

‘Serious girls’, prostitutes and ‘whores’. Calling genders to order

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Abstract: The sexual representations and the sexual experiences of individuals are marked by the gender they belong to, which induces social roles and differentiated ideals and determines behaviours, namely those that concern the body and sexuality. The speeches of young people questioned in an ethnological investigation on sexual representations in the Eastern suburb of Paris, denounce the opposition between feminine and masculine values, and show the difference between the representations and behaviours of young males and females. The speeches of young people denote a distinction between the ‘serious girl’, the prostitute and the ‘whore’, which marks a hierarchy of moral values, in relation to their behaviour in general and to their sexual behaviour in particular.

Keywords: *Gender, sexual behaviours, adolescents, ‘serious girl’, ‘prostitute’, France*

Introduction

Between 1997 and 2001, as part of an ethnological research on representations and sexual life of youngsters studying in the Parisian suburbs, individuals from 14 to 20 years old were questioned regarding their relationships and their representations about sexuality and gender issues.

This research was built upon a comparative analysis of two sample groups geographically closed one to

each other, from the East suburb of Paris, but with different socio-cultural features: on one hand, the students of a public secondary school, the Jean Jaurès high school, in Montreuil, who belong to the middle and disadvantaged class; on the other hand, the pupils of a private high school, the Gregor Mendel high school, and those of a private Catholic establishment, the Notre-Dame institution of the Providence, in Vincennes, who belong to a more affluent social environment.

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With 90 000 inhabitants, Montreuil is the largest city in its county, Seine-Saint-Denis, and the third city in Ile-de-France. The percentage of foreign population out of the city's total population is 18,7%, and comprises one hundred different nationalities. Employment among the Montreuil, holds a rather modest position on the social scale: a quarter of the population is part of the working class and the unemployment rate comprises 18,9% of the active population (it is of 25,9% among immigrants, as they are of a more precarious condition) (INSEE, 1999a). Vincennes is a city of 43.600 inhabitants, pertaining to Val-de-Marne, the fifth county in Ile-de-France, the largest and the least populated county among the suburbs of Paris. This city's unemployment rate is lower than the national rate: 9,5%. Its population benefits from a better socio-economic situation than the one in Montreuil: it encompasses 20,3% persons with executive positions and only 11,5% workers. The foreigners constitute 8,7% of Vincennes' total population: half the amount of Montreuil (INSEE, 1999b).

Seventy-eight pupils were questioned during this research: sixteen girls and six boys of the high school Jean Jaurès, fourteen girls and the same number of boys sent to school at the high school Gregor Mendel and sixteen girls and twelve boys attending the Notre-Dame institution of the Providence. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or in groups, at the exit of classes, on the street, in public places or coffee-bars located in the surroundings of school institutions. The interviews were recorded with the agreement of the interviewed persons,

who were randomly chosen. High schools were selected based on their specific features: one public high school located in a city where the population is more socially disadvantaged and the other two, private schools located in a city characterized by a more affluent social environment.¹

The High School Jean Jaurès is attended mostly by individuals from the middle and disadvantaged class, and when speaking of them cultural diversity is quite important: only 18 % of the students have French parents. Private schools are mainly attended by teenagers from the affluent, developed classes where cultural diversity is lower: 77 % of the students have French parents. It is about young people socialized in different environments, who have specific ways of speaking, to get dressed, gestures, aspirations, plans of life, representations, values and different behaviours regarding relationships and love. The socio-cultural and educational context of the teenager determines its interests, its behaviour and its capacity of adaptation. However, a classification crosses the representations of all questioned young people: the differentiation between 'serious girls', prostitutes and 'whores'.

The representations of sexuality

Beyond social order, the representations of sexuality and of the sexual experience of each are equally influenced by the gender order (Butler, 2005). The gender people belong to leads to differentiated social roles and ideals. Attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behaviour of interviewed

subjects are strongly marked, influenced by gender order. In the small sample of young people which was used as an empirical groundwork for my fieldwork, boys and girls hold different discourses on subjects, for instance, the one of the pornography. Faced with the growing offer of pornography (films, magazines, sex shops, Internet), the interviewed girls prove to be embarrassed, contrary to the boys, the main consumers of these products where the woman is often matched with a sexual object (Fourgnaud, 2006). For most of the boys, the pornography is a mean of learning sexuality. The girls who show to be less embarrassed by pornographic pictures are those who had more sexual experiences and who openly assert that they do not exclude the possibility of having intercourse without being in loved or have already had intercourse only for pleasure. The questioned girls seem less attracted by the pornography. The pornography is for them more a 'male thing'.

Representations of homosexuality are also determined by gender differentiation. The approval of homosexuality is unanimous among girls, except for some of them who are more tied to the religious values (Christians and also Muslims). However, religion is not the only factor of rejection of homosexuality. For three quarter of the boys met in Montreuil, homosexuality is the subject of contemptuous disapproval. Masculine homosexuality is considered as humiliating, particularly the performance of passive role, which embodies a gender switch. It is assimilated with a sexual and moral deviance (Jaspard, 2005). Female

homosexuality is less discredited by these boys, because it does not constitute an attack on masculinity. However, it is perceived as a loss of women to the disadvantage of men and, for this reason, female homosexuality is also depreciated. Homosexuality is, for them, a 'shameful and harmful' practice. The idea of homosexual family is rejected. The homosexuals could not constitute a family and have a background and descendents because it would be 'against – nature', against the order of the world wanted by God or by Nature (Dagognet, 1999).

First, this should not exist, bluntly, because this is a question of health... (Girl, 14 years old, The Jean Jaurès high school, Montreuil).

There are already no women, then if they go together! (...) for them to bugger, it is degrading. (Boy, 14 years old, The Jean high school, Montreuil).

Frankly, this disgusts me! I cannot imagine! (Boy, 17 years old, The Gregor Mendel high school, Vincennes)

In more disadvantaged environments, manliness is a 'standard value' exposed by boys' speech regarding gender and sexuality. Homosexuality perceived as an attack on their manhood is then linked with deviance; a deviance in comparison with norms, heterosexuality, and compared with a value to which these teenagers tie a lot of importance: masculinity. By its disrespect for this central value, homosexuality is considered as 'abnormal' and insulting. The homosexuals represent for them a threat to morality, health and fertility. From the point of view of the young people sent to school in Vincennes, criticism

in masculine homosexuality are rare. As for the female homosexuality, it does not imply any denigration.

I also think that they do what they want. Finally, I don't care if a girl flirts with me, I would tell myself that she thinks I am pretty! And I would say to him that I am not homosexual, they understand enough on this side there. (Girl, 17 years old, the Notre-Dame institution of the Providence, Vincennes)

It is nice to see men who can love each other. (Boy, 18 years old, the Notre-Dame institution of the Providence, Vincennes).

I find [homosexuality] normal. It is nature. (Boy, 16 years old, the Notre-Dame institution of the Providence, Vincennes)

Therefore the definition of deviance is enrolled in particular contexts and is determined by them.

Calling genders to order

Every society develops models that define masculine and female identities and sets up references in the elaboration of the sexual identity of subjects. Masculinity and femininity are social constructions. Gender roles vary in space and time. Each society develops a perception about what characterizes every gender that manifests itself by the ideals of masculinity and womanhood. These ideals are the foundations of gender order. Individuals are led to conform to the characteristics of their gender category, which are culturally established, dictated and acquired very early, in a powerful emotional and prominent context (Mathieu, 1991).

Every individual sees himself being assigned a gender identity, an identity that can be improved by the study of his roles, his rights and his duties. What determines the child's gender identity, it is the manner he is acknowledged and raised by its family circle. From their birth, girls and boys are socialized in different ways. This difference answers to the gender cultural stereotypes and is translated by behaviours, roles, rules of behaviour and of values assigned to each gender. In order to maintain the social order, every individual must carry on the signs of the gender to which he belongs at and to respect the social norms of gender.

Female sexuality is more liberated than twenty years ago, even if social control remains significant. The sexual repertoire extended, the age of first intercourse for men and women converged, being around the age of 17 years, on average, and the number of sexual partners of women increased, getting closer to that of the men (Bozon, 2002) even if the social control of female sexuality has always been so powerful exercised (Paicheler and Loyola, 2003).

For the boy, the variety of his sexual partners, his power to conquer a woman, the intensity of his sexual wish and his sexual performance confirm his masculinity. In contrast, the girl is placed on the side of caution and control. This logic gives rise to shared opinions such as to consider masturbation, that is to say research of sexual pleasure without a loving link/ intercourse as rather a masculine practice, even perceived as a defaming practice for the girls and status-enhancing for the boys. As an act aiming only at obtaining sexual

pleasure, masturbation is considered more legitimate for boys than for girls. It would be a more natural practice and more practiced by them than by girls.

Also, pornography is regarded by boys to be a legitimate mean of learning sexuality, opposite to girls. These last realize more easily a link between sex and communication, feelings and procreation, what means that they hardly separate the sexual pleasure of the love connection. The social order of genres or even genres' hierarchy depends on respect for these ideals and values (Héritier, 1996).

A greater freedom granted by boys' parents, the strengthening of sexual experience and the search of masculinity lead boys to express a greater desire of sexual activity than girls. Girls participate in this belief regarding the masculine desire in what concerns the intercourse as being more important than for the feminine need.

For the same reason, girls are expressing a rejection of prostitution, activity considered as shameful for the woman. The majority of the boys are rather situated as potential consumers of female sexual services, going to the point of promoting them as 'services given to the society'. Of course, they have quite other speech when it comes masculine prostitution. This one is condemned in the same way as the passive role of the homosexual relationship, because it reverses the traditional gender roles, throwing back the man in the sphere of the feminine. The one who endorses the female role becomes a 'whore/ tart- colloquial'. It is more the sex category than the sex of the partner that determines the classification of a man from the point of view of its sexual identity.

(Yannakopoulos, 1996).

The socio-cultural context demands the man to be the leader of wish and encourages the woman to mistrust her wish and to control it, teaching him that she is an object of pleasure first. This influences/ rubs off on the perceptions that the young people have of sexual practices, their representations of gender, sexual behaviours and relationships, and their opinions about moral deviance in what concerns sexuality.

Prostitutes, 'whores' and 'serious girl'

While it is perceived as a social problem by the girls, the boys support female prostitution and the prostitute becomes, in their eyes, a heroic figure. The prostitute is, in the logic of the woman as a sexual object, an image which respects the gender order. Her behaviour is considered as justified and her activity as normal, 'useful', a thing that 'has always existed'. The following evidences are clearly exemplifying the opposed perceptions, between girls and boys, of prostitution as the image of the prostitute.

It is the humiliation of woman, it is shame (Girl, 16 years old, The Jean Jaurès high school, Montreuil)

It is indeed a problem, because in order to arrive there, it is because there is a problem somewhere! (Girl, 17 years old, The Gregor Mendel high school, Vincennes)

I find this dirty; I think that we can always find solutions others than selling her body. (Girl, 18 years old,

The Notre-Dame institution of the Providence, Vincennes)

It is a job. (Boy, 15 years old, The Jean Jaurès high school, Montreuil)

I find that girls who do this, they are brave. I do not know, to give your body, just like that, to everyone, it is brave! (Boy, 20 years old, The Jean Jaurès high school, Montreuil)

It is good because otherwise there would be many more rapes. (Boy, 17 years old, The Gregor Mendel high school, Vincennes)

Honestly, this doesn't bother me. When I see stuff on the television like some sort of guys who go to girls and everything... damn... I wouldn't mind doing that! (Boy, 18 years old, The Gregor Mendel high school, Vincennes)

You see, in Holland, the girls which make this, they pay taxes. I find this well because it is not... we don't say 'it is a whore', but it is a prostitute! (Boy, 18 years old, The Notre-Dame institution of the Providence, Vincennes)

In the speech of the interviewed young people, a differentiation is made between the prostitute and the 'whore' or the 'bitch'. The prostitute – woman who performs sexual acts in exchange for remuneration – is in the service of others, notably men, and she does not overthrow the gender order. The prostitute is not being supposed to enjoy, she is rather perceived as somebody who sacrifices himself. She would fulfil a role 'of social orthopaedics', (Corbin, 1978), she would be one 'professional prostitute/souleuse' (Chaleil, 1981).

The expressed opinions about the prostitute are sometimes characterized by a sordid nature, but she is generally described by the interviewed boys as an image that deserve respect. She is appreciated, described as brave and her activity is perceived as a service returned to society. The prostitute finds no real satisfaction in the professional sexual act which she performs and therefore she does not deserve to be morally condemned (Nor, 2001). On the contrary, 'whore' or 'bitch' – woman who gets dressed in a provocative way, has many sexual partners and does not hide it – disturbs the social order by her uninhibited behaviour and overturns gender order by her search of sexual pleasure, as it projects a image detached from feelings of love, lack of self-control and control of sexual desire and sexualized body. The behaviour of the 'bitch' constitutes, from their point of view, a moral deviance, while the prostitute is only exercising her job, most often determined by economic necessity and not by pleasure.

The girls, as well as the half of the boys met in Vincennes, do not describe the prostitute as a respectable figure, as the boys attending the high school in Montreuil are doing. The bias of social belonging introduces a differentiation between the representations of the boys sent to school in the private school located in Vincennes and those attending the public high school in Montreuil. However, the differentiation between the prostitute and the 'bitch', the first one as a figure who is 'in her place' and the second perceived as damaging the gender order, is common to all the girls and the boys interviewed.

Three categories of female figures have emerged from the speech of the interviewed people: the 'bitch', the prostitute and the 'serious girl'³. This last type answers to the gender order and is dedicated to become mother, which puts her at the top of the hierarchy of values which has been built in force from categories and from gender roles in the studied context, that of the teenagers between 14 and 20 years old, attending high schools in the suburbs of East of Paris. The 'good girl' or 'the serious girl' 'does not sleep with the first to come', 'she is a loving person', 'and she respects herself'.

Although the prostitute has numerous sexual partners, 'she deserves respect' from some and pity from others, because she acts out of necessity and in a professional frame. The 'bitch', or 'the whore', is at the base of the scale of values because she breaks the inherited social norms of her belonging group, that of the youngsters of the neighbourhood, which demands that the girls be discreet, respectable and that they honour their status as future wives and mothers. The terms 'bitch' and 'whore' go to the point of becoming an insult.

There are bitches, I know this well and there are girls which are fond of their guys, that want to stay, perhaps to carry out more things with them (Boy, 17 years old, the Gregor Mendel high school, Vincennes)

There are two categories of girls: you see there are those who know how to impose respect and there are those bitches, which only search to turn off the guys (...) The prostitutes, are a separate case, because they do it for the money. (Girl, 17 years old, the Gregor Mendel high school, Vincennes)

The prostitute is not in contravention because she is only exercising her role, without corrupting social order, and her activity is circumscribed in areas and in an exact and given time (she works in specific schedules and places). Her behaviour fits with her role and she exists to satisfy men. She holds her grounds 'in her place'.

On the contrary, the 'bitch' has a behaviour considered illicit, nonstandard and 'pathological' and she blurs borders which separate the decency of indecency and she blends types. It is her, and not the prostitute, that, in the presentations of the questioned young people, represents the transgression of sexual order and female deviance.

Conclusion

The Parisian suburb is separated in cities and neighbourhoods with different social profiles, which modify behaviours, social representations and values to which the individual adhere up to the most private zones of his life, like sexuality. For the teenagers which belong to some disadvantaged environments, virginity is generally valued if it refers to girls and it is rather perceived as being shameful and a sign of weakness and a lack of manliness for the boys.

Gender differences are well defined; the girls are compared with prudence, while the boys brag about their sexual experience and they display the number of their sexual partners as trophies in their manliness contest. A girl who acts as a boy, that is to say, which has a big number of sexual partners, considered by the peer group as too important, who

has a number of loving relationships considered outrages for a 'serious girl', will be treated as a 'bitch' by her friends. Her behaviour is considered to be deviant and she is categorized as a 'bitch'.

The structures of domination affect interactions between genders. The gender order about which Judith Butler (2005) speaks is a structure which crosses all societies, even if its demonstrations are particularly meaningful in certain socio-cultural environments. It is in a place where manliness is strongly promoted that develops notions of 'serious girl' and of 'bitch'.

The gender order imposes a double regulation on girls and boys. This gender order, which determines the rights and social duties tied to every sex, determines a gender distribution of relationships and sexual experiments. If the girls are on the side of feelings and on discretion, the boys are on the side of the body and of the research of (hetero) sexual experiences and the demonstration of these. If the boys have to be 'men' and to show their manliness, the girls are urged to show reservation, notably in dress code and in sexual morality and discretion (Clair, 2008).

Our sample group is not representative. It simply aims to illustrate, from an ethnographic research, the fact that what constitutes

or not a deviance depends on values of the individuals who, in their turn, are determined by the socio-cultural context where they are inserted.

The categories presented here are not necessarily the only ones in force among young people, even if they are often used in their speech. However, these are common in all subjects and participate in the structure of their thought. However, the categories are common to all subjects and help to structure their thinking.

Notes

¹ The population of the high school of vocational education and that of the mainstream education high school, in Vincennes, do not have exactly the same profile, even though they are comparatively close one to each other, the first one being a little more socially and culturally different than the second. However, in this article, which is especially focused on a particular aspect of the young people representations; it did not seem to me necessary to underline this aspect, as I could make it during a more detailed description of the studied sample.

² Expression used in order to emphasize the dignity of the prostitutes.

³ Expression often replaced by 'serious girl'.

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