



On Prejudice, Violence and Democracy

María Mercedes Gómez

Albert Memmi¹ wrote that *difference* is a value that we assign to real or imaginary characteristics in order to establish social hierarchies. Those who have the power to assign value commonly position themselves at the dominant end of this hierarchy, using their power for “scaling bodies”² and in the process, establishing the relational character of every identity. Differences have been historically established in various ways: through the reification of biological characteristics as in the case of race and gender; the stigmatization of particular cultural practices and expressions such as in the case of religion, ethnicity, and sexuality; or through the development of economic formations and class differentiation. Biological, cultural and economic differences often overlap and reciprocally shape each other. One of the central challenges of contemporary democratic societies is how best to recognize and include such differences without reproducing hierarchies of inequality.

Dissenting Sexualities

Deconstruction and queer theories, as well as research on sexual behavior, have shown that a binary categorization of differences is inadequate and insufficient to contain the fluidity of our desires and our identifications. It is not only that *for some people* biological sex, gender roles, sexual desire and practices do not correspond, but that *they do not coincide for anyone*. Our sexuality and our self is undetermined and contingent. But the perception of this generates extreme anxiety because it not only discloses the unsubstantiated condition of sexual binaries, but puts them at stake. It also puts at risk the privileges that derive from such binaries.

Many of us dwell in societies of “compulsory heterosexuality”³ and act and live as *if* the binary construction of the world were natural and universal instead of contingent and socially constructed. Compulsory heterosexuality operates through political, sexual, social and economic practices that stigmatize and make targets of violence that which is perceived as feminine and sexualities, which do not conform to the heterosexual norm. Such a norm assumes male

¹ Memmi, A. 1971, *Dominated Men*. Boston: Beacon Press.

² The expression is from Young, I.M. 1990. “The Scaling of Bodies and the Politics of Identity” in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³ Rich, A. 1993. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Pp. 177-205 in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by H. Abelow, M. Aina Barale, and M. Halperin. New York: Routledge.



and female bodies invested with masculine and feminine roles, desiring the opposite sex and acting accordingly. Despite the cultural and legal reforms that dissenting sexualities have achieved in the past decades --especially gay men and lesbians and, in a lesser degree transgender people-- they are still submitted to second class citizenship and to extraordinary State and non-state violence in many societies.

People who embody difference are marked in two ways. The first way is premised on the assumption that one cannot become “the other” because the borders between the norm and those outside the norm are rigid. Race and gender, for instance, have been historically conceived, in social, cultural and legal settings, as essential, visible, and largely immutable physical attributes.⁴ In contrast, the second way seeks to exteriorize difference when the “other” threatens to become one of “us” or part of the norm. Prejudice against dissenting sexualities is paradigmatic of border anxiety because unlike other seemingly essential, visible and immutable differences, sexual orientation has often been seen as invisible and mutable.⁵ In this case, the assumed permeability of the borders of difference --between the norm and deviance or dissent-- is related to violence in a specific way.

A fundamental principle of democratic societies should be, as Nancy Fraser puts it, to achieve participatory parity for all their members in order to make collective decisions regarding the way they want to live their lives.⁶ Prejudices and the violent ways in which they manifest are central obstacles for the achievement of participatory parity. Many of the political, cultural and legal efforts to overcome prejudice focus on a notion of discrimination. I contend however, that explanations about different types of prejudices when collapsed into a single explanatory logic of discrimination are insufficient to elucidate the complexity of exclusionary practices.

Discrimination and Exclusion

The logic of discrimination seeks to maintain “the other” as inferior while the logic of exclusion seeks to liquidate or erase “the other” from the social world.⁷ These logics materialize in two uses of violence, which I call hierarchical and exclusionary. In the hierarchical use of violence, perpetrators maintain and enjoy difference as a mark of inferiority. In contrast, the exclusionary use of violence attempts to eliminate differences because they are understood to be

⁴ For instance, Kenji Yoshino writes about the tensions between discrimination and assimilation in American anti-discrimination laws. Yoshino, K. 2002. “Covering” in *Yale Law Journal* V.III, Number 4, January. P. 771

⁵ Young, *op cit.*, p. 146.

⁶ Fraser, N. and A. Honneth. 2003. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange.*, New York: Verso.

⁷ Gómez M. M. 2005. “Usos jerárquicos y excluyentes de la violencia.” in *Mas Allá del Derecho. Género y Justicia en América Latina*, edited by C. Motta and L. Cabal. Siglo del Hombre Editores, CESO, Centro de Derechos Reproductivos: Bogotá.



incompatible with the perpetrator(s)' world-view. In a compulsory heterosexual system of domination, non-heterosexual practices and identifications are a threat to the system. Keeping them as inferior is, in some cases, instrumental to heterosexual supremacy. But non-heterosexual identities are overall targets for exclusion although such exclusion takes place in different degrees for individuals perceived or defined as gay, lesbian, and transgender.

This means that remedies for violence based on social prejudice must include a profound transformation of the cultural practices which produce and reproduce such violence. Such a transformation requires a diagnosis of the different types of prejudice that pervade social interaction, as well as analytical clarity over the messages sent by, and the purposes behind, the violent embodiment of these prejudices. Hierarchical and exclusionary uses of violence are both expressive and terrorizing acts of power, but they are not equivalents. Intentions to keep "the other" inferior are expressed in different social contexts and political environments from those surrounding intentions to liquidate "the other." Because of this, laws and policies, often designed and interpreted using discriminatory logic, cannot be the basket in which all hopes for social and cultural change are carried. Anti-discrimination laws and policies are important but insufficient to deal with the phenomenon of violence based on prejudice. They may even be detrimental if governments, activists and politicians assume they replace other social and cultural remedies or if they are taken to be the solution for repairing harms done by economic historical asymmetry and repetitive discourses of hate and stigma.

Democracy and Violence

What notion of democracy would better respond to the challenges of both hierarchical and exclusionary violence? Those who struggle for specific legal, social and political recognition of sexual difference and diversity gather around identity politics; those who argue that the affirmation of specific identities supports hierarchical binarism and naturalizes difference struggle to deconstruct fixed identities and to demonstrate the fluidity of identifications. The distinction between identity and identification comes mainly from the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, but has been reformulated in political terms by theorists such as Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek as well as by the work of Jacques Derrida. In spite of their important differences, these theorists agree that the notion of fixed identities is inadequate to represent the processes of subject formation, and translate such impossibility into the political. Subject formation is mobile and fluid. It emerges through a lack of "being" –or a constant emptiness which drives us to search for identifications with the illusion that we can diminish or fill such emptiness. Subjects are "greedy emptiness"⁸ for recognition.

⁸.Kojève, A. 1996. "Desire and Work in the Master and the Slave" in *Hegel's Dialectic of Desire and Recognition*, edited by John O'Neil, Albany: State University of New York Press.



As with the subject, radical democracy requires the lack that permits desire. The saturation of such a lack in which antagonisms and contentions are possible, means violence. Political articulations around the relation friend/adversary, Mouffe suggests⁹, constitute radical democracy and foreclose the totalitarian rhetoric of friend/enemy. In this sense, democracy is always in transition, agonistic, conscious of its contingency, always to come.

Maria Mercedes Gómez is a political theorist that works on hate crimes and prejudice. She teaches at the Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia.

⁹ Mouffe, Ch. 1993. *The Return of the Political*. New York: Verso.