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The Genesis and Consolidation of Brazil's Anti-Abortion Movement: Counterposing the "Countermovement" with the Trans/national Religious Field

Gênese e consolidação do movimento antiaborto brasileiro: Contrapondo o "contramovimento" com o campo religioso trans/nacional

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Abstract

The article traces a genealogy of Brazil's so-called "pro-life" movement, from the 1960s through the start of the New Republic. It counterposes the concept of the "religious field" to the movement/countermovement framework through which pro-life movements are often analyzed, generally interpreted as a backlash to feminism. Bourdieu's concept helps reveal the plural oppositional dynamics that have shaped their history. Situating the Brazilian movement within a trans/national religious field, the article highlights how two key shifts in the 1980s -- the new papacy of John Paul II and Ronald Reagan's empowerment of the Religious Right in the United States -- aligned it with an increasingly global(ist) Religious Right. It is based on a larger archival research project on reproductive politics and governance in Brazil.

Keywords: Abortion. Reproductive politics. Social Movements. Religious field. Globalization.

Resumo

O artigo rastreia uma genealogia do chamado movimento "pró-vida" brasileiro desde os anos 1960 até o início da Nova República. Contrapõe o conceito de "campo religioso" ao paradigma de movimento/contramovimento, comumente usados para analisar os movimentos pró-vida, geralmente interpretando-os como uma reação ao feminismo. O conceito de Pierre Bourdieu ajuda a revelar a pluralidade de antagonismos que têm marcado a história desses movimentos. Situando o movimento brasileiro dentro de um campo religioso trans/nacional, o artigo ressalta como duas mudanças importantes durante os anos 1980 -- o novo papado de João Paulo II e a catalisação da direita religiosa estadunidense por Ronald Reagan -- o alinharam com uma direita religiosa cada vez mais global(ista). Baseia-se numa pesquisa arquivística sobre a política e a governança reprodutiva no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Aborto. Política reprodutiva. Movimentos sociais. Campo religioso. Globalização.

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Introduction

With his ascent to the presidency in 2019, Jair Bolsonaro became a cheerleader and fellow traveler of various far-right, masculinist, autocratic leaders in power in Hungary, Poland, the United States and elsewhere, eagerly joining in efforts to craft a paradoxically global "anti-globalist" alliance revolving in good measure around the axes of gender, sexuality and reproduction. Through initiatives like the so-called Geneva Consensus, a pact signed by 34 countries in 2020 pledging to roll back sexual and reproductive rights in international law, the alliance has advanced a reactionary vision of sexuality, family, and reproduction, positioning itself against a so-called "gender imperialism" purportedly advanced by feminists and LGBTQI+ activists.

Unsurprisingly, the ascent of these far-right populist governments and movements has garnered considerable attention from gender and sexuality scholars. A growing literature on transnational rightwing networks, extending to recent "anti-gender movements," has highlighted their ecumenical character, bridging religious conservatisms of various faiths as well as secular actors; their strategic deployment of secular discourses, including appeals to science and human rights; and the important role of transnational networks circulating resources, discourses and strategies (Corrêa; Kalil, 2020; Vaggione, 2014). Although some have traced longer genealogies (Junqueira, 2018; Cowan, 2021), many scholars characterize these mobilizations as conservative countermovements stemming from Vatican-led efforts to counter feminist gains mainstreaming the notion of "reproductive rights" at the Third UN Conference on Population and Development at Cairo (1994) and the Third UN Conference on Women at Beijing (1995) (Buss; Herman, 2003; Miskolci, 2018). This article offers a transnational genealogy of a key strand of activism that has contributed to the current juncture in Brazil, tracing the emergence and consolidation of the country's so-called "pro-life" movement, from faith-based mobilization surrounding the first family planning initiatives in the 1960s, through the constituent assembly that produced the 1988 Constitution. In tracing this history, I seek to contribute to the literature on anti-abortion activisms and transnational rightwing networks in two ways.

First, I move away from the movement/countermovement lens through which pro-life movements are often analyzed, generally as conservative reactions to prior feminist advances in reproductive rights (Rocha, 2020; Meyer; Staggenborg, 1996). Without denying this literature's important insights, it can obscure the deep historical continuities of these mobilizations and the shifting oppositional dynamics shaping their histories while presuming a binary opposition between religion and feminism. In the context of Brazil's military regime (1964-85) and protracted democratic transition, the Brazilian Catholic Church, one of the world's most progressive at the time, became a central actor in the country's democratic opposition, alongside feminists, creating unusual dynamics in reproductive politics. To understand this more complex history, I draw instead on Pierre Bourdieu's (1991, 2000) notion of the religious field, a "sociotopographic metaphor" intended to evoke both a "field of force" that naturalizes certain subjectivities, strategies and habits of thought, and a "battlefield" where actors compete for a monopoly over the production and distribution of religious objects, symbols and other forms of "religious capital" (Schultheis, 2007, p. 33). This approach complements the countermovement literature by allowing attention to the plural and historically shifting oppositions driving faith-based mobilization around "reproductive governance" (Morgan; Roberts, 2012). Indeed, an organized movement in "defense of life" began to be articulated in Brazil *prior to* the feminist movement's resurgence in the mid-1970s or public advocacy of abortion the following decade, initially to counter a movement advancing population control and family planning, which Brazilian feminists also opposed. Moreover, shifting oppositions within the religious field itself (among competing Catholicisms and between Catholic and Protestant denominations) also shaped the movement's history. My discussion focuses primarily on the Catholic Church, given its central historical importance in Brazil, particularly for its anti-abortion movement; though I refer to Protestant actors at key moments when they became more salient.

Some might object that the concept of the "religious field" should not be applied to a movement that includes both religious and secular actors and has embraced increasingly secular discourses in recent years. On this point, Bradford Verter (2003) suggests that Bourdieu under-theorizes relations among different

fields (religious, medical, etc.), presenting them like an "archipelago" of "independent islands scattered in a common sea," when they should instead be imagined as a "multidimensional Venn diagram" connected by "snaking elements," of which religion is "one of the snakiest," given its overlap with politics, medicine and other fields (p. 163-164). Building on this insight, my discussion highlights the strategic alliances and multi-organizational formations that have constellated around a "pro-life" agenda in Brazil, both through ecumenical alliances within the religious field and across multiple fields, through alliances of clerics, doctors, NGOs, lawmakers, etc. Such multi-organizational formations have allowed activists to contest reproductive governance by deploying specialized discourses across multiple fields, contributing to the "strategic secularization" of conservative, faith-based activism (Vaggione, 2014). To be clear, in highlighting such alliances, I do not mean to suggest a unity of thought, grand conspiracy, or mirror image of the "gender-ideology" straw man denounced by contemporary anti-gender movements. Rather, I trace these formations' gradual emergence from a religious field marked by contestation and difference.

Second, I situate the consolidation of Brazil's anti-abortion movement in the context of a heterogeneous transnational religious field in which faith-based actors were advancing competing projects of reproductive governance (albeit generally united by heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions restricting legitimate sex to the confines of marriage). Scholars of transnational feminism have noted the mutually constitutive dimension of mobilizations occurring at multiple scales, while attentive to power asymmetries. I employ Laury Oaks' (1999) term "trans/national" to capture this simultaneity, situating the emergence and consolidation of Brazil's "pro-life" movement at the intersection of competing trans/national currents of faith-based activism around reproductive governance.

In the next section, I begin by mapping debates on reproductive governance within Brazil's religious field before the promulgation of the encyclical on birth control *Humanae Vitae* (1968) and the emergence in the 1970s of a self-styled movement "in defense of life." I then argue that two key changes

in the transnational field during the 1980s — the new papacy of John Paul II and Ronald Reagan's empowerment of the Christian Right in the United States — contributed to conservatizing and ecumenizing tendencies in Brazil's pro-life movement that aligned it more closely with an emerging global(ist) Religious Right. To be clear, my intention is not to characterize the Brazilian movement as merely a foreign import. Brazilian conservatives have long been important in constructing transnational rightwing networks (Cowan, 2021), and it is important to be attuned to questions of translation as transnational discourses and strategies are deployed in local contexts. Nonetheless, given the contemporary Brazilian Right's common charges that feminists and sexual rights activists represent the vanguard of a "gender imperialism" advanced from the global North, it is worth underscoring the thoroughly globalized position from which they are leveled. The article draws on archival research, stemming from a larger research project on reproductive politics and governance in Brazil.

1 Mapping the religious field before and after *Humanae Vitae*

Any discussion of transnational religious influences on reproductive governance in Brazil must begin by noting that colonization was a joint enterprise between the Portuguese crown and the Catholic Church. Church and State authorities — together, though not without tensions — sought to discipline the sexual and reproductive lives of colonists, indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans and their descendants, "with a view toward territorial occupation" and governance (Corrêa; Arilha; Faleiros da Cunha, 2016, p. 222). Scholarship on Brazil's religious field has highlighted how, against this backdrop, multiple faith systems drawing on European, African and indigenous traditions coexisted under the nominal umbrella of a malleable and "inclusive" though hierarchical Catholicism, reflected in diverse syncretic practices of popular Catholicisms throughout the country and in many Brazilians' concurrent participation in multiple faith communities (Huff Júnior, 2008; Camurça, 2009). This nominal Catholic monopoly over Brazil's syncretic religious field began to erode in the 1960s, driven primarily by the proliferation of Pentecostal Protestant churches (Mariz; Machado, 1998). As Protestants have grown from around 4% of the population in 1960 to around 30% today, Brazilian Catholics have declined from

93% to about 50% (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020; Nunes, 2020). Already in 1962, the country's Catholic bishops identified Protestantism — alongside Marxism, spiritism, and naturalism — as one of four "mortal dangers" confronting the Church in their first programmatic plan for its national development (Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil, [1963] /2004). It is in this context that reproductive governance became a source not just of political controversy but of religious contention, driven by the global diffusion of reproductive technologies like the birth control pill and by growing international pressure on so-called "underdeveloped countries" to limit population growth.

In this section, I map debates on reproductive governance onto the shifting contours of Brazil's religious field during the 1960s and 1970s, a period that saw both a military dictatorship (1964-85) and a gradual shift in official government policy and elite discourses surrounding reproductive governance. The period was deeply marked by Cold War geopolitics, as U.S. Government support for the 1964 coup and ensuing regime coincided with its more aggressive global promotion of population control. After briefly discussing the significant role played by Protestant churches in early family planning initiatives, I focus on divisions within the Catholic Church before the papal encyclical on birth control *Humanae Vitae* (1968), a unique period when the Vatican's constraints on debate loosened. I then turn to the early development of a movement "in defense of life" in the 1970s.

Until this period, most Brazilian political elites across the left-right spectrum had embraced a pro-natalist view, reflecting the assumption that the country had too few people to populate its territory, not too many (Fonseca Sobrinho, 1993; Corrêa; Arrilha; Faleiros da Cunha, 2016). This vision was reflected in various laws and ethical norms that banned advertising contraceptives; proscribed doctors' recommending them to patients; criminalized abortion except in cases resulting from rape or posing a threat to the woman's life; and outlawed bodily injuries, widely interpreted to apply to sterilization. While enforcement of these measures was lax, they represented the public face of a double discourse that powerfully shaped the political landscape. On the eve of the 1974 World Population Conference at Bucharest, however, the

military regime announced a new Brazilian Demographic Policy that recognized couples' right to decide on the number and spacing of children and the government's obligation to ensure access to information and resources across class lines. In 1977, it launched the Program for the Prevention of High-Risk Pregnancies, though strong opposition from the Catholic Church, a resurgent feminist movement, and other political actors undermined its effective implementation (Costa, 1999).

Various factors contributed to this gradual shift, not least the mounting international pressure to curb population growth. By the early 1960s, a few well-placed Brazilian elites began echoing neo-Malthusian arguments circulating globally, and the first private organizations began offering family planning services and pressing the government to support the cause (Fonseca Sobrinho, 1993). The earliest initiatives were funded by the Pathfinder Foundation and subsequently by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and other international donors. Notable among these organizations was the Brazilian Civil Society for Family Welfare (BEMFAM), which was founded by a group of prominent doctors and social scientists in 1965, becoming the national affiliate of IPPF two years later. Although BEMFAM and other birth control organizations commonly distinguished between international efforts at population control, aimed at changes in countries' aggregate growth rates, and their own efforts to promote "family planning," pitched as empowering married couples, opponents often cast BEMFAM as an agent of foreign interests aligned with an imperial project of population control and authoritarian status quo, pointing to its foreign donors and close advocacy with the military government. It was primarily against these actors that a few ecclesiastic leaders and lay Catholic doctors began mobilizing opposition to population control.

As elsewhere in Latin America (Necochea López, 2014), Brazil's Protestant leaders became key interlocutors for international organizations promoting contraception and played an outsized role in the country's earliest family planning initiatives. Though differences existed within each group, divisions around reproductive governance between Catholics and Protestants gained salience within the Brazilian religious field because transnational actors

mobilized them. In the early post-war years, both IPPF and the Pathfinder Fund tended to regard Latin America as a bastion of Catholicism and machismo where very little could be done. In 1958, however, Pathfinder sent its fieldworker Edith Gates on a first "exploratory tour" of South America, with stops in Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil. To prepare for her journey, Gates sought contacts and guidance from representatives of several Protestant organizations engaged in transnational work, including the Presbyterian and Methodist Boards of Missions; the World Council of Churches; the U.S. National Council of Churches; the Christian Medical Council for Overseas Work and the Young Women's Christian Association. Reporting on these preparations, she noted that the missionaries had proven "most cooperative," predicting that Protestant doctors in the region would be particularly receptive though perhaps fearful of publicity. "It will not be wise to be directed *only* by Protestant church folk," she wrote (Center for the History of Medicine, 1958).

Writing from São Paulo in a diary report of her tour, Gates observed that, because it had the largest Protestant population in the region, the "leaders in New York" had considered "that Brasil (sic.) might be the most enlightened, and therefore hopeful [country] and that there was a strong and growing Protestant group that would probably respond" (Center for the History of Medicine, 1959). During her stay, she met (among others) with Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist and Anglican leaders and with directors of the interdenominational Brazilian Evangelical Confederation (CEB), Brazil's oldest Protestant political organization.[1] Several would become key interlocutors in Pathfinder's early efforts, providing contacts, organizing meetings and expressing considerable (though largely behind-the-scenes) enthusiasm for birth control. Following the tour, Pathfinder began funding its first initiative in Brazil, which operated out of a health clinic owned by the Anglican Church at the foot of the Praia do Pinto Favela in Rio de Janeiro. Under its (Catholic) director Jeanne Sambin, the Praia do Pinto Clinic began providing contraceptive suppositories to women in the *favela* as early as 1962, eventually involving door-to-door visits by a nurse-midwife in this and other favelas (Center for the History of Medicine, 1962, 1964).

[1] Gates also met with then Auxiliary Bishop of Rio Helder Câmara, who, according to Gates, even rejected the "safe period" approved by Pius XII. This stance may have responded to Gates' association with an imperialist project of population control. In any case, it would later shift, as I elaborate below.

In São Paulo, local birth control advocates began holding regular meetings at a Methodist Church in 1963, eventually opening the country's first family planning clinic, the Family Orientation Service (Costa, 2017).

Competing projects of reproductive governance mapped onto tensions between Catholics and Protestants within Brazil's religious field; their political salience magnified by religious and gendered nationalisms inscribing certain reproductive practices outside constructions of Brazil as a Catholic nation. These projects were sometimes territorialized through the role that churches were assuming in social welfare and development projects at the time. After the Praia do Pinto Clinic began expanding its efforts to promote birth control, for instance, the Anglican Bishop cautioned its staff to proceed discretely to avoid antagonizing Catholics working in the same favela with the Saint Sebastian Crusade, a major social welfare program coordinated by the Rio Archdiocese and municipal government (Center for the History of Medicine, 1965). In 1967, such a confrontation precipitated a major national scandal and congressional hearings, when a priest in Maranhão held a press conference to denounce a "monstrous crime against Brazil" and "attack on Christian morals" taking place "precisely in the largest demographic vacuum on earth." The Italian-born priest, who had lived in Brazil for about a decade, accused U.S. Presbyterian pastors of conducting a "veritable mass feminine castration" in the region with the support of doctors from the state of São Paulo, by placing Lippes Loop IUDs in women residing along the Belem-to-Brasilia Highway (Usam [...], 1967, p. 2). The controversy prompted a congressional inquiry commission to look into "alien interference in the country's demographic dynamics," backed by lawmakers from both parties, though it never produced a final report (Brazil, 1970; Fonseca Sobrinho, 1993). As it unfolded, leaders of the Brazilian Presbyterian Church issued a statement confirming that its mission outposts were providing birth control in the area to women who requested it, but without U.S. government involvement; that it coordinated these activities with BEMFAM, "a Brazilian organization" affiliated with IPPF; and that while licensed Brazilian doctors and nurses had applied IUDs in a few medically prescribed cases, they had not sterilized anyone (Pessoa, 1967, Section 4, p. 81).

Even as Protestant leaders were becoming privileged interlocutors for international organizations advancing population control, contraception was becoming a key point of distinction among Catholics advancing contested visions of reproductive governance. In Brazil as elsewhere, such divisions gained unusual visibility in the years between the Vatican's appointment of a Pontifical Commission on Birth Control in 1963 and Paul VI's promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. The Commission was created to advise the pope on the implications of new reproductive technologies for Catholic doctrine. Among others, John Rock, one of the developers of the birth control pill and a devout Catholic, argued that the method's reliance on synthetic hormones to temporarily postpone ovulation changed the timing of natural bodily functions and should therefore not be understood as artificially sterilizing but as merely a "deferment of the reproductive system" (McClory, 1995, p. 26). With *Humanae Vitae*, the pope rejected the recommendations of the overwhelming majority of the Commission, which potentially legitimized the use of hormonal methods, if only within the strictures of heterosexual marriage. Instead, the encyclical reaffirmed the Church's existing stance authorizing only "natural" methods within the framework of "responsible parenthood," rejecting other methods as sins against nature. It justified the stance by appealing to "natural law," a metaphysical framework grounded in the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas that posits a divine order governed by eternal, universal natural laws that are discoverable through reason. Through a kind of biologism that reads into the body a teleological mandate to conform to natural law, the framework has long undergirded Catholic doctrinal claims on sexual and conjugal morality as well as more recent denunciations of "gender ideology," for purportedly violating a telos immanent in the sexed body, and interpretations of fetal DNA as a telos of human life that must be protected (Junqueira, 2018; Vaggione, 2014). *Humanae Vitae* sent major shock waves throughout the Catholic Church that still reverberate, prompting repudiations and ambivalent qualifications by theologians, ecclesiastic leaders and episcopal conferences around the world.

Prior to its promulgation, however, the uncertainty surrounding the Commission's conclusions opened unusual space within the trans/national religious field for divisions to be aired more publicly. The three Catholic

clergymen called to testify at the 1967 congressional inquiry noted above, for instance, while assuming different stances on the scandal itself, all qualified their testimony by referring to the inconclusive nature of Catholic teaching on birth control, pending the Pope's final word on the Commission's work (Brazil, 1970). Among the theologians most actively promoting these discussions in Brazil was the left-leaning French-Canadian-born priest Paul-Eugène Charbonneau, who had moved to Brazil in 1959, where he taught theology at various universities. His 1965 book *Limitation of Births* took aim at a "certain theology" and pastoral practice that were prone to abstraction, inviting "moralists" to an exercise in "realism" that would bring "abstract principles and concrete problems" into "productive and healthy confrontation" (Charbonneau, [1965] /1968a, p. 93-95). Charbonneau's ([1966] /1968b) questioning of abstractions included what he called the "myth of natural law." Without dismissing its relevance at a very abstract level of "primary principles," he denounced a tendency to over-extend it to "secondary principles," essentially as a way to demand legal restrictions while shutting down debate (p. 225-226). Its routine invocation on questions of conjugal and sexual morality, he argued, explained the "radical intolerance" of Catholic teaching on these matters (p. 200).

Catholic divisions around contraception erupted more visibly at the II Brazilian Catholic Congress of Medicine, convened at the University of São Paulo School of Medicine in 1967. Several panels at the event focused on birth control, beginning with a plenary address by John Rock, and the topic became a major flashpoint. As described in an account circulated by traditionalists after the event, conservative Catholic doctors and clergymen organized a group at the congress to denounce the extensive attention paid to birth control and the supposed "excommunication" of its opponents (Médicos [...], 1967). Several were associated with the Brazilian Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property (TFP), the far-right sect founded in Brazil in 1960 to stifle the winds of reform that would later take root at Vatican II. The group attempted to circulate an article by the Catholic endocrinologist Antonio Rodrigues Ferreira (1966), president of the TFP's Minas Gerais section and future director of its medical commission. In it, reflecting the overlap of the religious and medical fields, Ferreira affirmed his medical duty to communicate Catholic morality to his

patients and countered Charbonneau's arguments point-by-point with papal declarations and doctrinal statements. This coordination between Catholic priests and lay Catholic doctors opposing birth control would become an early characteristic of anti-abortion activism as well; and indeed, some of those involved would later gain prominence in the country's "pro-life" movement. This included Father Ney Affonso de Sá Earp, who would later become a Cardinal and prominent anti-abortion activist. The gynecologists João Evangelista dos Santos and Dernival da Silva Brandão, whose book *Aborto: O direito à vida* (1982) would become a major reference for pro-lifers and who would testify for the movement at the Constituent Assembly, were also there.

In Brazil as elsewhere in Latin America (Felitti, 2012), the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* pushed much open questioning of orthodoxy within the Church back underground, while temporarily uniting much of the political establishment. President Arthur de Costa e Silva welcomed the pope's condemnation of "anti-Christian birth control methods," as "governor of a country seeking to occupy over half its territory," and over two-thirds of federal deputies, including leaders of both parties, signed a letter welcoming the edict, as "interpreters of the thoughts and sentiments" of a majority-Christian nation (O Brasil [...], 1968). With few exceptions, ecclesiastic leaders across the political spectrum fell into line, albeit framing support for the encyclical differently. The ultra-conservative Archbishop of Diamantina and TFP member Dom Geraldo Sigaud (1968) denounced "the enormous campaign mobilized by liberal Catholics, with backing from the Protestant and Masonic press" to divide the Church into two camps and called on "disoriented" priests and nuns to repent and admit their errors. The most prominent leader of the Catholic left, Dom Helder Câmara, then Archbishop of Recife, initially gave a measured response, stating that while it would not be easy to comply with the encyclical in "underdeveloped" regions like the Northeast, he would do his best to follow its guidance. After returning from the Latin American bishop's conference in Medellín, however — where the pope exhorted Latin American clerics to embrace his edict — Câmara framed stronger support in terms of resistance to U.S. imperialism, arguing that, had the pope reached a different verdict, "America, Africa and Asia would be [drowning] in pills" (National Archives, 1968). The CNBB Central Commission (1968)

combined both arguments in a statement, on the one hand positioning the pope as a "defender of the Third World"; on the other, (re)asserting the authority of the Magisterium and decrying the hedonism engulfing "so-called Christian Western civilization." As occurred elsewhere, growing numbers of lay Catholics simply disregarded the encyclical, as annual sales of the pill rose from 6 to 38 million cycles between 1966 and 1972 (Richers; Buarque de Almeida, 1975). In an excellent doctoral dissertation on the transnational pro-life movement, Kathryn Slattery (2010) argues that the encyclical not only "established the ideological basis for Catholic opposition to population control" but also planted the seeds for the global diffusion of the "pro-life" cause (p. 33).

During the 1960s, abortion (re)entered political debate in a subsidiary way, as one of two ghosts (alongside the specter of "mass sterilization") that haunted debates centering primarily on population control and contraception. In the absence of a feminist critique in public debate, this in part reflected a broad political consensus opposing the practice that even extended to family planning organizations, which often framed birth control as a way to prevent clandestine abortions (Fonseca Sobrinho, 1993). By the early 1970s, however, moves to decriminalize abortion in other countries and the Brazilian military government's unsuccessful effort to institute a new criminal code (a draft of which was debated throughout the decade but never implemented) placed the issue more squarely on ecclesiastic authorities' political radar. Documenting the increased parliamentary attention to the matter, Maria Isabel Baltar da Rocha (1994) identifies 13 bills on abortion introduced to the Chamber of Deputies between 1971-83, compared to 3 in the prior 25 years, including five supporting liberalizations.

In this context, Catholic leaders, together with lay Catholic doctors, began coordinating initial efforts to organize a movement "in defense of life," drawing on an existing infrastructure of Catholic lay organizations. More than debates over birth control, this opposition crossed the left-right spectrum. Among doctors, for instance, clerical opponents of abortion found allies not just in the ultramontane TFP Medical Commission but in the (secular) Rio-based Medical Association of the State of Guanabara (AMEG), which the Brazilian Medical

Association would purge to comply with the military's call for "total de-communization" and which had filed numerous complaints against BEMFAM, among other charges, for genocide (Arquivo Nacional, 1969; Conselho [...], 1967).

From the outset, early activists understood their efforts as part of a global struggle over reproductive governance, portraying abortion as a pathology of the First World or harbinger of modernist decadence. In 1971, the conservative Cardinal Vicente Scherer wrote to the AMEG president from the bishop's synod in Rome, hailing his Association's opposition to groups promoting "indiscriminate birth control" in Brazil but warning of an "even worse" campaign to liberalize abortion underway in wealthy countries that would soon to "find echo and promoters among us" (Centro de Documentação e Informação da CNBB, 1972a). The following year, Evangelista dos Santos and Brandão sent a dossier to the CNBB president denouncing efforts by some Brazilian obstetricians and gynecologists to import a "mentality" tolerating abortion already present in some European countries and U.S. States and criticizing BEMFAM for disseminating a "contraceptive mentality" that had primed Brazilian public opinion to accept it (Centro de Documentação e Informação da CNBB, 1972b). The two were also among 129 doctors from the state of Rio who sent a petition to the Justice Ministry expressing concerns that changes in foreign legislation might promote "this profoundly anti-Christian practice" and calling for elimination of existing exceptions to criminalization in cases involving rape or a risk to the woman's life (Um Brado [...], 1972). The TFP Medical Commission sent a similar statement calling for a total ban, which also blamed progressive sectors of the Church for fostering the mentality that had paved the way for legal abortion (Médicos [...], 1972). In 1973, the CNBB, citing both global developments and national parliamentary debates, published a collection of statements denouncing abortion by episcopal conferences from other countries, distributing it to lawmakers, clergy and Catholic radio stations throughout the country (A Igreja [...], 1972). This mobilization succeeded in passage of a legislative proposal eliminating the exception in cases of rape in the new criminal code; like the code itself, however, it never took effect (Nogueira, 1975).

Against this backdrop, ecclesiastic authorities also began promoting the

creation of the first pro-life organizations among the laity. The first and today the oldest group, the Gianna Beretta Molla Movement, was founded in Rancho Queimado, Santa Catarina in 1973 by Catholic lay activists, with support from the local archdiocese (Werlich 2012; Villaméa; Tarantino, 2019). More significant to the movement's development, however, was the establishment of the Movement in Defense of Life of the Archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1970s, largely composed of Catholic doctors and clergy and coordinated by Ney Affonso de Sá Earp[2]. A friend of his recalled the group's close ties with transnational pro-life networks already evident at its first meeting, where "Each person … received a set of slides that Father Ney brought from travels in the United States, after which the group began to give talks at schools, churches, wherever he was called" (Lodi da Cruz, 2010, p. 141).

In 1980, Deputy João Menezes (MDB/Pará) announced his intention to introduce a bill expanding exceptions to criminalization to cases presenting serious fetal anomalies or risks to a woman's health (Horrorizado [...], 1980)[3]. Among the reactions, Brazil's largest Protestant denomination the Assemblies of God approved a resolution at its XXV General Assembly in 1981 calling on its churches to mobilize against abortion, characterized by an editorial in its newspaper "*Mensageiro da Paz"* as its first official stance on the topic. Reflecting an incipient "conservative ecumenism" within the religious field (Jones; Azparren; Cunial, 2013), the editorial noted that the Catholic Church had responded to a bill to liberalize the practice introduced by Menezes in 1975 but that now, given the "sharp crisis" between Catholic clergy and the Government, "it was time for evangelical churches to take a stand" (Oliveira, 1981, p. 2). For its part, the CNBB responded by establishing an Emergency Commission in Defense of Life, which produced a plan contemplating an expansive "pro-life" infrastructure articulating Church and lay; Catholic and non-Catholic organizations, within Brazil and abroad. The plan called for nationalizing the experience of the Rio Archdiocese's "pioneer nucleus" by creating similar nuclei in diocese throughout the country; for a specialized lobbying arm to pressure lawmakers; for dissemination of "pro-life" messages through a national

[2] The group's website includes two founding dates, 1976 and 1978. Accessible at: https://www.defesadavida.com/home.php.
[3] Ultimately, it seems like such a bill was never introduced.

periodical and regular Church services; for ecumenical "pro-life" coalitions with other churches; and for a national secretariat to coordinate efforts by groups inside and outside Brazil. To advance the effort, the Commission mobilized an earlier generation of Catholic lay organizations, convening the Teams of Our Lady (for Catholic couples) and Christian Family Movement groups — branches of trans/national lay networks founded in Brazil in the 1950s — as well as the diocesan "family institutes" it had promoted in the 1970s to (unsuccessfully) counter efforts to legalize divorce (Centro de Documentação e Informação da CNBB, 1980). By the Commission's First Interdiocesan Meeting in São Paulo in 1981, the national bulletin had been created. There, the director of the CNBB family sector reported that nearly 80 dioceses had already awakened to "the problem of abortion," fifteen of which had a local commission or similar entity (Em Defesa [...], 1981).

By 1980, then, the Catholic Church and its lay allies had established the institutional and discursive foundations of a national "pro-life" movement. Notably, that year also saw Brazilian feminists' first public rally for abortion rights, responding to a police raid of a clandestine abortion clinic in Jacarepaguá (Barsted, 1992). Feminist scholars have analyzed the complex relationship between the country's resurgent feminist movement and the progressive Catholic Church in the context of *Abertura* (Amaral, 2014). As Leila Barsted (1992) argues, not only were feminists initially constrained in their public advocacy for abortion rights by their participation in a broad pro-democracy movement in which the progressive Church played a central role; feminists and progressive clergy also occasionally joined forces in denouncing population control, steeply rising rates of sterilization and caesarean births, and the activities of family planning organizations like BEMFAM. Christian Base Communities, moreover, catalyzed the formation of cadres and leaders of many social movements, including the feminist movement and various so-called "feminine" movements of working-class women demanding healthcare, daycare, and other basic services (Rohden, 1997). Finally, within the religious field itself, liberation theology created institutional and discursive space for the development of feminist theologies since the 1970s, generally by women theologians both inspired by its precepts and critical of its limitations (Rohden, 1997; Gebara, 1995, 2006).

2 Consolidating a Trans/national Religious Right

The 1980s marked a new chapter for the antiabortion movement that reflected a confluence of national factors and shifts in the transnational networks with which they were articulated. Nationally, against the backdrop of the widespread societal mobilization unleashed by *Abertura* and the constituent assembly, feminists began pressing more forcefully for the decriminalization of abortion as part of a broader agenda of comprehensive women's healthcare (Barsted, 1992; Baltar da Rocha, 1994). While stymied on abortion, they achieved a surprising victory with the regime's announcement of the Comprehensive Women's Health Program (PAISM) in 1983 (Costa, 1999). Feminist mobilization around PAISM and various legislative proposals to liberalize abortion gradually shifted the focus of pro-life activism in ways that the movement-countermovement literature has captured. This dynamic, however, is less an origin story than as a new chapter, growing out of the historical processes discussed above. Moreover, to understand the complex oppositional dynamics shaping this new chapter and aligning the Brazilian movement more closely with an increasingly global(ist) Religious Right, it is important to take into account two centralizing shifts in the broader transnational religious field in which it was embedded.

First, the new papacies of John Paul II — followed by Benedict XVI — prioritized the diffusion of a restrictive project of reproductive governance and a narrow understanding of the family within the Church's global networks, even as they disciplined left-leaning voices within it. As Archbishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyla ([1969] /2018) had advised Paul VI on the formulation of *Humanae Vitae* and, amidst the backlash following its promulgation, counseled him to rein in dissenting voices with a priestly instruction reaffirming the infallibility of papal teaching and the transcendent and immutable character of natural law. Paul VI never issued such an instruction. As pope, however, Wojtyla cracked down on theologians who had criticized the encyclical and used "full and explicit agreement" with it as a litmus test for the appointment and promotion of bishops, transforming it into a centralizing tool to move the Church's global networks in a more conservative direction (McClory, 1995, p. 152). In these efforts, he was ably

aided by his future successor Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

These top-down moves to discipline the Catholic Church internally were reinforced by Ronald Reagan's ascent to the White House and empowerment of the Religious Right in the United States. The administration's announcement of the so-called Mexico City Policy at the World Population Conference in 1984, requiring recipients of U.S. foreign population assistance to pledge not to perform or promote abortion as a method of family planning, prompted greater attention to the international arena by U.S.-based Christian Right NGOs. Among these, Human Life International (HLI), founded in 1981 by the American priest Paul Marx, became the principal motor for the creation of a global pro-life movement. Harkening to the regionalist imaginary of U.S-based birth control activists two decades earlier, HLI leaders prioritized Latin America at this time because they regarded its Catholic-majority countries as particularly propitious terrain for the cause (Slattery, 2010). Above, I outlined how competing trans/national projects of reproductive governance mapped onto the shifting contours of Brazil's religious field in the 1960s and 1970s, giving shape to a movement "in defense of life" that straddled the religious, medical and activist fields. Here, I trace how these two global shifts contributed to conservatizing and ecumenizing trends within Brazilian anti-abortion activism during the 1980s, shaping the contours of its contemporary, thoroughly globalized pro-life movement.

Scholars and journalists have amply documented the Vatican crusade against liberation theology in Brazil and Latin America under John Paul II and Benedict XVI (Portella; Carvalho, 2022). Both pontiffs sought to undercut its influence by silencing advocates and promoting conservative clerics. Less attention has been paid to this crusade's complex articulation with the parallel culture war that these same actors were waging simultaneously in the name of a so-called "culture of life" and of the "natural family." Although debates on gender, sexuality and reproduction did not map neatly onto left-right divisions within the Church (Cowan, 2021; Gebara, 1995, 2006), there were differences on reproductive governance that reflected liberation theologians' willingness to question traditional structures of ecclesiastic authority, calls for greater pluralism

within the Church, and epistemological challenges to abstract moralizing through insistence that theology take people's lived experience and social scientific knowledge into account. Moreover, in the Vatican's parallel campaigns against liberation theology and the "contraceptive mentality" denounced in the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), the villain of one story was often invoked in the other (Cowan, 2021).

The connection between the two crusades was made explicit at an unusual meeting convened in Bogota by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1984. The first regional meeting organized by the entity, its purpose was to assess theological challenges confronting the Latin American Church, evaluate the status of national doctrinal commissions and ultimately tighten Vatican control over doctrinal deviations. Ratzinger opened the gathering with a speech expounding on what he saw as three major doctrinal challenges facing the Church, locating them initially in wealthy Western nations but addressing their specific expression in Latin America. The first involved various challenges to sexual morality, which he attributed to the liberal permissiveness emanating from the West and more concretely to a rupture in the "original nexus" linking sexuality to marriage and procreation, its presumed teleological ends. This same rupture was at the root of another challenge: the loosening of gender roles and norms promoted by feminism. While acknowledging that feminist demands for equality might seem reasonable at first glance, he warned that they promoted a dangerous worldview that rendered all social roles interchangeable, most importantly motherhood and fatherhood, positing a world of abstracted individuals liberated from teleologies immanent in their sexed bodies. Ratzinger attributed the third challenge to excesses in the spirit of ecumenism promoted by Vatican II, which had fostered the false belief that moral values were free-floating and that people, including Christians, should use their reason to make autonomous moral judgments. The resulting rupture between being and good (i.e. of the understanding of certain actions as inherently good or evil) relativized morality, resulting, among other deviations, in the proportionalist ethics of liberation theology. Concretely, liberation theologians had privileged the creation of a just society as the highest moral good while neglecting everything else and earthly salvation over salvation in the afterlife. All three theological challenges,

Ratzinger concluded, unmoored people and practices from their inherent moral content and natural teleological ends. They all reflected misguided excesses emerging from Vatican II, further aggravated by globalization. Worse yet, all three posited "liberation" as a form of salvation — "liberation from morals; liberation from [sexed] human nature; liberation toward a utopian vision" — effectively producing a "soteriology of a post-Christian society" deeply threatening to the Church (Arquivo Nacional, 1984).

An account of the Bogota meeting was presented at the XXII CNBB General Assembly later that year. At that gathering, Brazilian bishops also overwhelmingly approved the statement, "In Favor of the Family and in Defense of Life." The CNBB had established the working group that produced the statement, which included prominent conservatives and progressives, to craft an official position opposing various bills to liberalize abortion and PAISM. The statement denounced a genocidal campaign of mass sterilization advanced by various international organizations associated with population control (IPPF, the World Bank, the Rockefeller Foundation, etc.), together with BEMFAM and the Brazilian government: a litany routinely condemned not only by pro-life activists but by feminists at the time. But in attributing "identical objectives" to PAISM and condemning various bills seeking to liberalize abortion, the bishops sought to counter priorities now being advanced by feminists (Centro de Documentação e Informação da CNBB, 1984).

Trans/national pro-life networks, meanwhile, were diffusing resources, tactics and discourses that aligned the national movement further with an increasingly global(ist) Christian Right. In 1984, the recently founded National Pro-Life Association of Brasilia became HLI's first Latin American affiliate. Its longtime director Humberto Leal Vieira (n.d.) recalled working closely with HLI to promote the creation of pro-life groups in several Brazilian states[4]. HLI maintained ongoing correspondence with numerous Brazilian activists, and U.S. pro-life leaders visited the country several times to disseminate material and strategies. During a trip to the country in 1986, for example, HLI director Paul

[4] A key figure in trans/national networks, he was later named lifetime member of the Pontifical Academy for Life and advisor to the Pontifical Council on the Family (HLI Staff, 2015).

Marx distributed several translated copies of the pro-life propaganda film *The Silent Scream*, screening it at numerous events throughout the country. The film's use of video ultrasound images, which shifted pro-life discourse from a religious to a biomedical mode, would help broaden the Brazilian movement beyond its Catholic base. Writing to Marx during the constituent assembly, Earp, his close interlocutor, reported screening the film to 1200 people in Rio in the prior 2 months, "in such different places as a Catholic parish, a school of medicine… a temple of the Assembly of God, a school for nurses" and a forthcoming screening at a Presbyterian Church (University of Notre Dame Archives, 1987). During his 1986 trip to the country, Marx even arranged two screenings on national television with the help of local Church leaders, marveling in his diary with the missionary zeal of a committed globalist that, "Some 15 million people saw the film because I came to Brazil. What virgin territory this, so far as pro-life efforts are concerned" (University of Notre Dame Archives, 1986).

Broader left-right divisions within the Brazilian Church conditioned the reception of transnational discourses and tactics, while revealing the everyday intersections of the Vatican's parallel crusades. Hence as recounted in Marx's diary report of his 1986 trip, after speaking to a group of women at a Catholic high school, introduced by the director as "liberationists in the good sense,"

> One well-dressed lady said that sterilization is better than abortion … One lady got up and said the government had proven that natural family planning doesn't work … [The director] said it was my opinion that the pill was abortifacient. He had never heard that! One lady asked for evidence (University of Notre Dame Archives, 1986).

Correspondence between Brazilian and U.S. activists reflects a shared repudiation of liberation theology, marked by differences on reproductive governance. Hence after speaking with Cardinal Aloísio Lorscheider, Marx concluded that the progressive former CNBB president was "a waffle on contraception and a real politician" (University of Notre Dame Archives, 1986). Writing in the HLI newsletter, Earp (1989) denounced Brazilian bishops who regarded abortion as a "secondary issue," even tolerating "a so-called 'liberation theology' star, Frei Betto, who advocates taking abortion out of the criminal code and justifies abortion for poor women who believe they cannot feed or educate

their babies." After speaking with Earp about Leonardo Boff's recent release from his mandated penitent silence, Marx recorded:

> Boff wrote a book in which he talks about the mother God; on the face of it, it would screw up the whole understanding of the trinity... Boff openly supports the feminists and ... individual feminist candidates for office. In writing, he is against *Humanae Vitae*... Msgr. Earp says that Boff and company are decidedly out to change the Church, junking the spiritual and supernatural and sacramental. They speak of Ecclesio Genesis, meaning, the generation of a new Church (University of Notre Dame Archives, 1986).

Among the stops where Marx spoke and screened *The Silent Scream* was the First National Congress in Defense of the Family and the Values of Christian Civilization, perhaps the first national expression of the New Republic's emerging Religious Right, seeking to influence the new democratic charter. Its concluding statement called on constituent assembly persons to enshrine Christian values in the new constitution, in part by protecting life from conception; but also called on religious authorities to ban "ideologies incompatible with Christian principles," particularly Marxism, and crack down on the "diabolical confusions spreading through Christianity" (Arquivo Nacional, 1986).

The constituent assembly catalyzed mobilization by numerous social movements seeking to shape the rules of the game in Brazil's new democratic polity. During the proceedings, three distinct coalitions mobilized around reproductive governance: family planning advocates, coordinated by BEMFAM; feminists, coordinated by the National Women's Rights Council (CNDM); and anti-abortion activists, coordinated by allies within the CNBB and supported by the newly formed Evangelical caucus (Pitanguy, 2018; Fonseca Sobrinho, 1993; Wohnrath, 2017; Freston, 1994). The latter coalition prioritized an amendment enshrining the right to life from conception. To this end, the CNBB introduced a "popular amendment," leveraging its national infrastructure to collect over half a million signatures on a petition (Pitanguy, 2018; Barsted, 1992). Drawing on Bourdieu, Vinicius Wohnrath (2017) highlights the CNBB's strategic mobilization of religious, activist, and medical "capital" to legitimize its position on abortion, as public hearings once again featured testimony by Catholic doctors and activists with the Pro-Life Association of Brasilia, which was assuming the role of the movement's federal lobbying arm. Facing a broad constellation of forces hostile

to abortion rights, the CNDM made a strategic calculation not to press the issue, arguing instead that abortion should not be treated as a constitutional matter but through ordinary legislation. It was this position that ultimately prevailed (Pitanguy, 2018).

Throughout the proceedings, Brazilian pro-life activists used HLI materials to great effect. Earp informed Marx, for instance, that they had screened *The Silent Scream* in at least two subcommittees, prompting both to overwhelmingly approve amendments protecting life from conception in draft sections of the charter (though both were ultimately defeated) (University of Notre Dame Archives, 1987). In a subsequent report, Humberto Leal Vieira, who, as a legislative consultant, had been deeply involved in these efforts, recognized "the great help received from HUMAN LIFE INTERNATIONAL in the form of leaflets and publications," which "[helped substantiate] comments ... on the proposed amendments" (University of Notre Dame Archives, n.d.). A few years later, upon returning from the Latin American Bishop's Conference in Santo Domingo, he went much further: "Everything we have achieved in Latin America is due to your organization — The Human Life International" (University of Notre Dame Archives, 1992).

Conclusion

In 1989, Brazil's anti-abortion activists met in Brasilia for the First National Meeting of Pro-Life Leaders. Paul Marx and another HLI colleague were in attendance, this time joined by another entourage of U.S. anti-abortion activists with Rescue Outreach, the recently founded international arm of Operation Rescue, which had gained notoriety in the United States through its radical "direct action" tactics blockading abortion clinics to prevent women from accessing services. The latter had traveled to several states in the country at Earp's invitation to train local activists in the tactic before reaching the capital (Centro de Documentação e Informação da CNBB, 1990). At the Meeting, Brazilian activists resolved to create a broad communication network linking their organizations to work more effectively as a national movement (University of Notre Dame Archives, 1989). The following year, after Fernando Collor's ascent to the presidency, Vieira wrote to Marx optimistically about the new political

landscape. Brazilian activists were preparing a "vast programme of information at the level of Government bodies (Legislative and Executive) and of diocese, besides pro-life organizations, on the basis of informative material received from HLI." These efforts had already born some fruit, he emphasized, citing Collor's purge of feminists from the National Women's Rights Council and the Health Minister's declaration of war on "birth controllers" and call for a program to boost natality: "All this thanks to information from us" (University of Notre Dame Archives, 1990).

Vieira's optimism, of course, was cut short by Collor's impeachment; and it would be several decades before the movement would again attain such influence at the highest levels of power, this time under a self-styled "captain" rather than a *marajá*[5]. By this time, however, important contours of Brazil's contemporary pro-life movement were already evident. This article has sought to highlight two dimensions of its consolidation. First, by situating its development within a plural and shifting religious field, I have sought to go beyond the oppositional dynamics with feminists generally highlighted in the countermovement literature. Rather, using Bourdieu's notion of religious field, I have highlighted less visible political and theological dynamics that have also shaped its history. Second, by situating the movement within the trans/national religious field, I have sought to highlight the thoroughly globalized nature of the project of reproductive governance it has advanced: no minor point given the contemporary Right's common deployment of anti-globalist, anti-colonial language to tarnish its opponents.

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[5] Nicknames for Jair Bolsonaro and Fernando Collor respectively.

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