

# Society, phobias, and differences

## *Sociedade, fobias e diferenças*

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**ABSTRACT** This essay had as object of analysis the ‘gender identities/sexuality’, from issues of the so-called ‘customs agenda’, in the 21st century. The discussion proposed here is articulated to the social needs of health in the vast Brazilian territory. The thought of Foucault, Butler, Derrida, and other authors of the ‘post-structuralist’ spectrum, are used to reflect on the relationship between identity and difference, and its impact on the control over bodies, in a continuous discriminatory process with the perpetuation of the cycles of violence and exclusion.

**KEYWORDS** Gender identity. Sexuality. Sexual and gender minorities. Homophobia.

**RESUMO** *Este ensaio teve como objeto de análise as ‘identidades de gênero/sexualidade’, a partir de questões da chamada ‘pauta de costumes’, no século XXI. A discussão aqui proposta está articulada às necessidades sociais de saúde no amplo território brasileiro. Recorre-se ao pensamento de Foucault, Butler, Derrida e outros autores do espectro ‘pós-estruturalistas’, para refletir sobre a relação entre identidade e diferença e sua repercussão no controle sobre os corpos, em um contínuo processo discriminatório, com a conservação dos ciclos de violência e exclusão.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** *Identidade de gênero. Sexualidade. Minorias sexuais e de gênero. Homofobia.*

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## Introduction

It is curious to think of writing – and do write – a theoretical essay that takes as its object of analysis the theme of ‘gender identities/sexualities’ (yes plural/multiple/s) and (re) place issues of the so-called moral agenda under reflection at the end of the first third of the 21st century.

The meanings of an apparent discomfort foresee a writing that will offer us a set of positions, almost always translated, into statements of truth. That said, it is impossible not to think about a complex level of layers, each one capable of (re)veiling a set of repeated questions that imply and are tensioned an infinity of times to the point of seeming a dynamic of eternal utopia.

I reaffirm that I do not intend to offer answers nor to produce truths that can be understood as generalizable and absolute. However, in a somewhat pretentious way, I hope to bring into dialogue authors with low consensus between themselves, and the sometimes-successful relationships that, in most cases, were relegated to generic interventions in the capacity for dialogue between social movements and the production of policies that actually address the social needs for health in the vast and unique Brazilian territory.

For that, I resort to Foucault’s thinking, supported by authors who have been at the center of my academic reflections in the recent years as a researcher, such as Butler, Derrida, and many others who have been classified as ‘post-structuralist’. I dare to question the (un)comfortable in focus (un)stable relationship between identity and difference and its effects on bodies that continue to be shaped, in a continuous process that results in violence and exclusion.

## Identity e difference

The fragility of the identity-category in our time has been very well formulated in the title

of Stuart Hall’s article<sup>1</sup>, ‘Who Needs ‘Identity’?’ The author recognizes that there is a discursive explosion around the concept of identity, while there is, equally, a continuous process of deconstruction of identity perspectives

The answer to the question/debate proposed by Hall requires a certain ‘cartography of identity’, which brings us to face the difference-category as a product or process of identity constructions.

The debate that starts from a logic structured in binary systems of thought bring into focus identity narratives as the announcement of what is immediately revealed, what is not. Thus, an identity defines/marks a difference.

Identities thus become markers of difference. As Woodward<sup>2</sup> points out, the marking of difference, based on an identity, takes place through ‘symbolic systems’ of representation as well as through processes of social exclusion.

Such symbolic systems of representation, when thought of in collectively, are on the verge of becoming an ‘everyday thought’, to employ a term used by Heller<sup>3</sup>. The author dissects this notion when reflecting on how it underlies the emergence of prejudice. For Heller<sup>3</sup>, processes of overgeneralization around a value judgment are able to shape, throughout history, a notion that such value judgment is an absolute truth, so people or social groups that escape that judgment tend to experience processes of social exclusion.

In this way, difference can be seen as something that escapes the previously introjected truth as antagonistic to certain identities. Thus, it triggers singular and collective circuits that are reified in permanent processes of ultra-generalization.

Prejudice ends up referring us to the relational forms in which the tension between identity and difference occurs. The forms and processes of signification and subjectivation and the contexts in which the processes of differentiation emerge end up signifying and re-signifying throughout history what will be allocated as another binarism that crosses

singular and collective bodies; what will be called normal/abnormal. The difference, in such a context, is constituted in a process of self-affirmation of the other, who resists the physical and symbolic violence generated on oneself from an identity seen as normal<sup>4</sup>.

This process of differentiation and apparent antagonism between identity and difference ends up determining what will easily be called hegemonic identities, setting up social scales of value in which some will have greater social respectability and acceptability than others.

One of the most visible examples of this process of social stratification and hierarchization based on the relations between identity and difference can be found in the social and cultural representations referring to gender identities and sexualities. It is widely known among scholars, the classic diagram developed by Rubin<sup>5</sup> by placing in opposition what he calls the 'charmed circle vs. outer limits.

This diagram reveals inside the charmed circle identities associated with 'good, normal, natural', while, in an antagonistic way, the 'outer limits' establish the differences as linked to 'bad, abnormal, unnatural'.

Thus, throughout history, an apparent game between identities and differences is set in motion, based on narratives between good and evil, right and wrong, moral and immoral, virtue and sin that result, within the scope of themes involving gender and sexualities, in the allocation of heterosexual, married and monogamous men as the desire of Western societies.

Likewise, the expression of these desires is: the woman, heterosexual, married, monogamous, and with children, but one step below men. There, a small gradient of difference is unveiled within hegemonic identities. Here, it is not just a question of a simple duality in which historically and culturally produced binarism are opposed, but of understanding that a binary pole can be made up of multiple binary poles within it.

## How to think of multiple different

A heteronormative logic governs the sequence that assumes that, at birth, a body must be designated as male or female, which will imply, therefore, assuming the male or female gender and then expressing desire for someone of the opposite sex/gender... once the logic that sustains such a process is binary, the multiplicity of genders and sexualities becomes unbearable (and unthinkable). Those who escape the sequence and regulatory norms risk, therefore, be in the domain of abjection<sup>6</sup>(138-139).

The logic that allows the existence and maintenance of a distinction based on the male/female binary and the social exclusion of all bodies that go beyond the well-defined tolerable limit continues to populate the daily life of societies, especially in countries where the foundations of a welfare state are still fragile or nonexistent.

The existence, in different degrees of intensity, of a certain 'tolerant humanism' creates a sense of well-being and conformity, which makes discriminatory processes and, therefore, symbolic and physical violence to LGBTQIA+ communities barely visible or seen as isolated cases.

In fact, the word tolerance already presupposes the existence of an inferior/different/object other to be tolerated. The extent of this difference determines the degree of tolerance of the one who is within the norm and regulatory standards of a society in relation to others that somehow escape the different forms of social regulation.

As Butler<sup>7</sup> warns us, a binary system infers stability in the sex/gender distinction. However, the author herself indicates the existence of a 'radical discontinuity' between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders.

Although the discontinuity and even the rupture of the sex/gender system may find bodies that go beyond and/or place themselves

in the borders well defined by binarism, nothing guarantees their social acceptability. The multiplicity of variations between sex and gender has already tried to blur boundaries based on bodies that always dare new and challenging ways of being and living.

Different, as an expression and affirmation of living without the intermediation of tolerance as a mobiliser of the relationship with the other, is not able to stop several effects molded in one's body from the experience of injury. The insult, as an act of language repeated to the point of becoming a 'performative utterance', puts back on the agenda the place of the normal. As Eribon<sup>8(29)</sup> states, "the injury tells me what I am to the extent that makes me what I am".

In the construction of the deviant subject, and under the body of the one who will be allocated in the place of difference, Judeo-Christian and biomedical narratives intersect that, over time, gain a legal framework that regulates the punishment of transgressors. These, in turn, will generate greater discrimination and end up reinforcing phobic practices within societies.

Thus, the multiple different bodies that break the identity/difference binary stability end up building what I will call invisible visibilities, that is, as bodies advance in the historical limit that delimits the transgression frontier, they make other transgressing bodies less visible. We return here to the same kind of hierarchical scale so well reflected by Rubin. This apparent return brings us another question: does this movement of 'fluctuations' between visibility and non-acceptance tend to become the parameter in which there will always be bodies (more transgressors than others) that are more discriminated against than others now related to the degree of social visibility?

The advances in legislation that protects and criminalizes homophobia still seem to be insufficient for something that is deeply rooted in the social imaginary. About this, the words of Borrilo<sup>9(107)</sup> sound like a warning:

Violence and discrimination against homosexuals often occur in the face of widespread public indifference. With some regularity, we learn that numerous gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transvestites, and transsexuals are fearful of being assaulted simply because of their sexual orientation.

This issue will be addressed later on. For now, it is necessary to keep in mind that, beyond the welcomed social protection laws, they may have little effect on their actual capacity to generate social protection. There is something that escapes and is like a ghost hovering over the entire social and political fabric.

We understand that "to name someone as a man or a woman, as a subject of gender and sexuality, means to name him or her according to the distinctive marks of a culture"<sup>10</sup>. The consequences of this labeling, in the appointed bodies, will be felt especially by those who will be left at the margin of the set of rights that they will not access, even though they are charged with a set of duties.

In any case, the questions raised by Lanz<sup>11(373)</sup> are challenging, intriguing, not to say incomprehensible:

Why, in the 21st century, is it still a current practice to deny civil rights to transgender people, citizenship rights that are guaranteed, without any restrictions, to cisgender men and women? What justifies, explains, and justifies the stigma, the social invisibility, the deprivation of opportunities, and the legal-moral indigence to which transgender people are condemned in our society?

This considering that Brazil continues to have high rates of violence and death against LGBTQIA+ populations, especially those who are transgender; and words such as 'gender ideology' and the 'moral agenda' continue to pervade political and religious discourses that result in increased discriminatory processes and, as a consequence, the maintenance of cycles of violence.

## Society, agendas and phobias

In the same way as xenophobia, racism or anti-Semitism, homophobia is an arbitrary manifestation that consists in designating the other as an opposite, inferior or abnormal; because of his/her irreducible difference, he/she is positioned at a distance, outside the common universe of humankind. Abominable crime, shameful love, depraved taste, disgusting behavior, ignominious passion, sin against nature, Sodom's vice - many other designations that for several centuries have been used to qualify the desire and the sexual and affectionate relations between people of the same sex<sup>9(13)</sup>.

Under these conditions, the presence of the other, who is different, will be a permanent condition of vulnerability. When the other becomes considered a threat (because he/she should not exist) and threatened (because his/her existence is a condition of risk), everything that refers to alterity ceases to exist.

On the other hand, the theme of alterity ends up being implicated in a game of construction/reconstruction of a duplicity of views between what I reject and what attracts me. Ambiguity ends up favoring a potential

concealment of everything that exists, but is not bearable to reveal and live within the daily life of each individual.

In this respect, it is possible to compare a study carried out by Carlos Skliar on different ways of approaching racism. In this study, Skliar refers to discrimination as:

A type of differential treatment, or rather, a specific production of alterity that penalizes what in the West has been, and still is today, named with the euphemistic minorities<sup>10(70)</sup>.

Thus, the construction of being different, in the scope of sexualities, ends up providing a political mechanism that relegates to difference an invisible visibility value, that is, it brings visibility to the subjects of difference as long as their bodies can be seen as potentially masculine. Sexualized bodies become a powerful marker of what may or may not exist and, especially, of how they should behave when granted a provisional authorization to exist.

## Collaborator

Motta JIJ (0000-0001-6435-1350)\* is responsible for drafting the manuscript ■

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