

Researching Sexual Subjects

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Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.



Researching Sexual Subjects*

Mario Pecheny**

*No querer traer sin caos
portátiles vocablos¹*

Alejandra Pizarnik, "Días contra el ensueño"

Researching sexual subjects posits a number of challenges due to the politically passionate or passionately political character that defines the field. One such challenge stems from attempting to reconcile the distance, inherent in research, with emotional or political commitment. I would argue, however, that this reconciliation cannot be accomplished by the mere usage of gender-correct grammar.

The challenge of combining distance with commitment is not new. Tension between autonomy in the practice of scientific inquiry and commitment to political processes has always existed in the social sciences. Scientists and intellectuals have settled this tension by privileging either the pole of legitimacy or the pole of commitment (one related to their professional knowledge and practice, and the other to an organic connection to the subjects of change) or by somehow integrating the two, which is never easily accomplished.

An additional challenge also surfaces in the common muddling of voices and spokespersons. Do we speak *about* specific subjects, or *in their name*? Academic voices do not represent a collective, as the spokespersons of social movements are not expected to respond to criteria of coherence and empirical adequacy—or any other scientific standard, for that matter. The legitimacy principles of one differ from those of the other.

Nevertheless, separating the scientific and political spheres, as Max Weber suggested, does not resolve the tension either. Claims to neutrality are products of either ideology or bad faith. How can we then think of a contribution from the social sciences that could satisfy the plural criteria of the field, respond with facts and lucid interpretations to the challenges posed by research subjects, and question those subjects while engaging

* Translated from Spanish by Miluska Teresa Martinez Sarson. Originally published as: PECHENY, M. 2008. "Investigar sobre sujetos sexuales". In: PECHENY, M. et alii. *Todo sexo es político – Estudios sobre sexualidades en Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Libros del Zorzal. P. 9-17.

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¹ "To avoid bringing without chaos/portable vocables".

their demands, claims, and expectations, without confusing their voices with the voice of their spokesperson?

A basic ethical tenet is to listen attentively to those whom, as scientists, we study. Not in order to accept uncritically what we hear, but to establish a dialog in good faith, corroborating information and discussing the principles that regulate action. Far from neutral is the bet on the defense of sincere listening and expression, the rigor in searching and validating data, and the criticism of circulating ideas about what is good and what is bad; in other words, the ethical bet that would combine scientific ideals and democratic political ideals.

But now, who does research? On whom is research performed? From what theoretical and methodological perspectives is research conducted? These three questions walk on the tension derived from the aspiration to do a social science committed to the principles that legitimize it before peers, as much as before the subjects of study. In this sense, the search for answers that we attempt implies accepting a pluralism of ideologies, theoretical-methodological conceptions, as well as languages and writing styles.

The question about who does the research refers to the legitimacy of researchers, and it translates into questions such as: Can only members of the oppressed classes study the oppressed classes? Can only women study women? Can only non-heterosexuals study non-heterosexuals? A rarely questioned assumption in this field states that the legitimacy of one voice does not arise from its good faith, the solidity of its information, or the rectitude of its principles, but from its identification—in the greater measure and detail possible—with the subjects who are the “object of research.” I use the expression “object of research” deliberately. It took social scientists more than a century to convince the rest of the scientific community that the objects of social science research are indeed subjects, that is namely its theoretical-methodological specificity. However, we tend to forget nowadays, ideologically, that the subjects of any study are always constructed as objects and at some point, therefore, objectified, homogenized, limited, contained, and “thrown before” the researcher, as indicated by the etymology of that word.

Let us return to the question of who is legitimately authorized to do research. According to my criteria, the orientation toward which an ethically grounded answer must be directed is as follows: Research can be undertaken by those who approach it rigorously from an empirical point of view; correctly from an ethical point of view; and in good faith from the point of view of the expression of their subjective experience. This claim is sustained on a double assumption: on one hand, there is no human distance so insurmountable that would make it so that a subject could not speak about other subjects. In other words, one does not necessarily have to be a worker to speak about workers, or a woman to speak about women, or to have a particular sexual orientation or gender identity to speak about those who have that sexual orientation or gender identity. On the other hand, proximity or resemblance in social positions (as relations of absolute identity do

not exist empirically) does not grant a “fidelity card”, nor does it necessarily provide a better perspective to produce inter-subjective dialog. The fact that one is a worker (or a woman, or of a particular sexual orientation or gender identity) does not guarantee *a priori* the most genuine reflection on the experiences of one’s peers. Likewise, greater distance does not imply incomprehension. Do proximity and distance have effects on the capacity to reflect on the experiences of others? My answer is: it depends.

In synthesis, to equate proximity to the authority to speak poses an irresolvable problem. In those terms, it is a false problem. The same applies to identity, meaning equality between those who are identical. So the challenge remains: how to make social, scientific, and intellectual discourses make political sense to social subjects. Furthermore, this has to do with a game of internal equilibriums between the aspirations and legitimacy of the social sciences, and the real or imagined role that the discourses of the social sciences play in the field of social conflict.

All that said, here comes a partial denial of what has been hereto stated: experience shows that it is the subjects themselves who will give recognition to reflections and research consistent with their own interests, demands, claims, and dreams. It will not be outsiders who do that. But insularity, the look toward oneself, threatens any effort from the viewpoint of political legitimacy, as much as from that of academic legitimacy. Hence the question about who does research has at least two answers: research is conducted by those who have the interest, skill, and commitment; as much as by those who share interests, demands, claims, and dreams with the research subjects. In fact to many of those who study the experiences of gender and sexual diversity, those issues are or have been part of their lived experience. However, to validate or to invalidate research and reflections on an experience exclusively on the basis of having lived it or not, though it works in the context of political rhetoric, should not work in the context of the social sciences.

The second question has to do with whom is research done on. In addition to the generic universal masculine that still rules the Spanish and Portuguese languages, problems also arise even when we try to designate the subjects of our research: non-heterosexuals, homosexuals, gays, lesbians, *travestis*, transsexuals, transgender persons, trans, bisexuals, and intersex, the members of sexual diversity, people and groups who do not adjust to hetero-normative or heterosexist standards, members of sexual minorities, sexual dissidents... and letters and acronyms, such as GLTTTBI. Difficulties run through the issue of whether these are indeed categories (which can be objectified by definition), groups, movements, identities (essential, constructed, fluid, necessary, contingent), or what. The unresolved tension of the first question reappears here: if among the main forms of oppression, domination, and violence in the field of sexualities we find subjugation in naming, objectification, and homogenization, then any definition thereby adopted for research will potentially contribute to reproduce the order against which subjects struggle. However, the trap is not avoided by fleeing from it, that

is, by not defining. According to the criteria that seem to me most adequate, we can try to ethically resolve this dilemma by using definitions always in context: depending on the discussion at hand, on the speakers, and on the degree of clarity we aim to communicate with. The absence of definitions, at least in academic texts, is absurd. (It is so politically as well, but that is another issue.)

The tradition to which the works included in this volume belong in is not composed of one single current in terms of theory or politics, but it is nevertheless an identifiable tradition: one within which sexualities and sexual subjects are inscribed in a framework of social relations, and are studied from a so-called “gender and rights perspective.” Beginning with studies about women and gender, followed by studies of homosexuality, and arriving at studies about trans-, inter-, and logical questionings of the blurred boundaries that define practices and identities in this field.

Today, here in Argentina, we are invested in the study “sexual diversity.” But probably this expression will be outdated by tomorrow. It does not matter. It suffices for now to define a field of practices, identities, and relations that do not adjust and/or that defy what we call hetero-normativity. By this term we understand the organizing principle by which the politically, institutionally, and culturally reproduced order of social relations, which makes of reproductive heterosexuality the parameter from which to judge (accept, condemn) the immense variety of practices, identities, and existing sexual, affective, and loving relationships: lesbians and gays who, with their specificities, move away from the standards of heterosexuality; trans whose identity and gender expression question binary norms; the emergence of intersex recognition, which shows the extent to which gender and biology intermix—producing avoidable suffering—; and a long list of etcetera’s, including hetero-sexualities differentiated (but not exclusively) by gender, age, and social class, which have been so naturalized that have become a residual category in this type of studies.

Many works in this volume address a variety of practices, identities, and relationships, which share a collision with hetero-normativity. And that is as far as their commonality goes. Each piece shows its own divergence, according to the cases with which it deals.

Finally, should there be a privileged or specific approach to these topics and subjects. A positive answer to this question, involving researching and researched subjects, both as research focus and political vision, can be found for example in the queer perspective. Its impact, although far from homogenous, is undeniable. It gave political and academic-institutional impulse (denying denial, as it emerged as a reaction to institutionalization) to the coming of age of these topics and subjects as legitimate. Nonetheless, the queer theoretical-methodological approach seems more suitable for the disciplines encompassed under the flag of the humanities. To adopt a queer perspective, our harder social sciences, less language-language than language-reality(ies), must almost change games of language. Here is an option: our epistemologies fall, our disciplines fall, and

we invent something new; or else we try to research these subjects and themes with our old rules and methodologies. The results can be seen in the works in this volume: it is not easy to adopt a queer perspective and be coherent with it—although some do achieve this—, so others try to follow the art rules of their disciplines—sociology, political science—without violating them or violating the subjects they approach.

In short, we are in the middle of a healthy process in an academia which, for better or worse, has already recognized the citizenship titles of emerging sexualities and sexual subjects. It is in this sense that we insist on the notion of sexual subjects: their desires and practices, their relationships and rights. To speak from the place of subjects capable of word and action, not the place of the victims.

Occupying the place of the victim has been a strategy adopted by individuals, groups, and organizations, to claim their necessities before others in terms of injustice, and demand reparation. Though the strategy of victimization has rendered gains, it also contributes to the de-politicization of conflict; it conspires against the capacity to act politically, and ultimately impedes the constitution of collective subjects. A competition reminiscent of the “chicken game” takes place among victims, whereby each one claims for themselves the position of “the most victimized” in a game of victimization that is functional, or at least coherent, with the neoliberal model. It contributes to social disarticulation and anchors structural conflict in an individual situation, reaffirming stigma and disempowerment. In short, to position ourselves as victims and not as subjects depoliticizes (privatizes, naturalizes) once again private and natural relationships which had been politicized. That is because it follows the reparation model rather than the universalizing model of rights, confusing the modern idea of political representation with the idea of being physically represented. In short, victimization obliterates the possibility to act, to act responsibly and with power, even with irony and a sense of humor.

Often in contexts of vulnerability and discrimination, but also of inventiveness and courage, individuals and groups live their lives, from the most intimate spheres to the most public. Movements, knowledge, and agendas separate and integrate as time goes by, and now we are witnesses of how social, feminist, health, and sexual diversity struggles speak, fight, and converge with one another in one same social and political field.