisting Neoliberalism, and Many Themes in Between." *Sociology Compass* 3 (4): 644–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00217.x.

Swami, Viren. 2012. "Social Psychological Origins of Conspiracy Theories: The Case of the Jewish Conspiracy Theory in Malaysia." *Frontiers in Psychology* 3. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00280.

TallBear, Kim. 2014. "Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry." *Journal of Research Practice* 10 (2): 17.

Taylor, Astra. 2019. *Democracy May Not Exist, but We'll Miss It When It's Gone*. First Edition. New York, New York: Metropolitan Books.

Terry, Jennifer. 1999. "Fear of a World Conspiracy." In *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society*, 329–52. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The World Bank. 2022. "Urban Population (% of Total Population) - Mexico | Data." 2022. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=MX.

Thoreson, Ryan Richard. 2014. *Transnational LGBT Activism: Working for Sexual Rights Worldwide*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.

Transparency International. 2018. “Corruption Perception Index 2018 Executive Summary.” Transparency International. https://www.transparency.org/files/content/pages/CPI_2018_Executive_Summary_EN.pdf.

———. 2019. “Results - Latin America and The Caribbean - 10th Edition - 2019 - GCB.” https://www.transparency.org/en/gcb/latin-america/latin-america-and-the-caribbean-x-edition-2019/results.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1991. “Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness.” In *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, edited by Richard Fox, 17–44. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Tuininga, Matthew. 2016. “The Problem with Gender Studies.” *Public Discourse* (blog). July 19, 2016. https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2016/07/17119/.

United Nations - World Population Prospects. 2022. “Mexico Infant Mortality Rate 1950-2022.” United Nations. Retrieved via MacroTrends: https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/MEX/mexico/infant-mortality-rate.

United Nations Informal Contact Group on Gender. 1995. “Report of the Informal Contact Group on Gender. UN Document No. A/CONF.177/L.2.” New York: United Nations.

Vaggione, Juan Marco. 2017. “Francis and ‘Gender Ideology’: Heritage, Displacement and Continuities.” *Religion and Gender* 6 (2): 302. https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10184.

Vera Balanzario, América Quetzalli. 2018. “El Frente Nacional por la Familia y las negociaciones públicas de la familia y las identidades de género.” Masters Thesis, Mexico City: El Colegio de México.

Victor Madrigal-Borloz. 2018. “Protection against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.” http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/73/152.

Walker, Louise E. 2013. “Spying at the Drycleaners: Anonymous Gossip in 1973 Mexico City.” *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 19 (1): 52–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/13260219.2013.805720.

Wallerstein, Immanuel Maurice. 2011. *The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy: 1730 - 1840s*. With a new prologue. The Modern World-System, Immanuel Wallerstein; 3. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press.

Weed, Elizabeth. 2011. “From the ‘Useful’ to the ‘Impossible.’” In *The Question of Gender: Joan W. Scott’s Critical Feminism*, edited by Elizabeth Weed and Judith Butler, 287–311. 21st Century Studies, v. 4. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Weiss, Meredith L, and Michael J Bosia. 2017. *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*.

West, Harry G., and Todd Sanders, eds. 2003. *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Wilkinson, Annie. 2013. *"Sin Sanidad, No Hay Santidad": Las Prácticas Reparativas En Ecuador*. 1a. edición. Tesis. Quito, Ecuador: FLACSO Ecuador. https://www.flacso.edu.ec/portal/publicaciones/detalle/sin-sanidad-no-hay-santidad-las-practicas-reparativas-en-ecuador.4066.

———. 2019. "Ecuador's Citizen Revolution 2007-2017: A Lost Decade for Women's Rights and Gender Equality." In *Seeking Rights from the Left: Gender, Sexuality, and the Latin American Pink Tide*, edited by Elisabeth J. Friedman, 269–303. Durham: Duke University Press.

———. 2020. "'Gender Ideology' as Modular Discourse: A Transatlantic Survey of Activism against Gender." In *The Handbook of Global Sexualities*, edited by Ryan Thoreson, Zowie Davy, Ana Cristina Santos, Chiara Bertone, and Saskia Wieringa. The Handbook of Global Sexualities.

William J. Perry Center. 2015. "Alumni Spotlight: Agustín Laje Arrigoni and Nicolás Marquez." June 5, 2015. https://www.williamjperrycenter.org/daily-spotlights/alumni-spotlight-agust%C3%ADn-laje-arrigoni-and-nicol%C3%A1s-marquez.

Wodak, Ruth. 2015. *The Politics of Fear: Analyzing Right-Wing Popular Discourse*.

Wood, Michael J., Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton. 2012. "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3 (6): 767–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611434786.

World Bank Group. 2022. "World Development Indicators: Gini Index." World Bank. http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI.

Wullweber, Joscha. 2015. "Global Politics and Empty Signifiers: The Political Construction of High Technology." *Critical Policy Studies* 9 (1): 78–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2014.918899.

Yanagisako, Sylvia, and C Delaney. 1995. "Naturalizing Power." In *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis*, edited by Sylvia Yanagisako and C Delaney, 19:1–22. New York: Routledge.