

On the Category Gender. A Theoretical-Methodological Introduction

Teresita de Barbieri

(Translated by Graciela Trevisan. The original article in Spanish appeared in *Debates en Sociología*, no. 18, 1993: 145–169.)

In order to ensure an effective control over reproduction, it is necessary to also act on sexuality, since what can be separated analytically is not so distinct in practice....

The problem, then, in male-dominated societies is how, why, under what conditions, at which moments, and since when men have appropriated the reproductive capacity, the sexuality, and the labor power of women. How is it that those powers of female bodies are disrupted via their subordination? How is it that those who do not have in their bodies the possibility to gestate, give birth, and breastfeed, nonetheless transform the visible reproductive organ — the penis — to a symbol of power: the phallus? How is it in our societies that even when the woman's body as well as the man's body has the capacity to produce pleasure in the other, only the female body is constituted as the erotic object? How is it that women's capacity for work is directed by societies toward fulfilling work that is socially essential but devalued?

These questions lead us to remember, once again, that in the human species, the sexual relationship is not only a chemical exchange that ensures the reproduction of the species. Much more than that, sexuality consists of the very diverse ways in which people relate as sexual beings to other sexual beings in exchanges that are, as with everything human, charged with meaning. Now these topics relate to a level of analysis of the psyche, the constitution of subjects and objects of desire in early infancy, and the resolution of the Oedipal conflict, which I am not going to take up here and which are each the focus of deep psychology. I only want to point out that psychoanalysis in its various forms has been theoretically constructed from the observation and the study of the psychic apparatus of people living in Western societies toward the end of the nineteenth century and during all of the twentieth century — that is, in a culture of a particular masculine domination. As social scientists we are

interested in the practices, symbols, representations, values, and collective norms, shared by the members of a society in different periods of time and that are absorbed in the psyche during the crucial years of early infancy.

Those practices, symbols, values, norms, representations, etc. are transformable. Today we have a wealth of knowledge about the historicity of sexual relations and reproduction that leaves very much in evidence the construction of meaning around them, those that are social and cultural: ideas and collective representations surrounding the bodies of men and women, sexual relations, fertilization, feelings, the disparate normativities that bodies undergo, and the controls that certain individuals, groups, and institutions exercise over others (Aries et al., 1987; Firpo, 1984). These show us that in this realm more collective tensions are at play than individual pleasure and the generation of new human life.

4. Several methodological implications for the social sciences derive from these questions. First, there is no woman, as has often been said, nor man. There are women and men in different social and cultural situations — this needs to be made explicit. The first point has to do with the stages of the life cycle. These stages are like gender; they are social constructions, as we know from the work of Philippe Aries (1973), that are articulated with each other.¹¹ Particularly important is the stage or stages in which women and men enjoy the fullness of the ability to reproduce; based on knowledge about these stages, one can capture key elements of prevailing gender relations, the way power is exercised, and the imagined representations that sustain it. At the core of analyzing gender relations in our societies is our examination the roles we imagine: for women we have the figures of mother, wife, and homemaker, and for men the figures of the head of the household, father, and husband.¹² In the early stages of scholarship, we discerned how girls and boys are shaped to accept and enact inequalities and hierarchies based on gender: from the blue or pink bow in contemporary obstetrics clinics, or the burial of the placenta near or far from home among the Maya initiation rites, to formal and informal learning and teachings and all the practices and symbols with which one

11. It is necessary to ask if the distance from the differences in age and stages of life constitutes a system in itself or if it is part of the sex/gender system.

12. The strong influence of Marxism in the seventies led to privileging the role of housewife and the analysis of domestic work among women of the working class. Since the end of that decade, motherhood became important, while the figure of the wife does not seem to have become the object of study in itself. In relation to the male figures we can say that everything still needs to be done.

coexists, celebrates, and represses. In later stages of scholarship we look at the distance between genders and how to decrease hierarchies and the intensity and strength of normativities. We must in turn open ourselves to thinking of gender/sex systems not only as binaries, but also using more than two genders that are the product of attributing to people at different ages and sexes different possibilities, duties, specific norms of conduct, and diverse capacities for decision-making and autonomy. For example, it has always caught my attention that in regions of Andean culture or under its influence, babies (male and female) up to two years old are called “la guagua.” Or the particular place women who have closed the reproductive cycle and have passed menopause have in certain cultures of clear male dominance. That is, the domination of men over women is not always the same throughout the stages of life as socially defined. Ethnographic and historical literature is full of examples of it.

A second sphere or context to delimit is the organization of familial and domestic life, a privileged space of women and identified in our societies as *the place* of female subordination. One must take into account the composition, size, and life cycle of homes, because not all domestic units are nuclear in a given moment, nor are they so throughout the life of families, as we well know in Latin America. Within them, it is necessary to distinguish the different positions that women and men occupy and the roles that they fulfill throughout the life cycle of domestic units and families. Similarly we should take into account the relations between domestic units and between relatives outside of the domestic group.

Economic conditions are widely understood and in the Latin American situation so impossible not to notice that I will not comment extensively on them. They of course include regional and local diversities and particularities. It is important, however, to remember that a class analysis is not the same as an analysis of social stratification, given that while the first seeks to understand and explain a conflict, the second only describes unequal situations....

From the racial point of view, in Latin America and in general in plural societies, it is necessary to discuss the ethnic-cultural context, using the assumption that the genders are constructed differently in different contexts. The relationship among people of different races redefines the relations between the genders. The abundant ethnographic monographs and existing documents from the pre-Hispanic and the colonial eras are amenable to a reinterpretation using a gendered perspective. Very few studies are about interracial-intergender relationships and, more specifically, the relationships between man-woman, man-man, and woman-woman of persons from different races, ethnicities, and cultures. This analytical perspective is new, I believe, and its insertion in the debate we owe largely to the black feminist movement of Brazil (Nascimento, 1980),

which has allowed us to demarcate the ethnic conflict from that of class, as a vast literature of Marxist and non-Marxist inclination claimed to do for many years.

To complicate the analysis further, we can observe some interesting questions. From the class perspective, the unequal relations between women that take place in domestic service was revealed from the very beginning of the feminist movement and women's studies in Latin America. Historical research shows that domination can be exercised in different ways over time and that not all past times have been worse, as positivism supposes and Marx himself supposed. Yet interwoven social relations within the familial and domestic spheres, that is, among women who share the same class position — and even among those who share class and race subordinations — reveal that subordination and the female condition are redefined throughout the life cycle and that some women enjoy power over other women. Even more, in contexts of high male domination, certain women can act as dominating agents. By investing them with authority, the system creates areas of uncertainty, divides women as a gender, prevents alliances and the constitution of cohesive oppositions, thus legitimizing that domination.¹³

5. Theoretically and empirically, the perspective of gender as conflict takes us to analyze:

- a) The systems of kinship, that is, the norms and forms of marriage, filiation and inheritance, as Rubin (*ibid.*) has indicated. That is to say, the framing that guides the most elemental loyalties and solidarities between persons of different sexes and generations, including the incest taboo and the legal norms regulating the intra- and inter-family relationships, as well as conflicts and their resolutions in those spheres.¹⁴
- b) Both in domestic settings as well as in the labor market and other spheres of social life, it is necessary to analyze the social division of

13. In Mexico, such a situation can be seen in different urban and rural contexts, linked to patterns of patrilocality and the coexistence of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in the same domestic space, beyond the authoritarianism and neuroses of the actors. Despite the fact that it has not been studied enough in its modalities and consequences, it can be said that mothers-in-law exercise control over sexual access, seduction capacity, and the labor capacity of their daughters-in-law, substituting — partially — the presence and direct control of the son-husband (See Aranda, 1990; De Barbieri et al., 1983; De Barbieri, 1990; González Montes, 1988).

14. See, for instance, the works of Aranda (1989) and González Montes (1988).

labor according to genders. For those of us who develop this theoretical perspective, the social division of labor is a fundamental sphere of the genders system, but as a consequence of the power conflict and therefore of the control that men exercise over the reproductive capacity and sexual access to women, and not as the key to where the subordination-domination between the genders originates. That is, the control over the labor capacity of women, even though it is one of the central elements in the subjection of the female body, is not the only one, because it is not the one that creates the specificity of sexual difference, as Rubin (op. cit.) has pointed out so well.

- c) If the gender system is a power system, it refers to the ways in which it is structured and to how that power is exercised and recognized. That is, it is necessary to direct our gaze to the definitions of persons and citizens as subjects of rights and responsibilities, to the forms and content of participation in the public sphere, to the state, the political system (and the parties), and to the political culture.¹⁵ These issues are increasingly present in the literature on women and genders, with analysis and reflection on social movements created by women (including the feminist movement in its diverse currents), the participation of women in the institutionalized political system and the orientation of state policies directed to serve the demands of the female population. From these studies, what becomes evident is the male character of these arenas as well as the difficulties in overcoming male dominance. Also evident are the conflicts of opposing interests between genders whenever male privileges are challenged and there is an attempt to limit them, as well as the alliances that can transcend the attributed gender of the actors; that is, men who take a stand and commit to the demands of women; women who act to maintain the privileges of the male gender. Do not forget also, in these spaces, that the management of the erotic capacity of bodies (female and male) is part of the political culture, as well as attitudes, jokes, ridicule, and gossip — easy resources to reduce opponents.

15. Traditionally in women's studies, as in other various objects of study in the social sciences, there is a distinction made between the public and the private spheres. The first is defined by male predominance and women's exclusion, the second defined as the sphere of the female. But this dichotomous social representation is today highly questionable and needs to be overcome (See Pateman, 1988; De Barbieri, 1991).

- d) The analysis of gender systems refers to the consideration of the subjectivity of the different actors in the system, the ways in which the psyche is structured, and how the subjects and objects of desire are constituted (Rubin, *op. cit.*; Torres Arias, 1989; 1990; Lamas, 1986).

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