

**How to cite this article:** Santos, A. C. (2020). Strategic identity and self-determination within the LGBTQI+ framework. *Discover Society*, DS77.

<https://discoversociety.org/2020/02/05/strategic-identity-and-self-determination-within-the-lgbtqi-framework/>

## STRATEGIC IDENTITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION WITHIN THE LGBTQI+ FRAMEWORK

**Ana Cristina Santos**

*“What is important is not what people make of us but what we ourselves make of what they have made of us.”*

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet*

Those who work on issues related to sexual identity and diversity through a gender lens are baffled by a question without easy answers. In what moment, and for what reason, does a single biographical aspect among so many others become the essential truth that describes us as individuals? What is the process through which we authorize the collection of singularities and multiple belongings that we accumulate to become dissolved in a particular (sometimes collective) noun, which then takes precedence? Who decides what biographical aspect to choose as the primary focus? How crystallized does this narrative about a person become?

There are nouns that turn into adjectives, in the sense that they qualify the subject in a totalitarian way. And in that qualification they implicitly contain a disqualification. When I qualify myself by my sexual or relational orientation, that primary identity that is externally given to me pushes out other categories that make up my story – and the biography of each individual.

One of the sides of this dilemma has been successfully unpacked. It is the side of insult, of discrediting stigma, studied by Erving Goffman (1963). “We come, at one point or another in our lives, to occupy the place of those who have been exposed to public condemnation, those who live with an accusatory finger pointed at them”, writes Didier Eribon (2013: 218).

Historically we have managed to transform insult into a political (and epistemic) flag, creating currents of production of queer and crip theory, fat studies, mad studies, and so many others.

The other side of this dilemma is perhaps more slippery, since it derives from a place that is actively constructed by the individuals themselves – the place of identity. We can think about identity as a foreign language that we learn to use as a means to allow communication. It is a strategic tool – that was precisely the line of thought followed by Jeffrey Weeks in the 1990s when he referred to identities as fictions. Necessary fictions, explained Weeks (1995), inasmuch as they allow us to operationalize the world and find a platform for demanding social change – a place of speech. But, similarly to the language metaphor, regardless of how easy it might be for us to communicate in a certain way and with specific interlocutors, the communication process does not end there. On the contrary, multiple languages and other textual forms must come into play, including body language, if we want to continue maximizing what we can learn and teach throughout our lives. For some reason, however, the conversation around sexual identity and diversity does not abide by the same logic of situated flexibility. Within the heterocisnormative paradigm, a deviation from the mainstream is all that we might aspire to be in terms of identity. And if the deviation from the norm becomes what defines us we are effectively authorizing the norm to determine our primordial identity.

It is deeply ironic that we have gone through decades of theoretical reflection and anti-normative political work just to fall into a trap that reminds us that we have never actually moved. We criticize a gender-based regime, but we are haunted by gender binarism in unfathomable ways; we reject being defined by our sexual orientation and marital status, but we keep talking about ourselves as if each of these facets was everything.

Didier Eribon writes: “But why should we be obliged to choose between different struggles being fought against different kinds of domination? If it is the nature of our being that we are situated at the intersection of several collective determinations, and therefore several ‘identities’, of several forms of subjection, why should it be necessary to set up one of them rather than another as the central focus of political preoccupation?” (Eribon, 2013: 242).

It is precisely because the totalitarian place of identity A or B does not result, for the most part, from self-determination processes whereby each person deliberates that a particular identity is the only one, or even the main one, that we must understand the mechanisms through which an apparently politicized and oppositional identity becomes the single locus of inescapable and homogeneous belonging. Part of this history relates to the evolution of Marxist thought, which

despite being crucial in the fights against class oppression was also responsible for the perpetuation of equally fundamental silences, namely in the spheres of sexuality and gender. Against the totalitarian class narrative as the only lens of socio-historical analysis, new narratives (possibly similar in their Manichaean stubbornness) were created. These were centered on forms of compartmentalized oppression that rejected intersectionality and strived to establish racism and sexism as single paradigms through which to analyze oppression. In the Portuguese context, the need to build a discourse focused on sexual orientation and gender identity stems from a lack of protection that was not addressed with the emergence of the democratic regime, as I have defended elsewhere (Santos, 2013; Hines and Santos, 2018).

Let us go back to the initial question: in what moment, and for what reason, does a biographical aspect, among so many others, turn into the essential truth about who we are and, more than that, the totality that describes us as individuals?

The answer is not simple or straightforward. We will not solve it in the space of an article. But we know this much: naming a category to describe the other is a demonstration of power and reflects from the start the asymmetry of the relationship. To name is to exert otherness. Realistically, those who are named do not have a right of reply. The identitarian category that is imposed on them exists beyond their self-determination. Therefore, the named category becomes the individuals themselves.

We also know that the primordial place that a certain named identity occupies to the detriment of others corresponds to the dominant regime in a particular socio-historical context. In this way, the colonial, racist, ableist, sexist and heterocisnormative paradigms, among others, contribute to building places of privilege and oppression, and, simultaneously, to creating individuals who name and individuals who are named. Therefore, it is important to recognize the political weight of the socio-historical structure as a factor that conditions the possibilities of existence.

But what do people think about the image of themselves that they project onto others? In what way do they believe they are read, what aspects of their life take on centre stage, what will they be known for someday, when others talk about them in their absence? If, under certain circumstances, nouns become descriptors that qualify and make it possible to break the silence and demand change, under other circumstances they disqualify because they become totalitarian. This disqualification assumes the weight of an imposed identity that becomes indistinguishable from the individuals, preventing their self-determination.

Every story is uncommon, unique and original due to a complex conjugation of experiences: we are many things. The problem does not lie in identity, but in homogeneity, in the totalitarian potential of a single, primary identity to the detriment of all the others that compose us.

At present LGBTQI+ activism seems to be ready to capitalize on that inner heterogeneity as a resource. What seems to be missing are ways of communicating that message: may all that we are cease to be secondary. In my book *Social Movements and Sexual Citizenship in Southern Europe* I talk about the importance of narratives of influence that report to the outside world the crucial role of social movements in the transformation of Southern Europe, and in particular Portugal, as we know it (Santos, 2013). Academia has an important responsibility in this respect. In our understandable scramble to fight against the invisibility of the collective we might have forgotten to give due attention to individual depth. We need to tell other stories, more diverse and intersectional, like people. And if we want to maintain a collective focus we need to contribute to a platform that makes visible the health care professionals, teachers, trade unionists, police officers, and policymakers who, besides being LGBTQI+, are also everything else that one can be. Now that the narratives of collective influence have been created, we have yet to create narratives of individual intersectionality – a call that directly implicates those of us who work in academia, especially in the field of Gender Studies.

I will finish with the words of Audre Lorde: *“I am not only a casualty, I am a warrior. [...] Because I’m a woman, because I’m Black, because I’m a lesbian, because I’m myself – a Black woman warrior poet doing my work – come to ask you, are you doing yours?”* (2017: 3).

## Notes

[1] This publication was made possible thanks to funding from the European Commission within the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020), under agreement no. 856680, and by the NORFACE European agency, via FCT (ref. NORFACE/0001/2016).

[2] The translation of this article was supported by Portuguese national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, under project UID/SOC/4304/2019.

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