

NORMALITY AND POWER: A REFLECTION ON GENDER

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ABSTRACT

THE QUESTIONS ON HOW THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POWER AND GENDER ARE ESTABLISHED AND THE WAYS IN WHICH THE CONCEPT OF WHAT IS CONSIDERED NORMAL STEMS FROM THIS RELATIONSHIP, REQUIRE AN IN-DEPTH STUDY. THIS INTERRELATIONSHIP IS THE BASIS FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING ON HOW CULTURE DETERMINES THE SPECIFIC WAY IN WHICH AN INDIVIDUAL ASSUMES GENDER.

KEY WORDS: POWER, GENDER, NORMALITY

Power is not monolithic, it is not simply an exclusive state property that flows from its single central axis to the remotest corners of society but rather—without denying the foregoing—a complex exchange of responsibilities, attitudes and roles determining the position of each social being. The simple fact of being inserted in society gives each individual a certain quota of power that is multiplied, transferred or disposed of in accordance with specific conditions. It should be understood that the individual can also multiply, transfer or dispose of that quota of power but this is not a simple act of will. Just as reality imposes certain (objective and subjective) restrictions, it can also provide certain opportunities. This dialectic maneuver

allows, to the extent historically possible, the empowerment of individuals, groups, classes, and so forth.

The question would be: Which is this power that is not confined to the state bureaucratic structure, its repressive mechanisms or even its ubiquitous ideological apparatus? Does it exist? Is it possible? Obviously this is based on the assumption that every class society is ideologized to the bones; but this is not the issue. The problem may be why seek this power that is concentrated and achieves its highest expression in the State though it is transferred to and erodes every interpersonal relation. The answer is simple: the way in which gender is determined by and from power is not confined to the way in which it is politically and legally sanctioned but rather omnipresent at every level of the social body. Since the purpose is to understand how gender is assumed, we must elucidate the nature of this power. This article attempts to analyze this relation assuming that power is present and materializes in other sociocultural spheres in a different and even opposite manner.

In his *History of Sexuality* Foucault deals with the matter understanding power as:

the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and making up its organization; the game which, through endless struggles and confrontations, transform, reinforce and reverse them; the support that such force relations find in each other allowing them to build a chain or system or, on the contrary, the overlapping, the contradictions that separate them; and finally, the strategies that make them effective, the general design or institutional crystallization of which is expressed in state apparatus, the formulation of laws, and in social hegemonies [1].

As the author asserts, it is not that power encompasses the whole social interweavement but rather is constantly taking place in the interaction among each and every fiber of the society in a mobile and non-equalitarian manner, becoming immanent to each social relationship and not limited to a simple binary opposition

(2). Therefore, from this particularizing perspective, the conventional dominant versus dominated relation becomes relative since everything is constantly changing from one extreme to the other—some times in a contradictory manner—in the different relationships that are established.

Foucault anchors the concept and determination of the sexual in the power-knowledge relation, i.e., how the discourse put together from the power position—as well as from the silence it conceals—ends regulating, repressing and pathologizing though also visibilizing and reorienting the sexual issue (3). This is one of the ways in which power manifests itself in the field of sexuality: medicine, psychiatry, psychology and legal studies are transformed into a power apparatus that both consolidates and undermines power. As Foucault points out this epistemological unblocking multiplies the effects of power thanks to the production and accumulation of new knowledge (4).

These scientific disciplines often reproduce, reinforce or are based on pre-existing norms or stereotypes but in their quest for objectivity end up doing quite the opposite, that is to say, undermining, transforming and sometimes legitimizing new stereotypes or norms

These norms and stereotypes interact with scientific disciplines but from a different acting and power-generating scenario embedded in tradition, the latter understood in this case as the set of ideas, customs, habits, rituals, and emotional response culturally inherited from and wreathed in the reputation of the ancestors. This is the scenario that dictates the space assigned to each sex, the occupations they should have, the way in which they interrelate, and so forth. This is also where what Ralph Linton calls the culture configuration model is defined, meaning the spectrum of ways in which the conduct of the members of a given culture can vary when faced with a similar situation (5), a model that contains the possible variations of gender conceived as probable within the given culture.

This idea is basic to understand the mechanism of power: culture conceives more than one way of living the gender and so tradition recalls, but it does not mean that all those ways are equally valued. Hence, some are preferred, others are tolerable, others invisibilized and/or considered frankly unspeakable and therefore marginalized. For example, in this sense, the male-chauvinist, the weak, the gay and the trans-gender would represent the logical sequence from what is expected and preferred up to the unconceivable in cultural terms. Hence, normality is summarized as those regulated conducts meeting what the cultural schemes consider proper, decent, moral, acceptable, natural and that are approved by science as non-pathological, or non-criminal, being the rest amoral or unnatural, to say the least, and identified with what is bad, dirty, impure. Therefore, some attitudes are condemned beforehand by the cultural system in which an individual is inserted and who at birth finds that a status had already been assigned, as Linton calls it (6), and that according to his/her sex must fulfill a general role—manifested in a series of circumstantial roles, with their own general and specific rules—determining his/her “normality.”

In other words, gender becomes the norm. As Judith Butler puts it:

Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative interstitial forms that gender assumes Gender is the mechanism by which the production and naturalization of the notions of masculine and feminine take place, but could also very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized. In fact, it could be that the same apparatus establishing the norm also serves to undermine the establishment of the norm, that it may, so to say, be incomplete by definition [7].

Here we are obviously referring to the dual dimension of gender: as a concrete phenomenon, historically placed, gender is binary, restrictive, but as concept in itself contains the potential of conceiving gender from a broader non-binary perspective. As the author asserts:

the norm only prevails as a norm to the extent it is socially practiced and is re-idealized and re-instituted in and through daily social rituals of the body. The norm has no independent ontological status, but it cannot be easily confined to its instances; it is (re)produced when it takes shape through acts seeking to comply with it through idealizations reproduced in and by these acts [8].

Subsequently, the individual—through the permanent socialization process it is subject to—will be trained to play correctly the role assigned. He/she will be named, dressed and taught to behave in accordance with a criterion established by his/her genitals. His/her first social group, the family, will make sure that he/she uses the gesture repertoire assigned and learns the habits and even to express himself/herself as it corresponds. Any mistake may be punished with violence.

Later on, in school, teachers will follow this same concept of normality and the other children will contribute to their own learning by keeping an eye on each other making sure that the norms they bring from their reference groups are complied with, reinforced by the school authorities. This adds to the constant media propaganda promoting sexist messages even in cartoons. In less complex societies, the process is in general similar though different in details.

Hence, those who do not comply with such norms and do not respond to corrective measures will be, firstly, brought to the Big Nurse, an excellent symbol borrowed from Ken Kesey's great novel: the science court in which psychologists, doctors, and psychiatrists become the instruments of power in the name of normality. As Foucault states:

Judges of normality are everywhere. We have the judge-professor, the judge-educator, the judge-“social worker”; they all enforce the universality of normative, and each of them whatever his/her domain, brings the body, gestures, behaviors, conducts, attitudes, prowess to trial [9].

Often, the “healing” process is nothing else but an implicit way of achieving normalization. If it is not possible, the individual ends in a descending centripetal spiral, being stigmatized as crazy, immoral, criminal and increasingly distanced from the healthy companion of his/her fellow human beings, and becoming a taboo and therefore turning into taboo any person who comes close to him/her, with growing possibilities of becoming what the stigma had already in store for him/her, reinforcing the idea that an “abnormal” path ends in destruction, an idea frequently used even when the intention is to get the opposite effect. The current Cuban filmmaking is a clear example of how tradition is concealed behind a supposed openness in addressing a topic while sending apocalyptic messages to those who dare deviate from the proper path.

This situation is independent from the existing legal and political sanction for these matters. In this regard, Foucault states:

No matter how common and institutional its mechanism may be, discipline is “unlawful.” And if the universal legalism of modern society seems to draw power limits, its well-disseminated panopticism, despite law, sets in motion a huge and also tiny machinery that supports, reinforces and multiplies power asymmetry and render drawn limits useless. Everyday panopticism, tiny disciplines can very well be below the emerging level of huge apparatuses and great political struggles [10].

Any scholar on gender issues aspiring to catalyze the changes of this power asymmetry should clearly understand the following crucial idea: political-legal

changes are not enough; it is also necessary to study, with a transforming intention, the deep and unconscious cultural roots that reinforce existing gender concepts within tradition.

As any other norm or set of norms, gender functions as a way of measuring or as a means to produce a cultural legibility principle that becomes a pattern for comparison (11), thus sanctioning legitimately the unequal distribution of power in society, justified by compliance or non-compliance with established normality patterns.

We can thus conclude that power—which as we know is not exclusive to the State—determines gender issues from the dual tradition-science approach which in a complex maneuver complement, hinder, reinforce, and annul each other; and this can be ideologically sanctioned and eventually politically adopted. Hence, by sanctioning normality from the point of view of gender, power legitimizes itself. Therefore, the definition of normal should always be preceded by the basic questions: Normal for whom? Which sociocultural system (that is, universal, political) is legitimized based on this alleged normality? Who are included, who are rejected, and who are left in a sort of liminal state within this normality? Given the importance of this topic and the urgent need to have a clear understanding in this regard, other in-depth approaches are essential.

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