For an epistemology of transition: Paul B. Preciado, psychoanalysis and the regime of sexual difference

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Abstract

This paper aims to illustrate Paul B. Preciado's thought on the epistemology of transition, which should take over from the current epistemological regime of sexual difference based on heterobinarism. Starting in particular from the lecture given by Preciado in Paris in 2019, we intend to focus on the main axes of Preciado's thought on the topic: first and foremost, the necessity of the denaturalization of gender with respect to biological sex; the denunciation of the normalization and medicalization endured by trans or intersex bodies, "deviants" with respect to heterobinarism; the ethnocentrism and necropolitical power of medical and disciplinary institutions vis-à-vis "deviants" and "monstrous"; and the concept of "transition" elaborated by Preciado as a decolonization with respect to the epistemology and disciplinary institutions of the current regime of sexual difference.

Keywords: decolonization; epistemology; gender; intersexuality; Paul B. Preciado; psychoanalysis; regime of sexual difference; transexuality; transfeminism; transition.

1. The word of Peter the Red, monsters and mutant bodies

On the occasion of the École de la cause freudienne's International Days on *Women in psychoanalysis* in November 2019 at the Palais des Congrès in Paris, Paul B. Preciado spoke before the academy, represented by 3,500 psychoanalysts. In the opening of the volume in which his paper is published

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(Preciado, 2020c), Preciado reports that he was greeted by an audience that was skeptical, when not irate. Before calling on psychoanalytic medical institutions to take responsibility, he addressed the audience by asking if any homosexual, trans or nonbinary psychoanalysts were present, receiving in response a heavy silence and some nervous laughter. Preciado recounts that after expounding his talk with the difficulties due to an unwelcoming audience, he was forced to conclude hastily amid aggressive comments from some bystanders; days followed in which excerpts of the talk, filmed and put online, were circulated, commented on, transcribed in partial and more or less accurate ways. Hence Preciado's choice to finally publish the original text of his own talk in volume, in order to offer a more immediate and clearer contribution to the debate in its entirety. The same audience that Preciado found himself in front of at the Palace of Congresses in Paris must have partially and superficially grasped the arguments that were being proposed to him: because they were expounded with all the limitations of orality under adverse expository conditions, and because they were profoundly dissonant with the training that those present in the room had received as psychoanalysts.

At the Paris event, Preciado says he placed himself before the audience by recalling the character of Peter the Red, the protagonist of the Kafkaesque short story *Ein Bericht für Akademie* [A report for an Academy]. Peter the Red, the narrator, is a monkey who, in order to speak before an audience of scientists, had to assume anthropomorphic attitudes, learn human language, until he turned into a man. This was not an evolutionary triumph of some sort, Preciado notes in the wake of Kafka, but a forced disguise to which the subject "deviant" from the norm was forced to undergo in order to be taken into consideration by the institutions by which that norm is enshrined. Preciado emphasizes how the humanization process experienced by Peter the Red does not constitute a path of emancipation, an ascending and improving evolution from animality to humanity but, on the contrary, a path of progressive imprisonment. The monkey is forced to take on guise acceptable to the scientific community in order for it to be granted the right to speak, but for it this means caging itself in a form that does not belong to it, that does not reflect its own subjectivity. Peter the Red manages to escape the cage of Hagenbeck's circus only to end up in the cage of "European colonial humanism and its anthropological taxonomies" (Preciado, 2021, p. 15) Peter the Red undergoes his own enmeshment in the rigid patterns predisposed by the human scientific community, and the continuation of the narrative sees him become an alcoholic in order to cope with his own new conditions of life in the society of human beings and his own new human identity. Peter the Red had to

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learn to speak the language of human beings for him to be granted speech, and so too Preciado tells of his studies to appropriate the: "language of Freud and Lacan" (Preciado, 2020c, p. 19), the language of colonial patriarchy, in order to be heard.

Preciado claims Peter the Red as the alter ego of trans bodies that dominant thought, through its discursive but also clinical practices, seeks to force into the ontological cage of binarism, into the epistemological cage of sexual difference. The blatant irreducibility of trans and non-binary bodies to those cages, Preciado denounces, has not so far led psychoanalysis to question the validity and universality of those rigid epistemologies and the political devices that constitute them, in order to adapt them to the multiformity of living bodies, but on the contrary: living and multiform bodies have been pathologized, subjected to even violent processes of normalization and medicalization, relegated to the realm of dysphoria, neurosis, and psychiatric disorder. One has not dared to question the validity of the theory even in the face of the variety and multiplicity of life that proves, by its very existence, to exceed that theory: the academy and official medical practices have rather preferred to "resolve" that excess, denying its legitimacy, relegating it to the realm of a pathological to be reabsorbed and corrected. Thus Preciado presents himself before psychoanalysts knowing that they will deem him to be mentally ill: he presents himself as a deviant, a mutant, a "monster", who nevertheless is produced as such by their own clinical practices.

2. NATURALIZATION AND HISTORICITY OF THE REGIME OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

By his mere presence at the Paris Palace of Congresses, even before his own content, Preciado frontally attacks the traditional discipline, even belittling the meaning of the study days that gathered psychoanalysts there: the theme of the days was in fact *Women in psychoanalysis*. The mere presence of a trans and non-binary body, which is granted the floor, undermines the assumption, underlying the choice of the theme and the overall setting of the discipline, that there is such a thing as "women". The radical nature of Preciado's questioning is due precisely to his directly corporeal constitution: "His truth emerges embodied in the visible metamorphosis of his body-language. His desire is not only printed in the signifiers he uses employs, but also in the mutant character that his body-language takes on" (Martins Parente & Silveira, 2020, p. 2).

Preciado asserts – and at the same time performatively demonstrates this by his own mere existence – that the thesis of the existence of "women"

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as a particular type of animate being, endowed with certain distinctive specificities within the sphere of "psychoanalysis", should nowadays be radically problematized. Although maximally general, this first critical note offered to psychoanalysts by Preciado's intervention is also radical in the etymological sense of undermining the now-naturalized assumptions of the psychoanalytic discipline under the discursive aspect and under the aspect of medical practice. From the observation of how a trans body knows how to radically challenge the whole edifice of traditional, that is, rigidly binary and heteropatriarchal, psychoanalysis, ultimately derives a political invitation: precisely that of assuming its responsibilities under the epistemological, medical-scientific, and precisely ethical-political aspects. Preciado invites the academy and traditional psychoanalysis to accept being called upon to problematize the thesis, widespread in common sense and mostly uncritically upheld in the academic and medico-scientific world itself, that naturalizes "men" and "women", as the same heteropatriarchal and binary regime that rests on such naturalization.

The naturalization of "woman" and "man" clearly rests on the anatomical and physiological evidence of biological sexes. The persistence of such a theoretical operation of naturalization is intuited as fallacious for at least two reasons: because gender is not immediately reducible to biological sex – as the social sciences have now largely taught – and because, even if it were, not all living bodies are reducible to the two biological sexes recognized by the heterobinary system – think of the crisis of medical practice and even of scientific epistemology in the face of intersex bodies.

The disarticulation of gender identity from biology and the anatomical endowment of human subjects has a long history in the feminist movement and contemporary philosophies. The entire first chapter of The second sex is devoted by Simone de Beauvoir to highlighting the relativity of the value to be attributed to the data offered by biology in designating the socially normative aspects of sexual and gender identity (de Beauvoir, 1953, pp. 33-64). Beauvoir herself can now be considered a cult thinker in the bosom of the academy in Western countries, a more or less integrated element in the pantheon of the great philosophers studied in our universities: she has been partially monumentalized by scholars while simultaneously being overtaken by more radical and inclusive feminisms, especially from the global South, with their histories of claims and progressive revivals. Yet, one of the major theoretical axes of The second sex, Preciado shows us with his experience at the Palace of Congresses in Paris, has been monumentalized as much as not assimilated: no matter how much Beauvoir is present in the teaching programs of universities, the academy as a whole still today, more than seventy years later, shows very

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serious difficulties in admitting that now trivial disconnect between the biological-anatomical dimension of human beings and their gender identity, and the baggage of social norms that directly derive from the latter. It is still destabilizing to the dominant discourse that social expectations of gender cannot be *naturally* assigned to sexed bodies through the assignment at birth of *male* and *female* roles. And it is all the more intolerable for the entire psychoanalytic edifice, which on heterobinarism immediately bases most of its theoretical and clinical tools.

Naturalistic positions manifestly reveal their obsolescence and the weakness of the still-proposed attempt to eternalize – that is, destoricize – social and political categories by disguising them behind the data of biology. What traditional psychoanalysis, as well as common sense and dominant discourse, considers "natural men or women" are actually the product of a political device long since unmasked by critical thinking. Paul B. Preciado resolutely disputes: "the natural existence of masculinity and femininity" (Preciado, 2021, p. 14) and decides to use his own experience as a non-binary trans person to demonstrate the far from natural or obvious status of gender connotation. Of the latter, on the contrary, it is necessary to highlight the historicity, and with it immediately also the susceptibility of transformations, oscillations, changes of status over time and according to the broader cultural and anthropological developments of societies.

Beauvoir's long-standing thesis that women are not born echoes in Preciado's living experience as told to her psychoanalytic audience. Recalling her own memories as a child in Francoist Spain, in a body recognized by society as unequivocally female at birth, she asks, "What was there in my childhood body that allowed her to predict my whole life?". The experience of the trans and nonbinary subject, with her own factual existence, shows the non-exhaustiveness of gender assignment at birth according to the genital apparatus with which one comes into the world, and the no longer sustainable arbitrariness of assigning social roles according to that same anatomical endowment. It was impossible for young Beatriz Preciado to mechanically trace her destiny of becoming a heterosexual bride and mother to her own mere infant physicality. The arbitrariness of the assignment becomes even more blatant when one sees how the attribution of gender roles does not even have to wait for the act of birth: an ultrasound scan of the fetus, which identifies its female biological sex, is enough to predict a future as a heterosexual wife and mother, even before its constitution as a subject. A human being, born with a given chromosome set and genital apparatus, "having been assigned to the female gender at birth" (Preciado, 2020c, p. 23), for that reason alone should submit to the *natu*ralness of a whole series of social expectations that to those "data of biology"

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serve as a seemingly necessary corollary. The first, truly basic step of a countersexual proposal is to first point out how the normativity of gender conduct is not naturally determined *but* socially constructed, and thus to reject it as a device of political control and over-termination:

It is about stop doing what one's gender prescribes, for example about abandoning, the spaces of victimization, caring, gentleness, seduction, availability, and listening for which we cis-female have been pharmacopornographically programmed since childhood. (Preciado, 2020c, p. 278)¹

The mere experience of a trans person, with its own uncomfortableness, demonstrates the rigidity and at once the violence of gender attribution: femininity, young Beatriz felt, was a cage. However, the rejection of the naturalization of femininity is only the first in a series of escapes. Here the need for transition is grafted as much as the denial of a certain still rigidly binary way of understanding transition itself. In choosing to break out of the cage of femininity, Preciado explains, it is not a matter of ceasing to be a woman in order to "become a man like the others" (Preciado, 2020c, p. 28). That is, to enter immediately into the other cage, that of masculinity. A transition understood as mere migration from one gender assignment to another, from one bank to another of obligatory heterobinarism, is not a sufficient tool to challenge that binarism but on the contrary becomes an experience capable of reinforcing it as an institution and as an epistemology. This is a real epistemological insufficiency, which reaffirms the impositional violence of gender binarism, if the only escape from compulsory femininity is identified in the entry into compulsory masculinity.

The overcoming of naturalistic positions in the epistemology of sexual difference, and thus the reconfiguration of genders as not naturally implicated by biological sex, is still but a step in the even more radical path of the abolition of gender as such. Preciado goes beyond Butler, beyond the performativity of gender, and much more radically rediscusses the very need for "gender" to be posited. The latter after all, Preciado denounces, since its conceptual birth with the work of John Money has been configured as "el instrumento de una racionalización de la vida en la que el cuerpo no es más que un parámetro" (Preciado, n.d. - link). This means first and foremost that "gender" is a (bio)political device: "es ante todo un concepto necesario para la aparición y el desarrollo de un conjunto de técnicas de normalización/transformación de la vida" (Preciado, n.d. - link). And it

¹ The section in chapter 12, entitled *Ejercicios de programación de género posporno. Coaching viril in the Anagrama edition* (pp. 277-279) is absent in the Feminist Press edition.

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is also a politically and socially configured device that does not hesitate to shred real nonconforming living bodies.

After rejecting the "naturalistic" foundation of the heterobinary sexgender system, Preciado seeks to dismantle this system itself, and to demystify the apparent obligatory nature of gender choice. Preciado's rejection is about binary gender identity and the legitimacy of its derivation from biology, not about the actual "natural" existence of gendered bodies; in this sense, if this rejection has been traced back to Solanas' "extinctionist approach" as it emerges from his SCUM Manifest (Evans, 2018, p. 287), it seems to me that it can be rather traced back to the work of Shulamith Firestone and should be framed within the general perspective of gender abolitionism as it is configured in xenfeminist perspectives (Hester, 2018, pp. 22-32). As an inhabitant of Uranus, Preciado wrote:

I am not a man and I am not a woman and I am not heterosexual I am not homosexual I am not bisexual. I am a dissident of the sex-gender system. I am the multiplicity of the cos-mos trapped in a binary political and epistemological system, shouting in front of you. (Preciado, 2020b, p. 37)

3. ANOTHER "TRANSITION"

Preciado then proposes the category of trans as something radically different from the transition from male to female status or vice versa: transition is not mere permeability of the barrier between male and female, to allow the unidirectional transition from one side to the other, but is radical questioning of the dichotomy itself. The transition affirmed by Preciado has value as a powerful epistemological tool insofar as it offers itself as a way out not with respect to one gender or the other, but with respect to the very fanaticism of sexual difference, to the overall cage of the false alternative between "natural" masculinity and femininity.

It is a matter here, Preciado says, of negating another mistaken view, because it is too rigid and because it again reaffirms patriarchal heterobinarism, of transition, linked to the bogeyman of irreversibility. Every trans or near trans person is strongly discouraged, especially at a young age, from embarking on their own path of transition, with the argument that they might later regret it: there is no turning back from transition. Transitioning from one gender to another involves status, physical, hormonal, possibly surgical, aesthetic, and performative changes that do not tolerate backtracking. The assertion of such rigid affiliation between the trans person and his or her target gender is, from an epistemological perspective, no less conservative than the principled denial of the legitimacy of the transi-

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tion itself. The thesis that the target gender is irrevocably assumed is not qualitatively more progressive than the thesis of the naturalness of gender assignment at birth: it concedes a "correction" of the natural error and, on the basis of the intervention to amend it, reaffirms the incommunicable alternative between the two traditional genders.

It is possible to bring the trans body back to normative heterobinarism by forcing it to jump from one gender assigned at birth on the basis of genital endowment to the opposite gender through the "pharmacological and psychiatric ritual" (Preciado, 2020c, p. 35). To be swallowed up in the opposite gender to the one assigned at birth is to fall back into normal and naturalized heterobinarism; it is to have not escaped the rigidity of the regime of sexual difference but to have remained under its yoke, thereby reaffirming its epistemological and practical validity. It means having to learn the codes of dominant masculinity in order to conform to one heterobinary norm rather than the other. This would be mere "mimicry", a concept that Preciado sharply rejects to speak of gender transition, which risks being seen as reduced to simulation or imitation of the chosen gender. Here Preciado highlights the radical nature of his own conception of transition: it is properly so if it is permanent, that is, if one assumes it as a process that is possible to travel in both directions. Denying that transition is a one-way journey constitutes the radical rejection of the epistemological approach to sexual difference: it invalidates its underlying dichotomy, defusing the obligation of choosing the cage in which to allow oneself to be imprisoned. The epistemologically revolutionary act is no longer to grant that there can be transitions from one status to another – from female to male or vice versa – but to deny that the definition on natural and biological grounds of each is exhaustive of the variety and multiformity of existing bodies.

The concept of transition outlined by Preciado then seeks to reaffirm life in its multiplicity that does not allow itself to be reduced to the norms of obligatory heterobinarism, and is surplus to the latter's ontological and epistemological categories. Preciado writes that "gender transition is an antigenealogy" (Preciado, 2020c, p. 49). It is no longer just a matter of "inventing a mechanical adjustment", whether hormonal, surgical or variously expressive, to hide the phenotype of the gender assigned at birth in order to acquire a different one, but it is a matter of accepting to make room in one's body for a parallel evolution of life that would otherwise never be expressed. The medical-surgical, technical and capitalistic dimension of the process under the physiological aspect does not exhaust it as a creative act; "naturalistic" readings, which would reduce transition to an extraordinary correction of natural and biological life, cannot recognize transition as the means of realizing, in the same body, another of the

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possibilities of the multiformity of life. The latter no longer accepts being reduced to biology. Preciado's discourse, which has invested the historicalanthropological dimension, now opens up to the vastness of the futuribles to which transition finally allows access, in a theoretical-practical sense and as an epistemological paradigm break: "To be trans", Preciado writes: "one must accept the triumphant irruption of another future within oneself" (Preciado, 2020c, p. 49).

4. Toward a new epistemological paradigm

The historical-anthropological dimension of Preciado's discourse first emerges in his assertion of the historicity and ethnocentrism of the regime of sexual difference, as of the disciplines it informs, first and foremost traditional and heteropatriarchal psychoanalysis. Preciado recalls the case of intersex births, to show in one respect the non-absoluteness of the binary model of the sex-gender system, which fails to subsume all the cases actually offered by nature – thereby debunking the claim that it would be nature with its eternal and superhuman categories that would ground heterobinarism itself. Second, the historicity of the regime of sexual difference emerges, for example, from a consideration of the single-sex epistemology in force in Europe in the Middle Ages and the early centuries of the modern age, according to which there was strictly speaking only one sex, the male, while women constituted imperfect, deficient males. The fanaticism of sexual difference, which can be considered as belonging to a now traditional epistemology, is not eternal, however, but historically determined – and also relatively young. The idea that a new epistemological upheaval will still take place to overcome the epistemology of sexual difference is not utopian, but a historically and anthropologically realistic scenario; especially since, as Preciado reconstructs in his Paris report, the model that is still dominant today nevertheless already entered an irreparable crisis after World War II.

Overcoming the regime of sexual difference is not only predictable from the epistemological aspect, but is desirable from the political aspect. The regime of sexual difference, in fact, is a semio-technical and cognitive lattice, which constitutes a limitation for our perception, for our expression, for the possibility of establishing relationships. In pretending to be universal, it edifies a whole complex of discursive and clinical practices with immediate effects on the political subjectification of "deviant" or "monstrous" bodies, as well as on the delegitimization of "deviant" forms of sexual and sentimental relations – that is, all those different from hetero-

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sexual monogamy. The arrogance of claimed universality is justificatory of the disposition of political and precisely necropolitical practices. Recalling Mbembe, for whom "exercising sovereignty means exerting control over mortality and defining life as the unfolding and manifestation of power" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 8), one can observe the connection between the absolutist claims of the regime of sexual difference and the consequences on the lives of subjects reduced by it to the margins. Preciado, moreover, criticizes in this respect the theoretical – or psychological – identity trap, according to which only subalterns would have one: this is the illusion that induces the hetero cis bourgeois white male to consider himself the universality of the human, and not one identity among others. Just as in the single-sex regime woman was identified with not "succeeding" in being as physiologically perfect as man, subaltern identities today would be characterized and connoted by defect, according to shortcomings with respect to the universal human model. Identity would thus be configured as the profile of any minority that cannot aspire to place itself as universal.

The characteristics of the hetero cis and bourgeois white male configure one type of identity among a great many others possible and existing de facto, but at the same time they delimit that specific identity that enjoys the power, historically and socially constituted, to legitimize or not all others, and to sanction which among all others do or do not deserve to continue to exist, and under what conditions: it is in this sense that Preciado speaks of a "necropolitical animal". Heteropatriarchal and colonial psychiatry and psychoanalysis – themselves victims of the illusion of universality, which blinds them to their own historicity and ethnocentrism, for that matter long denounced by ethnopsychiatry and decolonial studies – can legitimize or not legitimize processes of political subjectification. In our societies, they may in fact necropolitically deny the right to exist and to speak of subalterns who are not ascribable to the codes of the purported white Western heteropatriarchal universality. The cost of granting life, speech and political subjectivation is the sacrifice of "deviance" through more or less forced medicalization, psychiatric, hormonal or even surgical normalization.

All the limitations of the approach that neglects the ethnocentric element of this epistemology, which grounds clinical practices and political denials of subjectivity, are revealed in the case of intersex births. The medical-clinical practice of the instantaneous "normalization" of new intersex births in recent times is increasingly debated and no longer universally practiced, but it remains revealing of the practical violence that the regime of sexual difference is capable of exerting. Recognized as "deviant" and "deformed", the bodies of the many infants whose biological sex could

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not be uniquely identified because of particular conformations of the external genital apparatus, have in large numbers been surgically operated on, with the utmost ease, to be reduced to one sex or the other – with often dramatic psychological consequences, as intersex rights activism now energetically documents and publicizes. Trans bodies, while having historically and biographically specific experiences compared to intersex births, regularly experience similar attempts at pathologization and subsequent medical normalization, primarily through psychiatric categories and practices.

Significantly, the crisis of the current epistemology of sexual difference has deepened and extended through the work of struggle movements that explicitly set out to deconstruct dominant thought in its various meanings: the labor, feminist, homosexual, colonial critique, anti-racist, anti-capitalist and LGBTQI+ movements. The multiplicity of forms of deviance and resistance with respect to normative heterosexuality reflects the processes of political organization and subjectification of those minorities marginalized by the universal and colonial human – even Butler recalled the closeness between minority identities and the postcolonial subject, highlighting the concurrence between certain aspects of his own work and that of Saidiya Hartman, Homi K. Bhabha and other authors, with reference to, among other things, the process of "appropriation of the colonial 'voice' by the colonized" (Butler, 2006, p. 206).

More or less figuratively, Preciado speaks of the very construction of a transitional epistemology as a process of decolonizing epistemology: the breaking out of the cage of sexual difference, in his autobiographical account, had for him the meaning of *debinarizing*, *disidentifying*, *decolonizing*. The process of transition itself is a process of reasserting one's subjectivity, of decolonizing one's body, the trans body that has historically become a colony of medical and psychoanalytic discourse in the regime of sexual difference and its disciplinary, media and market institutions. Trans bodies, Preciado explains, are natural resources to feed the heteropatriarchal system, at the cost of extraction, exploitation and annihilation.

It is then an eminently political challenge to construct a new epistemology, an epistemology of transition, that can offer itself as a historical alternative to the equally historical epistemology of sexual difference, whose historicity precisely is denied by common sense, dominant discourse as well as hegemonic and academic psychoanalysis and medicine. Recognizing the historicity of the regime of sexual difference and the epistemology related to it, and demystifying the leap from the descriptive claims of the two natural sexes to the normative claims of heterobinarism, is necessary to found a new epistemology. In the meantime, it is a matter of tracing back to historicity and the cultural dimension all the lexical, cognitive, practical and

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political paraphernalia that comes with the regime of sexual difference, in order to finally recognize its surmountability. Preciado, in the Paris report, predicts that it may take "ten or twenty years" for a new epistemological paradigm "of the living body" to be delineated thanks to the work and activism of the anti-racist, transfeminist and queer movements. This would be a great collective work of experimentation and innovation – of relational and love practices, of family and filiation bonds, of gender identification, of sexuality. In such a process of collective critical and creative production, psychoanalysis, too, is called upon to play a role: that of initiating a process, even a difficult one, of depatriarchalization, de-heterosexualization and decolonization of itself, as discourse, narrative, institution and clinical practice. Initiating such a process would mean ceasing to legitimize the necropolitical violence of heteropatriarchal normalization and the fanatical regime of sexual difference: this is an urgent task with which Preciado explicitly invites the academy to confront.

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Riassunto

Il presente articolo intende illustrare il pensiero di Paul B. Preciado in merito alla epistemologia della transizione, che dovrebbe subentrare all'attuale regime epistemologico della differenza sessuale basata sull'eterobinarismo. A partire in particolare dalla relazione tenuta da Preciado a Parigi nel 2019, si intende mettere a fuoco gli assi portanti del pensiero di Preciado sul tema: innanzitutto la necessità della denaturalizzazione del genere rispetto al sesso biologico; la denuncia della normalizzazione e medicalizzazione subite dai corpi trans o intersessuali, "devianti" rispetto all'eterobinarismo; l'etnocentrismo e il potere necropolitico delle istituzioni mediche e disciplinari nei confronti dei "devianti" e "mostruosi"; il concetto di "transizione" elaborato da Preciado, quale decolonizzazione rispetto all'epistemologia e alle istituzioni disciplinari dell'attuale regime della differenza sessuale.

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