GENDER AS A SYSTEM OF POWER AND IDENTITY PERFORMATIVITY IN THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF CULTURAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to demonstrate the place of Gender Studies within Cultural Studies, reflecting on its epistemological evolution. In addition to recognizing the benefits of Cultural Studies' multidisciplinary context, this paper identifies key concepts - power and identity - closely linked to gender and its study. The concept of power - combined with discursive practices involving deep ideological/hegemonic moments, but also moments of resistance - is fundamental in understanding gender. Accordingly, gender is closely linked with the concept of identity, which involved in power relations, now follows the path of performativity.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Studies; Gender Studies; Power; Identity; Resistance

Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study surrounding Culture and all elements (directly or indirectly) constituting, valuing, or discussing it. Cultural Studies' strength resides in its ability to find an understanding between different research areas and contrast them in order to understand aspects of social reality, thus finding ways, solutions, and socio-cultural explanations for many aspects of everyday life. Once what seems to be the key event or key fact has been identified and its origin, status and possible evolution are questioned, it can be confronted with the suitable contemporary social and cultural theories. Therefore, Cultural Studies are imbued with action-research and require the appreciation of subjects and of their practices, by providing the necessary tools for the examination, interpretation, and critique of any text, institution, or cultural practice (Kellner, 2003) within the system of social relations where they are consumed and (re)produced.

Based on the previous statements, Cultural Studies provide Gender Studies with a strong theoretical and practical drive, by focusing on the human subject and its experiences, and usually targeting issues of the voiceless. It is possible, then, to include Gender Studies within Cultural Studies' policies, which are increasingly focused on new social movements of gender, racial, and class representation (Bounds 1999; Kellner, 2003). Cultural Studies develop a multidisciplinary program that seeks to analyze how socio-cultural movements can reproduce certain forms of sexism, racism, and subordination, but also how they can intervene in order to make a difference for certain social groups. Thus, Gender Studies can be placed under the broad scope of Cultural Studies, which, in conjunction with other fields, gain the scientific dynamism needed to intervene and solve crises and daily events.

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Cultural Studies identify which subject areas can interrelate in order to find solutions for the issues they pinpoint, providing dialogues within modern and postmodern theories, and political action. For this to happen successfully, the investigator has a key role in determining the study, as they establish the research and all its constituting steps; their scientific integrity, as well as their subjective nature is valued. Hence, it is up to the researcher to identify the problem, interrogate it (which does not necessarily imply a question) and set goals that will direct the study. Subsequently, literature review (which may cover a range of multidisciplinary theories, as long as they are within the scope of research) is necessary in order to foster dialogue between theory and practice. For Cultural Studies, it is only through this process that answers or solutions (both theoretical and practical) can be found and the curtain of new research opportunities can be raised. This scientific process can assist several studies, of various socio-cultural branches, such as History, Philosophy, Anthropology, Sociology, Linguistics, Literature, and Communication Sciences, and is particularly beneficial for Gender Studies.

In the 1980s (during Cultural Studies' "international phase"), Gender Studies became central to Cultural Studies from both the scientific and the epistemological points of view, as well as from the academic point of view (Baptista, 2014). It is at this turning point that cases, events, moments, and transformations encompassing the concept of "gender" start to be identified and articulated with other recurring and determinant concepts in the field of Gender Studies. Amongst these concepts are those of "power" and "identity", which - under the umbrella of Cultural Studies - often lie in the path of the discussion on gender.

It is with the advent of the 1980s that Cultural Studies also begin to interrelate the socio-cultural with power issues, in order to think about the production and organization of meaning in human relations and actions. For Johnson (1999: 51) "Cultural Studies are necessarily and deeply implicated in power relations", particularly those rooted in social microstructures including gender, race, class, and beliefs. It is this interest in micro-power and minority practices that ultimately gives voice to different modes of resistance and ideology. If, on the one hand, it is essential to understand the concept of "ideology" and its practices, which are able to reproduce social relations of domination and subordination (hegemonic power), on the other hand, it is also important to understand that these arouse the resistant forces of the oppressed.

Hegemonic power, which was first theorized by Antonio Gramsci (2006) to designate the ideological domination of one social class over another, gets a new productive articulation within Cultural Studies. Even though in a hegemonic relation there is always a group that leads, this relationship cannot be simply understood as a matter of repression of a dominant group over a dominated one: the interests of both groups must be taken into account for a relationship to form. This requires the dominating group to gather a set of moral, practical, intellectual, symbolic, and propagandistic elements able to lead the dominated group, not the direct application of repressive and prohibitive force. Now, this new understanding of hegemony will help Cultural Studies in another reading of socio-cultural practices, particularly in the case of Gender Studies. It is important to understand how this hegemonic power can be productive, particularly for gender issues.

According to Gramsci (2006), the supremacy of a particular group manifests itself through domination and intellectual/moral leadership. It is not a matter of regarding hege-

mony as an issue of repressive subordination by the hegemonic group, or, in the case of gender, for example, of regarding women as forcefully (in the true sense of the concept of forceful or physical violence) subject to male power. For the author, the interests of both groups over which hegemonic power is exercised must be considered. Regarding intellectual/moral leadership, the group that exercises dominion surrounds itself with a set of elements capable of directing and guiding the dominated group, without thereby applying repressive force.

The way the dominant group finds to maintain the intellectual and moral monopoly over the dominated group has to do with the construction of what Gramsci (1996) called "ideological block". This is the acknowledgement of the ideological power that institutions such as school, family, church, media, cultural events, political parties, and even simple stereotypes exert in the construction and maintenance of hegemonic power. In fact, it is possible to see that a group can hardly exert power without exerting its hegemony through an ideological apparatus at the same time (Althusser, 2006), and this is true from a gender perspective. Of course hegemony will contribute to the building and maintenance of gender discourse(s) and identity(ies) because, as shown by Bourdieu (1980: 67), we assume that "(...) the whole discourse on identity (...) shows the field of a symbolic struggle, where what is decided is who has the power to define identity and the power to make the defined identity known and recognized".

Although power traditionally lies in economic and State relations, Cultural Studies have transformed and adapted this tendency, adding socio-cultural awareness and treating power as a matter of language or discourse, which seems to be wiser today. Cultural Studies can be seen "as a discursive formation in a Foucaultian sense" (Costa *et al,* 2003: 41), because they consider cultural (or discursive) practices as fundamental in the construction of the reality we inhabit; a reality which is built and transformed through the discursive and nondiscursive forms that regulate what can be said (and by whom) under certain sociocultural contexts, referring to issues of power (Barker, 2000).

For Foucault (2006) power is distributed by social relations and multiplied in discourses and institutions; it is not just a negative control mechanism of the subjects. Institutions such as State, school, family, church, and the media boost the circulation of discourses of power and society representation, and have proven to be essential in the identity construction of individuals, particularly in terms of structuring their gender identity. In fact, nowadays, issues of power relate to issues of identity, especially when identity is seen as a problematic individually or collectively created under social pressures (Hall & Gay, 1996).

When we speak of power, ideology/hegemony, and the surrounding discursive practice, it is essential to mention not only the established relations of dominance (whether productive or coercive), but also the blooming possibilities of resistance. According to Bourdieu (1999: 5) all individuals are subjected to "historical structures of male order", so they risk "(...) resorting to ways of thinking that are themselves products of domination in order to think about male domination". However, this reality also enables escape points from these dominant discursive structures, creating elements of resistance that can include identity transformations.

It is also in the 1980s that Cultural Studies deepen the theories about identity construction, now focusing on the idea that the subject has "multiple identities continuously (trans)formed in relation to the way they are represented or challenged by surrounding cul-

tural systems (...)" (Hennigen & Guareschi, 2002: 49). According to Kellner (1997), it is in Modernity that identity follows self-reflexive paths susceptible to change, multiplication, and innovation, and in Post-Modernity that it becomes increasingly unstable and fragile, as a result of new anthropological and sociological conceptions and interpretations.

In the context of Cultural Studies, identity is involved in the place of cultural sharing, which leads Hartley (2004: 210) to claim that identity is based on "shared characteristics that are more cultural than natural/biological". This means identity is involved in the relations we establish with the Other and in how we address or represent the Other (Hall, 1992), creating adaptation and resistance dynamics. In other words, identity is constructed within the representation or discursive constructions circulating in society that come from the relations individuals establish among themselves, which may mean, on the one hand, a multiplicity of identities provided by social reality but, on the other, a stereotyped prison of identity models that are cyclic, pre-made, and ready to be applied according to certain subject characteristics. This reality is often applied in relation to gender, where "ready made identities" (Damean, 2006) - existing in social channels, especially in the media - are available to be applied according to the subjects' (female or male) behaviors, attitudes, and habits.

In fact, until the mid-twentieth century, gender identity was associated with socio-cultural acceptance and imposition, and its complexity was not questioned. However, this outlook undergoes a change when social researchers start to recognize there is no single cultural gender model, but rather a multiplicity of gender discourses (Moore, 2000). It is at this turning point that works such as *The Second Sex*[2], by the French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1977[a], 1977[b]) pave the way for the feminist discussion on gender roles and, consequently, on gender identity a social network of power relations (after the acknowledgement that biological sex differences are not fixed). In this sense, questions posed from the perspective of Cultural Studies put Gender Studies on the path of investigating the power systems that produce male and female as they are recognized. In short, the social and symbolic gender "rigidity" begins to blur when the true "nature" of gender is questioned. This is when "ready made identities" give way to "identity profiles" with more diluted borders, able to accept difference, and more susceptible to resistance.

In the twenty-first century, gender issues - associated with power relations and the construction of identity - are more discussed within Cultural Studies, not only as representation, but also as a social, discursive, and even ideological construction. It is in this context that the feminist movement's work of the previous decades will suffer an epistemological restructuring, giving way to a new understanding of gender and sexuality (conceived from a place other than nature). The author that stands out the most in this line of thought is Judith Butler (1990, 2004), for bringing to the discussion the possibility of thinking about socio-cultural reality as a place where gender and sexuality are no longer defined by nature but interpreted as "performativity". The notion of gender "performativity" moves away from the rigidity of the discursive structures that keep each gender within certain behavioral and attitudinal limits, and streamlines the process of adaptation of the subjects in "new" gender forms (which are not exactly recent, but as the rules governing reality do not embrace them, it is necessary to consider them as "new" gender forms). For the author, gender should be perceived as

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[2] *Le Deuxième Sexe* (published in 1949 and distributed in two volumes) is known as the philosophical essay that deeply analyzes women's role in society.

matter of "respect for bodies", which must be free from the discourses that form them (because bodies/sexes are not natural, but discursive).

Judith Butler's position in relation to Gender Studies becomes widespread within Cultural Studies (and supported by other great theoreticians, like Allison Weir, Luce Irigaray, and Rosi Braidotti), evolving along the lines of post-structuralism and making way for what is known as Post-Feminism. Currently, despite acknowledging the importance of the early feminist movement (both on the epistemological and ontological fields, as well as in political practice), it is essential to cultivate a place where the subject is classified as a human being before being thought of as male or female. This is the true essence of Post-Feminism. However, it is crucial to understand that, in order to carry out interpretations of the socio-cultural world (at the real, symbolic, and imaginary levels), research must often adapt to the spatial-temporal context, positioning itself (when needed) in-between Feminism, Anti-feminism, and Post-feminism.

To sum up, society's problem lies precisely in the fact that it is conceived in terms of sexuality (or "war of the sexes"), where sexuality is thought from and for the Other, before being built from and for the Self, the same inevitably going for gender. This means that gender discourses are full of stereotypical constructs (norms) about the sexes, which easily causes hegemonic relations between the dominant-subject and the dominated-subject, creating complex power webs that shape and severely limit subjects' identity. Gender Studies, articulated with Cultural Studies, identify and denounce this normativity, and announce forms of resistance. Gender "performativity" is a form of resistance to this panorama, opening the door to new forms of reality through incorporating. According to Butler (1993, 2004), we must think of the body as a transformation process that transcends and (re) constructs the norm, and shows the current situation is not permanent. That is, this is the time to reflect on the fact that if the world exists and is conceived in a certain way, it can be created and reconceived in another.

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