

Conceptual Tensions within a *Cuir* [Queer]-Feminist Sociological Approach to Sexuality in Mexico¹

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Introduction: From Queer Theory to *Cuir* Theory

The appearance in 1976 of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* represents a milestone in the sociological inquiry about the body and corporeal practices. The characterization of a disciplinary device for control of the body and sexual behavior that brands non-reproductive practices as “perverse” constituted a breakthrough in the field. A decade later, and inspired by Foucault's theoretical contribution, both the queer movement and queer theory would emerge in the United States as a result of the mobilization by nonconformist and AIDS groups, as well as the call by Teresa de Lauretis to “build another discursive horizon, another way of thinking about the sexual” (2010: 23).²

Although no consensus has been reached on queer theory, we agree with Arlene Stein and Kenneth Plummer when they say that its main contributions have been:

- 1) A conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides; 2) the problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general; 3) a rejection of civil rights strategies in favor of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody which leads to antiassimilationist politics; 4) a willingness to interrogate areas

1 Translated from Spanish by Luis Lorenzo Esparza Serra.

2 Years later, this author would renounce some of the uses of this theoretical approach which, in her opinion, had turned into an advertising strategy (Jagose 1996: 129).

which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality, and to conduct queer “readings” of ostensibly heterosexual or nonsexualized texts (1994: 181–182).

As early as the first decade of the twenty-first century, queer theory began to reach academic as well as activism spaces in Latin America, and “*cuir* theory” began to be discussed to address issues of non-hegemonic sexualities thanks to the ‘devious’ epistemological twist derived from its translation – which both researchers and activists found very useful to challenge the status quo.

This article purports to analyze the conceptual tenets of some of the sociological studies on sexuality in Mexico, including *cuir* theory. Our proposal is that sociological *cuir* feminism can, through a situated and *tense* dialogue, account for the various power mechanisms that define sexuality in Mexico, as well as the possibilities that open up for re-signifying heteronormative mandates.

Translations, Debates and Displacements of Queer Theory Through the Global South

In the early days of the year 2000, many people in Mexico and other Latin American countries (mostly postgraduate students and young researchers) observed, in awe, the incursion of queer theory in feminist and gender studies. This novel perspective – not free from snobbism – opened up the possibility of doing away with the binary frameworks of sexuality and gender and applying the sophisticated concepts of post-structuralism in its English-language reinterpretations. In order to position oneself in a queer (or *cuir*) perspective, one had to have a certain cultural capital and have read Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. In the world of activism, too, new ideas emerged but the fact was that those who didn’t belong to academia were left behind.

However, in these contexts, the term queer/*cuir* and its possible translations (*raro* [odd], *extraño* [strange], *torcido* [devious], *anómalo* [abnormal]) did not evoke aspects of everyday life. Some texts (cf. Moreno-Esparza 1997; Córdoba 2005; Viteri 2008; Epps 2008; Viteri/Serrano/Vidal-Ortiz 2011; Arboleda 2011; Rivas 2011) agree that the term has no easy translation into Spanish, and that its enunciation is in itself a de-contextualizing act in which the *performative context* (Rivas 2011) is lost. For Epps (2008), its complexity goes beyond finding

an “apt” translation, for we run the risk of silencing stories in which the term in question alludes to personal experiences.

This is partly why in Latin American academic circles the queer approach has polarized opinion and triggered a controversy between those who cultivate its use (cf. Moreno-Esparza 1997, 2016; Núñez 2007; Fonseca/Quintero 2009; Viteri/Serrano/Vidal-Ortiz 2011; Parrini/Brito 2014; Valencia 2015; List 2016), and those who see in the adoption of this term a concession to the imposition of hegemonic US academic theory (cf. Viteri 2008; Rivas 2011; Gargallo n.d.; Mogrovejo 2012; Falconí 2014; Espinosa-Miñoso 2014).

Though we share these concerns with such imperialistic practices, we mustn't overlook the fact that queer theory and queer culture have their roots in political freedom movements (Chinn 2010) and place themselves at the intersection and on common ground between various identities and social positionings to produce “a strategy that often defies the established order” (Sáez 2004: 31). These are women collectives of lesbians, Chicanas, Latinas, Black, and unemployed individuals – i.e., people who have been directly affected by colonization processes. Theirs is a struggle for visibility, not only of their diverse sexual positionings, but also a gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and physical ableness issue that should be acknowledged at the centers of power of both the feminist movement (dominated by White, heterosexual women) and the gay movement (dominated by White men).

We likewise concur with Paco Vidarte when he says that:

when addressing the problematic re-translation of the queer term in geopolitical spaces outside the US, it is important to keep in mind that this term is, to a certain extent, a product of the re-translation to the North American context of French post-structuralism (2005: 83).

It would be naïve to think that the concept has the ability to lodge itself in the theoretical reflections of Latin American academia without critical assessment. It is therefore more appropriate to “talk about the multiple ways in which such a proposal has been read [...] and develop a critique among us” (Figari 2014: 72–73), which would add to the long history of studies on sexualities and gender identities outside the heterosexual norm that applies in Latin America.

In this order of things, we embrace the proposal by several authors (Valencia 2015; Lanuza/Carrasco 2015) of using the term *cuir* (an unorthodox rendering of the word queer) to distance ourselves from the queer theory produced in the United States, while enriching it and questioning its achievements and

limitations. We understand *cuir* theory as a possibility of critically confronting queer theory from the Global South. If anything can be rescued from the early contributions of queer theory, it is its flexible quality and its ability to resist academic normalization and standardization (Butler 1990, 2004; Warner 1993; Halperin 1995; Jagose 1996).

The queer/*cuir* approach is neither the first nor the only theoretical effort to deal with sexuality in the region. Before its appearance, the social sciences and humanities already had a wide agenda on the subject (notably feminist gender studies). As a scientific discipline, sociology had already made inroads into the social dimension of sexuality.

The Sociology of Sexuality

For all the contributions by several forms of feminism, gender and sexuality were not considered relevant topics for sociology before the second half of the twentieth century. Even in our time, sexuality remains at the margins of the discipline (Stein/Plummer 1994). According to Steven Seidman, the earliest sociological works that dealt with sexuality – among them those of Ira Reis (1960, 1964) – “approached sex as a specialty area like organizations, crime, or demography. Sex was imagined as a property of the individual, whose personal expression was shaped by social norms and attitudes” (1994: 169).

In the heyday of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, a few works on homosexual males saw the light. Some of them used the ‘labeling’ approach to analyze the complex ways in which ‘deviation’ is built in social interactions marked by a hierarchy of practices that impose cultural parameters related to the notion of ‘normality’ (Goffman 1963; Becker 1963).

As a pioneer on the subject, Kenneth Plummer (1975, 1989) analyzed how one learns to live as a homosexual in the UK, where the discrimination and segregation resulting from the stigma attributed to certain sexual practices contribute to the formation of a social identity. The effervescence created by this topic in English-language sociology would last several years (Adam 1996/Weeks 1996).

The breaking of social movements around LGBTQ+ pride in the 1960s and 1970s, and the consolidation of Gay and Lesbian Studies departments at anglophone universities influenced the sociology of urban gay and lesbian experiences in public spaces (Plummer 1989; Stein/Plummer 1994). Laud Humphreys (2008) analyzed the configuration of sexual practices among men in public re-

strooms in the US, while in the UK Jeffrey Weeks (1985) treated sexuality as a cultural construct resulting from the political and historical tensions that define what we understand as sexual.

In the 1990s, Spanish sociologist Óscar Guasch pointed out the need to have a field within sociology devoted to the study of sexuality, “with sex, a social activity, as its subject matter” (1993: 106). In France, Michel Bozon (2002) called for the inception of a “sociology of sexuality,” but its basic assumptions were anchored in the heterosexual norm, treating non-heterosexual practices and identities as “minorities”. Unlike the sociology of the body and the sociology of emotions, the sociology of sexuality has failed to establish itself in the institutional curriculum. This is the case in Mexico, where it is hard to find a course on the subject in a university program.

One of the most thought-provoking recent proposals on the sociology of sexuality is Adam Isaiah Green’s theory of sexual fields (2013). A combination of Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas about practice and the role of interaction in structured contexts studied by Erving Goffman, this theory looks at the distribution of erotic socialization and entertainment within the gay communities of New York and Toronto.

Notwithstanding their relevance, these contributions continue to be biased, since most of them have been produced by White men in the gay scene of the Global North and are anchored in urban homosexuality.

In Mexico, in 1994, the now canonic work of Guillermo Núñez Noriega *Sexo entre varones. Poder y resistencia en el campo sexual* (Sex Among Men. Power and Resistance in the Sexual Field) was published. Based on an ethnography of homoeroticism in the state of Sonora, Núñez addresses the complexities of representing sexuality and the social conditions under which sexual and gender norms are resisted and re-signified. Núñez applies Bourdieu’s ideas to analyze the way in which the *sexual field* is conformed, as well as its implications in terms of *habitus*, that is, social and bodily practices.

In 2003, César González – under Kenneth Plummer’s supervision – published his doctoral dissertation *Travestidos al desnudo. Homosexualidad, identidades y luchas territoriales en Colima* (Naked Transvestisms. Homosexuality, Identities, and Territorial Struggles in Colima), where he analyzes how notions of deviance and “abnormality” are produced in that state and the traces of agency that can be found among those affected.

In 2014, an analysis of the homoerotic interaction that takes place in a Mexico City cinema was published by Andrés Álvarez, who applied Goffman’s and Simmel’s notions of frameworks of meaning, order of interaction, and physi-

cal contact. In 2018, Galindo and Torres-Cruz presented their research on the social configuration of “*metreo*”, or “sexual practices in the subway” found in Mexico City’s underground system lines. Their theoretical approach to tackle the social reduction of contingency in such practices combines notions coming from Goffman, Luhmann, Elias, Bourdieu, and Latour, and for a detailed analysis of the construction of such practices, the authors resort to feminist notions such as the *heterosexualization* of public space and the *heterosexual matrix*.

As in the countries of the Global North, research on sexuality in Mexico tends to concentrate on the homoerotic practices of *cisgender* men. We have found only two works that deal with the experience of transgender males in Mexico City, one by Eleonora Garosi (2004) and the other one by Ana Carvajal (2019). These two authors analyze transition processes of body and identity, how these processes redefine sexuality, and the social disputes for the recognition and the enactment of masculinity.

Sociology continues to face important challenges to account for the social dimension of sexuality. The social readings of the various brands of feminism and *cuir* studies are central to the analysis of the complexities of sexuality, as determined by factors such as ethnic affiliation, social class, and age.

***Cuir* Sociology? Concluding Remarks from a Conceptual-Tension Viewpoint**

Our conceptual proposal stems from a social understanding of sexuality: *i*) at the macro level, from the ways in which heteronormativity performatively produces subjects within binary frameworks; *ii*) at the intermediate level and from a relational perspective, the mechanisms through which certain institutions discursively generate processes of subjectivation based on ethnicity, social-class, age, and physical-ability strata; and *iii*) at the micro level, from the dynamics of resignification of heterocentric mandates by bodies in social interaction, and the subjects’ construction of new interpretations of practices and pleasures.

Though the *cuir* notion offers an interesting theoretical framework, we must make sure it doesn’t lose its gender and feminist dimensions. In adding other intersections, feminism must be maintained as the starting point for the understanding of sexualities and for emphasizing the roles of gender and (hetero)patriarchy.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1999, 2003) argues, any analysis of modern Western culture calls for an understanding of the excluding and regulatory binary identity categories. This approach allows to uncover the power mechanisms that impact the lives and practices of all people, including those who consider themselves as *cis* and heterosexual, for they too suffer under the normative requirements of hegemonic femininity and masculinity.

We propose a *cuir*-feminist sociology of sexuality that, in its macro dimension, takes into account its relationship with gender and the body as a productive element of sociocultural analysis, in tune with Judith Butler's queer feminism to *cuir* theory, her analysis of heterosexuality as a normative matrix of body control through a binary framework, and of the performative dimension of the production of subjectivities and sexualized and gendered bodies embedded in social structures (Butler 1990, 1993, 2004, 2009).

Though queer theory and sociology share the same vision of sexuality "as a social and historical construct" (Miskolci 2009: 151), their theoretical corpora are in constant tension over the understanding of the subject and the self. While queer (*cuir*) theory is focused on deconstructing the subject by proposing fluid ways to position sexuality and gender, sociology tries to understand the social construction of subjects to focus on identity as a fixed process. At the same time, both theoretical approaches understand sexuality as an historical process embedded in power.

It is for this reason that we adopt the critique of biological essentialism from the *cuir* approach and its rejection of universal classifications. At the intermediate level, it is essential to describe the discursive practices of institutions and the subjectivation processes permeated by, among other factors, ethnicity, social class, age, and physical ableness. We understand sociology more as "a way of thinking than a finite body of theories and data; it entails questioning existing social arrangements, an awareness that they are a product of history, an understanding of the social shaping of personal life and experience" (Jackson 1999: 49).

We refer to a sociological feminism with a *cuir* approach to emphasize a tense dialogue among these schools of thought. Such conceptual conversation exercise allows us to understand, at the micro level, not only the performative dimension of sexuality, within agency processes, but also the social dimension of social interaction in the process of making sense of sexuality, gender, and the body (Moreno-Esparza/Torres-Cruz 2018, 2019). This gives us an opportunity to think of the complexities of sexuality and gender. In our conceptual proposal, we highlight the relevance of incorporating both the discursive and

social complex dimensions of bodies and pleasures, informed by empirical insights.

Finally, the *cuir*-feminist sociology we propose must take into account the complexities derived from the intersection of sexuality with gender, nationality, social class, ethnicity, physical ableness, etc. as overlapping dimensions of inequality (Viveros 2016).

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