

BUTLER, J. (2004). UNDOING GENDER. NEW YORK AND LONDON: ROUTLEDGE

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With the erosion of the rigidity of modern structures of social organization, identity issues are more than ever at the center of social life. The liquidity of the postmodern world (Bauman, 2000) broke many of the frames that lined the way we presented ourselves to the world, opening up formerly unthinkable possibilities. However, some social norms are rooted to such an extent that they do not allow this process to be carried out in its entirety. Gender is the most paradigmatic axis in this field. How can we arrive at a place of true acceptance of each human as such beyond gender identity? What if the idea of gender as a fixed phenomenon was undone and we accepted the narrative of each individual as such? Would we not be closer to the humanization of each individual, of their recognition, if we looked at gender identity as performative?

In the collection of essays “Undoing Gender” (2004), Judith Butler suggests that the concept of gender be undone, transposing the essentialist, permanent and binary view, limited to male and female, which leads to the non-recognition of those who somehow challenge this standard. A crucial contribution to theories on identity and gender in the post-modern world, Butler notes that the humanity of those who do not fit the rigid gender norms are simply not recognized, concluding that this can only be done through the overcoming, or undoing, of gender.

Gender is seen as one of the most striking aspects of our identity. However, if we say we are possessors of a sexuality, this sexuality should not define us, but we should have the freedom to embody and live it without being considered less real because of it (Butler, 2004, p. 16). As the author asks: why do we believe that the origin of life in sexual difference is so much more significant of a moment in the construction of our identity than many others, such as social, economic or racial conditions? (Butler, 2004, p. 10).

Altogether, in addition to the introduction, “Undoing Gender” includes eleven texts, each of which contributes to further this same argument, with a dense theoretical basis coming from Psychoanalysis to Queer Theory. In this critical review, two of these chapters will be discussed more thoroughly: one about a case which illustrates the tension between biological and social gender and another one which deconstructs the gender norm in its formal configuration.

ASSIGNED VS SOCIALIZED GENDER

“Doing Justice to Someone: Fri Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality” (Butler, 2004, pp. 57-74) is the text which best empirically illustrates the need to undo

the gender, based on the story of David Reimer. Reimer is the individual at the center the dispute between two opposing views: of the social construction and the biological determination of gender. Without confirming or denying any of the arguments, Butler offers a third view on the case.

Born with XY chromosomes, as a child, David's penis was damaged after a surgical accident. His parents decided that David would become Brenda, after coming into contact with John Money's theory, according to which any child can be happy being socialized and surgically adapted according to a particular gender (Butler, 2004, 59). When Brenda began to want to buy boys' toys, to refuse to urinate sitting down, to take estrogen and undergo surgery, local psychiatrists considered that the socialization of David as Brenda had been a mistake. Then Milton Diamond, a researcher advocating the hormonal origin of gender identity, took over the case. At 14, Brenda started living as David, receiving hormonal treatment and surgical alterations (Butler, 2004, p. 60). In its first phase, David's life served to justify the theory that gender identity, seen as neutral in childhood, can be socially and surgically constructed, although unpublished interviews records show that the adjustment was not peaceful. In its second phase, it served to support the thesis that each person has a unique sexual identity, an uncheable inner truth (Butler, 2004, p. 62).

Thus, the whole discussion was always placed within this dichotomy between social and biological, and, more deeply, between female and male, without the possibility of existence outside of this structure. Butler suggests a third look, shared by the intersex movement: "The aim is to try to imagine a world in which individuals with mixed genital attributes can be accepted and loved without having to be transformed from a gender version more socially coherent or normative" (Butler, 2004, pp. 64-65).

The standard for the questioning of humanity must be self-understanding (Butler, 2004, p. 67), which is always shaped by what language allows. David's self-understanding was made in an unusual context: a strong monitoring and evaluation on the basis a model of femininity and masculinity. His self-definition was made before an audience and based on a pre-existing language shaped by current standards (Butler, 2004, p. 67). For example, the fact that Brenda wanted to play with certain toys was immediately interpreted as a deviation from the norm of what being young girl is (Butler, 2004, p. 70).

David's story is an extreme example of how gender is such a central axis of human identity, which is always seen as necessarily incorporating either female or maleness, whether based on biological or social reasons. If there was the possibility of David truly self-identifying, build his/her own narrative beyond the gender issue, would there not be a greater possibility of recognition?

PATHOLOGIZATION OF IDENTITY

If the essay on David demonstrates the concrete reality of gender standards, in "Undiagnosing Gender" (Butler, 2004, pp. 75-101) Butler focuses on the standards formally constructed. In this trial, Butler discusses empowerment and oppression potential that the inclusion of gender identity disorder in DSM-IV, the manual of mental disorders, provides.

The author identifies the tension between the arguments for and against the diagnosis and inserts it into the paradox of autonomy. On the one hand, maintaining the diagnosis allows access to safe conditions for people with less financial possibilities to undergo a transition. On the other hand, being diagnosed with gender identity disorder is to be considered “sick, sick, wrong, damaged, abnormal and suffer a certain stigmatization as a result of the very existence of the diagnosis” (Butler, 2004, p. 76).

The diagnosis can be a source of empowerment, contributing to the autonomy of the person and enabling the transition to be done in his/her terms and be used strategically as the pathologization is rejected. On the other hand, a diagnosis might be limiting to autonomy, by subjecting it to a process and language limited by gender norms.

More than that, the diagnosis assumes a fixed identity, it is necessary to prove that one wanted to live as the other gender for a long period of time, as well as have a life plan to live up to this gender (Butler, 2004, p. 81).

In short, it's a matter of how you look at the concept of autonomy. The arguments in favor of diagnosis see it as potentially empowering of individual autonomy, since it can be used as a tool. Against the diagnosis, is the argument that it may limit the autonomy, fostering stigma. Without it, the practical life of many people may be hampered. With it, a language in which people do not believe is used, avoiding the discussion of necessary issues (Butler, 2004, p. 91).

The diagnosis raises a number of questions on how to establish this disorder, especially in children: boys who play with female toys, girls who like to wear male clothing. It imagines that each individual is either comfortable or anxious about their assigned sex (Butler, 2004, p. 97). At the same time, this relation to the assigned sex is measured through cultural objects: clothes, toys, etc.

In addition to the social objects, there are bodily elements. The question of surgery arises at the center of performativity, since the cultivation of secondary sexual features within the norms is not seen as a pathologized choice, proving that sexual bodily indicators are cultural. A woman is not considered as suffering from a pathology if she wants to undergo breast augmentation, to become more feminine, “[s]ex is made understandable through the signs that indicate how it should be read or understood” (Butler, 2004, p. 87).

Butler concludes that we live a paradox of autonomy. Ideally it would be possible for people to undergo a transition without having to be pathologized. But, currently, the diagnosis may be necessary for some, forcing all to live in this paradox, to “be undone in order to of ourselves”.

Since the publication of “Undoing Gender”, gender identity disorder has been replaced by “gender dysphoria” in the revised DSM, DSM-5, published in 2013. This linguistic mitigation is justified by the desire to avoid the stigma (APA, 2013), since it is no longer presented as a mental disorder. Despite claiming to avoid stigma, this diagnosis remains an essential feature that hinders the performativity of gender, viewed as a relatively permanent phenomenon (Butler, 2004, p. 81).

IDENTITY AND RECOGNITION

The study of identity is at the heart of Cultural Studies. With the changes the concept has suffered as the assumptions in relation to it were questioned, it becomes necessary to undo and redo the way we think identity. The gender difference is paradigmatic, in this context, in relation to other axis of difference (Hall, 1996, p. 15), and thus may be the key to rethink the entire concept. For Stuart Hall, the view of identity as performative is an important step to overcome the impasse of the inability to build a bridge between the discursive structures of identity that are imposed and the ability of the individual identify him/herself.

The contribution of Butler is crucial, not only in the field of Gender Studies and Cultural Studies. More than academic, it is a necessary and urgent human and political input, in order to promote true comprehensive recognition as it seeks to establish a solid bridge between the possibility of individual autonomy and humanity's social recognition of each individual.

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* Submitted: 16-02-2015

* Accepted: 20-04-2015