

THE IDEOLOGY OF COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND THE ABIDING PATHOLOGIZATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY – IS IT POSSIBLE TO HAVE AUTHENTIC RECOGNITION WITHOUT THE CONCEPTS OF FREEDOM AND CHOICE?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to criticize the naturalizing and psychologizing discourses on homosexuality, which we understand to be a product of the ideology of diagnostics (which defines what homosexuality is, its 'causes' etc.), and which, among other effects, produces its pathologization. Considering the case of Brazil (but not only), even when the agents of this discourse are homosexual themselves or activists in the LGBT movement, it is not rare to find statements on the existence of 'innate homosexuality' or on 'psychological sexual orientation' used as arguments against the stigma of 'abnormality' or 'perversion' applied to homosexuals, resulting in a depoliticizing argument which remains hostage of the ideology of diagnostics and pathologization. As counterpoint to the view of the fight for gay rights as a fight for recognition of a 'gay identity' (coinciding with the ideology of diagnostics) we propose the idea of a fight for changes in the cultural/moral valuation of individuals who are stigmatized by their sexual options and whose right to erotic autonomy is denied.

KEYWORDS:

Pathologization of homosexuality. Ideology of diagnostics. Recognition. Freedom of choice. Erotic autonomy.

RESUMO

Este trabalho tem o objetivo de fazer a crítica do discurso de naturalização e psicologização da homossexualidade, que entendemos ser um produto da ideologia do diagnóstico (que define o que é a homossexualidade, suas "causas" etc.), que, entre outros efeitos, produz a sua patologização. Analisando o caso do Brasil (mas não apenas), mesmo quando os agentes desse discurso são homossexuais ou ativistas do movimento LGBT, não é rara a afirmação sobre a existência de uma "homossexualidade inata" ou como "orientação sexual psicológica", como pretendo argumento contra os estigmas de "anormais" ou "pervertidos" aplicados aos homossexuais, privilegiando-se um argumento despolitizante e refém da própria ideologia do diagnóstico e de patologização. Contrapomos ao argumento da luta por direitos gays como luta por reconhecimento da "identidade gay" (coincidente com a ideologia do diagnóstico) a concepção da luta por reconhecimento como luta por mudanças na valoração cultural/moral do status de sujeitos estigmatizados por suas opções sexuais, quando se lhes nega o direito à autonomia erótica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Patologização da homossexualidade. Ideologia do diagnóstico. Reconhecimento. Liberdade de escolha. Autonomia erótica.

Although the gay cause has had some important victories and accomplishments in many places, there are still numerous attempts to keep homosexuality in the pathologization zone where it was placed once. Although it appears that homosexuality is no longer understood as a “deviation” from a so-called “normal sexual development” (supposedly “since its removal by the WHO from the list of mental disorders, in 1990”), and despite all of the claimed “advancements” made so far in several countries, in the scope of gay rights, it is certain that, in our societies, with a few differences between them, the stigma of sexual anomaly has still been impinged to homosexuality.

Gays, lesbians and transgender still find their sexuality and gender practices considered as disorders, problems, “an embarrassing issue to the families”, “personal secrets”, etc. gay, lesbian and transgender people are still subjects of everyday conversation, TV shows and the media, power-related debates. In our societies, we continually hear people say very naturally: “We accept a gay neighbour, but when it happens in our home, it’s another matter...”; “I didn’t reject him when he came out, I hugged him, took care of him... but I was ashamed, I suffered a lot because my son is gay” or “If it’s difficult for young gays to accept themselves because of all the prejudice, let alone their parents”¹. To many people, perhaps most people, including LGBT folks, homosexuality remains fateful, a fact in one’s life that can’t be dissociated from doubts, consultations, medical and psychological investigations and diagnoses on alleged causes for homosexuality.²

Nowadays, freedom of choice in the scope of sex and erotic desire are not fully acknowledged as a person’s determination to the exercise of their autonomy - doing what we Gayle Rubin called “erotic justice”³. Nowadays, freedom of choice in the scope of sex and erotic desire is still not assumed as the determination of people in exercising their autonomy. Especially, the sexuality of homosexuals remains the object of a number of speculations and pathologizations.⁴

Our hypothesis here is that even when inserted in progressive environments and granted rights, homosexuals remain seen through the prism of a pathologizing ideology, which distinguishes them as carriers of a biological or emotional specificity, presumed as the cause of a supposed sexual abnormality⁵. In this ideology, which has become the social common sense about homosexuality, the fate of gays, lesbians and transgender people will not be fulfilled with the complete acknowledgement of their rights, but in the abbreviation of such rights by many

¹Words extracted from <http://mulher.uol.com.br/comportamento/noticias/redacao/2013/09/01/pais-contam-como-encaram-a-noticia-de-que-os-filhos-sao-gays.htm> . Accessed on 09/02/2013

² Cf. Michel DORAIS, “La recherche des causes de l’homosexualité : une science-fiction ? ». In : WELZER-LANG, Daniel ; DUTEY, Pierre ; DORAIS, Michel. *La peur d l’autre en soi : du sexisme à l’homophobie*. Québec : VLB ÉDITEUR, 1994

³ Cf. Gayle RUBIN, “Pensando sobre sexo: notas para uma teoria radical da política da sexualidade”. *Cadernos Pagu*, Campinas: Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero Pagu, n. 21, p. 1-88, 2003, p.10.

⁴ Cf. Judith BUTLER, Judith. *Deshacer el género*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2006, p. 113-148

⁵ A view of homosexuality which contributed to theorists such as Sigmund Freud. See, e.g., Sigmund Freud *Três ensaios sobre a teoria da sexualidade*. Rio de Janeiro, Imago, 1972 (Obras Completas, v. VII) e, igualmente, FREUD, Sigmund. *A vida sexual dos seres humanos*. Rio de Janeiro, Imago, 1976 (Obras Completas, v. XVI)

regulations (a clear example occurred in France, with the strong protests against the legalization of gay marriage and gay adoption) or in the “hope for a cure” through medical or psychological treatment (in Brazil, such debate has been reopened with the proposition of laws for the creation of politics and devices for a “gay healing”, by homophobic congressmen from a religious platform) or in the brutal oppression and criminalization of homosexuality as it occurs in Russia, by actions of its Stalin-Nazi-Fascist totalitarian government.

It may seem like this hypothesis is dated, because nowadays homosexuality is no longer treated as pathology, either by medicine, psychology or the laws of many countries. Around the world, the laws of several countries recognize the rights of gay, lesbian and transgender people. In fact, it all became a reality, and it is undeniable that important accomplishments and advances have occurred, but what I want to demonstrate is that it all was conquered by means of great struggle, yes, absolutely! However homosexuality is still submitted to the discourse that insists on facing it as an aspect of one’s life which is not naturally evident, and deserves to be investigated about its “causes”. A kind of discourse that, interiorized by gays, lesbians and transgender themselves, has made them believe to be carriers of an exclusive sexuality, apart from the others, with “unknown ethology” and which makes them question why they have become homosexuals.

The last decades have shown several “researches” on the genesis or psychogenesis of homosexuality. Not a day goes by without articles published in newspapers, exposition in TV shows, media news, etc., about “new studies on homosexuality”, “discoveries on pre-natal factors causing individuals to be sexually attracted by the same sex”, “researches prove that all homosexuals were sexually atypical as children and teenagers, and every sexually atypical child and teenager will become a gay adult”... if nothing is done about it, days will come when we will mistake such investigations for the discovery of a new sexual species in the human zoo.

The idea that homosexuality can be (or is) biological, genetic, the reality of an individual from birth, thus being natural, innate, as it is believed as to heterosexuality, is seen by many homosexuals as a favourable matter in their struggles for identity statement and equal rights. But it is necessary to say that they are completely mistaken. The allegation that the discovery of the “biological aspects” of homosexuality is favourable to gays, lesbians and transgender people is simply depoliticized.

The permanence of a common sense (furthermore, the notion of *common sense* was claimed by conservatives in France as an argument against the institution of gay marriage, who declared to be opposed to “a law that goes against the laws of biology and against common sense”⁶), which still produces perceptions of homosexuality that turn it into an object to learn, probe, investigate, it becomes a political prop of profound ideological efficiency. The acceptable explanations on what is homosexuality end up resituating it as abnormal, incomprehensible, and something to be seen as a mishap on the way of gays, lesbians and transgender people: a

⁶ Cf. <http://www.portugues.rfi.fr/franca/20130524-manifestacao-contra-casamento-gay-no-domingo-acontece-em-clima-de-tensao>. Accessed on 03/09/2013.

genetic, physiological and psychological mishap; never coming from one's freedom of desire, freedom of choice and erotic autonomy. Being a homosexual is still a situation that inspires concern or caution, something of which the existence, accuracy and legitimacy is uncertain.

Even when the social discourse seems to assimilate a new notion for the understanding of homosexuality, as in the case of the concept of "sexual orientation", no relevant transformation occurs. More and more, the growing substantialization and naturalization of the idea of sexual orientation – which was supposed to be a substitution to the pathologization of homosexuality – resulted in nothing more than a new diagnosis for homosexuality, still of medical, scientific character, assigning to psychology and sexology the definition of this different, secluded sexuality.

This is how I propose we think we are not free from the pathologization discourse. Such discourse demonstrates its efficiency when those who were supposed to be the first to refuse it, become accomplices of its own acceptance. Today, gay people believe to be politically counterproductive, and even forbidden!, to understand the so-called "sexual orientations" as choices of one's eroticism, sensuality and desire, always subjective and singular, thus being translated as *elections, options, preferences* of one's desire. For them, the easiest method to "convince" society is appealing to the argument of nature, according to which homosexuality is a natural sexual orientation, of biological character. The refrain "I was born gay" is pronounced by some as a political alternative to the homophobic discourse.

It is not too much to repeat a naive capitulation facing the hegemonic sexual ideology which does not realize that, once more, pathologizing diagnoses for homosexuality are accepted, disguised as "scientific explanations" – we are now at the advanced age of "sexual orientation", society is now able to understand homosexuals: our sexuality is an "orientation". It is no sin or disease! Well, why, then, would this notion be strong enough against homophobia? For its capacity to naturalize homosexuality? For its conservative essentialization?

Our goal here is to present an argument that, to us, it should become part of the currently urgent revocation of the understanding that has been maintained about what constitutes homosexuality, as well as part of the production of another understanding, which might become a broadly social comprehension, and turns into a ground for social recognition (and the political struggle for recognition) of gays, lesbians and transgender people. Our questions are: Will there be an authentic *recognition*⁷ (social, political, and of rights) without the idea of sexualities as choices, preferences and options? Will the institution of some rights without the revocation of the concept of homosexuality as a separated "sexual orientation" (caused by some undiscovered fact, or another cause inside the zone of pathologic irregularities) represent true

⁷ Here, we use the concept of recognition as do Charles TAYLOR, *A política do reconhecimento*. In: _____. *Argumentos filosóficos*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2000. p. 241-2; Axel HONNETH. *Luta por reconhecimento: a gramática moral dos conflitos sociais*. São Paulo: Ed. 34, 2003 and Nancy FRASER. "Reconhecimento sem ética?" In: *Lua Nova*, São Paulo, 70: 101-138, 2007.

emancipation? Will recognition without the notions of choice and freedom in the scope of desire and sex effectively represent a social transformation?

To these questions, I answer NO. For true emancipation and authentic recognition, the pathologizing concept of homosexuality must be revoked, multiplied into many versions, even when disguised in the ideology of liberalizing acceptance or family love (“which should put love above all prejudice”), even though remaining prejudiced.

I could rely on Nancy Fraser’s concept, when proposing that claiming for recognition means *claiming for justice*. As highlighted by the author, the recognition of persons or entire groups, social sectors, etc., means *social subordination*, meaning that all of them are deprived of *participating as equals* in social life: “what makes non-recognition morally acceptable, under this perspective, is that it denies some individuals the possibility to participate as equals in social interaction”. And she proceeds: “Repairing injustice certainly requires a recognition policy, but that does not mean another identity policy. Otherwise, that means a policy that aims to overcome subordination, integrating people who are falsely recognized as members of society, able to participate with other members as equals. Conceiving the non-recognition as a *status* subordination, they see the mistakes in social networks, not in individual or interpersonal psychology. Being falsely recognized, under this perspective, means not only to be undeserved or devalued in conscious attitudes and other people’s beliefs. [...] It means, instead, being denied of participating as integral partner in social interaction, and being prevented from participating as a pair in social life, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural valuation defining someone as undeserving of respect and esteem”.⁸

The ultimate depathologization of male and female homosexuality requires a politic battle and a counter discourse policy, so that (inspired by Judith Butler⁹), *dediagnosing* sexualities, they will be once and for all liberated from medical, psychological and pedagogical categorizations. This requires the reflections and political struggles for gay rights recognition to cast off the combined discourse of biology, medicine, psychology – a branch of medicine, extension of the medical discourse. As long as the idea that homosexuality is something that needs to be explained, diagnosed, revealed, is consented, gay desire will remain in the sphere of pathology.

The unacceptable factor to the hegemonic sexual ideology and the homophobia produced by such ideology is the mere idea of the freedom implied in the concept of homosexuality as desire, a choice, a preference, an option. In our societies, many cannot accept the idea that homosexuality is a choice, decision-making, although entirely conscientious and totally well-resolved. In the ideas defended by various studies (anthropological, sociological, historical and psychoanalytic), sexual desire is constructed in personal paths in which numerous elements are

⁸ Cf. Nancy FRASER. “Reconhecimento sem ética?” In: *Lua Nova*, São Paulo, 70: 101-138, 2007, p.107

⁹ Cf. Judith Butler, “Desdiagnosticar el género”. In: _____. *Deshacer el género*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2006, p.118.

blended, following conscious and unconscious directions, always culturally and historically situated, but always a choice in the economy of pleasures.

We understand that, for the end of the current sexual ideology, under the baton of compulsory heterosexuality¹⁰, the source of homophobia, it is primal to refuse every ideology of diagnosis that makes homosexuality something to be investigated, scanned, probed, as an object of medical, psychological curiosity, etc.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the only way to achieve the end of the pathologization of homosexuality and of all erotic-sexual practices dissidents from the hegemonic sexual ideology and the correlated homophobia, is the affirmation of sexual desires as libidinal, sexual, emotional choices based on the freedom and on the exercise of erotic autonomy – having no relation to genetic, physiological, psychological or environmental determinants.

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¹⁰ The expression "compulsory heterosexuality" was first used in an article by American essayist Adrienne Rich, in 1980. By the expression, the author understands heterosexuality as a political institution, a politically motivated agency, of overvaluation of the heterocentric culture and heterosexism, institutionalizing not only the deletion of the existence of lesbianism and feminism, but homosexuality in general. The following uses of such expression, varying from compulsory heterosexuality to mandatory heterosexuality, as in Judith Butler, Didier Eribon, inter alia, intend to point out the dominance of an ideology of consecration and institutionalization of heterosexuality as unique, universal, natural, innate and legitimated as "normal".

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