

# The Imprint of Nationalism and Fundamentalism on Sexuality

By Alejandra Sarda

I would like to share with you some ideas and experiences about the relationship between nationalism, fundamentalism and sexuality in Latin America. When I refer to “fundamentalism,” I follow the definition I learnt from my colleagues in *Women Under Muslim Laws*, that is, fundamentalism as the use of a distorted version of religion and/or culture to maintain or achieve political power.

In Latin America, the relationship between nationalism and fundamentalism has a very long history. It started with the indigenous empires that were ruled by an alliance of priests and warriors. Those empires subjugated other indigenous nations; exploited them economically, and offered women and men from the defeated nations as human sacrifices so their gods would grant them even more power. They tried to uproot all customs that did not fit with the empire’s militaristic and hierarchical vision, such as the power held by women in many of the subjugated nations, or the diversity of sexual practices and identities.

It continued with the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors, with the genocide perpetrated by the military on the bodies, and by the catholic priests on the souls, sexualities, artistic expressions and languages of indigenous peoples in Latin America. The church and the military became allies again to traffic female and male slaves from Africa, who were subjected to the same genocide to destroy their cultural, sexual, religious and linguistic practices. During colonial times (before the 19 century), the catholic church, with the support of the secular power, persecuted and murdered hundreds of women that practiced their sexuality outside marriage (with men or with other women), male homosexuals, as well as religious and political dissidents, to preserve “natural order and public morals.”

With the 19th century came the builders of the new American nations, free from Spanish rule but slaves to English capital. The states that exist today in America were created, and nations had to be made up for them. That is how flags, national anthems and legends came to be—all of them of a military nature. All American national anthems are war songs.

The fundamentalist use of religious symbols is also common to all our countries: a virgin who incarnates the spirit of the nation, who goes to war with the troops, and to whom the national flag is consecrated. The indigenous, Afro and mestizo genocide continued, because the new nation-states needed more land and more wealth. Migrants from Spain, Italy, Russia, China, Japan, as well as Slavic, Arab and Jewish people without states, came in droves to the continent. The nations that were making themselves up needed homogeneous and strong identities, so the migrants were also forced to silence their languages, customs and particularities to be included. Church, police and medicine came together to persecute, torture, and in some cases, murder any person who wanted to live her or his sexuality outside the “natural order and the public moral,” as preserving these was key to building and then preserving the new nations.

With the 20th century came the USA empire, to impose the rule of McDonald’s and Coca Cola, of structural adjustment plans and privatisations. The military contributed with the “war against subversion” that meant death, prison, torture and forced exile for hundreds of thousands of people fighting for social justice. With some remarkable exceptions like Brazil or Chile, most of the catholic hierarchies in the continent joined in and blessed this new genocide, which was deemed necessary to preserve the “moral order” of the nation. They spread the idea that political dissidents also lack morals and engaged in a disorderly sexuality—something that was not true, because revolutionary groups were as puritanical and militarist as the system they

were trying to destroy. It is worth noting that libertarian movements—from women to sexual dissidents—that started with much strength in the 1960s and 1970s were eventually “erased from the map” due to the urgency and violence of the genocide against fighters for social justice. It took almost two decades to recover the possibility to talk and organise politically around the issues of sex and gender, and when it happened, it was not in the quest for “sexual liberation” but of “sexual rights.”

A product of the alliance between the sword and the cross still very much in force is the idea of “public morals.” All over Latin America, trans people are arrested and tortured because their presence in the street is enough to offend “public morals.” A gay pride parade is forbidden for that same reason.

Penal codes in all our countries, as well as international human rights treaties like the International

It is possible to demand a re-definition of “public morals,” one that comes from people and communities, one that we agreed on after sitting together and talking about the boundaries we want to put on the way we behave in public, shared spaces. It is possible to build social movements like the Zapatista movement that articulates a strong claim not just for one culture but the right of many cultures to exist, for “a world with many worlds inside,” as they put it.

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights itself, condone such violence because they mention “public morals” as a valid reason to restrict freedom of expression, including the expression of one’s gender identity. No law defines what is understood by “public morals.” It is the church, as embodiment of the nation’s soul that does so.

The empires—all of them—are always militaristic and puritanical because their strength is based on the control of people’s bodies, minds and wills. Most nations dream of becoming empires, and do their best to be as effective in controlling their people as the empires.

Nations dreaming to become empires—both those that achieve their dreams and those that do not, both those that were made up to fill up a state and those we can not remember when they them made up—all of them share some myths about their origin that justify their alliance with fundamentalism. In the origin that nations dream for themselves, there is always Nature and God.

The context, however, is not Nature as something we are part of, but as something foreign to us, something given to us by God, to serve Him through Her. And who knows what God desires? His representatives on earth, of course. They will tell us what the “natural” uses of Nature are, and these are only those that please God. As we are talking of an imperialistic logic here, of a logic of servitude, those “natural” uses will be exploitative: sexuality is for reproduction; the body is for work; animals, to be eaten or kept as pets; plants, or decoration; and earth, water and air, to generate wealth. Any other use of “nature” is “unnatural.”

How strongly are nation and nature related is seen when somebody becomes part of nation (acquires a nationality). We then say she or he became “naturalised.”

Contrary to what happens in Nature, where almost everything changes, grows, dies, mixes and mingles, in the human imagination, what is “natural” like the nation is that which does not and can not change, and that which is one. Nation is one people, one blood, one language, one race, one national anthem, one flag, one voice. Nation has always been and will always be.

Religion, which is inseparable from nation (there are no secular nations), is also one: one god, one book, one interpretation of that book.

In this context, sexuality is also one: for each person, there is only one sex that is possible and acceptable, one sexual preference, one sexual practice, one purpose for sexuality, one life stage to be sexual. All of that has been decided by Nature in such a way that pleases God.

It is difficult to be human. It's scary. Because in fact we are alone, we never really get to fully know anybody—not even ourselves. At the most we can touch, for a moment, the mystery that other lives are, for a moment of love, friendship, ideological or artistic or spiritual communion, sexual pleasure. But only barely.

Then we are again alone, we will die and we have no way of knowing what happens to us half an hour from that moment. We fear everything that we can not control, and that is almost everything, even though we like to imagine it is not so much so. In some issues, we might fool ourselves but in others, like sexuality, it is impossible. Here, control fails us in seconds before a desire, a dream that we would have never thought ourselves capable of, and suddenly there it is, happening to us. That is why the alliance of the cross and the sword that maintains empires is founded on our loneliness, our fragility, our need for warmth and approval, our vanity that makes us need to feel part of something eternal and transcendental. What this alliance controls the most is that part of life most impossible to control, the part we fear the most: our sexuality. We thank the cross and the sword for protecting us from what we can not control by obeying, by being part of their institutions, by believing that we need institutions to mediate between us and the chaos of life, uncertainty and death.

Is it possible to attend to those fears and those needs in a different way? Yes. It is possible to base our sense of belonging to a particular place on the planet in values that are not militaristic or imperial, and do not need the protection of states, churches or dogma. It is possible to attend to those fears and needs in the way the air feels at home, the food, the stories, the jokes that need no translation, the songs our mothers sang and we know by heart without ever having decided to memorize them. It is possible to experience sexuality

as play, communication, exploration, deep respect for our own body, its rhythms, its mysteries, its desires, and for the body of the other woman, other man, other trans person—or women, men, trans persons—that are honouring us with their surrender for a single night, for a couple of nights, for their entire life.

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In Zapatista communities, girls are no longer kidnapped and forced to marry at 12, as was the custom before, because the women have decided that they want to choose when and whom to marry, if they want to. As far as I know, the Zapatista movement is the only social movement in Latin America that not only speaks of women and men, homosexuals and lesbians, but also of transsexuals. There is a Zapatista passage that best illustrates how the movement links sexual, ethnic, economic and politic forms of resistance:

Let us name any corner of the planet, and let us be persecuted together with the homosexuals, lesbians and transsexuals there; let us resist together with women the fate of silly decoration that is imposed on them; let us resist with the young the machine that crushes down rebellion and non-conformity; let us resist with workers and rural peoples the bleeding that neoliberal alchemy imposes on them, to transform death into dollars; let us walk on the footsteps of the indigenous peoples in LA and, with their feet, let us give the world a rounded shape, so it can roll. Let us name and look at a world that does not exist right now, but that will start to exist in our words and in our eyes.”

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