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# The personal is political: Moral authoritarianism and female teachers in the Uruguayan dictatorship (1973-1984)

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes the forms of moral persecution deployed against primary education teachers during the Uruguayan dictatorial regime (1973-1984), seeking to address the modalities shown in the evolution of a long-term State paternalism and the curbs imposed on emerging generational changes in gender relations through the institutional promotion of a binary and traditional model.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, an academic reflection trend has developed in the Southern Cone that addresses state violence during the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s and its relation to gender and sexuality. This kind of approach has moved away from the centrality of political-party aspects to rescue the testimonies of the countless forms of resistance against dictatorships, the experience of political imprisonment, and gendered forms of state violence. In the case of Uruguay, some research (De Giorgi 2015; Sapriza 2005) confirmed, from a gender perspective, the particular forms in which this violence was carried out against women's bodies, analyzing how the dictatorship considered sexual difference as representative of a *natural order* that needed to be preserved and restored to maintain national security.[1]

But the situation of the education system during the authoritarian period has been an under-explored topic in Uruguayan academic production. Key works addressed the convergence in educational programs of right-wing nationalist Catholicism, the Doctrine of National Security (DSN), neotomism, and Hispanism (Campodónico, Massera, Sala 1991), and the impact of the authoritarian process on secondary education and the university system (Markarian 2015; 2021). However, none of these approaches paid attention to primary and early childhood education during this historical period, to the administrative changes, nor policies of morality that the dictatorship developed to regulate internal functioning, nor the persecution or dismissal of teachers under "moral" reasons. This article aims to advance in this direction, articulating studies of recent history, gender, and sexuality, with the history of education to reflect on the ways in which the civil-military authorities of primary education visualized teachers who were labeled with *moral conduct* problems, on the mechanisms through which, recreating a state paternalism, they sought to discipline their bodies, and on the possible consequences for that generation of teachers. For the analysis of this research, 1653 teacher files were reviewed, which are located in the archive of the Council of Primary Education (CEP), as well as the minutes of CEP sessions from 1965 to 1985. Press clippings from the time and pedagogical publications were also consulted.

The article begins with a brief analysis of the centrality of primary education in the Uruguayan imaginary and then studies the roles that *morality*, the rural, and the fight against generational changes in gender relations had during the dictatorial regime. The text goes on to study detected cases of persecution on moral grounds and closes with a series of final reflections.

## 2. Uruguayan public primary education and moral norms

Public and mandatory primary education emerged in the 19th century and achieved, during the 20th century, a solid professionalization, through training centers, and promotion and competition systems for all hierarchies. Its teaching staff quickly became feminized, under the protection of Batllismo, which promoted a different model of woman within the framework of a "State paternalism" (Villamil, Sapriza 1984: 47), with access to political participation and education, and the possibility of working outside the home.[2] The primary system continued to grow until the arrival of the 1960s, the economic crisis, and the Cold War, when teachers began an unprecedented cycle of protests and mobilizations, to which the government of Pacheco Areco (1968-1971) responded by dismissing dozens of teachers. At the same time, in the 1960s, the traditional social vision of women also began to be confronted in practice by their growth in union, labor, and political participation, challenging the gender roles that had historically been assigned to them. The visibility of these generational tensions sparked reactions within the field of local right-wing groups. Groups like the Juventud Uruguaya de Pie (JUP), an ultra-right-wing organization, can be understood as a reaction to the "disrespectful materialism" and "distortion of customs" of young people, among whom "debauchery as a moral principle" was becoming widespread (Bucheli 2019: 217). Similarly, the anti-communism of the late 1960s blamed "Marxist subversion" for corrupting family and women, and defined young people – due to a moral panic about changes in gender relations and intergenerational conflict – as "morally unstable subjects" and potential victims of local communism (Rey 2021: 81).

These discourses converged during the author-

itarian period (1973-1984) in education, which became a supporter of the return to a *natural order* and anything that questioned it was considered a threat to the family. That is why for Lieutenant Colonel Buenaventura Caviglia, a hardliner within the Armed Forces, the war was "comprehensive" and should include all fronts, including the moral and psychological ones. The enemy, he added, had fostered "alcoholism, the dissolution and disintegration of the family through divorce, and vices, prostitution, pornography, free love have been destroying the morality and character of a people who were once tough and untamed" (Caviglia 1974: 231). As a faithful reflection of these concerns, during the 1970s a set of rules was approved that broke the system of competitions and promotions and that clearly enabled persecution under moral reasons. [3]

Law No. 14,101 of 1973 required teachers to maintain a "moral conduct" in line with their functional obligations, as stated in Article 39 of the Common Provisions. In turn, this requirement was taken up by Ordinance No. 17 of the National Education Council (CONAE) and, in a similar tone, Ordinance No. 28 established, as a cause for dismissal, in addition to political reasons, the "possession of negative antecedents that inhibit the moral and civic education of the students" (Ordinance No. 28, 1978: 30). These three regulations were the most commonly used in the administrative inquiries that were initiated during the dictatorship against 71 teachers for their "moral conduct", of whom 27 were women with "dodgy" or "immoral behavior", while the rest were male teachers accused of homosexuality, child sexual abuse, and problematic drug use. This text studies only the female teachers because they have significant common elements and major differences with the other subgroups included in this category (homosexuals, drug users, etc.).[4]

In that sense, when analyzing how institutional practice defined "immoral behavior" among women, elements related to heterosexual sexual practices outside of marriage, disrespect for school authority, and patriotic symbols appear. For example, in the resolution of the Primary Education Intervening Body against Macarena in 1976, it was included as an aggravating factor that she "distorted the performance of the School by disregarding and contravening the authority of the Principal" (Folder 2934/1975: 4).[5] Forms of social interaction and behaviors considered incompatible with traditional gender roles that condemned women to decorum, obedience, submission, and lack of autonomy were also punished.

Also, the vast majority of the cases analyzed here occurred in rural schools in the countryside. Among other things, this is because, in this type of educational setting, it was common for teachers (due to distance, communication problems, etc.) to reside in the dwelling located next to the classrooms for the children. This physical proximity always made it very difficult to keep intimacy and educational practices separate. The legislation that regulated the dwelling was created in 1959 and indicated clear restrictions: strangers could not spend the night in the institution's facilities without authorization, and only the teacher's legitimate family could accompany them. However, this rule was applied with varying degrees of rigor depending on the historical period. In light of the documentation reviewed for this research, it emerges that during the civic-military dictatorship (1973-1984), both security problems and conservative perspectives ended up promoting its strict observance, significantly increasing disciplinary measures to punish non-compliance.

## 3. The rural world and the values of the nation

For the educational discourse of the 20th century, the rural space was visualized as an area where multiple vulnerabilities intersected: a demanding place (due to its isolation), heterogeneous and culturally backward, where it was necessary to detect different needs and coordinate actions with all social players present to promote profound transformations. Although this discourse was present in Primary Education since the 1920s thanks to the significant development of rural schools within the system, during the dictatorship, that historical experience was disregarded, and the reports on material poverty and barriers to access to education disappeared. The rural world was construed as a homogeneous place without conflicts and was conceived as a *moral reserve of the nation*. For example, in 1975, during an investigation of a teacher for accusations about her moral conduct, the resolution of the Intervention Council indicated that she was "a rural school teacher who should have sought

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an appropriate way of life, in accordance with the rural environment where there is a very strict concept of morality" (Folder 1148/1975: 7). These discursive changes are related to the exacerbation of the *interior* that was adopted by the cultural discourse of the civilian-military regime and to which it sought to give priority in its action, since the best traditions, customs, and values to preserve in Uruguay resided there. But the recognition of folklore was achieved through strong adaptations and manipulations that allowed it to become functional to the objectives of the civilian-military regime (Marchesi 2001).

Teachers became the custodians of that tradition and stopped being the transforming seed of that heritage. For example, in 1976 the investigating lawyer submitted a report stating that the complaints against the teacher were "inconsistent" and that "simple rumors" were not enough to apply disciplinary measures. However, he recommended henceforth that she refrain "from any equivocal attitude that may compromise the good name of the school administration", since "the mere incrimination of a teacher having committed an immoral act [...] thereby affects the best interest of the service whose care corresponds to the Primary Education Council" (Folder 775/1973: 156). According to this vision, the teacher was the defender of those values and their most perfect and exemplary embodiment, so this setback was synonymous with the delegitimization of the entire institution. This logic justified the strict surveillance of teachers and allowed the deployment of disciplinary strategies over their bodies, as well as the testing of forms of confrontation and management of an emergent generational tension that expressed other ways of relating to the body and tradition, introduced by some young female teachers, more attentive to the global changes that were taking place in the field of gender and sexuality. On occasions, this tension was even recognized by the neighbors who reported them: "She had fun like any girl of her age" (Folder 3525/1972: 53), pointed out a neighbor of the school, but this was not enough for excusing the teacher from a strong sanction for her alleged "scandalous behavior" during a fair at the school. The embodiment of traditional values required a desexualized and sober behavior, and the visibility of any youthful trait was construed as inadequate to the context and the educational project.

However, that problematic youth could sometimes also justify the deployment of paternalistic rationales that allowed for the minimization of sanctions as long as it was accompanied by a redeeming dynamic. For example, in 1976 Silvia was accused by her neighbors of maintaining a romantic relationship with a male neighbor despite being legally married. The statements made during the investigation were highly incriminating, but the arrival of a new principal at the school (the previous principal had been removed for political reasons) managed to generate, according to her own words, a complete change in the accused teacher: "guided and advised by me, she completely rectified her behavior [...] the immoral acts committed were carried out under an abnormal psychological state in her married life, which the unscrupulous Director encouraged in both parties' relationships" (Folder 299/1976: 10). The accused party acknowledged during the interrogation that she had "reconsidered, and resumed a normal life, resolving my differences with my husband" (ivi: 89).

The investigating lawyer considered in his final report that Silvia's behavior had affected the prestige of the public school, but the recognition of the error and the return "to a normal course, stabilizing her life and eliminating the described disturbances" should be taken into account as mitigating factors, as well as "her youth and the difficult environment in which she performed her duties" (ivi: 95). Consequently, instead of removing Silvia from her position, the Intervention Council opted to suspend her without pay for six months. The salvation of the heteropatriarchal family, public recognition of the error and its rectification before the entire community, as well as her lack of experience and the influence of a Marxist infiltrator, contributed to the development of forms of tutelage that have – as has already been emphasized – a continuity in the Uruguayan State's policy.

## 4. Complaints and the construction of moral conduct

Administrative investigations into these teachers accused of *immorality* usually began in three distinct ways. The first, which encompasses the majority of the analyzed cases, was the submission of a complaint to the inspection, generally signed by a

group of parents and neighbors of the school or occasionally by some members of the Commission for Advancement. For example, in 1976 the Intervention Body of the CEP initiated an inquiry into Daniela, an interim teacher at a rural school in the department of Lavalleja, after receiving a letter from neighbors who accused her of receiving "frequent visits from males at her school, which led to comments" (Folder 1148/1975: 7). These accusations usually prompted an immediate investigation.

The complaints reveal how teachers and the social life of the school were subject to rigorous social control, even when the population around them was scattered across the territory. Rumors frequently appear in the testimonies of the people interviewed during the investigations. For example, one of the neighbors interviewed at the local police station in relation to a teacher accused of immoral behavior stated, "I do not have a very good opinion, actually. She was not an acceptable person from a moral point of view. It was rumored, and this was the children's version, that she brought men into the school" (Folder 775/1973: 127).

Also, on some occasions, when inspectors detected what they considered a problem, they encouraged the person in charge of the children's care to file a complaint. On several occasions, typed complaints appear, with excellent spelling and syntax, which do not match the general educational level of the rural context, where most had not completed primary education and some even signed with a cross because they were illiterate. This effort to reduce the barriers that prevented an investigation was often recorded in the file through the way the complaint was introduced. For example, the inspector of Canelones pointed out in Folder 1257/1972 how the parents of a student came to her office to formalize a complaint, whose handwriting did not match their signatures. But these solutions aiming to bridge the gap between bureaucratic rationale and the oral culture of many neighbors were not always transparent and sometimes raised significant suspicions among the authorities themselves.

In some cases, the complaints from neighbors never went beyond oral communication and therefore, no investigation was carried out. But in other cases, the speedy action taken by intermediate authorities was striking, even to the investigating judge in charge of the case. For instance, the lawyer in charge of investigating a teacher in Colonia concluded that the complainant was an employee of Hernández, a well-known rancher in the area, who was at odds with Mario, another local rancher who had spent the night at the school on some occasions, which had prompted the complaint. Both ranchers had a long-standing dispute because the former wanted to buy Mario's land, who refused to sell. Cecilia, the accused teacher, was also in conflict with Hernández due to disagreements over the delivery of materials to the students. The investigating lawyer then concluded that the accusation lacked "consistency" and, as the statements showed, the main accuser "did not write it, did not take it to the inspector, and perhaps had little knowledge of what she was signing", so in his view it was clear that the complaint was "motivated or prompted" by "a special interest of third parties in the problem" (Folder 3421/1976: 104). In fact, of the three accusers, two worked for the rancher Hernández (his cook and his foreman) and the third felt offended by the teacher because she had made his son fail the school year. Although this complex plot was fully identified during the investigation, Primary Education authorities chose to ignore all these aspects and stated that the charge against Cecilia was extremely serious and well established, and that was what mattered. [6]

In third place, sometimes the complaints were made by a colleague or by the authorities themselves after an inspection or surprise visit to the school. For example, in 1977, an investigation was initiated on the Principal of a school for the blind in Montevideo. Martha was accused of insulting the children in a "vulgar" manner, of making "economic distinctions between the parents of the students," of practicing "corporal punishment" against the students, of "homosexuality," and of having "raped a girl" (Folder 2921/1977: 4). The complaint was signed by four teachers who worked at the school under her direction. The investigation showed the allegations to be false and the judge concluded that the only thing that had been proven was the dismal state of human relations among all those involved. Finally, the Intervening Body decided to sanction Martha and her four accusing colleagues with a reprimand that was recorded in their files, and the five teachers were placed under special surveillance by the authorities to prevent fur-

ther inconveniences.

In this way, complaints were often linked to local or work-related disputes or rivalries and were an expression of that conflict. For example, in December 1972, Denisse faced a letter signed by some 25 parents and neighbors who accused her before the inspection of Río Negro of "certain shameful and degrading acts for our school, and public school in general," among which: "Without daring to attack her morals, we can affirm that her general behavior leaves much to be desired" (Folder 3225/1972: 9). But on July 27, 1973, the inspection received a new letter, this time signed by two people who, having signed the first one, now wanted to retract "since we were surprised in our good faith, and totally unaware of the true purpose that motivated the letter, they urged us to sign, claiming that highly prestigious people in the area would do it" (Folder 3225/1972: 41). Two pages later in the Folder, there is a third letter, dated also on July 23, in which more than 90 neighbors signed in support of the teacher and her work, demanding her immediate reinstatement.

Thus, the *moral conduct* of female teachers appears in these administrative processes as the result of a complex web of local and institutional powers that, more than objectifying specific behavior, recreated certain inputs in order to conquer official support and prevail with their micro-political strategies in the context of local or work-related struggles. Therefore, accusations of immorality should not only be interpreted as a critique of new behaviors that challenged conservative views on the social world and gender interaction, but also as the strategic use of a discourse and a conservative perspective disseminated by the educational system to take the conflict that was experienced with an authority or between two or more members of a locality to a new level. These uses of conservative discourse were also present among the military authorities of the regime, who allegedly supported and defended it as a way of intimidating and pressuring teachers to tame their bodies and make them comply with their requests and whims. In 1976, the Technical Inspection raised a complaint against Jorgelina, a teacher in a rural school in San José, to which it attached an official document from the Police Chief of that department. The document, signed by Daniel, police superintendent of Section 1, stated that Jorgelina had been found on repeated occasions wandering in the departmental capital in the company of people identified as "belonging to leftist sectors, with the full certainty that she also professes these ideals", and that she had been registered as part of the "floating population" in various hotels in the city, "accompanied by different men suspicious of pimping" (Folder 1117/1976: 21). The investigation carried out revealed that her conduct was "impeccable," but during Jorgelina's interrogation, the underlying problem emerged: the teacher was being sexually harassed by the police superintendent. "I met him when he flirted with me on several occasions, and then I saw him when he detained me twice [...] when I was in the company of my current husband, and on that occasion, he told me that he would detain me every time he saw me with him" (File 1117/1976: 43). In order to escape the harassment, Jorgelina formalized her relationship, got married in 1976, and went to Buenos Aires for a few months. However, upon her return, the problems worsened: Jorgelina's husband was detained approximately one day every twelve days for months, and on each occasion, he was held in custody for 24 to 72 hours, without any explanation on the reasons of the police operation. Also, during the investigation, information emerged that the superintendent Daniel had been dismissed by the Ministry of the Interior in April 1977 for "irregular conduct in his private life" (File 1117/1976: 55). Nevertheless, the superintendent had also accused Jorgelina of having links to left-wing parties and this record of being an organizer of a Marxist student publication was filed in the Infantry Battalion.

Finally, on May 31, 1978, CONAE removed Jorgelina from her position, stating that her record inhibited her "from public service and especially from teaching", since educational work should seek "the moral and civic formation of students" and teachers must have "a moral conduct consistent with their functional obligations and profess the democratic ideal" (File 1117/1976: 7). The resolution mostly used political aspects to justify the dismissal, but ambiguously introduced moral aspects, despite the investigation demonstrating their inconsistency. Anti-communism often sought to discredit its enemies from a moral standpoint, in order to undermine their credibility at a more comprehensive social level. Jorgelina's case was no exception.

## 5. Final thoughts

The civilian-military dictatorship caused a loss of autonomy and of the competition system in primary education, as well as the structuring of a sophisticated system of surveillance and monitoring, which sought to align the teaching staff with the political and moral objectives of the regime. During this process, educational authorities and their middle ranks promoted heteronormative and strongly hierarchical visions of family and gender relations that sought to construct an order anchored in traditional values, as well as the diffusion of an imaginary anchored in a homogenizing and sweetened rural world. This hard-core interior, conceived as the moral reserve of the nation, was construed in opposition to the city, which led the educational institution to promote and disseminate traditional "virtuous", sober, and obedient forms of femininity, which differed in many aspects from the ideals historically disseminated during Batllismo, which were much more critical, autonomous, liberal, and secular.

Furthermore, this *strict rural morality* was used as a reason to recreate new forms of state paternalism over female teachers, inducing them to comply with traditional gender mandates and to slow down the generational changes that had been visible in the agency and bodily autonomy of women. In this way, the persecution of teachers on moral grounds during this period had some features of continuity, in that it continued to exploit traditional state tutelage over women. However, there were also signs of rupture, such as the increase in disciplinary sanctions for non-compliance with the regulations that governed the behavior of teachers in rural areas, and the introduction –for the first time in education– in the context of the Cold War, of an orthodox Catholic moral discourse on sexuality, honor, and the bodies of teachers that was linked to a profound anti-communism. These policies resulted in the dissemination of a persistent fear, mechanisms of self-censorship, and surveillance of bodily politics in a whole generation of teachers. This contributed to the naturalization of heteronormative performance in the teaching role, which eventually led to strict observance of dress and behavior in line with traditional ideals of femininity.

In addition, the research confirmed that beyond the moral, cultural, and political project of the dictatorial regime, all the actors involved in the system used these discourses and visions as inputs to formulate their complaints, as well as to legitimize their claims before the authorities and process their domestic community disputes. These strategic uses –which in many cases included objective elements– of the moral norms and imposed value system demonstrate the multiple social appropriations that a moral narrative can have at a social level. At the same time, the institutional uses of these values also make visible forms of sexual violence completely neglected until now, confirming the great heterogeneity of forms that it took during the authoritarian period.

Finally, the inquiries and hundreds of interrogations applied during the investigations show the precariousness in which these teachers had to navigate during the authoritarian period, as well as the importance of observing their professional role in an unwavering way under the gaze of others, given that any mistake could eventually lead to disciplinary action. Thus, each case file allows us to see how virtue and morality were and are, above all, a delicate collective construction that involves different types of recognition and silences, all of which express changing power relations and evaluation systems, which ultimately shape a fragile and contingent opinion about the behavior of the other, their talents, and performance at a given moment.

Both the advocacy of traditions and folklore and the importance given to any indication of a potential problem in the system also brought an increase in the discretion of middle ranks in their task of internal persecution and discipline. The analysis of persecution for moral reasons allows us to see the multiple forms civilian collaboration took within the regime, and exposes a group of principals and inspectors who, during the dictatorship period, benefited from promotions and recognition thanks to their thorough search for all types of subversion within the system, suffocating and silencing critical reflection, pedagogical experimentation, and the professionalism that the Uruguayan teaching profession had historically achieved in the process.

## Notes

[1] In the region, some key references in this axis are Andújar, D´Antonio, Gil, Grammático and Rosa (2009), Oberti (2015) and Langland (2008).

[2] The governments of José Batlle y Ordoñez (1903-1907 and 1911-1915) were marked by a reformist drive in the political, economic, and cultural levels, and a strong secular culture.

[3] The only normative precedent was subsection D of article 2 of Decree-Law no. 10,388 (Feb 13,1943), which establishes as a condition for entering the public service "to prove moral suitability by offering satisfactory information about one's life and customs."

[4] Often, educational authorities believed that there were possibilities to "regenerate" teachers considered "disobedient," while it was common for teachers who used psychoactive substances to be considered individuals with a serious health problem, and homosexuals were treated as "degenerates" who should be expelled without exception from the educational system.

[5] All of the names used are pseudonyms, in order to avoid the re-victimization of those affected by these disciplinary processes. Likewise, any information that could allow their identification has been deliberately suppressed.

[6] These complaints from neighbors can be interpreted as part of the atmosphere generated by the Cold War and the National Security Doctrine. For an analysis of this in the region, see Calandra and Franco (2012), Joseph (2008) and Roniger and Sznajder (2005).

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