

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

What is happening with the movement at present is that its effervescence for the affirmation of identity and difference has made it forget other transversal spaces: class issues, labor problems, health policies.

An Interview with Fernando Serrano

March 18, 2010

Fernando Serrano's house in Bogotá, Colombia

Fernando Serrano: My name is Fernando Serrano; I am an anthropologist. At present I am in charge of the so-called LGBT Community Centers Strategy, which is a part of Bogotá's LGBT public policy, and which seeks the development of a series of services for that specific community and for the community at large, on issues of sexual and gender diversity. Before holding this position I was in charge of drafting what is currently the LGBT public policy in Bogotá, the decree sanctioning it, its guidelines and everything that constitutes the framework for that policy. I became engaged in public policy because I had been working on issues of LGBT activism for many years, although from the perspective of the academy and the connection of theoretical and conceptual knowledge with the needs of the movement.

Carlos Motta: Do you work from a university?

FS: I worked in universities for a long time, but on different subjects. This was partly because local universities have not yet developed programs; although in some universities there have been important efforts aimed at opening spaces, the issue is not a box-office hit in any university, and there are no consolidated spaces. There are areas for reflection on gender, sexuality and sexual and gender diversity, but they are very specific things. Since the year 2000, I had been working with the Javeriana University on the *Ciclo Rosa*, an initiative that is reaching its tenth year carrying out two activities: an academic one involving discussion, reflection, dissemination of debates revolving around the issue, and the section related to filmmaking. *Ciclo Rosa* has institutionalized an annual cycle on the subject. Prior to that I worked for many years at the Central University in matters of juvenile cultures, diversity and topics related to contemporary cultures.

CM: What has been Colombia's public policy in relation to the LGBT issue?

FS: In this matter two aspects should be differentiated: while at present we speak of a public policy as something that is concrete: a decree, a normative framework, some commitments on the part of the city, before those existed there was a public policy, but it was a negative one: when government institutions operated through homophobic discriminatory practices, there was an implicit public policy of harassment, of invisibility. In those cases, despite the fact that it was not in writing (although we did have a period of legislation opposing our cause), the public policy was evident. In the 1980s, homosexuality was de-criminalized. These changes in the legal aspect, however, did not imply that institutional practices had changed; there was a certain public policy in all these series of excluding and discriminatory practices. The police legitimized them. The ways in which the space and the places for homo-socialization were regulated and

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

the way in which those who went public were defined show the existence of a public policy.

CM: In relation to the police, did the practices you mentioned involve exerting violence against LGBT persons?

FS: This is a very long story that is imprinted in people's memories in terms of explicit actions of exclusion and discrimination. Many trans persons describe the way in which the police had institutionalized the raids in pubs, meeting places and cruising areas. Many gay men describe the way in which the police acted systematically in these places. We are not talking about a random, circumstantial action or of the decision of an actor in particular, but of the actual institutionalization of discrimination and exclusion. Towards the year 2000, in the case of Colombia in general and of Bogotá in particular, an important change took place regarding the way in which the agendas of the social sector were articulated. In the 1990s there was very important progress, generated above all by HIV activism in terms of a dialogue with the public institutions. The HIV activism began to create conflictive, contradictory communication channels with public entities to provide responses to the issue, responses which were always incomplete but which generated an antecedent of the need for a dialogue with public institutions. In 2000 that situation became more complex, new elements were included and, in the case of Bogotá, certain communication channels with the District, basically to organize activities that had gradually become institutionalized, as was the case of the march, began to be generated. The need to make the march something systematic led some of the leaders and leaderesses of the movement to start seeking a dialogue with institutions, with the city administration. The progress of those years should be read in a scenario in which certain discourses began to gain considerable strength: topics of citizen culture, of participation, of broadening the social agenda, which although they did not include the LGBT issue, did include certain social sectors, certain population groups which, in one way or another, were already paving the way – at the institutional level – for the broadening of the agendas of social policies. During Luis Eduardo Garzón's administration, an explicit commitment was made for it to respond to the needs of the movement through a series of actions such as the establishment of a public policy related to the issue of sexual and gender diversity. This process began to take shape towards the year 2007 through a framework document, since within an institutionality such as ours, if there are no framework documents action becomes difficult. This does not mean that the existence of a framework document solves things, but in one way or another, these kinds of institutional frameworks are important because they establish responsibilities and make it possible to define assumptions and create spaces for the issues to exist.

CM: What are the parties involved and what type of movement are you referring to?

FS: Whenever one wonders when a movement was born there is a problem, because one will always find an antecedent, and depending on the way one has participated in the story, it may have different nuances. In my opinion, social mobilization in issues of sexual and gender diversity in Bogotá has a history of many, many years, and I am not talking about ten or fifteen years, but about many more. If we wonder how people began to articulate in response to some specific needs, we may find that already in the 1950s and 1960s there were people who got together in certain places or met in certain spaces in the city, who exchanged information, who generated certain discourses in common. Even if they were not institutionalized, or formalized, and some were much more ephemeral than others, there already was a mobilization at that time.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

This is a story that must be read as if it involved many small fragments which become connected in some cases, while in other cases they are rather parallel stories.

The 1970s are fundamental because they mark the arrival of all the international discourses, all the ideas of mobilization in foreign countries, the left-wing radical discourses, the sexual liberation discourses. What we are living at present in Bogotá, that is, the existence in 2010 of community centers, of a public policy, of institutions with responsibilities, a budget assigned to deal with these issues, is the result of a history built on the efforts of many people. The point I consider important to highlight is that of the issues that mobilizations gradually articulate, because it is there that the matters that gather more weight, the discourses that become explicit, and the actors that begin to appear may be found. Hence the importance of the mobilization for HIV prevention in the 1990s, since it was a fundamental element for the mobilization of issues of sexual and gender diversity.

CM: Can you elaborate on how this mobilization is constituted?

FS: In the United States, when the crisis of HIV began, there was already a mobilization of a social sector with certain identities, spaces, places, with a public visibility, which was the one that reacted to the impact of the epidemics. In the case of Latin America in general, and of Colombia in particular, while it is true that there were some important articulation endeavors at that time, there wasn't a consolidated sector, a sector articulated in public spaces that would react in the face of this matter. The need to react in the presence of this issue led to an increasing generation of meeting spaces, work networks, organized groups which, although their specific topic was not HIV, began to explore matters of identity, of discrimination, of negotiation with the public sector, of relationship with the State. Obviously, fundamental differences must be established with the search that women, for instance, had been carrying out through feminism, and what the lesbian movement had been exploring, which is also a very long-standing mobilization.

Those movements of the 1990s, which had, above all, a shade of self-reference, play a fundamental role because they gradually create a qualified human resource; people who already begin to qualify their discourse, which is, besides, the basis for other people to begin to generate reference exercises, to know who is doing what and where. In the case of Colombia, an element we often highlight as a fundamental landmark of change is the experience of *Planeta Paz* between 2000 and 2004. This is a project of mobilization of wide social sectors that includes the subject of sexual and gender diversity and that, in my judgment, plays a fundamental role in the history of the movement in Colombia. The discourse on peace, human rights and conflict, which were issues addressed by syndicalists, defenders of human rights and experts in violence begins to incorporate "strange" actors: gays and lesbians. Beyond the fights for identity, we want to know what we can say to the country, and this seems to me a fundamental element and a very important change in the history of the agendas on sexual and gender diversity. This begins to generate other types of questions; human rights organizations begin to incorporate the subject of sexual and gender diversity, issues of violence against gays, lesbians, and trans persons, and the issue of bisexual persons, in their reports on human rights. It also generates, for the sexual and gender diversity movement, a series of questions revolving around what our agendas are, in what direction we want to go, what our notion of change is, what notion of social transformation we defend, what idea of the political we are generating. It is in that

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

scenario that the subject of public policies and the relationship with the State, for instance, begins to emerge.

CM: Did you participate in this project?

FS: Of course. It is important to bear this in mind; that is why I was telling you that it is important to read people's concrete stories. We participated in a process, then we left it, we went on to another, we shifted from one organization to another; that mobility makes it possible for the accumulated life experiences to nourish new processes. Many of us who participated in *Planeta Paz* moved on to other articulation processes and then we engaged in actions aimed at achieving a public policy.

CM: What was the work of *Planeta Paz* and who participated in it?

FS: *Planeta Paz* was basically one of the great national initiatives revolving around the issue of peace and conflict, together with the Peace Network and the Assembly for Peace. In *Planeta Paz* there were many social sectors differentiated by issues of identity, class, political agenda...It was then that we decided to adopt the acronym LGBT; we decided that we should have a name that linked us together. Through this election, questions regarding what we have in common with and what is different from other social sectors began to be generated. What can we say to the indigenous movement, or to the *campesino* movement, or what can they say to us. This gave rise to very important alliances.

CM: What happened after *Planeta Paz* in terms of public policy?

FS: In *Planeta Paz* the notion of public policy did not have a shape yet, but certain ideas began to circulate which were the basis that made it possible to begin to seek a connection with the State in 2003 and 2004. People who were involved in that process went on to serve in the city administration and became key interlocutors of the movement with those institutions. Had it not been for the experience we had with those people, it would have been much more difficult to engage in a dialogue with the city. Although the city's institution displayed in those years a discourse on diversity and inclusion, it did not include the issues of sexual and gender diversity, which continue to be the most difficult to tackle. Thanks to these people and to the movement's accumulated experience, to its qualified discourse, the movement is gradually concentrating its agendas, incorporating ideas such as democracy and inclusion.

CM: When was the idea of a public policy conceived?

FS: We must consider two levels: the issue of public policies aimed at different population sectors is not something new in the city, it has its own history. The period around 2006 marked the beginning of a series of dialogues between some of the movement's actors, for instance, Germán Rincón, and the person who was then running for president, Luis Eduardo Garzón, to ask the latter what he was going to do for us. Garzón was not elected president, he became Mayor of Bogotá, and his administration was strongly oriented towards the work with population groups. The idea of a public policy for the LGBT sector was consistent with the development plan of that moment, not only because there was a political commitment that had been previously agreed upon, but because that administration had this particular approach; in fact, it was an administration that generated a lot of public policies aimed at many population

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

sectors: Afro, indigenous, handicapped persons, and many social sectors that had not been considered subjects of public policies before that.

CM: What are those conditions and what is meant by a public policy in regard to those issues?

FS: This is a good debate. I think there is a very contradictory component in these issues. To make these issues an object of public policies is quite conflictive, and it must not be contemplated as the great solution, but as with all complicated things, they had to be tackled. The series of changes brought about by the city's administration entailed the generation of spaces, for example, public entities with explicit responsibilities on the subject. This is very important, because it was no longer a question of receiving favors; this was no longer a gift for some poor, discriminated persons but a responsibility; it was a task of which an institution was in charge, which also implied that the institution must generate adequate conditions: it did not suffice that the institution assume a responsibility if it had no budget, no personnel, no institutional conditions to do so. But, how should this be done to avoid its ending up being a much more dangerous trap than what existed before? This implies a series of transits, negotiations, transforming certain demands of the movement into discourses. Many people may have a very critical reading; they can say, for instance, that this is tantamount to selling the movement to the State, that it should be kept outside the State. But one must consider what this means in our particular case, and up to what point we can stake everything on a complete separation from the State, on no negotiation and no dialogue with public entities. Few cities in Latin America have a program like the one we have, in terms of the number of instances, of the way in which they are articulated, the tasks that are handled; this is a very important progress. But it has had contradictory effects which it is now time to make explicit. For example, this having been a demand of the social movement, and an issue through which it is articulated, once the policy was achieved, the movement lost, or could not find, another issue to articulate it. It fought for a long time for something that was achieved, and the movement now wonders in what direction it is going.

CM: What are the policies that have been implemented? And what is the movement's academic theorizing in relation to the implementation of these policies?

FS: I regret that this should not have been the subject of all the debates that could have been held. Many decisions had to be made with very little time, and many debates were left aside. Undoubtedly, one could have spent four years of academic debate on the subject, but by the end of those four years the administration would have changed. In 2007, we were given three months to draft a public policy. Garzón's administration came to an end that year; either it had to be done or it had to be done. The political opportunity had to be seized. This does not mean that there were no debates. We had, for instance, the discussion regarding which would be the subjects of the policy. Some of us considered that the policy should not be focused on identity issues, because focusing the policy on identity categorizations generated a very complicated problem with those who did not identify with those categories. Others considered it was very important to include identities on account of visibility, and that eliminating identities was equivalent to eliminating those who had fought. This led not only to the inclusion in the framework document of the public policy of the LGBT groups, but to the policy being oriented toward the issue of gender identity and sexual orientations. Categories which are also problematic, but which at least allowed us to say: the subject of this policy is a historical subject that resorts to identities in a political

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

way, but it is not limited to them, it is not merely an affirmative discourse. This was very clear in the conceptualization of the policy; some people considered that it should be a policy of affirmative actions, but those of us who were involved in the drafting did not support that stance because we did not agree with a proposal of affirmative action, among other things because from the point of view of public policies, affirmative actions are just one possible path. We looked up examples of European countries, of Latin American countries, of groups of handicapped persons, we checked several stakeholders. In sum, I consider that the academy should have taken a much more committed stance and have played a much more prominent role in this issue. Which does not disqualify the very important actions carried out by individual persons.

CM: What does this document comprise?

FS: A public policy as such has a legal framework: the decree that establishes in a normative way the authority, the legality, and the framework work guidelines that ultimately determine how the city undertakes the commitment to implement a cultural change.

CM: Is there a way of measuring whether this policy has had an effect on the change of popular imaginaries or of cultural situations?

FS: Several measurements have been made; even before this framework existed, several entities in the District have been measuring, through surveys, behaviors, changes, and indeed there have been very important changes. In some of the surveys, for instance in the one conducted in 2003, 70% of the population responded negatively to the question of whether they wanted to have a homosexual neighbor. During the most recent surveys, the percentage has decreased, although it is still high. In 2006, 50% of the population answered negatively; it is a very high number, but some years ago the figure was 70%. This is just the third year of implementation; supposedly this year, or the next, a first impact assessment established in the action plan must be carried out. What I think is important is that when this becomes the object of policies, it becomes institutionalized within a very complex system of indicators, forms of measurement, institutional responsibilities, institutional action plans, a whole series of mechanisms pertaining to the institutional apparatus, which greatly increases the level of complexity of things. The challenge is how to avoid losing the long-term objectives and how to prevent the social mobilization from straying its gaze. At this moment I wonder how much sense of belonging the movement has with respect to this policy. For me, at this moment, the key question is what the big political stake that will provide a content to this is, because this makes sense if there is a discourse that supports it, otherwise it becomes just one of the twenty thousand population policies that we have already had. I cite the example of what has happened with other types of population policies: the case of the youth policies is a very interesting case. This country has an extremely long history of public policies focusing on youth. The ultimate balance always turns out to be that they are inefficient. I do not believe that a public policy may solve, by itself, a social need, which does not mean that it is not useful; it is, but it doesn't solve the need and, in my opinion, the key factor is that if there isn't a clear orientation regarding the social actors that motivate the policy, the whole thing is reduced to institutional matters and bureaucracy. That is why one must ask oneself what the reflection posed by the social movement is, independently of what there exists in terms of institutional structure.

CM: What is the movement's objective?

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

FS: I cannot and I wouldn't dare say what the objective of the movement is because it is something that must be constructed collectively. I think that what has been happening with the movement is that it has had some very interesting developments in terms of a specialization of work areas, of forms of action, of the inclusion of organizations which have defined their individual profiles, but I perceive that the movement is still caught in a discourse that is very much focused on self-referenced identities, on demanding recognition exercises. It lacks a much wider understanding of the issues of sexuality, identity, and of what that implies in the current political scenario. Considerable advances have been made and there have been significant efforts, but going beyond a demand for recognition is still pending.

CM: How is the voice of the movement related to the brutal class gap that exists in Colombia? How was this reflected in the construction of the document, and is the document equally inclusive for the different social groups?

FS: Let us begin by the second part. When this document was constructed, some consultation exercises were made which attempted to seek and cover a diverse range of social actors and actresses; we spoke with different groups, for example, handicapped people; we staged workshops in prisons to understand what the needs of the inmates were. The greatest possible effort was made to consult a very wide spectrum of voices because we knew that class differences, generation differences are fundamental to determine the type of demands. But while it is true that there are fundamental differences, it is also true that some issues are absolutely common and it is very important to bear that in mind because sometimes, in this enumeration of differences we may risk losing sight of the fact that there are articulation spaces and that there are issues we have in common. For example, the question of culture. For a group of young people from the south of the city, or for one of fifty-year-old gay men, it is necessary that this be a cultural transformation; this is an articulation point. While a differential approach is important, one must be careful to prevent this differential approach from eliminating articulation spaces or common agendas. The debate that is taking place implicitly or explicitly is how to avoid losing our common spaces in the midst of so many differences. As for the voice of that movement – where is it, who are the ones who speak, what is the tone of that voice? – I think it is a problematic exercise; it continues to be, in any case, a centralized voice, a voice that is in principle a masculine one, of those men or women who have achieved certain recognition in public spaces and in certain forms of politics, but there are many who work from the outside, and I think a very complicated problem resides in this aspect. One of the criticisms that has been pointed out to us is that the configuration of that voice belongs to the Colombian middle class, and that it has been a construction somehow designed for a bourgeois middle class, people with certain education and economic capacity, and that it somehow excludes certain social difference factors.

Some four years ago, a group of trans persons who have been working for more than ten years began to become visible in Ciudad Bolívar, in Bogotá. Is the movement basically a middle-class movement, or have certain middle-class sectors used a representative voice, and this does not mean that there may not be lots of people doing lots of things in other places that articulate with other agendas? It is often said that in the case of Bogotá, the movement is basically a movement dominated, controlled by gay men, for gay men, with a gay men discourse. But, if one analyzes the question, lesbian women have a prominent role in Bogotá; they have had spaces reflecting a clear presence; many of the most long-standing organizations in the city are women's organizations. I will not deny the masculine privilege that exists in our organizations,

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

but here there is a very clear action by women who have fought for a space and they have progressively earned it and who have been present.

With the issue of class, it is necessary to be careful, not because an element of class does not exist, but it is the sectors that have access to a certain level of privilege that also have access to activism, that represent, that can use a fragment of their time to devote themselves to certain things.

CM: I think it is interesting to know how this subject is considered in relation to the implementation of this policy and what the cultural changes in each stratum – social, racial, ethnic – and at the national level are.

FS: We would have to consider several things: someone might say that this is a discourse of privileged middle-class sectors because in fact that is its origin, but this does not imply that it will prevent broadening the agendas and that a different kind of actors may have a level of participation they did not have before. Many of these public policy actions attempt to privilege, direct, focalize actions in sectors that have a greater degree of vulnerability. Many public policy actions are clearly focused on generating equity and balance, precisely to achieve that some privileges that were concentrated in some places are conveyed to other places. I cite a concrete example: this year we were planning the strategy for a traveling community center which was devised because there was a very important policy which was concentrated in an area of the city that, in a certain way, might privilege certain social sectors, certain people who were concentrated in certain sectors of the city (Chapinero). We decided to decentralize that strategy and devise one that could be applied to the localities that have greater access difficulties.

CM: How is the leadership in this community group constituted and what is the inclusion of minority groups within this leadership?

FS: There would be two things to consider: within this political framework, the Advisory Council, which is an instance of social representation in the political sphere, was created. It is there that we find the representation of the differences. However, leaderships are also limited; they also represent partial voices. If we are thinking about this specific text, there was an attempt to perform an exercise to include as many voices as possible. But it was a limited exercise, just like the movement was limited. When we did that, we had no idea that there were a lot of social actors in other parts of the city doing things; the movement continued to be concentrated not only in Bogotá but in certain areas in Bogotá and in certain voices in Bogotá. One of the greatest challenges is to create rallying spaces, since there are sectors that are simply not interested in becoming connected; we must think, above all, that we are not talking about cumulative, pyramid-scale programs, in which an actor represents ten others and joins still another. This is not so in a sector like this one. Above all, and I would like to highlight this, because the issues of sexual diversity and gender identity do not function with the representation models of other issues. It is not so easy to construct a representation model as it is to do so in boards of community action. There is an interesting case: a group that said “we are gay men, we are transformists, we are transgenders and we are fags, and on this basis we are moving.” This is quite suggestive, for a person who works from certain reflection scenarios can see there is a mix of four very different agendas, four kinds of categories. If in compliance with the framework that we have drafted we should say to them: “You are transgenders, and in order to have access to these resources you must join the transgender project”, they

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

would do it, because it is the way in which the scenario is presented to them. But these are the traps of many of these social policy and public policy programs: they make people define themselves from certain places or they make them fight over certain resources. In this respect we have a very complicated scenario: the diversity policies. In order to respond to the demand that they do something about diversity, local administrations create some vague budget items where they place all the issues related to diversity and the one who gets there first, or the one who shouts out louder is the one who obtains the most funds. This is perverse, because it sets in motion a struggle for funds through a way of referencing oneself. How is the need for a social movement interpreted through a public action? Must these policies be available to heterosexuals? There are many heterosexual men who are discriminated on account of their gender expression, because they are clearly effeminate, or heterosexual women who have a very masculine gender expression and may be discriminated as a result of this. May they or may they not be the subject of this policy? On the other hand, many of those who can finally implement or draft those policies have come – myself included – from the social movement, or hold a dialogue with the social movement, then, for the States, this implies a “guarantee” that an adequate response to a need is being provided. But being a participant in the movement does not constitute a technical guarantee; the fact that I am part of the social movement does not mean that I automatically have the knowledge to implement a political action.

CM: I find what you mention about a universal notion of LGBT rights, of a policy for all the identities in different cultural contexts very interesting. There is something that I find particularly interesting in Colombia, and it is that the issue of race is never discussed, and not only in the LGBT sphere...

FS: The issue of race is certainly present, but we have to think how it works here. If we should ask why there isn't a specific action for the Afro LGBT population, the institution would answer: we have to design a specific action for the Afro LGBT population, but they are also poor, so this requires a specific action for the poor Afro LGBT population and I find this game very complicated because it presupposes that differences function, not only that they are cumulative, but that, besides, they function in the same way.

Obviously, this is a racist society, but it is so because the ways in which the race registers function are not like those in other places. One may wonder why there is not a specific action for the race issue, why there isn't a specific action for the generation issue. And one may render the scenario so very complex! Although the demand to make evident internal differences is valid, one must be careful not to fragment the points in common, and when I say fragment, I don't mean that there must necessarily be a homogenizing discourse. When I worked with Afro communities, there were no gays; that does not mean that there are no men who have sex with men, there are lots of Afro men who have sex with men, but they do not define themselves as gay. This doesn't mean it is a problem. No, I do not want to get to that absolutely hegemonic and domineering register. The indigenous movement, for instance, is absolutely resistant to gender agendas, and there is a very strong tension between that movement and the women's movement. When we had the first *Planeta Paz* scenarios, it was very interesting to see that there were many people who did not conceive that there may be articulations between one scenario and the other. There was the notion that we had a place and we had to include because it is the right thing to do, but let us not think about how this will affect us, how the two things connect. That is the problem of many identity policies and of many of the identity discourses that the State entities channel: they generally play with very fragmented discourses and they accumulate them, and in this

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

way they accumulate the discrimination of one and the other. They do not contemplate the intersections or other types of articulations that people may be constructing from completely different places.

What is happening to the movement at present is that its effervescence for the affirmation of identity and the difference has made it forget other transversal spaces: class issues, labor problems, health policies. In this city, for instance, family policy has nothing to do with gender policy, in fact they are contradictory, they are opposed; then what dialogue can there be between two opposing conceptions of what the social subjects are. We have to think about how to construct another articulation place that does not eliminate differences and that does not solve things merely naming them. But what do we do to avoid the answer being: here is the section of homosexual bodies; here is the section of black bodies; here is the section of indigenous bodies?