

III

A Concept That Does Not Exist

A reading of Elizabeth Duval's After Trans *(III): "Against Tolerance and Statistics" and "Trans Theology: The Gospel of La Veneno"*

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1. Eight out of ten

In *Después de lo trans* (*After Trans*, 2021), the Spanish writer Elizabeth Duval argues about the foundations of the trans category instead of fortifying them, which makes her a rare and valuable interlocutor. The two previous instalments of this reading reached a twofold conclusion. In her first chapter, Duval showed that nobody chooses their identity, that one comes upon it in the repertoire of one's age; yet identifying as a woman, however involuntarily, does not suffice to be one. In her second, she showed that social violence operates through perceptual schemas; yet being perceived as a woman does not suffice either. The third and fourth chapters change the ground. They no longer ask what a trans woman is, but what sort of group trans people form, and Duval's answer is the boldest in the book: none at all.

The third chapter, "Against Tolerance and Statistics", opens with Pasolini.[1] To tolerate someone is a refined way of condemning them, since the majority grants the different person the right to be different without ever ceasing to see them as such; it releases them from the physical ghetto only to confine them in a mental one. Duval lives that sentence with considerable lucidity. Trans people are invited to speak during Pride week, and only about what sets them apart. Then comes the heart of the chapter, a figure that ministers, news agencies and commentators were all repeating in the Spain of 2020: "more than 80 per cent of trans people are condemned to unemployment".[2] Duval argues that the figure "comes out of nowhere as a rhetorical instrument for manufacturing victims", and she proves it.[3] The European survey of trans people found that, across the Union, half were employed, one in four was studying and one in eight was out of work.[4] In a footnote, Duval traces the 80 per cent to its source: a participatory assessment carried out with 33 trans women in Barcelona. The Spanish study with the larger sample put the figure, for 2009, at a little over 35 per cent.[5]

All of this must be conceded, and gladly. The criticism is sound: one cannot take a sample of 33 vulnerable women and extend the result to a far broader category. So is the conclusion Duval draws from it. Trans, she says, "cannot describe a demographically or sociologically coherent group", and to put a middle-class student who passes unnoticed in the same statistic as a sixty-year-old trans woman who worked the streets is "a self-serving conceptual steamroller".[6] Duval is here at her best: rigorous, left-wing in the good sense, suspicious of cheap compassion. What follows does not dispute her numbers. It disputes that the principle she turns on other people's numbers ceases to apply when the arguments are her own.

2. A concept that does not exist

If a group is too heterogeneous to sustain a common unemployment rate, there is no reason whatever for it to be more homogeneous when it comes to sustaining a common explanation. Whoever demands stratification by age, class, era and passing before speaking of unemployment must demand it too before speaking of how an identity is formed. It may very well be that what we now call "trans" gathers psychological, social and biographical phenomena that are causally distinct and share nothing but a recent label. A category can be politically useful and scientifically dreadful. "People with disabilities" works admirably in legislation while grouping mechanisms that have nothing to do with one another; nobody would think of seeking a common cause for blindness, paraplegia and deafness because they share a clause in a statute.

What is remarkable is that Duval needs no one to tell her this. She says it herself, in this very chapter, in so many words. The steamroller, she writes, feigns "a supposed equality among all the people presumably grouped together by a single concept that does not exist".[7] A concept that does not exist. And in a note to the same chapter she goes further: "conceptually, trans is not a valid framework", and what has "obvious political utility" is the use of "a strategic trans identity to build a coalition without head or tail (at the theoretical level)".[8] It is the disability analogy, very nearly word for word. For Duval, trans is a political umbrella with no theoretical coherence, and she says so without equivocation.

The difficulty begins when one returns to the earlier chapters with that sentence in hand.

3. The proliferation of an umbrella

In her first chapter, Duval set out to explain a phenomenon: "the proliferation of trans people in our Western framework".[9] Her explanation was single and elegant. The codes of gender loosened as women entered paid work and sex came apart from reproduction, and a looser language produces more speakers who do not fit. In the second chapter she restated it as a formal proposition: "the proliferation of trans subjectivities" must be read as "a loosening or blurring of codes", such that a male body which ought to have received a masculine socialisation may acquire a "feminine" one through the influence of media, school, law or family.[10]

But if trans is a coalition without head or tail, "the proliferation of trans people" is not a phenomenon. It is the sum of several, each of which may grow for different reasons, at different rates and in different populations. The man who transitions at fifty and the adolescent girl who declares herself a boy at fourteen share a label and a form; nothing guarantees that they share a cause. Before Duval wrote her book, the clinical literature had already recorded that adolescent referrals to gender identity clinics in several countries had become predominantly female; Aitken and colleagues documented the shift in 2015.[11] A change of that kind in the composition of a population obliges one to ask whether one is facing a single phenomenon on the rise or several distinct phenomena counted together. To explain by a single mechanism the growth of a label that gathers such disparate trajectories is precisely what Duval reproaches in the 80 per cent: taking a real heterogeneity and converting it into a unity by means of a word. The steamroller she denounces in the statistics, she drove herself through the theory two chapters earlier.

Duval has a defence, and it deserves its best form. In the first chapter she said that the mechanisms of gender acquisition "can be applied to anyone", and in a note she made clear that studying why someone arrives at a discordant identity "lies well beyond" her essay; she even suggested that psychoanalysis might explain "some cases" of trans women through foreclosure, which is to admit that there are different cases.[12] She might say, then, that she never offered a trans aetiology, only a general theory of how gender is acquired, valid for everyone. But the defence exacts its price. If her theory explains nothing specifically trans, it does not explain the proliferation, and the proliferation was what the first chapter claimed to explain. Duval must choose. Either the first chapter explains a unitary trans phenomenon, and collides head-on with the non-existent concept of the third, or it explains nothing in particular, and her thesis about the rise in trans people is left floating in mid-air.

4. Rigour with other people's figures

There is, moreover, a double standard worth laying on the table. The same author who goes to the source of the 80 per cent and counts its 33 respondents writes in her first chapter, of the number of trans people in the world, that there is "an exponential statistic", and corrects herself in the very next breath: "perhaps I exaggerate: I am fairly sure it is not an exponential trend, though it is rising".[13] There is no figure, no source, no sample. The same goes for her hypothesis about the virtual: that forums, social networks and role-playing games have multiplied trans identifications is offered as an explanation without a single number in support. Demanding the sample from one's opponent and sparing oneself the trouble when the argument is one's own is also a steamroller, merely driven in the opposite direction.

5. The gospel and its soul

The fourth chapter, added at the end of October 2020, is a critique of *Veneno*, the series by Javier Calvo and Javier Ambrossi about Cristina Ortiz, La Veneno, the Andalusian trans woman whom Spanish television in the nineties turned into a spectacle and who died in 2016.[14] Duval reads it as a gospel. The series does to La Veneno exactly what it accuses the media of having done: it turns her into an image, an idol, a martyr who dies for everyone's sins and redeems the trans women who came after her. The critique has brilliant pages and two precise objections. The first is that the series puts into La Veneno's mouth a dogma nobody contradicts: "if you are one, you will always be one, because this is something you carry inside from the day you are born".[15] The second is that it renders her anachronistic. Duval recalls that La Veneno also said at one time that she was a man, and doubts "very much that she ever used the word trans" the series has her pronounce. "Myths require anachronisms."[16]

One might think Duval is here contradicting her own historicism, since in her first chapter she sanctioned precisely what she now reproaches: reading past existences in the light of present forms. There she wrote that existences "which we would once have called, for example, butch lesbians" today "find another perfectly acceptable way of existing as trans men", and that the *travestis* of the mid-century "would probably have been what today they would be offered the chance to be". Fairness, however, requires a distinction. Her complaint against the series is not continuity as such. The chapter opens with the child Valeria Vegas watching La Veneno on television, and Duval writes that La Veneno is for her "a reference for her imaginary construction, a possibility, a strategy of being".[17] Duval herself reads La Veneno as the repertoire in which another woman found her form, and between "might have found another form today" and "was really trans all along" there is a difference that must be granted her. What she reproaches in the series is the soul: the idea that being trans is carried within from the cradle and passes intact through the ages.

That reproach, however, leaves a question the book never answers. If yesterday's butch and today's trans man are two forms of "the same existence", if the mid-century *travesti* and the present-day trans woman share something that makes the one the forerunner of the other, what is it that they share?

6. Three answers for one existence

There are three possible answers, and the book contains two of them.

The first belongs to the series: an inner essence. Being trans is a soul one carries from birth, which each age clothes in whatever words it has to hand. It is a coherent answer, and Duval rejects it quite rightly, for it is the very "gender neoplatonism" she denounced in her first chapter: the body as prison of a sexed soul. The second answer is Duval's, and it consists in having none. She rejects the soul of the series, and in her second chapter she had rejected sex as well, declaring it a convention. Take away identity, which is historical, the category, which is conventional, and self-description, which changes with the repertoire, and nothing remains that would allow one to speak of "the same existence". The series has a bad answer; Duval has none at all.

The third is what remains once the other two are discarded, and it must be put carefully, because it is easily caricatured. The body alone does not tell us what persists. A butch and a feminine lesbian have the same female body, and the latter becomes a trans man in no era whatsoever. What persists is a sexed body with dispositions that do not match what was expected of that body: a presentation, a desire, sometimes an orientation. The body is not all that persists, but it is the term without which "not matching" means nothing. The butch's masculinity is masculine in relation to a woman's body; without that body it is a deviation from nothing. And so the body returns to the book once again, like those tiresome relations one sees off at the front door who, ten minutes later, are found in the kitchen putting the kettle on.

7. The only firm thing about "us"

The body returns, moreover, from Duval's own lips. In her critique of *Veneno*, her deepest objection is that the series makes sisters of Valeria Vegas, an urban middle-class journalist, and Cristina Ortiz, who grew up in a village, was driven into prostitution, obtained hormones on the black market and was raped by prison officers. "It cannot be said that, wherever we come from, we are somehow all the same."[18] Duval includes herself in the contrast: she too never had to sell herself, and never suffered that violence. And to mark the distance, she lists what she does share with La Veneno: "we will share our inability to gestate, we will share some childhood experiences (and only perhaps), we will share fears, imaginaries, but we cannot be the same".[19]

Note the order. The childhood experiences come with a reservation in brackets. The fears and imaginaries are vague. The first thing to appear, the only thing affirmed without hesitation, is a feature of the body: the inability to gestate. And the inability to gestate does not distinguish a trans woman from any man; what makes it a trait shared among trans women, rather than between them and other women, is a body of male origin. Nor is this an isolated detail. In her prologue Duval tells us that she writes because she will never be a biological mother, and that hormone treatment left her sterile.[20] In the series, the worst insult Valeria suffers, by Duval's own account, is her boyfriend's mother alluding at Christmas dinner to her inability to bear children.[21] Every time the book looks for what unites trans women, or what wounds them, the answer lies in the body the theory had sent into exile.

Duval is right about almost everything she says in these two chapters. Tolerance is a condemnation with good manners, the 80 per cent was smoke, and the series turns a real woman into a holy card and puts words in her mouth that were never hers. But the principle with which she dismantles other people's statistics dismantles her own theory as well, and the question with which she reproaches the

series for its eternal soul leaves her with nothing to put in its place. When at last she must say what holds the "us" together, the only firm thing she finds is a body. It is the concept that, by her account, does not exist, and the one thing the book never quite manages to stop naming.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021 (ebook, ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0), ch. 3, "Contra la tolerancia y la estadística", quoting Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters* (1976), "Gennariello". The ebook has no fixed pagination, so references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. All translations from Duval are my own.
2. Duval, ch. 3.
3. Ibid.
4. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), *Being Trans in the European Union: Comparative Analysis of EU LGBT Survey Data*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2014; cited in Duval, ch. 3.
5. Duval, note [m] to ch. 3.
6. Duval, ch. 3.
7. Ibid.
8. Duval, note [n] to ch. 3.
9. Duval, ch. 1, "La imposibilidad conceptual de la autodeterminación".
10. Duval, ch. 2, "Cuatro proposiciones sobre lo trans", third proposition.
11. Madison Aitken et al., "Evidence for an altered sex ratio in clinic-referred adolescents with gender dysphoria", *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 12 (3), 2015, pp. 756–763.
12. Duval, ch. 1, "Un primer programa político: devenir sujeto", and note [e] to ch. 1.
13. Duval, ch. 1, "Esbozar una definición del género".
14. Duval, ch. 4, "Teología trans: el evangelio de la Veneno según Valeria Vegas (y los Javis)", on *Veneno*, series created by Javier Calvo and Javier Ambrossi (Atresplayer Premium, 2020).
15. Duval, ch. 4, fragment 1.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Duval, ch. 4, fragments 6 and 7.
19. Duval, ch. 4, fragment 6.
20. Duval, "Prolegómenos".
21. Duval, ch. 4, fragment 6.