Unreal: Catholic Ideology as Epistemological War

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My reading of this special issue made me pause on the interview with Father Krzysztof Charamsa. The striking description of true episcopal ignorance about gender and sex – and this while the paranoid denunciation of ‘gender ideology’ has never been so aggressive inside the Catholic Church as now – might be a point of departure to think this specific agnotology as a *Catholic epistemological war*.

Historically, the production of modern knowledge by dominant groups has been compiled by the construction of ‘scientific’ dominant knowledge which could be defined as: a production of an archivist corpus of their own ‘discoveries’, ‘victories’ or ‘realities’; an exploitation of subaltern or ‘minor’ knowledges, extracted from dominated groups and/or by exploiting subaltern subjects of knowledge; a production of a unique vision which is perceived or universalized as reality; or a construction of a scientific criterion of exclusive objectivity as ‘neutrality’ (Alcoff and Potter 1992; Benhabib et al. 1995; Bordo 1987; Collins 1990; Dotson 2011; Haraway 1991; Harding 1986). This positive accumulation of knowledge is always, at the same time, a process of agnotology, that is, a production of ignorance. Agnotology has been theorized both in the feminist history of science and epistemology as well as in colonial and whiteness studies (Fricker 2007; Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Proctor and Schiebinger 2008).

Agnotology describes a particular epistemological gesture which consists of erasing alternative or antagonistic visions and points of view, in a way that actively eradicates dominated lived experiences from reality and, even, from the possibility of reality. While Marilyn Frye didn’t talk about ‘agnotology’, she offers a fantastic analysis of *what it means to be real*. She identifies a ‘phallogocratic scheme’ (Frye 1983) within modern power apparatus, and defines it as a dominant intelligibility scheme which constitutes a kind a prism, a gaze, inside each perception that is perceived or judged perceivable. She focuses especially on women and lesbians as non-perceivers, non-seers, non-authoritative subjects of knowledge (165). This non-recognition is a derealization: ‘There is a peculiar mode of relating belief and action which I think characteristic of the construction of phallogocratic reality, according to which a project of annihilation can be seen to presuppose the nonexistence of the objects being eliminated’ (163). Lesbians in particular are eradicated from reality, Frye specifies. While

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women are erased in history and speculation, physically liquidated in gynocidal purges and banished from the community of those with perceptual and semiotic authority, we are on the other hand regularly and systematically invited, seduced, cajoled, coerced and even paid to be in intimate and constant association with men and their projects [...] (Frye 1983: 166)

Lesbians are not invited to join reality – ‘the family, the party, the project, the procession, the war effort’ (*ibid.*).

Inside the Catholic Church, Charamsa speaks of a ‘masculinist system of the Vatican’. This system is characterized by a double process of ignorance working at full capacity and an understanding of how a mystification of Mary can eliminate ‘real women’ and how lesbians are purely unthinkable/unperceivable as real people. This situation partly explains why the Catholic Church targets gays men and official texts and discourses talk about ‘homosexuality’ or evoke LGBTQI issues, yet the question remains intact what kind of existence ‘gay men’ might have in the eyes of the episcopal ideologues. As Charamsa said, ‘the lexicon is part of ignorance’ (p. 5).

In fact, we have to isolate a specific kind of agnotology when it comes to official catholic considerations on gender and sexuality, a hitherto unseen production of what we could call a renewed arrogant ignorance. The interview with Charamsa allows us to locate this ideological renewal (related to ancient or obsolete forms of Christian, and especially Catholic, heterosexism) in three main strategic epistemological, emotional, and semiotic struggles.

First, the ignorance of Catholic theological authorities is absolutely shocking: episcopal thinkers don’t read *at all* gender and sexuality studies, they don’t listen *at all* to the revindications or claims by LGBTQI families, associations or movements, they don’t take account *at all* of these lives. These are just rumors from another world, a strange, frightening, unreal one. No one considers it as possible, moral, or even strategic, to waste time and energy ‘to comprehend reality’ (Charamsa p. 9). This ‘Papal Agnotology’ or pontifical epistemic violence is both an injunction to silence (this rumor has to stop), and an auto-determination to be silent (and impose silence with the entire the Church, see Charamsa’s account of the politics of fear inside Church that forbids any expression of doubt p. 8–9). That is to say, a determination not to listen to this rumor (while listening could in fact be strategy to know the enemy better and fight back more efficiently), to listen to its own denial. This epistemological strategy of incompetency is fascinating because the Catholic Church has always had a pretense to produce or ‘count-produce’ knowledge; a will to confront Catholic dogma to a new (heretic) world as a way of maintain its hegemony. This is not the case anymore.

Second, in the mid-nineties, the Catholic Church committed itself to a *new semiotic war*. This war shifts traditional Catholic heterosexism towards a semantic struggle in which a systematic re-signification of words and concepts is developed. Mikhail Bakhtine (V.N. Volochinov), in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, or a philosophy of the ideological sign, describes how every word ‘is woven with multiple ideological wires’ (37, my translation); and how, as a sign, some words are always an arena where social antagonisms rage on (44) – what Bakhtine called ‘pluriaccentuation’ (*ibid.*). ‘Gender’ could be a perfect illustration, as word/ideological sign, of a Catholic semiotic strategy to destruct antagonistic senses and significations of gender and impose a unique *accentuation*. Gender signifies ‘enemy’. This ideological imposition affords itself the luxury to

talk about gender as 'gender ideology' to better mask and veil its own commitment is this semiotic struggle. Indeed, 'gender-enemy' creates a useful coalition inside Christian Churches (Charamsa, 6). Unilateral accentuation or ideological domination supposes a process of linguistic falsification and de-realization of words. Sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual choice, are subsumed under the only legitimate expression: 'homosexual tendency' (Charamsa, 11). And with 'tendency' Catholic ideology marks homosexuality semantically, in creating a new sign with an old accentuation: 'tendency' maintains a citational relation with *deviance* and reactivates a form of demonization or pathologization of heterodox genders or sexualities.

There are two major benefits in the pursuit of this strategy, I believe. On the one hand, the Vatican might continue to pretend to be affected by homophobia, to fight back homophobia and might be acknowledged as a new actor in the world wild prevention of violence against LGBTQI. Yet the insistence of the Vatican to re-signify 'gender' has a political goal and a material effect: this ideological strategy reifies queer folks as *homo sacer*, queer bodies, lives and families, as *assaultable* (Butler 2004). This amounts to semiotic extermination, which is an active reproduction of heterosexist violence. On the other hand, the ideological strategy of the Catholic bishops produces what I propose to call an *epistemological tiredness*: outside the Church, but also inside the Church, queer people are exhausted to respond to this falsification of gender and paranoid abstraction of 'gender ideology', as well as the semantic resignification of sexuality, including the construction of 'scientific' data about the unhappiness and psychic illness of homosexuality, or the occult goal of a supposed homosexual or feminist proselytism. Sexual minorities are under a coercive scheme of intelligibility, consuming them to constantly *rectify reality*, forcing them to produce counter semiotic, counter scientific data, counter ideology.

Third, and finally, Father Krzysztof Charamsa, repeatedly highlights the emotional dimension of this war. 'Gender ideology' is indeed the sign of an emotional ideological fight. The stakes of gender and sexuality are translated in a renewed version of the Apocalypse. LGBTQI and feminist activists and theorists are the new *gentiles*, these ungodly people, faithless communities and families. This is an old pattern that serves the justification of heterosexist brutality. We know that this emotional apprehension of heterodox lived experiences constructs an entangled power apparatus: *all the catholic are straight, all the queers are blasphemous*. Perhaps something else exists. The Catholic Church wants to maintain its ideological domination over the ethics of life as well as over the *interiority of the self* and erase and eradicate any lived experiences that constitute, following Michel Foucault, a 'counter-conduct'. Identifying homosexuality as impiety is a kind of involuntary revelation of other possible ethics of life, and practices of the self, which are *ungovernable*. For many centuries, the Catholic Church has told and written, named and targeted, stigmatized and killed or redressed impious people, communities, and nations. At present, this strategy seems close to being partly abandoned in favor of a will to *not know* and a *compassionate panic* for 'homosexuals', a *hateful care* and an *uncared love* for all Christians – despite their 'sexual tendency'. This is the emotional government of the 'enemy', a new form of pastoral care, which emerges to hold back contemporary forms of mysticism, a queer, feminist, *parrhesia* – these lived experiences of faith without the repressive and normative self-discipline of 'intimate identity', a faith and love confident in oneself and one's reality.

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