Media and memory: building a gay subjectivity*

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We have a special need by the history. Educated in heterosexual families, we grow and discover our homosexuality destitute of gays ancestral, without a sense of our roots. John D'Emilio

In the contemporary world, the notion of community is inexorably tied to the identity formation. Both auto-identity and collective identity — that Stephen Mennell (1994), referring to Norbert Elias, nominates as "I-image" and "we-image" respectively — are formed from living together in a certain community of heartfelt. When we refer to a certain community — such as the cyber community, the medical community or the gay community —, we are recognizing common frame references among members of this social group: a "we-image" which links the group to those practices and values recognized as constituent of the community, and different from the other groups, helping to create a context necessary for the formation of the "I-image".

We can allude to the traditional communities, where the little mobility and the presence of an authority limited the individuals' access to experiences that didn't

happen in the local environment (Giddens, 1991:103ss). After the appearance of mass communication, and the world big migrations, these distant experiences could break the barriers imposed by the local limitations. The mass media becomes a "mobility multiplier". It allows *individuals to vicariously experience events that happen in distant places, and because of this, it stimulates their capacity of imagining alternatives to the characteristic life forms of theirs immediate locations* (Thompson, 1998:168). Experiencing new habits, new cultures, the individuals could rely on other references that were not those dictated by tradition. Therefore, community is anchored, mostly, in the sharing of meanings. Because of this, we call it a community of heartfelt.

What would characterize this community of heartfelt would be the sharing of *values, goods and practices (...) that are constituent of the individual in the social relations* (Tacussel, 1998:4). To Rousiley Maia, the community *isn't necessarily related to a physical location, but to the formation of an identity situated in places that can be dispersed* (Maia, 1998:02). According to Scott Lash, in the contemporaneity, the communities are "cultural communities", because, among others factors, they can be widely *dispersed by the "abstract" space, and also perhaps throughout time, (...) their "instru-*

ments" and products tend to be not material but abstract and cultural (Lash, 1995:193).

Thus identity acquisition would be attached to the intense sha-re of meanings in a certain community. Because of this, individuals would be able to join many communities according to their particular interests. But this wouldn't be an arbitrary choice. Lash sustains that the affiliation to a community implies the acquisition of a pre-established identity, which means that *the person isn't born or "thrown" in an automatic way, but it is thrown at them* (Lash, 1995:193), that, of course, involving always a cognitive specification and a freedom to question the inherited cultural meanings. By choosing specific communities, individuals have the opportunity to encounter so many lifestyles which are adequate to behavior manners, habits, values and traditions of the chosen group (Giddens, 1981).

Thinking of the social fields notion, as proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), we will realize that the lifestyles own dimensions are interpenetrated mutually. Following this discussion, Adriano Duarte Rodrigues proposes a society organized in a variety of spheres, relatively autonomous, with an operation logic that identifies each one as a social field, with rules, strategies, *habitus* and legitimization on its own forms (1990; s/d). The social fields would be spaces where the agents' common interests would be incorporated. In this sense, the expression "habitus" becomes useful when we refer to the manners, inclinations and feelings that predominate among members of particular groups (Mennell, 1994). Then, values, beliefs, styles would be constituted of their members' intersubjectivity: (...) *The community is precisely the intersubjectivity space* (Tacussel,

1998:04). We are living in a society where there are *lifestyles' multiplicity, and in a way, a multiculturalism* (Maffesoli, 1998:125).

Mennell, connecting identity to habitus notion, considers that it is possible to say that, in our society, nowadays, *several habitus layers are simultaneously presented and they can have different qualities* (Mennell, 1994:177). Patrick Tacussel stands out that we *will have many heartfelt communities which are related to our intersubjectivies relations* (1998:04-05). John B. Thompson considers plausible that the formation of contemporary communities (...) [could be] *tied to communication new systems development that enable symbols and beliefs division (...), although these individuals never have interacted directly* (Thompson, 1998:62).

In the contemporary Brazilian sexuality, the establishment of a homosexual *ethos* must be thought as a collective action: the community operating to subvert the dominant heterosexual paradigm. So we must understand community's construction through the identity notion. The identity isn't fixed, it is transformed as time goes by. The homosexuals, who were seen as effeminate in 1920, were portrayed differently inside the *camp* conception of 1950 and the hyper-masculine gay we can notice from the 80's on, as well.

John D'Emilio identifies the beginning of a homosexual resistance in Foucault's "inverse speech", specifically, an identity speech stimulated by the heterosexist medical model of the XIX century, which emphasized the sexual "deviant" connotation. That would have contributed to the creation of a vision in which sexual orientation would be defined on an individual basis. However, it is necessary to consider the resistance possi-

bilities provided by the social structure and the existence of a social space in which a homosexual identity could be expressed. To him, *the material conditions for gay life, until the 60's, were that most gay men had little opportunity to conceive themselves as part of a collectivity* (D'Emilio, 1992:107). That opens the way for a homosexuality political economy appreciation, from the family history, the gender and the production manners points of view.

The urban grouping of homosexual has been treated as a ghetto. Until the beginning of the last century, just the bars or flirt spaces (parks and public restrooms) were considered as an expression of a homosexual lifestyle, which *encouraged an identity that was either public and collective and that was propitious for a collective conscience* (Weeks, 1985:192). Some studies on the homosexual urban spaces in the post-war period, which were centered in the bars culture in different cities, are enlightening when we want to corroborate this urban grouping vision of homosexual in ghettos: community's gay history of San Francisco, in the United States (D'Emilio, 1992); a project in oral history of lesbian bars in Montreal, Canada, between 1945-1975 (Chamberland, 1993); the history of Sidney, in Australia, "the city of Sodoma" (Wotherspoon, 1991); in Brazil, the study about the formation of a homosexual ghetto in São Paulo in the 50's(Perlongher, 1989); in an opposite direction, with an essentialist vision, we can mention the vigorous work of Rictor Norton (1992, 1997).

The ghettos were constituting themselves impelled by two aspects: (1) A self-defense form of the homosexual against the blemish propitiated by the definition of sexual prac-

tices between men, in scientific terms; (2) The society intolerance. They created codes to identify amongst each other, who would belong or not to the community. Thus, the ghetto would allow their members to create and reinforce mutual reliable liaisons. The confidence that is established between members of the group is expressed through rites, specific recognition signs, that don't have other reason than to strengthen the small group against the big group (Maffesoli, 1998:131). The ghetto, in this aspect, was a positive factor for the liaisons of meaning invigoration in the community heartfelt. However, I argue that besides the existence or not of previous homosexual subcultures in the XIX century, it is, however, the definition of the term "homosexual" that made it possible to talk about a "community" when we refer to the homosexual social group.

At this moment, it is fundamental to think about tradition, because the idea that each one has about himself and the sense of belonging to a group are modeled by the values, behavior standards and by the beliefs that are received from the past. With the advent of modernity and the communication explosion, traditional forms would lose their anchorage on everyday shared locations. However that doesn't mean that the traditions ended. For Thompson, *the traditions will survive throughout the time only if they are continually* reincorporated *in new contexts and* reanchored *in new kinds* of *territorial units* (Thompson, 1998:165, author's grieves).

This emphasis in the past leads us to the immediate association between tradition and memory. Giddens says that the *memory, as well as the tradition (...), is related to the past organization regarding the present* (Giddens,

1995:81). In other words, *the tradition is an orientation for the past, therefore the past has a weighed influence or, more precisely, it has a weighed influence on the present* (idem:80). Relating memory and identity, Halbwachs (1952; 1990) proposed that the memory is acquired as the individual take as his the memories of the group with which he relates: there is an appropriation of collective representations processed by the individual in interaction with other individuals. To him,

> *The collective memory frames aren't suddenly constituted by the individual combination of memories, neither are they simple empty forms in which the memories, coming from somewhere would insert themselves. On the other hand they are precisely the instruments which the collective memory uses to recompose a past image that, each time, corresponds to the society dominant thoughts* (Halbwachs,1952:viii).

Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos reminds that Halbwachs, working with the "social memory frames" notion, said that we *built our memory as members of certain social groups and, in this process, we obligatorily use the available social conventions* (Santos, 1998:156).

As we mentioned, a homosexual community constituted in the end of the XIX century acquired larger visibility in the end of the 60's, inaugurating a new lifestyle, with the events of *Stonewall Inn*. Can we talk about tradition in this community? The answer, indeed, will be yes. We can talk of invented tradition, using Hobsbawn's thoughts (1984) or even Thompson's (1998): past more than thirty years, the Gay Parade, that occurs in countries all over the world in reference to the disturbances in a New York bar is a ritualistic practice incorporated to the social memory frame of the Brazilian gay community, for example.

Let's remember, at this point, the connection Giddens made between tradition and memory. Tradition and memory are confused because both refer to the past symbolically structured and both need the everyday repetition practices to survive. Could we think in the intense nocturnal life, in the drugs use, in the "bath culture", in the cult of the body as gay community's traditions? Yes, since these practices make part of collective representations of this group and are ritualized in the everyday life, as we can see in the gay scenes in Brazilian cities.

Regarding memory as one of the identity constituent forces, we find in the gay community other memories that are rendered to reanchor the tradition in everyday life contexts. They are iconographies (from Tom of Finland, for instance), effect sentences, films (as *The Wizard of Oz*, maximum *cult* in the north American gay community) or the *camp* image of Carmem Miranda. As reminded by Santos, Halbwachs, when considering the social memory frames, was lifting the matter of the "other generic" in our reality as perception, where not just co-presence is a prerequisite for identities' constitution. She recalls that the author *showed the importance of information on mediating the identity* construction process (Santos,1998:154s).

Thompson also agrees with these mediations in the identity construction process and points out that the traditions became increa-

singly interlinked with the mass media. Because of this, *traditions are gradually disconnected from the particular places and are becoming dependent on an interaction form which is no longer face to face* (Thompson, 1998:174). The iconography, the pictures, films and publications for gay became, thus, social memory frames which this community uses for the "I-image" constitution. Furthermore, *the individuals can have similar experiences through the media without sharing the same life contexts* (idem:200). In fact, the identity construction perpetrated by the media *accomplishes basic social functions traditionally consigned to the myth — the cultural reproduction, the socialization and individuals' social integration*, as they showed by João Pissarra Esteves (1999) and Rodrigues (1990).

These functions would be assured by the media through the thought and action models widely offered of spread symbolic and imposed social pictures for imitation and ritualistic processes:

> *The production of identity models - useful identities perfectly coded and stereotyped — finds us through publicity, fashion, and several mass media narratives and also from the inherent characters of mass media* (Esteves, 1999).

However, the author considers that

> *The different records of the mass media, regardless of their style, are still being directed to an entirely conventional commercial logic and they obey a necessary strategy: public's differentiation and the market segmentation*

as a homogeneous more effective global process, with strict commercial porpoises (idem).

Even so, these new forms of identity experience wouldn't necessarily lead to a dissolution of the "I", as some theoretical proposes of the post-modern have thought, but, on the other hand, we still imagine the *construction possibility of one I fragmented but flexible, multiple but integrated* (ibidem).

Therefore, the mass media has a determining role in the contemporary identity process, and besides that, it doesn't exhaust the social life in the world. The relation with the mass media doesn't result in an inevitable and invariable absolute *fictionalization of the reality that turns the prefabricated lifestyles into mere atomized individuals impersonators by the* mass media (Honneth cited by Esteves, 1999).

At the end of the XX century, the gay culture in Brazil gives opportunity to a market *boom*. In 1995, a magazine showed that it was viable to successfully publish materials for a restricted group of readers, discussing specific themes. This magazine, called *Sui Generis*, already extinct, was destined exclusively to homosexuals, and they placed in the news agencies in the whole country 30 thousand copies each month, satisfactory enough number for an editorial market such as the Brazilian one.

Sui Generis was published in an attempt to celebrate a unique gay identity, following the model of gay magazines edited in the United States of America. The magazine was a vehicle for a totally integrated identity. However, in general, the approach of the articles about homosexuality, introduced by the non specialized mass media, has a di-

dactic character (who are the gays?, How do they live?, for example, are frequent questions that we can find); we also find news that hear the homosexuals themselves. Even then, they still have a didactic accent as these specialists always try to clear more obscure points about the homosexual lifestyle. Besides, there is a preoccupation to point out the normality of the homosexual. In the specialized press, at first directed to the community, we can notice the same tone. It looks for an explanation and the normality, emphasizing the identity recognition.

A characteristic that we can point, in the 51 searched editions, is the non-expansion of service rendering activities, pointed by Sérgio Costa as one of the mass media's way to insert local elements in social actions discussions. We can say that the magazine *Sui Generis*, for example, didn't deliberately attempt to consolidate a vehicle for the community's image. The magazine, obviously, was especially auto-identifying with the Brazilian gay community, but it didn't reveal a political insert in the sense of a service rendering for this community: we don't find, for instance, periodic information about the Aids or educational campaigns against violence or against police abuse. Even though these themes could become headline reports, there aren't specific columns in the publication clarifying these matters to the community. The sections that could be identified as rendering service are, generally, the bars, saunas and nightclubs addresses, the parties' programming and the shows that will occur in the cities. To Costa, the countries' mass media (and here we relate them to our specialized magazine) *are aimed to strengthen, close to their public-target, the loyalty and*

reciprocity feeling, assuring for themselves a captive public (Costa, 1997:7).

We can't ignore that the homosexual action in Brazil doesn't seem well structured. If homosexuality wants to have a public life, conquer social space, it is necessary to give importance to the communication spaces that promote the pertinent themes. Moreover, they must create clubs and directed entities to the education and community's consciousness on the varied aspects that involve such sexual option. In other words, the community needs a kind of History, some social memory frames that provide a feeling of belonging to a social group.

We realize in the Brazilian homosexual action another deficiency: the non-contribution of expressive ways for the construction of local public spheres. However, the social actions introduce their *own organization profiles, a specific insert in the social scene and particular articulations with the political and institutional framework* (idem:2), In Brazil, just a few organized groups of homosexual rights get this interaction, even so, only in matters related to health. Groups as Gapa (Aids Support and Prevention Group), for example, can't be considered as activist organization fighting for the homosexual citizenship. Even though Aids is a matter related to the homosexual community, it isn't exclusive of this social category, which justifies the lack of political performance by these groups in the citizenship matter of the homosexual, in a broader view.

We can consider events as the festivals of gay and lesbian movies— events already institutionalized in Europeans countries — that work with larger success than the organized groups. Perhaps that occurs because they

are widely covered by the mass media and, what is more important, without any aberration character. I mean that the mass media faces this kind of festival as a cultural manifestation that can and must be followed by society, independently of the sexual option. What counts is its aesthetic and cultural values, generally of vanguard, that the exhibited films introduce. It is common to see heterosexual going to the exhibitions, without pre-concepts or prejudices, since they are interested only in the movies. These festivals are important, because we can characterize them by its "political force" (*Sui Generis*, 1995:01:8). That happens because, during these events, particular cases, experiences, life stories, ideas, reflections, strategies and a variety of proposals are shown through the movies. When thousands of a minority gather to absorb all this material, it acquires dimensions and expressive meanings inside the society as a whole; the discussion promoted by these festivals mustn't be discarded.

We can also talk about the Gay Parade, which happens annually in some Brazilian cities, following the model of European countries and the United States. It is certain that it has a strategic character, not a very explicit one, since it aims to get society's attention for the category existence. Internally, the demonstration would also have this strategic vocation, once it alerts some homosexuals, still hesitant about their sexual orientation, that they aren't the only ones in that condition. There is no doubt that the parade provides a visibility for the community that can be understood more effectively, in mass media terms, than the performances of the organized groups for the defense of the homosexual.

However, the public's reaction to the problems that are showed in those festivals and in the parade wouldn't depend only on the contents treated. The generated impact would also depend on the ability of these events to manipulate in an adequate form the media resources, *producing, by the use of the spectacular or by a public relations efficient work, facts with informative content* (Costa, 1997:11). So, we can say that the larger debate happens in the mass media, specialized or not. After the Aids, mostly the printed press, but also the electronic mass media, opened spaces for the related subjects of sexuality, in a generic way, and of the homosexuality, more specifically:

> *The opening of such channels can be explained, among other factors, by the need of the communication instances (...) to legitimate in front of the "new publics" that emerge from the democratization, in an attempt to consolidate the image (not necessarily true) of impartiality, plurality and porosity for the social innovations, condition* sine qua non *for the mass media commercial success in a democratic context*
> (idem:13).

At this point, other matter arises when we think of these homosexual communication flows: how does it give legitimization to these matters in a larger public sphere scope? But is that equal to say that the information published in these specialized mass media doesn't overtake community's borders? The theater director Gerald Thomas suggests that *who needs information about homosexuality are the heterosexuals. Then, who*

had to publish things on the homosexuality issue is Folha de S. Paulo and Jornal do Brasil [Brazilian newspapers] (*Sui Generis*, 1997:29:20). To Costa, the social actions would manage to insert in the public sphere a debate on the themes that are more significant to homosexuals *through their public relations work, the public events they promote and broadcasting their own instruments* (idem:8). In those *communication forms, the character and the different functions that they occupy in the organizations dynamics* would constitute, above all, *instruments of internal formation of opinion and of legitimacy and recognition* consolidation *of associations close to their participants properties* (idem:9, author's grieve). This legitimacy would be conquered in the homosexual environment and in life basic certainties, through the experience on an individual dimension and the production of meanings for the concrete particularities. This legitimacy, thus, would propitiate a lifestyle self-understanding, preferences and values of the homosexual, so as to make such understanding clearer and eventually incorporated by the society.

Here, it is necessary to stress the mass media role in the circulation of social heartfelt and the reflexive process that allows the perception of these heartfelt. According to Habermas (1995), the themes arisen in specific fields, such as science and biology — and we could include the homosexuality — manage to penetrate other specialized systems, or even life around the world, through a common language: *The common language allows this circulation of meanings between spheres and produces transformations, as loads of a system from the knowledge elabora-*

ted by each (Fernandes, 1999:6). To Rousiley Maia,

> *It is through the common language that the specialized speeches are, first and privately, appropriated. It is through communication interaction nets and circuits that distant influences, contradictory specialized speeches or transmitted symbolic products by the media gain meaning* (Maia, 1999:8).

Therefore, common language found in the media the box of necessary resonance for the debate circulation between public sphe-res. The media centralism, in the pre-structuring of the public spheres, in the contemporary world, was turned into a privileged place, where the several social actors fight for visibility. It seems to us that the "publicity principle" was progressively transformed in the complex societies of today, crossed by the electronic mass media and, in particular, by the television. Now, we also work with plural public space defined by the transformation rules and restrictions in the mass media field and by a technique logic. The media becomes the public sphere main institution that allows different actors to argue themes and, when promoting the visibility to these matters, to enlarge the debate and carry on these matters to the other public spheres. Thus, the parade and the gay and lesbian movie festivals are marked by this attempt to enter a larger mass media public space.

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