Looking for sex in all the wrong places*

K. R. CAMARGO Jr & R. A. MATTOS

Institute of Social Medicine, State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of how issues on sexuality are captured by the World Bank’s economic rationality, producing a sanitised discourse which, through its silences, further contributes to a normalised view of sexuality.

Given the Bank’s authority to determine what kinds of health and development programmes are established in the developing world, it is in a unique position to influence approaches to issues of gender and sexuality. An analysis of the Bank’s documents reveals, however, that rather than addressing these fundamental components of some of the most pressing health emergencies of our time, its economic rationality and technocratic viewpoint has effectively silenced and sanitised the discourse on sexuality, thereby limiting what sexuality and gender-related issues can be tackled in the context of Bank sponsored programmes, and constraining efforts to advance fundamental sexual rights. Nevertheless, unexpected and paradoxical results may arise from that process, which, thus, does not necessarily lead to the furthering of a comprehensive conservative agenda.

Keywords: World Bank, sexuality, discourse, discursive formations

Introduction

The time has come to think about sex. To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic […] But it is precisely at times like these, when we live the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality. (Rubin 1998: 143)

*This article is based on a longer study that was developed in collaboration with Sexuality Policy Watch, with funding provided by the Ford Foundation. For an extended discussion of the issues examined in this article, see “Looking for sex in all the wrong places: The silencing of sexuality in the World Bank’s public discourse”, which is available as part of the e-book, SexPolitics: Reports from the Front Lines, edited by Richard Parker, Rosalind Petchesky, and Robert Sember, 2007. This e-book includes a series of case studies, as well as a crosscutting analysis, focused on the politics of sexual health and rights in eight countries and two institutional contexts. SexPolitics can be found online at <http://www.sxpolitics.org/frontlines/home/>. 

ISSN 1744-1692 print/ISSN 1744-1706 online © 2008 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/17441690801980896
The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of how issues of sexuality are captured by the World Bank's economic rationality, producing a sanitised discourse which, through its silences, further contributes to a normalised view of sexuality.

Such discourse has the power to set the agenda for public policies, thus establishing boundaries and limits to what can and cannot (or must and must not) be explicitly dealt with in the associated debate. Nevertheless, unexpected and paradoxical results may arise from that process, which does not necessarily lead to the furthering of a comprehensive conservative agenda, as we will argue in this text.

There is a key background assumption to this paper, which will not be detailed here, a conception of sexuality as an intersection of politics, desire, culture and biology, much along the lines discussed by Altman (1995), among others. This conception is a key tool in the struggle for sexual rights, especially when taken, as Petchesky (2000: 91) urges, as an affirmative right built upon a set of key ethical principles. One of the steps along that struggle is, in effect, the deconstruction of the received, naturalised view of sexuality; and because of that, a political discourse that silences sexuality is inherently reinforcing the conventional, heteronormative, view of sexuality. As we intend to demonstrate, this is precisely the case of the Bank’s public discourse. It thus follows that the starting point of the discussion is a closer examination of the World Bank’s constitution and inner workings, in order to dispel prevailing conceptions of a monolithic and impervious Leviathan. It should be noted that producing this paper posed considerable challenges; on one hand due to the constraints we faced, both of time and resources, and, on the other hand, by the object of study itself, which is the analysis of an absence.

**Theoretical framework**

There are two key conceptual references for this paper. We based the discursive analysis of the text on Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, particularly with regard to his analysis of discourse and text as a totality within itself (Foucault 1972; Gutting 1989). The two core categories here are discourse (Foucault 1972: esp. 26ff) and surface of emergence (Foucault 1972: 41). Regarding the first, Foucault proposes a form of textual analysis that focuses exclusively on the ensemble of statements as its object, disregarding, as a methodological option, considerations of authoring and context and, consequently, conceptualising what he calls “the discursive space” as a totality in its own right; as for the second, Foucault states that specific forms of discourse arise from equally specific institutional and historical contingencies, and it is the ensemble of such contingencies that he denominates a surface of emergence. In this study, we consider the ensemble of texts made available by the World Bank as a discourse, and, the institution itself, its surface of emergence. One of the issues that Foucault tackles in the aforementioned book is how to evade the problems posed by the use of conventional analytical tools and concepts—particularly those that imply some foundational ontology, which would be in direct contradiction to his proposal.
Foucault’s ingenious device to circumvent that hurdle is to create new categories of analysis, with a known process of creation that can thus be made explicit and accounted for in the process; the relevant concept for this text is that of discursive formations (Foucault 1972: 38). With this concept, the idea that those objects change throughout their discursive trajectories, and cannot be mapped to pre-existing “things”, is fully embraced; what gives such transient objects a temporal continuity through successive transformations is precisely the stability of the transforming processes that operate on them – denominated rules of formation by Foucault.

In order to support our inferences with regard to the effects created by specific types of discourse, we resorted to key concepts from the work of the Polish epistemologist Ludwik Fleck (1979), (Cohen and Schnelle 1986), namely: the thought collective (Denkkollektiv) and thought style (Denkstil). He described the first as “[...] a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction; we will find by implication that it also provides the special ‘carrier’ for the historical development of any field of thought, as well as for the given stock of knowledge and level of culture” (Fleck 1979: 39) and the second as “[...] a definite constraint on thought, and even more; it is the entirety of intellectual preparedness or readiness for one particular way of seeing and acting and no other” (Fleck 1979: 64). It must be stressed, that the thought style is not an optional feature that can be wilfully, consciously chosen, but rather, an imposition made by the process of socialisation represented by the inclusion into a thought collective. As a consequence, Fleck writes, “once a structurally complete and closed system of opinions consisting of many details and relations has been formed, it offers enduring resistance to anything that contradicts it” (Fleck 1979: 27). The underlying assumption we are making here is that there are both a thought style and a thought collective identifiable in the intellectual work of the Bank, characterised by a technocratic view of political governance, more precisely, one dictated by neoclassical economic theory, that will be addressed later in this text. This thought style frames how problems are perceived, what tools are adequate to deal with them and, ultimately, what constitutes a solution in the first place, having thus a major impact on the dealings of various actors involved in the process.

Methodological strategy

In order to select a body of literature that would constitute the material of this analysis, we queried the Bank’s online document database, which gives convenient access to over 14 000 documents (as of 11 October 2005). Searches can be made through a fairly simple interface, allowing queries through specific words, groups of words, or expressions. We used a number of different search strategies to retrieve an adequate set of relevant texts, with the results shown in Table I.

Since some of the documents where retrieved by more than one strategy, the end result was a sample of 34 texts. In order to enhance the odds of finding relevant material, not covered by the search strategies described above,
we conducted another search using the word “gender”, yielding 1 256 hits; we read the online abstract of each of those documents, and excluded those which were not actually relevant to the present discussion, narrowing the selection to 200 documents, which were downloaded and given a first examination of their contents. That step, in turn, left us with 38 documents after discarding again those without actual relevance to this discussion. The analysis of those will not be presented here, but we will, nevertheless, resort to quotes from some of those papers in this text.

The documents have diverse names in the Bank’s taxonomy (reports, working papers, publications, data sheets, etc.), but for the purposes of this paper they could be grouped under four broad categories: policy proposal; appraisal of results; research papers; and, finally, commissioned work. The first two have a very similar overall layout: the text is itemised; they include several graphs and tables; boxes for singling out important points; and lots of examples from “good practices” or success stories are provided. The appraisal of results usually begins by posing a few questions, and almost invariably responds to them positively, ending, in turn, by pointing out that further work needs to be done. Those different kinds of documents constitute a hierarchy, with the research papers occupying the bottom and the official Bank documents the top; the former are signed by specific individual authors and, in almost every case, they carry a disclaimer stating explicitly that their views are not the Bank’s official views, whereas the latter have the authorship attributed to the Bank itself. This is also a functional hierarchy; papers at the bottom are much more sensitive to ongoing debate within and outside (and even against) the Bank, being much more attuned to the state of the art of several contemporary heated political debates; those, however, do not necessarily percolate to the top, and contentious points of view are usually expunged from the official Bank documents. Commissioned works are, as the name implies, bodies of text (more frequently books), funded, to some limited extent, by the Bank (research grants and/or editorial aid) and written by independent agents, usually from Academia, with a high degree of independence from the Bank and, thus, similarly to the research papers, not branded as “official” documents and with varying influence on those.

It should be noted that the Bank has a very diverse staff, and responds to ever-changing political injunctions, and this is reflected in its polyphonic (at times, cacophonic) discourse. As an ensemble, the documents constitute thick discursive layers that cross-reference each other, weaving a network of statements that seem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search expression</th>
<th>Type of search</th>
<th>Number of hits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual rights</td>
<td>Exact phrase</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual diversity</td>
<td>Exact phrase</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual health</td>
<td>Exact phrase</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV/AIDS sexuality</td>
<td>All words</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Query results.
impenetrable at first sight. We faced an additional, and major, obstacle in this analysis, namely, how to write about something that “isn’t there” in the first place. We presumed from the start that actual discussions on sexuality would be, at best, a marginal component in the Bank’s discourse, and the research proved that even that was an optimistic expectation.

**The World Bank: Introductory notes**

Despite decades of investment, supposedly geared towards producing more development and reduction of poverty, most of the poor and developing countries have economies that are in bad condition, fuelling an apparently endless cycle of social crises. Much of this sad state of affairs is directly related to the actions of the twin global financial institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The bargaining power of their loans has repeatedly subjected poorer countries to unpopular adjustment policies, more often than not with catastrophic results. Both institutions are much maligned around the world as a tool of imperialistic domination by the richer countries and, in particular, by the US. And yet, the World Bank, in particular (since this is the institution that will be dealt with in this paper), has demonstrated, time and again, a sensitivity to pressure from organised movements from civil society. Specifically in the case studied here, it has consistently demonstrated, over the last ten years or more, a commitment to take into account gender issues, at least in the copious literature it produces, and it became a major player in the HIV/AIDS arena. How can these seemingly disparate aspects of the oppressive juggernaut crushing Third World economies, and the sensitive international bureaucracy that responds to political pressures from grassroots agents, be reconciled?

In a nutshell, the Bank is a multinational bureaucratic organ, which needs to continually propose and implement loans and projects to certain countries in order to justify its own existence. In order to do so, it needs to keep the delicate balancing act of being financially and intellectually credible to both lenders and borrowers, in the sense that it must demonstrate that it does have the epistemic authority in its many fields of expertise. These areas of supposed expertise are ever-expanding, thanks to the near absolute hegemony of economics-based thinking in our time.

It turns out that one of the main arenas of the Bank’s struggle is in the dispute over ideas – on how to preserve the core of the economic rationale that it embodies and, at the same time, somehow respond to criticisms, such as those presented above. From an economic point of view, the Bank’s task in that regard is eased by the current hegemonic status that neoclassical economic theory – the scientific ideology of neoliberalism – has achieved.

The prevailing ideological consensus around neoclassical economy provides the Bank with a fall back position to deal with even the harshest evidence of the negative impacts the adjustment policies have had in numerous places around the World. Much of the debate around public policies has been recast in the last two decades (at least) in terms of economics. Economic theory became the
facto yardstick with which to measure good governance. Specifically, neoclassical economics dictate the rules for better or, as is more often the case, for worse. Neoclassical economic theory can be briefly described as the encounter of Adam Smith’s invisible hand with Newtonian physics and mathematics, having as its starting point a research programme pioneered by Walras and Jevons in the late 19th century (Ormerod 1994: 41; Fullbrook 2004: 71). Neoclassical theory ultimately hinges on the conception of society as a simple sum of individuals, consumers who are constantly competing with each other in order to maximise their gains (Hodgson 2004). From that axiom, builds a series of deterministic mathematical models, which “prove” that, left to themselves, markets maximise social welfare, and, therefore, any intervention is inherently destructive. This picture has two important implications: the homo economicus is guided by nothing but self-interest, and, the lesser the intervention of the state in the economy, the better. From the latter point stems the technocratic view that politics is a disturbance in the management of society at large, and, thus, technically sound policy proposals should be “armoured” against such “spurious” interference.

Findings: Looking for clues in a barren landscape

We found three discursive formations that interface with the broad definition of sexuality, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper: “women-gender”, “sexual–reproductive rights”, and “sex-as-a-risk”. For each of those discursive formations we were able to find at least one reference that seemingly addressed the complexity of the underlying issues. However, these issues did not spread to the more official documents, or were systematically left out, as discussed in the following pages.

First discursive formation: Women-gender

We found a considerable number of documents referencing the canonical body of literature in this area, particularly in relation to the international mobilisation around the Cairo and Beijing conferences. Overwhelmingly, the majority of these neglect engagement with any issue related to sexuality. Rather, they concentrate on framing the discourse around the argument that gender inequalities – more specifically, in terms of income, education, and “power” – are an obstacle to development and, as such, must be addressed. “Power” is apparently taken in terms of male/female relationships in a household, thus reinforcing heteronormative views of what constitutes a “family”. Such framing performs the antagonistic dual function of simultaneously reinforcing the central role of economics in the political argument while seemingly responding to the organised political pressure of women’s movements. This discursive formation is a recent transformation of the old “women in development” equivalent, and is still strongly influenced by it, as the following passage suggests:

Gender. Differences created by social (including cultural, religious, and political) constructs that result in different roles for, and power relationships between, men and women. Such roles are learned, vary across different societies, and change over time. However, in this document, it is
also used as commonly understood within the Bank, as a surrogate for “sex”. (The World Bank Group 2002a: i)

This is particularly relevant, since the document it was extracted from is an overall assessment of the progress the Bank made on gender issues.

The overall economic framing of the argument is demonstrated by another excerpt, taken from a working paper. That document, in particular, is a paradigmatic example of the neoclassical notion of gender. Consider Figure 1, from a series of equations included in one of the papers, which supposedly represent “female power”.7

And then, in pristine economicese, the authors state:

This paper extends the collective approach by proposing and estimating a framework where the weights are endogenised and simultaneously determined with the household’s expenditure and earnings decisions. Defining a female’s “power” as her endogenously determined welfare weight, the study finds on Nepalese data that the woman’s share of household earnings understates her true “power” in influencing household outcomes. (Koolwal & Ray 2002: 8)

Or, in other words, women are actually more powerful than previously thought. Also note, the use of “female” to refer to women, again conflating the differences between “sex” and “gender”. Through the completely de-sexualised version of gender, favoured in the Bank’s discourse, in lieu of a conceptualisation of gender as a complex relational system that encompasses a significant part of people’s lives, that is closely related to sexuality and its expressions, the reader is presented with a binary classification system, perfectly adhered to the traditional man-woman dichotomy associated with “sex”. Furthermore, actual sexual expression plays no role in this peculiar concept of “gender”.

Second discursive formation: Sexual-reproductive health

With regard to sexual-reproductive rights, there is a 1998 document that frames precisely that concept and its consequences:

Reproductive health is not merely the absence of disease or disability. It is a state of physical, mental, and social well-being in all matters related to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that women and men have a right to a safe sex life, and to reproduce if and when they wish. This includes the right of men and women to be informed about and to have access to safe, effective, affordable, and acceptable methods of regulating childbearing. The reproductive health approach requires health services that enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide the best chance of having a

We specify the female power variable as follows:

\[
\theta(z_1, z_2, \epsilon_d, \epsilon_{d2}) = \left( \frac{z_1}{z_1 + z_2} \right)^\phi
\]

(5)

with \( \phi = \phi_0 + \phi_1 \left( \frac{\epsilon_d}{\epsilon_{d2}} \right) \)

(5a)

Figure 1. “Female power” according to some economists.
healthy outcome for both mother and child. It also encompasses information and services to improve reproductive and sexual health through disease control and increasing gender equity. (Tinker et al. 1998: 1)

That definition, however, seems to be lost in the bulk of the documents that address this discursive formation. “Sex” is often dropped from actual discourse. For instance, a review of gender issues includes a section for “sexual and reproductive health” in the part concerning Haiti. The word “sexual” is dropped from the corresponding headings in the sections about Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, and the discursive formation seems to be captured by its previous history, rooted in the proposals of population control, that is, reducing fertility among the poor as a means to reduce poverty (The World Bank 2002b). Demographers and economists, of a different persuasion than the neoclassical orthodoxy, point out repeatedly that this is a causal inversion. The reduction of poverty brings a reduction of fertility, rather than the other way around. However, the notion that birth control is a strategy to reduce poverty is still very present. Another important feature is that “birth control” is almost invariably mapped to women only, dismissing the point, made in the quote above, about the role of men. Additionally, reproductive health is often conflated with family planning, thus reinforcing the heteronormative versions of sexuality, i.e. sex as being necessarily linked to reproduction, and the latter being necessarily linked to “families”. Furthermore, family is itself a concept that is not explicitly defined in this body of literature, as if there were a “natural” definition of family with which everyone agrees. Lastly, discourse around this discursive formation is often linked to the third, mapping sexuality into the medical domain.

**Third discursive formation: Sex-as-a-risk**

The sex-as-a-risk discursive formation is articulated, on the one hand, with the “sexual and reproductive health” theme and with regard to the prevention and control of sexually transmitted diseases, and, on the other, with HIV/AIDS prevention. The overall argument combines disease prevention and treatment with the recurring theme of promoting development and fighting poverty, which is one of the key aspects of the World Bank’s overall discourse. This has been evident at least since the publication of “Investing in Health” in 1993. In this case, STDs and HIV/AIDS, as well as more general conditions, such as maternal mortality or teenage pregnancy, are conceived primarily through a biomedical frame. There are at least three areas of focus in that theme, with little, if any, existing interaction between these sub-areas within the discursive formation. These discursive sub-themes include discourse on: (1) education as a means of prevention; (2) a medicalised approach to sexual activity; and (3) HIV/AIDS.

The most sophisticated discussions on sexuality are part of the overall discourse on HIV/AIDS prevention, while there are some restrictions. The most comprehensive presentation we found on these issues was printed, unsurprisingly, in an academic publication on culture and public action, co-edited by the World Bank
and the Stanford University Press. The chapter dedicated to HIV/AIDS presents the following reasoning:

In much of the world, a significant part of what may be called sexual culture is the deliberate withholding of information from youth. Although the discourse of biological reproduction dominates, the majority of sexual acts taking place anywhere at any time are nonreproductive. [...] Linking all erotic behaviour to the requirement of a species to reproduce threatens to confine explanatory models and delay understanding of what is really going on. Culture is the primary process by which the human being meets biological needs, both organic and perceived. Thus, sexual cultures can be understood to be those constellations of ideas, practices, and artifacts and their meanings and contexts in which people participate, either as a lifelong involvement or at various times of their lives, that are adapted to meet felt erotic needs. The erotic components are linked to the body through gender or role presentations, expectations and actions, larger kinship and social roles and structures, demographic dynamics, economic environments, beliefs and attitudes, political forces, and, as we are becoming increasingly aware, disease and its meaning. Sexual cultures vary through time and place and are thoroughly influenced by a myriad of factors. The HIV pandemic can be counted on to be a major factor influencing changes in various sexual cultures as time passes. (Jenkins 2004: 264)

But, when we look at the specific literature from the World Bank on education as a means of prevention, as well as HIV/AIDS, it falls into the “deliberate withholding of information from youth” pattern, pointed out in the previous excerpt. Even when acknowledging the need to address, say, sexual education, the policy guides are usually singularly silent on the clear and explicit details necessary to implement effective interventions. This can be seen in reference materials produced by the World Bank (for example, see The World Bank Group 2003) and, most characteristically, in a sourcebook for HIV/AIDS prevention programmes (The World Bank Group 2004b). In a chapter describing experiences from the African continent, for instance, the general goals and intentions are presented, but little information is given regarding how programmes address those goals in actual practice. Moreover, no reference is made throughout the text to the existence of diverse sexual orientations or practices. This type of information should be foregrounded when designing HIV/AIDS prevention interventions on several levels. Another official World Bank Group (2004a) abundantly demonstrates the availability, in its collection of documents, of the kind of refined information necessary for dealing with HIV/AIDS prevention, as a few selected quotes show:

More importantly, this study confirms other research findings, namely that the sexual identity and sexual behaviour of MSM only slightly overlap. In fact, the large majority of MSM do not identify themselves as homosexuals, and furthermore, most of those MSM that were interviewed for this study acknowledge having had sexual relations with a woman during the last month preceding this survey. [...] The homosexual and heterosexual circuits are closely inter-linked, and therefore, the cost to society of maintaining the taboo of same-gender sexual practices, and marginalising people engaged in same-gender sexual contact is very high. (The World Bank Group 2004a: vi)

In underdeveloped countries, MSM are not integrated in the prevention and treatment strategies for HIV/AIDS. In assessing the inclusion of MSM in prevention strategies, one study notes that only 25% of national HIV programmes mention MSM as an important target group for prevention campaigns, and a mere 9% of them mention specific programmes targeting male sex workers (Parker et al. 1998). [...] The exclusion of MSM as a target group in HIV/AIDS programming has led various international organisations, such as the World Bank, to formulate responses that seek to incorporate MSM in the fight against HIV/AIDS [emphasis added]. (The World Bank Group 2004a: 4)
This indicates a compartmentalised approach within that organisation, where the threads concerning sexuality are never woven together within a single narrative. This is particularly visible in this last discursive formation. As the preceding quotes show, despite the presence of specific documents, which adequately tackle the subtleties of sexuality and its repercussion in the public arena from a more comprehensive point of view, such documents are the exception to the norm. More importantly, the institutionally more relevant documents (project appraisals, handbooks, resource guides) are not among those.

Finally, an important commonality between the last two discursive formations is their medicalisation of sexuality; that is, sexuality is reduced to a set of medical prescriptions. This is evinced in many of the researched documents, but particularly in three project reports (The World Bank Group 2005a, b, c), particularly with regard to HIV/AIDS programmes and policies.

This reduction is part and parcel of the overall technocratic view of the Bank, where technical and scientific principles take precedence in dictating norms and priorities with regard to public policy or to people’s private lives. A restricted view of “health” – namely, the absence of disease – takes precedence over any consideration of rights or pleasure. Corporations of specialists – medical doctors and, even more powerfully, health economists – are assumed to know “what is better for you”, be it the individual or society, thus effectively producing a normalised, de-politicised and de-sexualised (paradoxical as it may seem) view of sexuality, described chiefly through silences and discursive gaps.

Conclusion

The realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuver, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political. But there are also historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicised. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated. (Rubin 1998: 143)

As expected, a comprehensive view of sexuality is conspicuously absent from the World Bank’s public discourse. The thought style that permeates its analysis, as well as the inherent effects of these institutional arrangements, make it very unlikely that an agenda centred on a positive conception of sexual rights, such as fostered by Petchesky (2000), will be realised in the space of its public discourse. To a certain extent, this is a reflection of a process not entirely dissimilar to that analysed by Petchesky, in that paper. In concert with Petchesky’s analysis, we encountered an absence that can be traced to a complex drama, where “the fine points of the language become a critical terrain for the contestation of power – and the meanings of sexuality – through endless spirals of domination, resistance, and reconstitution of discourse” (Petchesky 2000: 86). With two important differences, though; as an organisation, the Bank is far less permeable to organised political pressure from civil society actors, and arguments backed by
scientific rhetoric, and economics, in particular, carry significantly more weight than in general political discussions within the UN.

As a consequence of such silences, the discursive formations that arise from that surface of emergence reinforce an essentialist, biological conception of sexuality, that is inherently heteronormative. In the aforementioned work, Petchesky provides us with a list of ethical principles that are relevant to a positive agenda concerning sexual rights: “sexual diversity, habitational diversity (‘diverse family forms’), health, decision making (personhood), and gender equality” (Petchesky 2000: 91); comparing those items to what we found in the World Bank’s literature, only the last three are somehow contemplated. When they are, it is in a limited form, such as sexual health, that seems to be conceived in terms of not having sexually transmitted diseases, and in a way that clearly conflicts with other principles, such as acknowledging the need for gender equality but at the same time framing it in a way that: a) is little more than “sex” by another name, shedding all the interactive dimensions to it and restricting its regard to women, and b) reinforces a heteronormative conception of a family consisting of a man, a woman and their offspring. Given the political strength and epistemic authority that the Bank’s discourse carries with it, this state of affairs constitutes a clear obstacle to the actual acknowledgment of positive sexual rights. Coupled with this, the technocratic thought style of the World Bank effectively de-legitimises any claims based on rights, or attributing importance to pleasure, while at the same time conceding even more authority and power to technical specialists (i.e. medical doctors and, even more so, health economists) over “lay people” in matters of public policy and with regard to individual private lives as well.

This, in turn, helps us to understand the deafening silence on sexuality in the Bank’s discourse. As Lützen (1995) states, “a researcher ought to keep in mind [. . .] that the study of sexuality is not just a study of La mise en discours – but also of silence. In some instances, silence must be interpreted as silence, and with this silence as a track one must reconstruct the attitude causing the refusal to talk about and touch on certain areas” (Lützen 1995: 27). The Bank’s silence on sexuality – or, more adequately, silencing of, if we consider how certain issues and considerations present in some bottom tier documents disappear as the narrative moves up the hierarchical scales – clearly indicates how this whole area of human experience is a non-issue for the Homo economicus.

This does not mean, however, that the pragmatic consequences of that type of discourse are necessarily a setback for progressive forces. The reliance on “scientific evidence”, despite all the criticism that can be leveraged against it, at least allows room for discussion of a number of issues around sexuality, that competing discourses, such as the religion-based, simply interdict. As an activist and researcher recently wrote:

My trajectory has been that of admitting my undeniable bias in dealing with issues that are part of my own experience and struggle, without ceasing to consider the fascination that the scientific discourse has always exerted on me, precisely because it offers a point of view from a lens that needs not be that of any fundamentalism and that, because of that, can promote discussions without disrespecting differing stances. (Almeida 2005: 19, our translation)
Another example can be provided by the Brazilian experience with World Bank-funded projects in HIV/AIDS. In addition to frequently including activities that ran counter to some of the Bank’s orientations, the World Bank-funded projects required the inclusion of non-governmental organisations in the programmed activities, which resulted in boosting the participation of Brazilian civil society (or at least some of its most organised sectors). This may not have been fully anticipated by the Bank. Additionally, this text should not be taken as a blanket indictment of Bank-sponsored programmes and activities, or demean the relevance of the goals put forth in the documents examined, even while pointing out their limitations. However, this does indicate that the public discourse of the Bank is yet another important arena where the establishment of an affirmative conception of sexual rights must be fought for, and which carries potentially global repercussions.

Notes

1 The translations of “Denkkollectiv” and “Denkstil” to, respectively, thought collective and thought style, were adopted in the 1979 English version of his book, possibly to stress their nature as specific concepts within a general theoretical framework.

2 Although we did not use any quantitative methods, we still find that the word “sample” is applicable.

3 The main source for this part of the text is Mattos (2000). Some additional information was provided by Chamberlain (1996) and the Bank’s own website.

4 This is not to say that the Bank adopts that particular theory as its “official” discourse; in fact, discussion within the Bank is permeated by other views, such as institutionalism, in particular (one could argue that the Bank itself would not make much sense in purely neoclassical terms). But, since that is indeed the hegemonic view in economics, by and large, it is bound to have an effect on how the technical arguments are cast.

5 The effects of decades of “adjustment policies” were already mentioned at the beginning of this paper; for the catastrophic repercussions on individual lives of this state of affairs, see, for instance, Forrester (1997) and Sennet (1998).

6 As shown, for example, in Williamson (2000). For a more extensive critique of neoclassical theory, see also Keen (2001).

7 From a quasi-layman point of view, we would say that this probably also reflects the over-mathematisation of economics, strongly criticised by Ormerod (1994).

References


