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**FREEDOM OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION
AND CONSERVATIVE COUNTERPUBLICS:
an analysis of the controversies in *Desenhando com Terços*
and *O Evangelho segundo Jesus, Rainha do céu***

*LIBERDADE DE EXPRESSÃO ARTÍSTICA
E CONTRAPÚBLICOS CONSERVADORES:
análise das controvérsias em *Desenhando com Terços*
e *O Evangelho segundo Jesus, Rainha do céu**

Giuliana Kauark


 <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7313-0198>

João Domingues

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8971-6213>

Caroline Dumas

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6774-5656>

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**Freedom of artistic expression and conservative counterpublics:
an analysis of the controversies in *Desenhando com Terços* and *O Evangelho segundo Jesus, Rainha do céu***

Abstract: This article examines the tensions regarding freedom of artistic expression in Brazil, focusing on the controversies triggered by the performance *Desenhando com Terços* (Drawing with Rosaries), by Márcia X., and the play *O Evangelho segundo Jesus, Rainha do Céu* (The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven), starring the trans actress Renata Carvalho, both taken as paradigmatic of contemporary forms of censorship. To deepen the analysis of these controversies, the article draws on the sociology of public problems, adopting as a methodological principle the ordering of disturbances and problematic situations, as well as the publics and arenas they bring into being. The analysis reveals that, in clashes between different regimes of judgment, a far right counterpublic emerges and consolidates itself, acting through disruptive performances, contesting the cultural landscape, and seeking to restrict artistic productions that challenge its conservative values.

Keywords: public problems; freedom of artistic expression; far right; counterpublics; censorship.

**Liberdade de expressão artística e contrapúblicos conservadores:
análise das controvérsias em *Desenhando com Terços* e *O Evangelho segundo Jesus, Rainha do céu***

Resumo: O artigo examina as tensões em torno da liberdade de expressão artística no Brasil, destacando as controvérsias envolvendo a performance *Desenhando com Terços*, de Márcia X., e o espetáculo *O Evangelho segundo Jesus, Rainha do céu*, protagonizado pela atriz trans Renata Carvalho, ambas tomadas como exemplares das manifestações de censura contemporânea. Para aprofundar a análise dessas controvérsias, o artigo se fundamenta na sociologia dos problemas públicos, tendo como princípio metodológico a ordenação dos distúrbios e situações problemáticas, bem como dos públicos e arenas criadas. A análise revela que, nos embates entre diferentes regimes de ajuizamento, emerge e se consolida um contrapúblico de extrema direita, que atua por meio de performances disruptivas, disputa o cenário cultural e busca cercear as produções artísticas que confrontam seus valores conservadores.

Palavras-chave: problemas públicos; liberdade de expressão artística; extrema direita; contrapúblicos; censura.



1 Introduction

This text seeks to contribute to a set of tense and seemingly irresolvable issues that have intensified amid the rise of conservative and right-wing publics – or, as we shall argue, counterpublics. We refer to the relations between the human right to freedom of artistic expression, its potential conflicts with manifestations of the religious phenomenon, and the implications that contemporary forms of censorship hold for artistic production.

To situate this debate within its complex terrain, we begin by outlining certain mediations we consider crucial. The first concerns the discursive recourse to censorship, typically invoked by individuals – often within the artistic field – who have faced direct obstacles to the circulation of their work and/or personal attacks. Our discussion draws on recent studies on the subject (Costa; Sousa Junior, 2019), and approaches censorship in ways that depart from the notion of prior restraint, which was institutionalized as state policy in Brazil during parts of the Getúlio Vargas era and the civil-military dictatorship. Unlike these earlier forms, contemporary censorship operates through indirect and informal means—yet proves no less effective.

The second mediation concerns the act of enunciation by those responsible for potential censoring gestures. Though it may seem self-evident, it is important to underscore that those who impose restrictions on artistic activity will not publicly identify themselves as censors. Instead, this enunciation will appear to be rejected by those interested in the impediments, with other meanings being mobilized;

A third aspect concerns the scale of such processes. While these controversies are sharply felt within our political community, it is clear that censorship-related incidents are by no means exclusive to the Brazilian context. On the contrary, international reports have denounced violations of freedom of artistic expression (ONU, 2013; UNESCO, 2020). This may reveal that chains of censorial events and censorship strategies can give rise to fringes that cannot be deciphered strictly in terms of local tensions.

Accordingly, we call attention to non-native circuits of restriction that have gained traction over the past decade and a half, even when emerging from democratic processes within their respective countries. These experiences – largely animated by efforts to reinvigorate repertoires of the far right political spectrum – have revealed a recurring pattern of subtraction regarding retreats from policies advancing sexual diversity and gender equality; setbacks in religious tolerance initiatives; escalating tensions around immigration; among others. These areas of dispute also infiltrate the domain of culture. As diversity and difference – found in repertoires of gender performance, faith expression, and non-heteronormative aesthetics that contest monolithic identities – become central to aesthetic expression, culture and its productive structures increasingly come under the scrutiny of far right groups (Haggard; Kaufman, 2021; Kristóf, 2017).

A fourth dimension concerns the high frequency of such incidents in Brazil. These



episodes have unfolded within the context of the New Republic, although they appear to have intensified – or at least gained greater visibility – over the past decade. A common argument attributes this shift to the rupture triggered by the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, which fractured the fragile pact among antagonistic social groups that had been tenuously mediated under *Lulismo* (Singer, 2012). This rupture opened space for the emergence of a radicalism aimed at halting the expansion of rights for certain segments of society. In light of the volume of controversies affecting the artistic and cultural sphere, we suggest that the supposed democratic pacification of Brazilian society may have been overstated. Within this context, it is plausible that heuristic frameworks have overlooked social environments in which the expansion of rights was not perceived as progress.

In this article, we examine two moments in which freedom of artistic expression was curtailed due to conflicts framed by notions of the sacred. These artworks engage symbolic dimensions of Christian objects and figures that destabilize normative patterns of religiosity in the public sphere. These tensions are further intensified by a juridical debate in which two foundational dimensions of secularism collide: the rights to freedom of expression and to religious practice. What is at stake is a contest among moral worlds engaged in an ongoing dispute.

The first case dates back to 2006, in a controversy surrounding the exhibition *Erótica – os sentidos na arte* (Eroticism – The Senses in Art), then on display at the Banco do Brasil Cultural Center (CCBB) in Rio de Janeiro. The sponsor – a mixed-capital bank – intervened directly in the curatorial process, removing a reproduction of *Desenhando com Terços* (Drawing with Rosaries), a work by Márcia X., who had passed away in 2005, and canceling the exhibition's transfer to the CCBB in Brasília. The removed piece was a photographic representation of the performance, which featured a pair of rosaries intertwined to resemble two crossing penises. The episode received widespread media coverage in newspapers such as *O Globo*, *Jornal do Brasil*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, and *Correio Braziliense*, and mobilized the artistic community – somewhat taken aback by what seemed to be a lingering residue of censorship, even if ostensibly isolated and non-institutionalized, unlike previous moments of democratic suspension in Brazil (Lança, 2017; Oliveira, 2011; 2014).

A little over a decade after that controversy, in 2017, the creators of the play *O Evangelho segundo Jesus, Rainha do céu* (The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven), starring the trans actress Renata Carvalho in the role of Jesus Christ, faced a veritable crusade against its staging and circulation in various cities and performing arts festivals. The play, a monologue based on the work of British playwright Jo Clifford, was adapted for the Brazilian context and directed by Natalia Mallo. It explores the presence of Jesus in contemporary Brazil through the body of a trans woman. Since its debut, the production has been the target of intense online attacks led by religious leaders, politicians, institutions, and individuals. In addition, it faced legal actions that resulted in its prohibition. Given the wide repercussion of the case, alongside others that occurred during the



same period and political context¹, it became emblematic for the analysis of censorship of artistic expression in post-2016 Brazil (Lima, 2022; Oliveira, Camelo, Orlandini, 2022).

In this article, we examine the sacred controversies surrounding Drawing with rosaries and The gospel according to Jesus, Queen of heaven, analyzing them through the lens of the political period and the sociological study of public problems. More specifically, we seek to understand how freedom of artistic expression becomes socially constructed as a public issue, considering the actions of publics and counterpublics involved, the strategies they employ, the public arenas legitimized in the conflict, and the role of the state in institutionalizing the matter. This article does not aim to resolve the conflicts at stake, but rather to illuminate dimensions of the issue shaped by the political agendas of far right groups, their politico-legal-discursive interventions in the realm of public morality—understood here as censorial—and their impact on the restriction of rights and freedoms, particularly in the arts.

2 Sacred Controversies: Drawing with rosaries and The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven

In 2006, the CCB (Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil) in Rio de Janeiro hosted the exhibition *Erótica – os sentidos na arte* (Erótica – The Senses in Art), which featured around 110 works by more than 50 artists. One particular piece drew public attention following broad media coverage. It was a still image depicting the performance Drawing with rosaries by the artist Márcia X., which portrayed a pair of rosaries arranged to stylize two intercrossed penises.

Controversy surrounding the piece arose after Carlos Dias, a former state deputy and pre-candidate for governor of Rio de Janeiro, filed a report with the civil police. Known for having passed the law that instituted confessional religious education in the state's public schools, Dias reported the artwork as constituting the crimes of public offense to decency through obscene objects and insult to religion or disruption of related acts, both provided for in the Brazilian Penal Code. His complaint was grounded in the claim that Drawing with rosaries offended the religious sensibilities of Catholics and violated public decency. He also stressed the presence of children at the exhibition, and the possibility that they might have seen the work in question. The local press reported and widely disseminated his complaint.

¹ Santander Cultural, the institution hosting the show, following a major social media campaign accusing some of the works of promoting pedophilia, blasphemy, and zoophilia, prematurely shut down the exhibition *Queermuseu – Cartografias da diferença na arte brasileira* (Queermuseum – Cartographies of Difference in Brazilian Art). As another case, *La Bête* is a performance by Brazilian artist Wagner Schwartz in which the audience is invited to manipulate the choreographer's body; he was accused of pedophilia after a video of the performance went viral, showing a child and her mother touching the artist's hands and feet while he was nude. Both cases occurred in September 2017, the same month that the first prohibition of The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven took place.



At the same time, the piece was already being discussed online, especially in communities on Orkut, a social media platform widely used in Brazil at the time. Paola Lins Oliveira (2011) observed that the first online mention of the case came from Felipe Aquino on the Catholic news portal of the Canção Nova Community. In his post, Aquino condemned the exhibition as offensive to the faithful and encouraged readers to file formal complaints with Banco do Brasil. The controversy was soon shared across Orkut communities dealing with Catholic issues, thus spreading knowledge of Márcia X.'s work. Numerous comments condemned the exhibition and reported contacting the bank to demand the removal of the piece due to the perceived offense.

Shortly thereafter, the CCBB's board of directors ordered the removal of Drawing with rosaries without informing the exhibition's curator. The official statement cited the criminal complaint and the large volume of phone calls and emails as justification for the decision. This prompted numerous reactions and petitions – both from artistic and religious figures and organizations – either in support of or against what was seen as censorship by the cultural center. A religious group launched the campaign “Blasphemy No! Catholics Out of Banco do Brasil,” while in contrast, artists organized a protest in front of the CCBB where people wore shirts that read “Educa-ação/censura não” (“Educa-action/no censorship”). Cardinal Dom Eusébio Scheidt, Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, issued a statement supporting the removal of works deemed offensive to Christian religion. Conversely, Minister of Culture Gilberto Gil issued a public statement declaring that “all censorship is unacceptable,” and called for the CCBB's decision to be reversed. He also cited Article 5, Section IX of the Brazilian Constitution, which affirms that “the expression of intellectual, artistic, scientific, and communication activity is free, regardless of censorship or license”.

Ultimately, the exhibition's scheduled presentation at the CCBB in Brasília was canceled. The institution released a statement claiming the cancellation was due to threats by other artists to withdraw their work in protest of the removal of Márcia X's piece. These artists had conditioned their continued participation on the reinstatement of Drawing with rosaries, a demand the Bank did not fulfill. As a result, the entire exhibition was canceled rather than having the artwork reinstated.

This controversy featured public claims that Drawing with rosaries was offensive to the religious sentiments of Christians, especially Catholics. On the other hand, there were strong defenses of Márcia X.'s work, with arguments maintaining that the piece was not offensive or that the right to artistic and cultural freedom of expression protects works of art even when they challenge certain moral codes. The arguments raised in this debate echoed those later seen in the controversy over the play *The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven*, more than a decade later.

What if Jesus returned as a travesty today? This question is the central premise of the aforementioned play. The Brazilian adaptation of the performance faced criticism from sectors of society from the moment of its premiere in 2016, during the *Festival Internacional de Londrina* (FILO) in the state of Paraná. Due to its inclusion in the festival, religious organizations issued public statements condemning the play. They argued that the production disrespected the image



of Jesus Christ by portraying him as a transgender woman, and that having a *travesti* actress in the role was offensive to religious sentiment. These responses sparked local controversy in Londrina, motivating both opposition to and support for the performance. On that occasion, the play was staged in a different venue than originally scheduled due to protests.

The Gospel gained national attention the following year, in 2017, when it was scheduled to be performed at the SESC Theater in the city of Jundiaí, São Paulo. Less than two hours before the performance, while actress Renata Carvalho was in the dressing room preparing, she was informed that the play had been legally banned following a court decision initiated by a local resident. The lawsuit claimed that the play was offensive to Christian faith because it portrayed Christ as “a transgender person.” Arguments citing the sanctity of Jesus Christ were coupled with legal reasoning, raising the issue of the boundaries of freedom of expression. While acknowledging the constitutional right to freedom of expression, the plaintiff insisted that this right does not permit offenses or disrespect toward religion and its adherents. The performance, therefore, was framed as a form of religious intolerance – what the complainant called “a hate crime that violates freedom and human dignity”. The court ruled in favor of the complaint and prohibited the performance at SESC Jundiaí. The judge’s decision was based on the assumption, shared by the plaintiff, that portraying Jesus Christ as a *travesti* in a theatrical setting was a form of ridicule and a violation of Christian religious sensibilities.

The unprecedented nature of the court decision drew public attention to the play and the case of its prohibition. Many people spoke out, denouncing the ban as an act of censorship and an attack on artistic freedom. However, other groups supported the decision. Councilman Douglas Medeiros (PP), for instance, proposed a motion of repudiation against the play in the city councilor of Jundiaí, which was approved by the plenary a few days after the prohibition.

The case sparked a wave of activity on social media. An avalanche of comments flooded Facebook pages, particularly the play’s official page. While regular posts gathered fewer than ten comments, the post about the court ruling amassed over two thousand, split between supporters and critics. From then on, the play became engulfed in an atmosphere of intolerance and aggression. Far right pages and conservative politicians posted comments against the production or circulated news about it. Such acts which alone sufficed to incite a flood of hostile and threatening comments against the people involved in the play’s production, especially the actress. The messages incited hatred against trans people, propagated stigmatization, and included threats of physical violence—even death—against the actress.

Additional legal actions sought to ban the play in the cities of Porto Alegre (RS) and Belo Horizonte (MG), but in both cases, the requests were denied. Nevertheless, a second court decision prohibited the play from being staged in the city of Salvador during the *Festival Internacional de Artes Cênicas da Bahia* (FIAC) in October 2017. As in Jundiaí, the accusation that the play offended Christians was based solely on the portrayal of Jesus Christ as a trans woman, played by a *travesti* actress. The debate around the play and the clash between freedom



of artistic expression and religious sentiment continued in the other cities where the play was scheduled. Ordinary citizens, religious leaders, artists, and politicians expressed their views sometimes intensely, whether in an organized fashion or not, both in the spaces where the play was performed and online.

This also occurred in 2018, in the cities of Rio de Janeiro, Garanhuns, and Recife. In the capital of Rio de Janeiro, then-mayor Marcelo Crivella refused to provide a public venue for the festival *Mostra Corpos Visíveis*, in which *The Gospel* was to be included. In a video posted on social media, he stated: “Under my administration, no show, no exhibition will offend people’s religion. I will not allow it. As long as I’m mayor, we will respect the conscience and religion of the people” (Crivella, 2018).

In Garanhuns and Recife, the organizers of the events that were to host the play decided to cancel the performances following public backlash. In Recife, the monologue had been advertised as part of the *Janeiro de Grandes Espetáculos* (JGE) festival, but after another virtual crusade against the play, the organizers canceled the performance. The *Festival de Inverno de Garanhuns* (FIG) witnessed perhaps the most violent episode, as described by actress Renata Carvalho herself (Carvalho as cited in Ker, 2018). The decision by the city government and the state of Pernambuco (both producers of FIG) to cancel the performance had national repercussions, including a statement from presidential candidate (and future president) Jair Bolsonaro, who posted on X (formerly Twitter): “Who benefits from portraying Christ as a trans person? Is this freedom of expression? Is it art? Is it culture?” (Bolsonaro, 2018).

Artists such as Daniela Mercury and Johnny Hooker came to the play’s defense and criticized the festival: “We are at a festival that falsely celebrates freedom. Well, I want to say that Jesus is also a *travesti*” (Hooker as cited in Albertim, 2018). Furthermore, opponents of censorship launched a crowdfunding campaign to enable *The Gospel* to be performed in Garanhuns, even if outside the FIG, and the effort succeeded. During the performance, an explosion occurred in the venue – apparently caused by a bomb – which created a sense of panic. A general commotion ensued, involving the actress, the audience, the FIG organizers, and the security personnel, who had been hired to protect the artists but instead threatened to ‘punch’ Renata and blocked people from entering the performance space

In the five cities where the play was barred (by court order, denial of public space, or cancellation by a festival), there was intense mobilization on social media. Religious groups (both Catholic and Evangelical), politicians (city councilor members, state and federal representatives, mayors, and the president), and numerous individuals posted comments online attacking the play and actress Renata Carvalho. Among thousands of messages circulated on Facebook, Instagram, X and other platforms, many incited hatred against the actress and the LGBTQIAPN+ community. Hostile comments threatened to throw rotten eggs, beat, whip, assault, torture, administer electric shocks, break limbs, crucify, hang, shoot, bomb, and murder. In each city where the play was scheduled, politicians and religious leaders called upon their followers to join in the smear campaign.



In this sacred controversy, there was an escalating violence in the conflict between freedom of artistic expression and religious sentiment.

3 Freedom of artistic expression as a public issue

We now turn to an interpretation of the controversies briefly described above, using as our analytical framework several elements found in the definition of public problems. It is important to note that the fields of sociology and political science in the United States and France have made significant contributions to this debate, which remains underexplored in the Brazilian context. These theoretical approaches suggest quite different paths. One such path involves examining how a particular sensitive issue, specific to a certain social group, is amplified in scale and transformed into a matter to be addressed publicly. It entails understanding how feelings of unease are processed in order to define a shared social reality among various actors of the public sphere.

The issues at stake involve diverse and complex gradients: environmental, racial, and economic dimensions, along with representations of gender, sexuality, religiosity, or spatial concerns. What this body of literature invites us to reflect upon is, in fact, the itinerary of publicization. To render a problem public involves a heuristic inquiry into how certain issues are framed through distinct regimes of engagement: Who initiates the issue? What are the social positions of these actors that shape their attention to and interpretation of the matter? What strategies do they employ to elicit recognition from other groups? Which arenas are legitimized by the various actors engaged in the struggle to define the problem? (Valcarce, 2005). These questions enable us to identify how group perceptions of problems are embedded in conflicts among different regimes of judgment. (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2020).

By employing the notion of public problems to investigate constraints on freedom of artistic expression, our aim is to underscore the importance of identifying and analyzing disturbances and problematic situations, the publics involved, and the arenas of debate that form around the issue. Daniel Cefaï (2017), a key reference in this line of thought, elucidates the dynamics through which a public problem takes shape:

Faced with a problematic situation whose consequences are perceived and evaluated by a group of people as harmful (...) these individuals become uneasy, question, investigate, experiment, and discuss. They try to define the problem, determine its causes, detect its factors, and assign responsibility. They associate and organize, find leaders to make their voices heard and to persuade and mobilize on a larger scale. They speak out, testify, evaluate, argue, criticize, deliberate, and appeal to public opinion and authorities. When they do not intervene, they seek solutions on their own, imagine scenarios, propose alternatives, and attempt to figure out how to regulate or eliminate what they have defined as a problematic situation (Cefaï, 2017, p. 188).



According to Cefaï (2017, p. 191), the disturbance is “of an affective, sensitive, and normative order. When not yet articulated in descriptive and conceptual language, it is experienced as unease, agitation, confusion, anxiety, or obsession”. Not every disturbance becomes a recognized problem, it depends on the scale and success of collective mobilization around it. According to the author, there is a dimension of collective passion inherent in experiencing a disturbance.

Our initial argument is that the works *Drawing with Rosaries* and *The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven* may be identified as moments of disturbance that, in a specific political conjuncture, revealed how elements of artistic production reflect the escalation of public problems. Following Cefaï’s (2017) definition, we understand that those who felt affected perceived both works as unacceptable, illegitimate, or intolerable. It is essential to seek evidence of unease, agitation, and obsession on the part of the groups and individuals involved – motivations that quickly triggered collective mobilization.

In the case of *Drawing with Rosaries*, the criminal complaint dissemination on virtual communities and the encouragement of numerous complaints via email and phone calls revealed a strong urge to remove the work from the exhibition immediately, reflecting a sense that the issue required a quick institutional response. The organized protests and the campaign “No to Blasphemy! Catholics Out of Banco do Brasil,” led by João Carlos Rocha, further evidenced active mobilization by groups opposing the presence of the work at CCBB.

In *The gospel according to Jesus, Queen of heaven*, the intense mobilization on social media, with messages of hate and defamation, also reflected unease and agitation from those who opposed the play’s content and message. More gravely, the threats and attacks directed at the actress and production team in particular – and the LGBTQIAPN+ community more broadly – revealed a disproportionate aggressiveness in the conflict between religiosity and artistic expression.

It is important to stress that a disturbance can only become a public problem if it combines instituted and instituting elements. On the one hand, it is pre-shaped by precedents such as practices, beliefs, customs, or a public culture grounded in previous problematizations. On the other, it depends on a network of symbolic, legal, mediatic, and institutional mechanisms that sustain its presence in public debate.

In both cases, we can observe how several mechanisms were activated. The representation of religious figures and symbols in contexts that challenge social norms – especially regarding gender and sexuality – became a significant symbolic mechanism, both explored and contested in the works, forming the conflicts crux. Legal actions and court decisions underscored the use of the judicial system as another mechanism, mainly to suppress freedom of artistic expression, a recurrent trait of contemporary censorship, often referred to as “judicial censorship” (Costa & Sousa Junior, 2019, p. 31). In terms of media mechanisms, in addition to traditional press coverage, social media emerged as a locus to amplify debate, expose controversies, and engage a broader set of stakeholders. Finally, administrative actions and decisions, especially from institutions that maintain cultural venues



and/or festivals, were evident. We can also consider as institutional mechanisms the activation of leadership figures, civil society organizations, legislators, and more.

Therefore, it is crucial to mobilize the topology of agents involved in the situation. Political leaders or public figures become prominent as representatives of the people and/or the state, seeking to project an image of defenders of traditional values, and assuming the role of formal complainants. Certain religious sectors and institutions – especially those not aligned with heterodox interpretations of faith – also stand out, striving to take active part in the public debate when it touches on moral controversies. Lastly, we also observe citizens who identify with the issues at stake, mobilized through a form of digital activism in the first case, or the smear campaign on social media in the second.

A public problem is far from unanimous – on the contrary, it is constituted by the absence of consensus or agreement. When relations of tension and conflict go beyond the individuals directly involved and come to concern a broader population, they take on the character of a political process. As a result, the conflict gives rise to a public, especially when it becomes possible to identify two opposing camps confronting each other over an issue, addressing an audience.

In the cases studied, these two camps represent conflicting moral communities: on one side, a public whose interpretive framework of faith and its religious symbols appears less receptive to secular views; and on the other, a group composed of artists and their supporters, who advocate for the questioning role of art, including works that critique religion's place in society. To the contributions from the sociology of public problems, we add the concept of counterpublic, as explored by Camila Rocha (2018), given the relevance of her analysis of the emergence and consolidation of the Brazilian new right.

Initially associated with Nancy Fraser's (1990) perspective, which linked it to subaltern groups, the concept of the counterpublic refers to marginal groups that develop discourses in opposition to the dominant narrative. Under the influence of theorists such as Michael Warner (2002), greater emphasis has been placed on the performative and disruptive nature of counterpublics, regardless of their subaltern position. It has been argued that the notion of counterpublic may also encompass conservative and right-wing groups, even though these have historically been part of the establishment. In certain political contexts, such groups may adopt an anti-establishment stance in response to perceived threats to their interests or ways of life.

When theorists of the sociology of public problems state that the emergence of an issue gives rise to a public, we must not overlook the fact that the collective identity that gathers and mobilizes such public results from a gradual formation process over decades. It is relevant to associate this phenomenon of public creation in the cases addressed here with Rocha's (2018) reading of the new (far) right in Brazil as a counterpublic.

According to the researcher, following Brazil's redemocratization, it became uncomfortable to identify as right-wing – a phenomenon labeled in other Latin American countries as the “ashamed



right.” As a result, there was a decline in the influence of conservative ideologues, who lost support with the democratic transition and shifting interests on the part of both the state and business elites. This “shame,” however, began to dissipate during the height of *lulismo* (2006–2010), a moment that combined profound changes in communication practices – through the popularization of social media and the expansion of broadband internet access – with the native political context, in which the *mensalão* scandal became the visible thread around which discourses on political corruption were organized. At the time, a crucial space for counterpublic expression was the social network Orkut², in which communities proliferated, bringing together individuals who felt unrepresented in traditional arenas of political debate. It is no coincidence that the year 2006 and the Orkut platform mark the “Drawing with rosaries” case

Regarding the censorship of *The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven*, in which we observe an orchestrated and institutionalized action, it coincides with the period of consolidation of this counterpublic. According to Rocha (2018), the consolidation of the far right counterpublic in the cultural scene and political system takes place starting from the pro-impeachment campaign against Dilma Rousseff, a moment in which this group sought to move beyond online debate and adopt other forms of intervention in the public sphere. In this sense, the author highlights street demonstrations and protests, the increased penetration of right-wing literature in the publishing market, and a closer relationship with institutional politics. We can conclude that the formation and rise of this counterpublic, as well as its success in mobilization, may be attributed to factors including: the creation of strong collective identities; emotional dynamics arising from interactions between political groups and moral communities; and tactical use of social media.

The identity of the new Brazilian far right counterpublic is shaped by a complex combination of ideological, sociocultural, and, in a certain sense, technological elements. From the outset, it defends traditional values such as family, patriotism, and social order, aligning itself with certain anachronisms, such as authoritarianism and intolerance, as well as with charismatic leaders who embody these beliefs. It employs symbols, images, and narratives (such as flags, slogans, logos, and memes) that resonate with the group’s values and beliefs and contribute to the construction of its collective identity and the mobilization of followers. Moreover, it defines itself in opposition to the dominant narratives in the public sphere, criticizing left-wing policies, progressive social movements, and institutions it views as promoting an agenda contrary to its conservative values. Finally, it makes intense use of social media for mobilization and coordination, while expressing distrust in established political and media institutions. Crucial elements in the emergence of this counterpublic are its identity and discourse as performative, in the sense of combining aggressiveness with a certain dystopian outlook, both amplified in the virtual environment.

2 It is important to note the speed with which Orkut, created in 2004, became popular in Brazil. “In January 2006, around 75% of all users were from the country (Fragoso, 2006), signaling an early engagement of Brazilians compared to people of other nationalities in social networks of this type” (Rocha, 2018, p. 122).



In this context, it is relevant to examine the disruptive nature not of the two artistic works – which are, in fact, intentionally performative, poetic, and aimed at disturbing the existing social order – but rather of the acts of censorship they faced. In both cases, the disruptive discourse (understood here as hostile, indecorous, and politically incorrect) manifested in the digital environment, while also deploying critical-rational arguments to demand the suspension of the works. In this sense, Tuquiniqum (2024) argues that conservative embodiment has given rise to performances and appearances driven by a hatred of difference. The author also highlights a narcissistic drive for visibility through new communication technologies, suggesting that an economy of images was constructed around acts of censorship, attacking on the cultural sector.

It is important to emphasize that the digital environment should not be seen as hierarchically inferior, given that both online activism and intense harassment and defamation on social networks became crucial factors in the censorship of the artistic works under study. It must be underscored that it is not isolated individual manifestations that possess the power to intimidate, but rather the collective and persistent nature of threats that succeeds in silencing artistic and cultural expression. In the case of *The Gospel*, it was precisely the harassment on and beyond social media that most affected actress Renata Carvalho and ultimately justified the end of the play's run. In an interview granted to Caroline Dumas (2023, p. 109), the actress recounts:

I received daily death threats, was the target of defamation and fake news, a bomb attack, I wore a bulletproof vest, had police officers inside the theater, the audience was searched and passed through metal detectors—these violences made me ill; I developed panic disorder and my depression worsened. Apart from all the harassment that takes away my work and my mental health, they do everything they can to stop you and make you give up. I confess I was expelled from many places because I no longer had the strength to fight, but theater and art are the only spaces where I am passionate. [...] With the election of the ineligible candidate, the rise in violence, religious fanaticism, and the pro-gun campaign, I decided to take a break. At the same time, I was working on other shows – *Domínio Público* and the premiere of *Manifesto Transpofágico*. After some time without performing *Jesus*, I rediscovered what it was like to live without threats, for they had become so normalized in my life, and with that, I decided to bring this cycle to a close. (Renata Carvalho in interview with Caroline Dumas, 2023).

By incorporating Carvalho's voice, we must also acknowledge the emergence of another public shaped by these controversies. This public comprises artists and cultural workers, institutions, and social movements that stand against censorship and, as such, approach the issue from a perspective diametrically opposed to that of the far right counterpublic³. The aforementioned performance *Domínio Público* brought together, in addition to the actress, Wagner Schwartz, Elisabete Finger, and Maikon K, who reflected on the censorship they had faced. In an interview conducted by Isaura Tuquiniqum (2024), when asked how they resist attacks and obstructions amid the rise of the far right in Brazil, the artists emphasized that their response lies in continuing to create and present

3 In the recent period we can identify: Artigo 19, 342 Artes, Movimento Artigo Quinto, Movimento Brasileiro Integrado pela Liberdade de Expressão Artística (MOBILE), among others.



their work. This dynamic of counter-questioning is a common feature of the public arena, in which different publics help to trace lines of fracture between identities, interests, and opinions.

The public arena is a social space in which actors, driven by beliefs and convictions, negotiate, dispute, and aspire to public goods. These are spaces of confrontation and performative enactment, mobilized around different “scenes” (Cruz; Freire, 2003). The intertwining of these scenes limits the volume of competing demands, whether due to their indeterminacy or to the system’s capacity to process them. The literature also highlights a tendency for agendas to be absorbed and arenas to become institutionalized as public policies, even as it is acknowledged that solutions to public problems are not the exclusive domain of state representation (Antunes, 2020).

In the sociological analysis of public problems, both the influence of diverse publics and of the public arena, as well as the recognition and legitimation provided by segments of the state play crucial roles in the emergence and resolution of these problems. Thus, in conclusion, what interests us is to understand the degree of attention and legitimation granted by the state in the cases studied.

Although in the Drawing with rosaries controversy the CCBB opted to restrict the work before any official ruling, the federal government, represented by the Ministry of Culture, expressed its opposition to the contestation raised by the mobilized groups, as well as to the decision taken by the institution maintaining the cultural space. The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven, in turn, coincided with a context of rising conservative ideologies, which made morality-related controversies more prominent on the public agenda. Moreover, that was also a period of intense political change, with transitions and elections occurring on an atypical timeline. As such, the controversies gained traction through the platforms and agendas of political parties ascending to power. Thus, we witnessed the intense mobilization of public agents in the attempt to prevent the artistic work.

During Jair Bolsonaro’s administration, a series of actions sparked concerns about state censorship in the cultural sphere. From the dismantling of the Ministry of Culture to the suspension of public funding calls for audiovisual productions, the government adopted a critical stance toward projects it deemed immoral or inappropriate. Projects addressing LGBTQIAPN+ themes were particularly targeted, with suspensions and rejections that raised serious issues about freedom of artistic expression and ideological interference in cultural policy. These measures were perceived as part of a broader strategy to control cultural expression, posing a significant threat to diversity and freedom of expression in Brazil. It was during this period that accusations of censorship of artistic freedom in Brazil reached the agenda of the Organization of American States (OAS), becoming a topic of discussion before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). This indicates that the public arena surrounding freedom of artistic expression extended beyond the specific controversies examined, encompassing broader disputes within the domain of cultural policy.



4 Final considerations

The constitution of a public issue around freedom of artistic expression is a complex and gradual process, subject to the nuances of the political and social context in which it unfolds. An examination of these cases makes it clear that, although both generated controversies related to freedom of expression, the degree to which these issues resonated with broader publics differed significantly.

In the case of *Drawing with Rosaries*, although it provoked disturbances and conflict, the matter of artistic freedom gained only limited traction as a public issue over time. This can be partly attributed to the prevailing political and social context, which appeared more favorable to the diversity of opinion and freedom of expression at the time. The somewhat assertive statement by then-Minister of Culture Gilberto Gil, in support of the artists involved, seemed to suggest that the moment represented more of a residual obstacle than a clear instance of censorship. Nevertheless, the underlying tension between the spheres of art and religion seems to have been merely subsumed at the time, making it likely that the establishment of a counterpublic was only incipient.

By contrast, in *The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven*, various factors contributed to amplify the public issue of artistic freedom. The consolidation of counterpublics grounded in conservative moral values, a political context marked by a series of denunciations of artistic censorship, and the engagement of other actors in the republican circuit were key elements to raise the issue of artistic and cultural freedom of expression to a level of heightened public relevance.

It is important to highlight that the tensions addressed here complicate, to some extent, the “expected” trajectory of state institutionalization of public issues. In the case of Márcia X., the dispute was effectively closed by the decision of Banco do Brasil. Acting as mediator, arbiter, and executor, the bank’s decision to halt the exhibition effectively neutralized the controversy over time. However, the underlying issue remained unaddressed.

The case involving Renata Carvalho, however, proved to be far more complex. The months leading up to the staging of the play were marked by heightened tensions around artistic freedom. The 2016 Parliamentary Committee of Investigation on the Rouanet Law, the shutdown of the Queermuseum – Cartographies of Difference in Brazilian Art exhibition, and the controversy on Wagner Schwartz’s performance *La Bête* at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, both in 2017, revealed more “seasoned” strategies from legislative actors aligned with religious conservatism⁴.

As in 2006, there was also a statement from the Minister of Culture in office in 2017, which was somewhat more vacillating, however. The then Minister Sérgio Sá Leitão was recorded during a meeting with members of the evangelical caucus in the federal legislature, offering a personal opinion

⁴ In the same year, a bill was filed in the Senate to prohibit the granting of incentives under the Rouanet Law for cultural projects that incite crimes or violate public morals. For more information see (PROIBIÇÃO [...], 2018).



that the MAM-SP case may have violated the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Braga, 2017). In an official note regarding Queermuseum, the former Minister invoked the principles of freedom of expression and artistic creation, while also defending indicative ratings (ESCLARECIMENTO [...], 2017).

Having been the target of both public attacks and legal challenges, the months during which the play was performed demonstrated how unresolved the issue remains. What emerges in the contested arena of cultural production at the limits of artistic freedom is a performative clash between enduring moral systems. Efforts to resolve this dispute appear increasingly to shift from the political-institutional arena – in which no consensus for normative production exists – into the judicial sphere. Yet within that arena, the inconsistent rulings, as seen in the case of *The gospel According to Jesus, Queen of heaven*, offer little promise.

Finally, this study reinforces the understanding of the far right in Brazil as a counterpublic, particularly through its disruptive performativity. This performativity mobilizes its audience by provoking disturbances and eliciting intense emotions such as repulsion and indignation, fostering a form of engagement that amplifies its presence in the public sphere. Such tactics serve to reaffirm and expand conservative values. The far right's disruptive actions – from aggressive online behavior to orchestrated public demonstrations – aim not only to incite controversy but also to reframe human rights and diversity agendas as public problems. Through the examination of these sacred controversies, we observed how the emergence of freedom of artistic expression as a public issue has served to legitimize contemporary forms of censorship. In response, artists continue to create and to assert the political significance of the arts.



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Academic Biography

Giuliana Kauark - Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia (UFRB)

Professor at the Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia, Centro de Cultura, Linguagens e Tecnologias Aplicadas, Santo Amaro, Bahia, Brazil.

E-mail: giulianakauark@ufrb.edu.br

João Domingues - Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF)

Professor at the Universidade Federal Fluminense, Instituto de Arte e Comunicação Social, Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

E-mail: joaodomingues@id.uff.br

Caroline Dumas - Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA)

Doctoral student at the Universidade Federal da Bahia, Programa Multidisciplinar em Cultura e Sociedade, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

E-mail: caroldumasoli@gmail.com

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Júlia Guimarães

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