

Sofía G. Solís Salazar

Barcelona Autonomous University

National Fund for Culture and the Arts of Mexico

Begonya Sáez Tajafuerce

Barcelona Autonomous University

Subversion of sexual and national identities in Mexican Contemporary Art

One hundred years after the Mexican Revolution wondering what is to be mexican is a repeated topic of research of various sorts. It seems that is an issue that needs to be rethought, especially when politics and mexican culture are in a process of high transformation. At the end of last year was accepted the law on civil marriage and adoption for homosexual couples in the nation's capital. The frequent confrontations generate friction that could give us an accurate data on discrimination not only of sexual minorities. Maria de la Heras (2010a) submitted for the newspaper *El País* a survey conducted in Mexico on homoparental families. The results of the 500 people interviewed show contradictions in their answers that can be considered as a symptom of the transformation of contemporary mexican culture. But, also speaks about the resistance of the people themselves to change which represents a challenge for defenders of minority groups not only in a legal fight with government institutions, but also in the clash with the rest of the population that stigmatize them as a minority; affirmation that marks a division between them and the "others".

A 77.4% of those polled responded "no" to the question about whether they considered homosexuality as a disease; a 56.6% also responded with a refusal if children of homosexual couples also "turn to" homosexuals. - It should be noted that the question involves a sublimated form of discrimination in the sense that they "turn to" homosexual, what they were before? - Returning to the survey, the majority also believed that homosexuals are not degenerate. However, despite everything, they

respond with a “yes” to the question if homosexual marriage is against the values of the Mexican family with a 58.8%; with 65.8% in favor of the inquiry if the children of homosexual couples would be affected psychologically. Two responses generated particular interest: 53.8% said that adopted children by same-sex couples would grow up to be excluded from society, and a 53.7% that nobody is born homosexual, but the environment and education help it. These answers generate contradictions: Who exactly would exclude children with same-sex parents? Who “promotes” homosexuality? Possible answers to these questions will lead to a rejection or a lack of awareness of one’s own acts of people who try to wash their hands to stay as far away from the homosexual agenda.

In another survey conducted by Maria de las Heras (2010b) also published in *El País*, 62% of those polled replied that the discrimination of different minorities is due to ignorance. One might wonder in what sense ignorance can lead to discrimination? Ignorance and lack of knowledge of what branch or what issues? In this case, is not that society do not know that homosexuals should not be discriminate because also have rights or fall within the range of “normal”, but is a thought that justifies what they say with action. More than a failure, it is a lack of understanding and apprehension to an idea that revolves around the natural manner of the sex / gender. They could be considered prisoners of melancholy that is generated from the symbolic threat of loss of identity.

In this latest survey on discrimination different groups were detected of suffering marginalization or exclusion, set in the following order being the first the most discriminated: people with AIDS, homosexuals, indigenous, disabled, obese people, people with mental weakness, the elderly and finally women. Also, were identified some factors that promote discrimination: first school, followed by the family environment, social customs, authorities, laws and religion. Based on the results of the last block and returning to the theme of ignorance as a cause of discrimination,

we might infer that in some cases the school is a source of ignorance and thus discrimination.

On the issue of discrimination against women as a last group with responses from 31% to if it was considered as much discriminated group. These results could cheer feminist organizations that have been working constantly to reduce the marginalization of its kind. It is a success according to the data, but is also a claim to the preference in the defense of gender debate of women. First the women and children said the captain, this way seems to feel the atmosphere of the gender struggle in Mexico that has been often questioned by different groups, as post-feminist, their attach to the defense of women that also facilitates heteronormativity.

These surveys show a confusing picture, but in process, around the issue of sexual identities in Mexico. To this point researches should be guided to extend and to go in depth to the knowledge of mexican contemporary subjectivities in order to update the debate about sexuality. As well as, there is need to problematize the paradigms that considered natural the body to build structures and arguments that leave exposed the repressive cultural patterns in the endeavor to advocate for free choice. In this arrange of ideas, and in favor of this aim, art could provide a set of elements of symbolic representation exposed in a given period, and at the same time gives us the possibility of an aesthetic analysis that might contribute to a restatement of the symbolic.

From this perspective, the work of contemporary artist and gay activist, Nahum B. Zenil is favorable. In his work could be seen different scenarios that inevitably lead us to question national and sexual identity, social hierarchy, ethnicity, family and religion (Fig. 1). Of great interest are the



Fig. 1 Zenil, Nahum. *Retrato de boda* (Wedding portrait).

projection and the impact that has been achieved in the population and the importance of his paintings in the process of breaking paradigms and creating new ways of understanding (Debroise, 1986, 2006; Emerich, 1989, 1994, 1997; Sullivan, 1996).

It is very important to mention that Zenil's work is often related to the 80s art movement known as neomexicanism. This movement reappropriated postrevolutionary pictorial art, but offering new conflicts and symbolism of the used themes. As actors we can name: Julio Galán, Adolfo Patiño and Zenil himself. Although, there is a debate over whether the neomexicanism existed as a consolidate movement, or at least preconceived. Some private galleries displayed the works on the same concept sponsored it, but not with a previous theoretical stand; being this the reason of its quickly extinction (Debroise, 2006:276).

The neomexicanism offers interpretive keys of Zenil's work, and generally of mexican identity, putting in conflict the cultural pattern over which it is based. If we applied the genealogical analysis performed on Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* would serve us, as David Halperin (1989) said, not to get the job done as a historical documentary of national and sexual identities in Mexico, but to find the nodal points of the repression of sexuality discourses, their change over time and specifically their involvement in the process of subjectivation as a route of "invention" that arouses interest in Mexico and was put in conflict in the art of the 80s (Debroise, 2006: 278 y 314). From here, a first hypothesis could be point out locating a nodal point in the Mexican post-revolutionary period, in which an attempt to put in track the history and culture of the country in a new order away from the conflicts of Independence and Revolution. It was a cut and beginning of a new story, at first more just. It might be a good idea to make an analysis of the construction of discourse and symbolic process, such as the empowerment of the national symbols or the importance of works as *Forjando la Nación* of Manuel Gamio or José Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica* (1993). In the same tenor, to identify the contribution that made artists

like "Los Tres Gandes", which figuratively materialize the new mexican in their recognized murals that emphasize the use of the popular expression in a manner of archaeological rescue that became the archetype of mexican (Azuela, 2005).

According to Franz Fanon this kind of painting could be understood as one of the common returns of postcolonial societies (Fanon, 2006:60; Foster, 2001:220). The postrevolutionary actors battled for a precolonial identity but knowing well about the dynamics that operated in the colonies. They were scholars who picked up their ideas from those which they were against. Slavoj Žižek on this point finds the benefit of the rescue of popular expression as an opposition that allows to undermine the power through the excess raised from the clash of the remains of the colonial and the precolonial past in a way that the involved agent emerges from the same dynamic, detonating inner forces of the colonial carrying it to its end. Under this line of thought quotes Marx saying that the limit of capitalism is the capital itself being unable to control its own contradictions (Žižek, 2001: 271).

However, in the case of Mexico at the end a counter-power emerged and became a rule, and again the requirement to mine it in the same way. In the art came the "ruptura" that was opposed to the revolutionary propaganda art, new life came with formalism that allowed the change of the "new" hard rule. However, there are conditions that remain in a silent and invisible frame that set standards of behavior in Mexico. The "ruptura" happened in the 60s but in the 80s nationalism took a new shape, as we said. With the boom in the U.S. of lesbian and gay liberation, the paranoia of the AIDS epidemic and in addition to the large destabilization of the country from political, social and economic crisis happened in Mexico, artists equally concerned by those events decided to return to the figurative use of the body and the patriotic symbols of neomexicanism (Debroise, 2006:312).

The return to the postrevolutionary art could be consider as a symptom, following Žižek, something that remained hidden not forgotten in the unconscious but

noiseless in the Truth that emerges from the false recognition; and that now comes from the past through a repetition that gives more strength and signification (Žižek, 2010:91). It is interesting to discover that in an interview to Zenil, he responds naturally to the fact that his work does not respond to a forced or a critical way. The elements that form his paintings were surrounded him being the reason for their appearance. In what way affects the perception of the artist in the meaning of the work or the symptom? We may infer two hypotheses: first, the safety the non critical intention to face the continue condemnation from the Government about the use of national symbols. And second, the self induced ignorance as the symptom verification.

In Zenil paintings mexican flags tie him and leave him with no movement as in a libidinal game with repressive measures as Judith Butler, following Michel Foucault, implies on the process of subjectivation of the prisoner in *Surveiller et Punir* (Fig. 2). This suggests that the subject is constructed from the interpellation of control mechanisms and its rejection. Butler constantly insists not to forget this argument in the sense of recognizing that we were formed by the same mechanisms of control against those we might be against. Thus, any attempt to subvert only would lead to the absorption and transformation of power itself helping to a failure of the endeavor of resistance. Both, Butler (1997) and

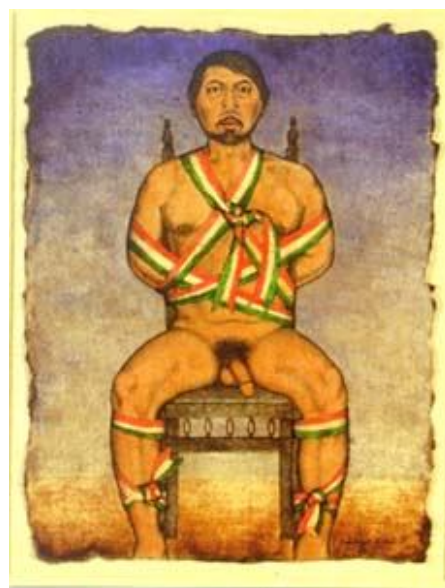


Fig. 2 Zenil, Nahum. *Prisionero III* (Prisoner III) 1984.

Foucault (1986) did not conceive the subject out of power, instead is created and performed by the power itself through the same methods of legitimation and exclusion. We could infer that the power itself considers the excluded as part of its own mechanisms, in other words, creates subjects to be marginalized as a form of legitimize the difference of the other.

Foucault distinguishes that power also creates possibilities of resistance. But these contingencies are generated within the same repressive spectrum not finding some form of radical resistance. Žižek found radical resistance in the same line of totalitarianism. He locates resistance in the surplus that supports the operation of power itself. This would mean that the notion of a previous subject before subjection and in its collision with the power exceed it. At this point seems that Butler and Žižek get in conflict in the old debate about the cartesian subject. Žižek defends the prediscursive subject arguing that the evidence of its existence is the overwhelming proof to learn that the mechanisms of power have been satisfactorily completed. In addition to that, if this prediscursive subject did not exist there would not be an ontological basis in support of the resistance (Žižek, 2001:271). In any case, the passionate attachments as a submission to Another are those that penetrate to the unconscious, it would be more subversive to say honestly "I do not exist on my own, I am just the fantasy embodied by the Other" than to enunciate any false autonomy (Žižek, 2001: 275).

To tinge the arguments, Žižek refers to Foucault's discourse as kind of aestheticisation of ethics: "each subject, without any support of universal standards, has to build its own mode of self control, must harmonize the antagonism of powers, to reinvent itself, in certain sense, occur as subject, to find its own special art of living" (Žižek, 2010: 24). In the same vein, Butler proposed the performative condition; there is to say that gender is performed through actions that eventually become natural and placed at different levels of biological conception and discursive construction from the regular repetition of symbols. But, Butler innovates in the idea that if we consider gender as a construction through power relations, as an embodiment or incarnation of the cultural requirements, thus it can be performed or renewed under our own corporeal terms by way of choice in a chance of resignification (Butler, 2001:41).

So, aesthetics might be a chance of resistance. Art would find its strength, as Žižek said, in the excess of the pre-symbolic discourse being able to turn the repression

of sexuality in the sexualization of repressive measures. Not in the sense of libidinal mechanism of power, neither in the way of pleasure in guilt and punishment, but in the strict sense of ultra sexualizing the symbolic in a performative way as Butler depicts and Beatriz Preciado (2007) exemplified with her postpornography theory or the reappropriation of violent language of Monique Wittig (1997). As well, Zenil exceeds the hidden under the historical line transforming his images in a symptom full of signification. Also, he contributes in the aim to compose a historic base of a new aesthetic that gives possibilities of a restructured understanding.

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