

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 17 October 2019



The Secularisation of Discourse in Contemporary Latin American Neoconservatism

Podcast with **Jerry Espinoza Rivera** (21 October 2019).

Interviewed by **Sidney Castillo**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-secularisation-of-discourse-in-contemporary-latin-american-neoconservatism/>

Sidney Castillo (SC): *Now we're still in the fourth day of the [EASR Conference 2019](#), in Tartu Estonia. And it has been a hectic week with a very, very rich learning experiences, sharing with colleagues and hearing about their research. And now I'm sitting here with Professor [Jerry Espinoza Rivera](#). Welcome to the Religious Studies Project.*

Jerry Espinoza Rivera (JER): Thank you.

SC: *And would you be so kind as to introduce yourself?*

JER: I am a professor, assistant professor at the University of Costa Rica. I teach philosophy at the School of General Studies. And now I'm presenting a paper about the Latin American neoconservative discourse, here in Tartu.

SC: *Perfect. And we welcome you here. It's nice to know that here at the EASR we have Latin American representative scholars working, and that they take part not only in Latin America or in Spanish speaking countries, but also here in English speaking fields. And it's very nice to know that our work is being known, in that sense.*

JER: I agree.

SC: *So, just to jump right in to the questions. The first question, I think, tries to frame your subject –*

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especially here at the EASR: how can we understand conservatism in Latin America? So you can give us an overview.

JER. OK. I differentiate between traditional conservatism and neoconservatism. Traditional conservatism in Latin America is closely related with the Catholic Church. You know that the Catholic Church has had a very strong influence in Latin America, especially in politics. And traditional conservatives have been closely related with Catholic thought. So in my presentation, I make a review of this ideological approach of the Catholic Church, especially during the 19th century. Because there is a big difference between the Catholic thought before the [Second Vatican Council](#) and after the Second Vatican Council. So the traditional conservatism is deeply closely related with the catholic thought before the Second Vatican Council. For example, the Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council considered that the only salvation was possible inside the church. Nobody outside the church could be saved. And this traditional conservatism was based on the idea that only absolute truth was the Catholic truth. That's quite a big difference between this traditional and the neoconservatives.

SC: *And if you could give us somehow a comprehensive understanding of how the transition of conservatism to neo-conservatism happened? It was probably about the Second Vatican Council but in more contextualised forms? It would be interesting for the Listeners . . . (5:00).*

JER: Actually, I do research about not only the neoconservatives in Costa Rica but in Latin America. I use quite a famous book, right now in Latin America, written by two Argentinians. One is Agustín Laje and the other one is Nicolás Márquez. They wrote a very popular book at this moment that is called [The Black Book of the New Left](#). It's a book written to discredit what they call the New Left. And it's very interesting to read in this book how they use, for example, the science in a different way than was used by the traditional conservatives. Because traditional conservatives were very sceptical about science – not only about science, but about reason in general. If you read, for example, the syllabus written by the Pope Pius IX, he condemned the use of science as it wasn't the truth. It was considered an error by the Pope Pius IX. And that was traditional conservatism. In traditional conservatism, science was not the way to achieve the truth. The way to achieve the truth was the faith: faith in the Catholic Church. In neoconservatism it changed. If you read the book by Laje and Márquez you can see that they use the science as . . . they consider science as a kind of certainty; as absolute truth. It's completely different. In this case, science is not a way to cut across below the faith, as it was in the traditional conservatism, but the absolute truth.

SC: *So, you've mentioned the relation of conservatism to the Catholic Church and the*

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neoconservatism that is shown in this book. It seems to me that they are different instances of institutionalism. So does analysis of this book tell us something about religion in some way? In which way?

JER: That's another very interesting issue: that this neoconservatism is not considered religious to conservatives. Of course, underground they are religious, but they don't use the religious discourse to justify their ideas, they use science. They use another kind of justification. For example, in this book, the Black Book of the New Left, they never quote the Bible, because they try to demonstrate that it is science that demonstrates or proves that, for example, homosexuality is against nature. Or, for example, that life begins since conception. And it's, of course, against the groups that support the legalisation of abortion. And there are many examples where they show how they use science, or a kind of discourse of science, to demonstrate their ideas.

SC: *So, paradoxically it seems that traditional conservatism was against science and now neoconservatism is pro-science. But underneath they're both religious (10:00). That's very interesting to know. You mentioned something about homosexuality. To probe this issue more, I'd like to ask: what are the discursive forms that neoconservatism is playing?*

JER: It's interesting to see how these neoconservatives, they build a kind of new enemy kind of antagonism for themselves. Their enemy is not now what it was during the cold war, for example, Communism. But now their enemy is more related with sexuality. And that's why they use this term "gender ideology". The term is essentially an empty signifier. What does it mean, when I say that is an empty signifier? That it doesn't have any meaning. But they use it to attack, or to discredit for example ideas by [Judith Butler](#) or the ideas of [Simone de Beauvoir](#) or all their theories philosophers or thinkers that have written about gender. So they create this concept. They call it gender ideology to discredit But not only to discredit these thinkers, but to discredit any policy or any fight related with sexual or reproductive rights. That's why, for example, you can see in Latin America, how these groups attack for example, any decision related to legalisation of abortion. They call it gender ideology. Because they created a kind of enemy to discredit and they use this term, this signifier, to discredit any policy related with sexual and reproductive rights.

SC: *Which is a thing I believe also I stayed in (audio unclear) and there was a tendency for the state to . . . or at least not everybody was in favour of reproductive rights or sexual rights.*

JER: Yes. You can see how it was very important issue in Brazil during the last election. [Jair](#)

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[Bolsonaro](#) the President, he uses it, this discourse, to discredit his enemies. What does it mean? It means that it's an important issue in Latin America, not only a discourse of minorities. What you can see in Brazil, you can see it in Colombia, in Peru, in Chile and many countries. This discourse of the neoconservatives has grown. In my country Costa Rica you can see it for example. Now there is a big conflict about the use of mixed toilets. It is, you can consider it like something very unimportant, but some religious groups, conservative groups, use it as an excuse to attack the government. And it's a very good example of how the neoconservatives use these kinds of issues to discredit or to attack some policies (15:00).

SC: *Like a point of entry for doing politics for Latin America?*

JER: Yes. It's interesting to see how Laje and Márquez, they are travelling across every region, every country, presenting their book. It's interesting to see how, for example in Costa Rica, there was a big controversy about the presentation of this book, but you can see that they are looking for these kind of controversies. Because they know that it makes them famous. For example, in the case of Costa Rica, one of their presentations was forbidden at one of the Universities, because it was considered that it was discriminatory. So they made it a case, they made it an issue to become famous, because of the controversy that they generated.

SC: *Also I believe that it's not only dependent on this book. It's got currency worldwide.*

JER: Yes, of course. I use the book as an example. Because the book is incredibly famous and very popular. It's interesting to see how a book that, if you read it the book it . . . academically, it's very week, you know? Their arguments are very week. It's very easy to refute them. But they know that there are many people who want to read this kind of argument. And that's why, actually, the book, you can't buy it; it's free! So it's easy for people to obtain the book. It's interesting how they promote their ideas.

SC: *And going back to this issue of traditional conservatism and neoconservatism: so it's not related, neoconservatism, to the Catholic Church?*

JER: No. that's another difference with between traditional conservatism and neoconservatism. Traditional conservatism was deeply, closely related with the Catholic Church, but neoconservatism not only includes Catholics, but also neo-Pentecostalist parties. For example in my country, in Costa Rica, there is a quite a big neo-Pentecostal party, who was there actually participated in the last

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election and was one of the parties that obtained more votes. It was a disputed presidency, with the candidate that finally won. But they obtained forty percent of the votes! It's really, really big. And what's interesting is to see that in spite of the fact that it was neo-Pentecostalist party, many Catholics voted for this candidate. Ten years ago it was unimaginable. It's very interesting to see how this neoconservative discourse is attracting not only people who are traditional Catholics, but people who belong to other kinds of churches.

SC: *Speaking of that, I think that, in sociological terms, it's interesting how these concepts of the conservatives' cause reached civil society(20:00). And that's why I also want to ask, what effect does it have in the shared imaginary of the general public?*

JER: Yes, the growth of these parties is not only a political phenomenon, but a social phenomenon. It's extremely related . . . in the case of Brazil, for example, there was a big influence of WhatsApp in the election of Bolsonaro. That's exactly the same case in Costa Rica. Social networks were very important in the final election. Because it's easier to spread fake news through these kind of networks. Ten years ago, or twenty years ago it was more difficult to do these kind of things. Now, with social networks, it's easier to spread this kind of fake news. You can see it in the United States, in the election of Trump. It is quite a similar process.

SC: *Do you have any further remarks to kind-of sum up what we have been discussing so far?*

JER: I just want to remark how dangerous is what's happening right now, not only in Latin America but in many countries. Even here in Europe – you can see it in Poland, in Hungary and in Slovakia and other countries. It's a new kind of politics that uses hatred towards some groups, minority groups, for example LGBT collectives, or the feminist groups. And this is new. And they use it because they realise that it's quite popular. You know? This kind of discourse is quite popular. People easily believe these kind of ideas that you can read: things about “[homosexualisation](#) of the world” for example. It's kind-of crazy ideas they are spreading, and it's quite dangerous. You can see it happening in the United States in 2016, and you can see it in Brazil in the case of Latin America. And this phenomenon is spreading around the world.

SC: *So it's akin to . . . even to conspiracy theories?*

JER: Yes. In the case of Latin America it's even worse, I would say. Because it's also related to the problems that are related with poverty, inequality and other problems that make that easier for these

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people to be attracted to this kind of discourse.

SC: *Right. Well, Professor Espinoza, it was very nice to have you here at the Religious Studies Project and we hope to have you again, soon.*

JER: Thank you.

SC: *Thank you.*

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