

# May I speak for myself? – Notes on diversity

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Recently, on a short introduction to his vote in favor of the criminalization of homophobia in Brazil, the Supreme Federal Court minister, Celso de Mello, gave the following warning:

I know that due to my vote and to my well-known position to protect the rights of minorities (who compose the so-called ‘vulnerable groups’), I will inevitably be included in the ‘Index’ kept by enthusiasts of intolerance, whose somber minds... ignore the importance of the harmonious and respectful cohabitation of antagonist world views!

The minister’s caveat echoes the recent global exacerbation of intolerance to diversity and intransigence in face of otherness. In November 2017, in São Paulo, a true cultural war took place when conservative groups tried to stop philosopher Judith Butler’s participation at the public event *The Ends of Democracy*. The entrance of the emblematic venue SESC Pompeia became the stage of a Dantesque spectacle, in which protest phrases were accompanied by the setting on fire of dummies representing Butler. Under the influence of huge ideological and moral impregnation, protesters deviated her ideas on gender identity towards themes such as pedophilia, sexual abuse, and indoctrination of children and adolescents.

In such situations, the mobilization of affections of love and hatred indicate how much the human sexuality – in its Freudian wider sense later retrieved by Jean Laplanche – is a powerful psychic organizer, capable of putting individuals in a state of alertness, ready to defend something they understand (or feel) as structuring and extremely valuable. This psychic organizer, impregnated with conscious and unconscious meanings, is often capable of transforming the debate around certain themes into a minefield.

In his celebrated 2003 article *Gender, Sex and the Sexual*, Jean Laplanche questions whether the introduction of the term “gender” within psychoanalysis – as opposed to “sex” – could reaffirm the “intimate enemy of gender”, “the Sexual.” “Sexual” – with a capital S – relates to Freud’s revolutionary discovery: the perverse-polymorph infantile sexuality, postulated in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. “The Sexual is the repressed of infantile sexuality,” that which “most disgusts adults” and is condemned by them.

In a critique of Robert Stoller, Laplanche affirms that his notion of gender would reduce the term to a “synonym of the conviction of belonging to one of the two social groups defined as masculine and feminine.” He questions whether its introduction in psychoanalysis does not represent the adherence to a supposed libertarian voice that would guarantee the right of choosing between masculine and feminine to all people: would it not excessively impoverish the possibilities of the Freudian Sexual? Would it not limit the unrestricted multiplicity of identities and orientations of desire allowed by Freud’s discovery, within a risky “theoretical” repression of the whole conflict inherent to infantile sexuality? We will come back to the Laplanchean question further ahead.

First, the query: through which paths shall the infantile sexual pass before becoming this “powerful psychic organizer,” which, depending on the symbolic arrangements that it establishes, leads to positions more or less comfortable to the individual in terms of their own sexuality and that of others? What could conduct an individual, in certain cases, to rigid defensive formations that do not tolerate and violently reject the Sexual? Why can sexual diversity become so threatening?

The variables involved are complex: the premature designation of gender transmitted to the child even before their birth; the sexualization in the context of the complexes of Oedipus and castration; and the consequent identifications. The journey through these variables can be understood as the repository for the symbolic world and the psychic device, which, impregnated by the unconscious residues of infantile sexuality, will direct the way the person will face their own erotic life and that of the other.

In face of this complexity and of a heterogeneous exterior world, full of contradictory (religious, political, economic, and social) ideals, how can one build paths to think and, even more, fruitfully discuss diversity with different people? How to cross this minefield?

Psychoanalysis' technical proposal – to guarantee one with the space to speak about oneself – allows a psychic work in the direction of one's own fantasies. It is the individual who can say something about themselves from the raw material of their unconscious. If psychoanalysis' listening works this way within the session's private domain, it is possible to consider that a potential contribution from psychoanalysis to the public debate about diversity could be to offer the same listening device to the speech of minorities, extending this procedure to an ethical and clinical challenge.

In her book *King Kong theory* (2006), feminist writer Virginie Despentes describes her saga in the search for answers to radical questions about her singularity. "I started seeing analysts, healers and other wise men. They didn't have much in common, except that they kept telling me, 'You must reconcile yourself with your femininity.'" (p. 104).

In this plunge into the constitution of a psychic place for the woman in a sexist and patriarchal society, Despentes comb the French social folklore on themes such as rape, prostitution, pornography, and power. She investigates the subjective possibilities open to women across the web of unconscious fantasies that traverse society. And she does so by justly and sophisticatedly denouncing the massacre of erotic expression possibilities allowed to women in comparison to men.

We are formatted to avoid any contact with our savageries. (Despentes, 2006, p. 89).

And yet, my libido is complex – what it says about me isn't necessarily what I want to hear, and doesn't always fit with who I would like to be. But I can choose to know this, rather than turn away and say the opposite of what I know to be true in order to preserve a social image that makes me safe. (Despentes, 2006, p. 79).

When writing about safety, Despentes clearly points out how "rape culture" and other forms of coercion and exclusion of women compromise their freedom of auto-direction – which, according to her, is much more facilitated to men. She denounces, thus, the framing of her demands into formatted and vague expectations of something called "femininity".

This was about femininity. And what did they mean by that? I received no clear answer. My femininity... I am not a pig-headed person, especially if something is said several times and with great conviction and obvious kindness. So I tried to understand. Sincerely. What I was lacking (Despentes, 2006, p. 104)

The final conclusion sheds light upon numerous prejudiced ideas regarding women, associated to the enigmatic notion of femininity as opposed to virility. These ideas confine women into restrictive subjective positions – first, and fundamentally, within their own fantasies and, consequently, within the social space.

To be complexed, something typically feminine. Dimmed. To open the ears wide. Not to shine too much intellectually ... Everything that doesn't leave a trail. That which is domestic, which is done

every day, which has no name ... Wanting to have sex with everyone: virile. Responding with brutality to anything that threatens: virile ... Everything that allows us to survive: virile, everything that makes us gain terrain is virile. (Despentes, 2006, p. 107)

Despentes' powerful account redirects us towards Freud's premise regarding the role of the preconceptions infiltrated in the culture in the origin of conflicts and symptoms. Similarly, we can consider the role of these preconceptions in the structuring of theories and forms of listening, which can be reviewed and expanded through the attentive listening of the individuals involved.

Another debate to which such listening can contribute is the one about transsexuality. In January 2019, the Facebook page of the Brazilian Psychoanalysis Society of São Paulo (SBPSP) shared an interview with Marco Antonio Coutinho Jorge and Natália Pereira Travassos. The psychoanalysts spoke to newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* about their recently launched book *Transsexualidades: o corpo entre o sujeito e a ciência* [Transsexualities: the body between subject and science]. Although the book and the interview affirm a non-pathologizing perspective on transsexuality, the reflection around how Medicine has been approaching gender reassignment surgeries sparked online reactions. Comments on the Facebook post warned that some psychoanalysts' potentially misleading views could be used by conservative voices to impose obstacles to those who want to receive the treatment.

The authors are emphatic in affirming that, from a psychoanalytical point of view, "any transsexual experience is strictly singular, making it impossible to apprehend it through psychological generalization" (Jorge, Travassos, 2018, p. 13). Nevertheless, by approaching transsexuality as a social phenomenon, they question Medicine's disregard to the issue's complexity, since it offers a surgical procedure as an objective and definitive solution for the identity conflict at stake. "... the original lack will never be tamponed by prosthetics and sutures... Science exacerbates this body objectification and approaches it as a machine, eliminating all space to psychic working through" (pp. 24-25).

Coutinho Jorge and Travassos go on to inquire about the "push towards surgery," congregating different aspects: the "therapeutic auto-diagnose and auto-prescription;" the possible relation between homophobia and pressure for a hygienist correction of bodies by surgery; and biological hypothesis about transsexuality.

They conclude that

...it is the idea of the true transsexual that orients the whole transsexualizing procedure in Brazil, as it is preconized by the Health Ministry. And this generally stops the candidate from revealing their subjectivity due to concerns about gender, roles, and expressions (Jorge, Travassos, 2018, p. 91).

In addition, "for psychoanalysis, there is no 'true transsexual' since there is not an essence in itself that can be reduced to an identity" (Jorge, Travassos, 2018, p. 103).

As researchers of the transsexual question – be it through a social or psychoanalytical perspective – the authors raise relevant points. However, they approach transsexuality through Lacan's notions of real, symbolic, and imaginary, contrasting the real of the body supposedly involved in transsexuality with the symbolic exits of other transgender expressions, such as transvestites. Such approach can be questioned, since it might allow for reductionist and generalizing readings regarding an otherwise always unique and singular experience – as defended by the very authors.

Coming to the end of this article, it seems that also in the theoretical debate about diversity we find a minefield. Both Laplanche's question about the use of the term "gender" in psychoanalysis and

Coutinho Jorge's and Travassos' inquiry regarding the "push towards surgery" transit across different dimensions. On the one hand, they support some of psychoanalysis' fundamental premises, such as the "Sexual" with capital S (Laplanche, 2003), or the refusal of the "trap of universal truths incompatible with a subject's approach" (Jorge, Travassos, 2018).

On the other hand, from a social, political, and cultural point of view, they must be attentive to the fissures within the discourse of the minorities, from where can sprout specific knowledge regarding the subjects' agency. The well-known notion of *gender fucker*, for example, disassembles the exclusively binary perspective on gender – feared by Laplanche as a damper of Freud's discovery – without eliminating the subject's possibility to identify (even with the so-called standard "masculine" and "feminine.") Those online voices warning against the potential misleading readings of the specialists' interview on SBPSP's Facebook page does not deny the authors' sophisticated work, but rather expound the worry about them being used to completely stop surgeries – an important conquer from transsexuals that should not be revoked by arguable theoretical understandings. The attentive listening to minorities' discourses can avoid both theoretical and clinical violence and iatrogenesis – which are not infrequent in the history of psychoanalysis.

### References

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