



Title: How has queer theory influenced the ways we think about gender?

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Type: Original article

Keywords: gender

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Gender theory and the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I am going to explore the contributions and complications produced by the development of queer theory, with reference to our understanding of gender. Firstly, I will give a brief introduction of the concept of queer and its evolution into an authentic theory of queerness. Then, I am going to concentrate on the encounter between queer theory and traditional feminism, highlighting the theoretical differences that result from this confrontation. After that, I will analyse the peculiarity of queer theory and its attempt to give an alternative notion of gender and to defeat the dichotomy between hetero/homosexuality by introducing a wider spectrum of possible sexual identities, mentioning also the importance that Judith Butler's work *Gender Trouble* (1990) had in this process. Finally, I will give a practical example of the application of queerness by referring to the experiences of Brazilian transgendered prostitutes, symbol of 'deviation' from normative gender expectations.

The aim of my analysis is to demonstrate the way in which queer theory not only influenced, but also gave the possibility to change and rethink how we approach the concept of gender, by introducing a wide range of implications that had been excluded by the previous gender discourse.



1. Queer Theory

Once the word 'queer' used to be a colloquial term for homosexual. It was embedded by a strong homophobic significance and often used as an insult. Recently, the meaning of queer started changing by losing its negative connotation and it began to refer both to individuals that were attracted to others of the same sex, but also to individuals' sexuality and bodies that did not conform with the societal dominant norms. Hence, queer explores the discrepancy between gender identity, anatomical sex and sexual desire, resisting hegemonic heterosexuality. It turned into a symbol of struggle against heterosexual culture, becoming a term of reference for those marginal sexualities that could not fit into the traditional discourse about gender and sexuality.

If we consider the genealogy of queer theory, this is the result of a continuous process that begins with the gay liberation movement of the 1970s, that passes through the lesbian and gay movements that developed between the mid 1970s and the mid 1980s, then the gay, lesbian and bisexual organizations of the mid 1980s and early 1990s, to end with the development of the contemporary queer—lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender—activism (Beemyn and Eliason, 1996). Thus, it is clear that this constant transformation and expansion of the approaches to gender and sexuality show the increasing attention that had been given with regard to both these issues in the last five decades, but also 'the dynamic nature of both sexuality and the political organizing that has developed around it' (Beemyn and Eliason, 1996, p. 5). The expression 'queer theory' was coined in the early 1990s and it is not accurate to associate this approach with lesbian and gay studies, since it also comprehends new and different topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery (Jagose, 1996) that were not taken into account into gay and lesbian studies. Moreover, at the basis of queer theory there is a new understanding of sex, gender and sexual identities as sites in becoming that do not match with the normative discourses of the previous gender studies, but that actually 'problematizes the idea of fixed gender and sexual identities and challenges the basis for a unitary identity politics' (Beemyn and Eliason, 1996, p. 5). Through its emphasis on this interpretation of the notion of identity as fluid and in constant formation, this approach insists on the fact that individuals are constantly questioning the idea of fixed and stable identity in multiple ways. Queer theory is also based



on the belief that it is pointless to make any reference to specific groups -such as gays, lesbians, women and so on- since identities comprehend such a wide range of elements that it is impossible to catalogue individuals altogether in a category, on the basis of a single shared characteristic—being a woman, for example. Hence, queer does not concern any particular identity category but it is an umbrella term that, refusing labels and rejecting stereotypes, encompasses all those subjectivities that, crossing the boundaries established by the dominant norms, do not fit into the traditional defined concepts of gender and sexuality.

2. Feminism meets Queer Theory

Both feminism and queer theory are interdisciplinary studies that question the dominant understanding of gender by problematizing the relationship that exists between gender identity, anatomical sex and sexual orientation (Fineman, 2009). However, these sort of 'subversive' approaches that challenge the hegemonic idea of sex and gender, present evident differences.

On the one hand, while feminism 'is linked to a conception of gender identity centered on the idea of a female sex (biologically, culturally, legally, and socially determined), the degree to which sex and sexuality are considered necessarily central or an all encompassing component of the feminist analytic remains in dispute, with competing feminist approaches apparent' (Fineman, 2009). The fact that sexuality actually was not a priority for feminist theorists was demonstrated in the moment in which, in their pursuit of equality between men and women, feminism struggled the oppression of the latter on the basis of the mere sex, without considering any possible situation of discrimination caused by women's alternative sexuality. Thus, inequity and injustice on the basis of women's sexual orientation remained unchanged and a practical example is the fact that a lesbian could not have been fired from her job because of her being a woman, but she could have been fired for her being a lesbian (Fineman, 2009). Feminism also provided an understanding of 'women' as a universal group, a monolithic block defined as their being other than 'men'. Focusing on the women category, this approach worked in an exclusionary way with regard to 'those who have felt constrained, even obscured, by feminists' injunctions to identify with and as women, over against men and masculinity', and that felt more represented by the anti-assimilative queer theory (Bidy, 1994, p. 105). Hence, feminism is characterized by a dichotomy that puts in a constant



opposition male and female gender and this approach leads to work through a scheme of defined identities and social structures, in a way that actually limits the potential of feminism for change and evolution (Fineman, 2009).

On the contrary, queer theory is an anti-normative approach that refuses these dichotomies by suggesting a more complicated explanation of gender and sexuality and it actually goes beyond the limit of feminism that, with its emphasis on gender identity, leaves almost unexplored the sexuality field. Hence, queer theory focuses especially on the notions of sex and sexuality by considering all those marginalized sexual identities that could not fit into the hegemonic social discourses, legitimating them as alternative sexual orientations that can be defined by the term queer. It is precisely through the notion of fluidity that queer theory formulates a new understanding of gender identity, by rejecting the binarism between men and women. Indeed, queer theory argues that gender identity cannot be merely reduced to this opposition, since it encompasses a wide spectrum of subjectivities that are not necessarily identifiable with the term 'man' or 'woman'. This approach also suggests that it is not possible to define an individual's gender on the basis of such individual's not belonging to the opposite gender, but rather gender must be considered as a social act that an individual of either sex can perform (Butler, 1990).

Moreover, feminist binary thinking led to the development of additional juxtapositions at different levels. On the one hand, the conceptualization of gender as if it was two opposite categories, contributed to generate a distinction between feminine and masculine anatomical sex and consequently to reinforce the biological assumption of the male/female sex difference. On the other hand, it also brought to the opposition between hetero and homosexual orientation by considering sexuality as an inner and unchangeable individual's trait. So, this binary gender order is strictly linked with heteronormativity, that puts heterosexuality in a hegemonic position with regard to homosexuality, seen as a deviation from the norm, and that completely denies any other possibility of alternative sexuality (Fineman, 2009). The aim of queer theory is to deconstruct such defined categories and the hegemonic structures and ideologies that contribute to the perpetuation of the understanding of gender, sex and sexual identities as fixed and unchangeable. Hence, through the notion of fluid and non-heteronormative identities, queer theory gives the possibility for the creation of a dynamic queer community for 'a being-together animated by resistance, discord and disagreement' (Sullivan, 2003, p. 148) between individuals, recognizing difference and diversity (Hatzfeldt, 2011). □□



3. Peculiarities of Queer Theory

The dominant assumption of the natural connection between gender identity, birth's sex and sexual desire derives from the early biodeterminism. This approach provided an interpretation of identity based on the postulation that each individual is born with a specific sex, male or female, which determines a defined gender, man or woman, and consequently one's sexual orientation towards individuals of the opposite sex, heterosexuality. By taking for granted such linear connection between the individual sex, gender and sexual orientation, biodeterminism provided the legitimization of an hegemonic discourse that comprehended a limited spectrum of possible identities—heterosexual men and heterosexual women. This conceptualization not only considers heterosexuality as the 'normal' sexual orientation, but also promotes the reproduction of fixed gender roles that maintain the patriarchal matrixes of society in place (Hatzfeldt, 2011).

During the 1970s feminism started questioning the coherent connection between sex and gender, in particular through theorist Simone de Beauvoir's definition: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 267). Thus, gender started to be considered as a social and cultural construction of what means to be woman or man that not necessarily had to overlap with the natural bodily differences into male or female, provided by the anatomical sex. Although feminism took a step forward the previous biodeterministic approach, it did not take into consideration the aspect of sexuality, whose link with sex and gender remained uncontested.

Judith Butler (1990) is the first gender theorist that completely disentangles the link between gender, sex and sexuality and, through the formulation of the concept of 'gender performativity', she contributes to give a brand-new understanding of gender identity. In her most influential work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), the author argues that the supposed link between gender, sex and sexuality is a cultural and social construction that subjects manifest through the repetition of performative acts in times.

However, this performance executed through bodily acts is not a spontaneous decision of the individual but it is inserted in what Butler, influenced by Foucault, defines 'regulative discourses'. Such discourses contribute to the creation of regulatory sites, where identities are generated and reproduced, that serve as means to keep social control over practices in gender



and sexual identification. Hence, identity categories are instruments of regulatory regimes that have the purpose to secure that such identities are coherent and adapted to heteronormativity (Hatzfeldt, 2011).

So, Butler (1990) gives a performative understanding of gender that goes beyond the idea that it is culturally and socially constructed. She actually argues that gender identity is not an expression of the individual's natural gender and of what they really are at an intrinsic level, but it is manifested through repetitive practices that the subject constantly enacts. Thus, performance is not manipulated since it is not conscious, but controlled through regulative discourses, and there is no self behind it. Hence, in Butler's perspective, the subject is totally deprived of agency and transformed into a mere illusion of the self—they are not the actor of the action but the outcome of it (Butler, 1990).

Judith Butler (1990) does not confine her study to gender but she also takes into consideration the dominant understanding of the anatomical sex and, in her analysis, she rejects the binarism between female and male, by considering also the bodily sex as produced by discourse. She argues that the assumption of sex dichotomy as a natural truth provides a justification for the dominant understanding of gender in binary terms and heterosexuality as the norm, since they seem to be direct and natural consequences of the biological sex difference. Through the deconstruction of sex and gender, Butler (1990) gives also the possibility to expand the ways in which sexual orientation is understood by rejecting the notion that sexuality should be defined by a mutually exclusive gender preference. This destabilization of heteronormativity is also intrinsic with the struggle against heterosexual assumptions that contribute to reproduce a sex-role system. Such system is an expression of social behaviours considered appropriate for either men or women that serve to constantly reproduce hierarchical power relations between these categories, and consequently to reinforce male/female binarism. Moreover, the postulation that each individual is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is preferable with respect to any other orientation outside of it, also leads to the development and legitimization of various forms of discrimination, such as homophobia, bi-phobia and trans-phobia, against those subjectivities excluded from heterosexual discourse (Tilsen and Nylund, 2010, p. 4).

'When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one' (Butler, 1990, p. 6). Butler's interpretation of the identity as fluid and



free-floating instead of fixed is the principle at the basis of queer theory and it is exactly through this notion of gender as destabilized that the possibility of the recreation of the identity is allowed. So, queer refers to a wide range of possible identities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, but can also refer to fluid identities that are situated in-between these multiple orientations (Weinberg, 1996). This is based on the post-structuralist concept of non-essentialized identities, considered as sites in becoming, both culturally constructed but also contextually determined, that are changing constantly through space and time (Tilsen and Nylund, 2010, p. 8). Queer theory does not merely complicate the hegemonic assumptions with regard to the connection between gender identity, anatomical sex and sexual orientation, but it totally rejects biological theory of identities (Tilsen and Nylund, 2010, p. 8). It actually began also questioning the significance and the utility of gender and sexual categories by problematizing binary constructions, and consequently in queer theory the notions of heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality disappear, since there is no definitive difference between men and women or heterosexuality and homosexuality (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1994).

4. Empirical case

Don Kulick (1998), in his work *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*, explores the lives of a group of travestis prostitutes that constitute a controversial minority in the Brazilian city of Salvador, Bahia. Travestis is the Portuguese term for transgendered people, individuals whose gender identity does not match with their assigned birth's sex, in a way that it is totally independent from their sexual orientation. Thus, this category seems to represent a perfect example of deviation from the hegemonic discourse about gender and sexuality and from heteronormative expectations. Kulick (1998) gives an overview of the experiences of this group of Brazilian travestis whose 'being feminine' is not limited to cross dressing, but that identify themselves with feminine names and pronouns, that take female hormones and that also have surgery, through silicone injections, to modify their bodies in a more feminine way. In spite of travestis' constant attempt to result effectively feminine, they do not consider themselves like women in men's bodies: most of them refuse to remove their penis in order to become 'biologically' women and have a rejection towards the vagina, considered a disgusting organ (Kulick, 1998).



So, the author explores not only the ways in which travestis reshape their bodies and the motivations that lie behind this decision, along with that of working as prostitutes, but also the complicate relations they establish with each other, with their families and with their partners. Actually, the type of relationship these subjects enact with their sexual partners, normally attractive young boys, constitutes one of the most interesting points of Kulick's work (1998). Travestis tend to have male partners that are sexually attracted to women and not to men, and that during the sexual act keep their traditional masculine role of active partners that penetrate the passive ones, not the contrary. Indeed, travestis, that reach the sexual fulfilment only when they play the active role with their clients, are not interested in the sexual complete satisfaction in the relationship with their partners since they want them to be manly, active and make them 'feel like women' (Kublick, 1998). Considering that culturally, in many areas of Latin America, gender is strictly linked with the sexual role played by the partners during the sexual act, a man can have sex with another man without being considered homosexual. As long as men play the active penetrative role during the sexual performance they maintain their virility, while on the contrary, a passive man that is penetrated is considered a *veado*, term used with reference to an effeminate gay man. Notwithstanding the assumption of this submissive role during the sexual moment of their relationship, at the same time, travestis acquire the masculine role of earning money to economically supply their boyfriends' needs. Thus, 'supporting an attractive young boyfriend could be interpreted as a form of conspicuous consumption, much as a wealthy heterosexual man might maintain a young mistress' (Beattie, 1999, p. 128).

Kulick (1998) provides an exhaustive example of the complexity of the negotiation of gender, sex and sexuality through the experiences of this group of Brazilian travestis that reconstructed their identities by melting in an alternative way both male and female characteristics. Travestis share a female gender with women and refer to themselves with a feminine vocabulary, but at the same time they refuse to have surgery to become effectively women, they are horrified by the feminine sexual organ and also 'claim to understand male sexuality better than women because they have male brains (*cabeças de homem*)' (Beattie, 1999, p. 128). Thus, it is impossible to confine these subjectivities into the third-gender category and outside the female/male binary system. They actually stress the malleability of female and male categories in a specific social context by resisting gender proscriptions and defining themselves as 'radical gays who force the society to accept their sexual orientation'



(Beattie, 1999, p. 128). However, differently from veados, they do not tend to conform to heterosexual normativity through male dressing and mannerism (Beattie, 1999).

5. Conclusions

The contribution of queer theory in redefining gender identity by complicating its previous understanding provided by gender theory is undeniable. Queer theory defeats the binarism between men and women categories and consequently between male and female biological sex and hetero/homosexuality and the automatic link between these notions. It considers gender and sex both socially and culturally constructed and refuses the idea that sexuality is organized around heterosexual and homosexual dichotomy. Through the deconstruction of these categories, it allows the introduction of a wide range of implications that give the possibility of thinking about gender and sexuality in a new and more complex way. Queer theory has actually been criticized because of its refusal of recognizing defined categories, such as women, gay, lesbian and so on, that consequently have been denaturalized and reduced to a mere discourse without paying attention to the effective material conditions that are at the basis of these dominant discourses.

However, despite the critiques, queer theory can be seen as a sort of 'inclusive' approach that encompasses all those marginalized identities, considered as fluid and free-floating, that cannot fit into the normative discourses, allowing them to be effectively recognized as legitimate alternatives to traditional identities. Through this process of legitimization, queer theory rejects fixed labels that refer to stable identities, and provides an alternative term, queer, which embraces all alternative and fluid subjectivities that cannot be ascribed in the hegemonic discourse.



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