
8. Sex, gender and sexuality

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It is tempting to see sex, gender and sexuality as analytical categories referring to timeless properties of the human body, social aspects of behaviour that reflect this, and biological imperatives of the species. Indeed there are very powerful political forces heavily invested in promoting that view of those very terms, framed with religious, moral and political ideologies. Ideologies are understood here in a general sense as systems of ideas that organize concepts in a mutually supportive manner, thus generating a sense of coherence and certainty (Freeden, 1998). The view that sex, gender and sexuality are just descriptive concepts, with perhaps some normative aspects, does not capture the power that ideological systems – even ones which seem to omit or marginalize these crucial particularities – exercise in and through social institutions. These institutions – whether overtly political or not – form human beings as subjects and frequently treat them as objects.

If sex, gender and sexuality are treated as constructive categories (not just constructed ones), then power-relations start to become visible, and the work involved in keeping them hidden (and in keeping us incurious) emerges (Enloe, 2004). This is how feminists, speaking as and for women as a marginalized majority, have come to view sex, gender and sexuality, though in widely differing ways. However, the point of their work, and of this chapter, is to politicize these terms, and expose the ways that they function in international politics, rather than to make them definitional debating points. On that basis, then, a contemporary view of these concepts must commence with a prior concept, ‘woman’ (Tickner, 1993).

WOMAN, POWER AND FEMINISM

Naming ‘woman’ as subject and object of knowledge and thus identifying a perspective that was independent of the frameworks through which men (as such, and as excluding women) had conceptualized the world, has caused something of a knowledge-quake in post-Second World War times (Beauvoir, 1997). While woman had certainly been conceptualized by

men, actual women had had little input into knowledge production about themselves, or about their assignment to a second sex, until this point, at least in terms of recognition by male-exclusive or male-dominated institutions. After this feminist intervention, sex was thus no longer merely biological and thus objective, and in that way as in other ways defined from a male-centric perspective.

While literatures, scientific and otherwise, appeared to proceed from commonplace notions of bodily difference such that sexual dimorphism was presumed to be obvious, it is notable that this differentiation of humans into two distinct phenotypes presupposes reproduction. Knowledge of what this is and what it is not, how it works and does not work, and why it matters and to whom, are all historically varied and variable (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Claims on all these points, often framed with physical and social science, religion and morality, racial and national purity, social reform and revolution, merely demonstrate the intensely political character of the concepts involved, and how easily they play into national politics and therefore international relations (Stevens, 1999). These are not private or non-state matters, and, as with the domestic/international distinction, the activity of drawing such lines – and disciplining those who challenge them – merely displays the power-claims through which politics arises.

Binary sexual difference as male/female is thus not a mere reflection of heterosexuality as a species-imperative. Rather sexual difference is understood here as a heteronormative project, abnormalizing and abjecting same-sex desires. This denigration then assigns exclusive privilege and normative status to male–female desires, given that male–female difference is already defined in reproductive terms. In popular political discourse the concepts that make up heteronormativity are often referred to as family values – clearly a major ideological term through which religious, moral and political concepts can be powerfully articulated. Feminist theorizing and activism have intervened decisively in this conceptual nexus through the international women's movement and any number of 'grassroots' political campaigns. These feminist campaigns advocate women's rights and protections in marriage and divorce, employment and civic life, domestic and public spaces, health and education, property and inheritance, childcare and protection, and innumerable other issues, all of which expose local and national circumstances to international attention (Hawkesworth, 2006). In that way feminist activism has made heterosexuality a highly problematic concept, not merely – and not centrally – in relation to homosexuality, but in relation to the myriad practices through which it is institutionalized and thus projects itself as a singular normality.

SEXUALITY, LIBERATION AND GENDER

The lines of opposition and alliance between feminism, as women's liberation, and recognition and validation of same-sex desire, as lesbian and gay liberation, are necessarily a kaleidoscope of shifting perspectives and interests. Indeed that conjunction has produced questioning within feminism of the concept of woman itself – its reference within a heteronormative understanding of sexual difference and desire, and its reference within hierarchies of political domination and oppression (Phelan, 1989). Much the same is true of the concept of woman in relation to racial and post-colonial struggles for liberation, which are always intersected with nationalisms and social class. The result is the destabilization of an apparently timeless and inescapably biological concept – woman – by showing how it often universalizes white, middle-class values and judgements typical of the so-called developed world (Spivak, 1999). Sex and sexuality are thus politically contested concepts, not because they are internally contradictory or referentially confused, but because they are constitutive of political projects. Their unique power arises because, more than other concepts, these two define – through ideological elaborations – what an individual human is and is supposed to be. So-called 'trans' and intersex bodies fit none of these projects, and thus, when made visible, they challenge internationally and nationally imposed frameworks through which persons are recognized as safely normal, or otherwise (Spade, 2011).

Gender is a concept originating in nineteenth-century social science, when an objective interest in sex and sexuality became morally and politically acceptable, though – as was the case with knowledge production in general – this was largely confined to males. Typically scientific activity was conducted in ways that made woman the problematic sex in relation to male bodies and minds, and further pathologized homosexuals (of either sex, though more usually males) as deviant with respect to heteronormative practices and institutions. The concept gender was understood to refer to behaviour in relation to sexual dimorphism of the body as a biological normality, which in turn was understood to presuppose reproductive capacities and activities as defining for normal human sexuality. Gender was thus a placeholder in a project of normalization and pathologization of bodies and behaviour in relation to heterosexual male presumptions of superiority (over women in terms of sex and over homosexuality in terms of sexuality). From this perspective properly gendered behaviour for males and females would be distinctly different, given bodily differences in relation to reproduction and – so it

was presumed – childcare and domesticity. Heterosexual men were thus in charge of knowledge-creation in relation to the properly organized sexual behaviour of men and women in relation to each other as different sexes, and in relation to improper sexual behaviour, which was said to contradict natural difference with unnatural sameness.

Femininity and masculinity were the concepts through which gender was understood to distinguish female from male behaviour. While this type of descriptive account goes back to Aristotle in his *Politics* (and was specifically queried by Plato in his *Republic*), the modern version created therapeutic sciences and reform movements, which did much more than observe supposed regularities and consistencies. Social, medical and moral technologies – using technologies in the very broad sense of tools for building things – were set in motion as political projects. These made human behaviour conform to prescriptive accounts of human excellence and normality, as against deviance, pathology and criminality. These projects included missionary evangelizations, national liberations, racial liberations, class liberations and eugenic sciences, separately and in various combinations. Women's movements – local, national and international – often mobilized to publicize and enforce laws and policies founded on views of this kind as to what was appropriate to femininity as a universal norm, and what was not (Mottier, 2008).

Gender as a transnational technology was distinctly asymmetric, in that it typically focused far more on controlling women's individuality, agency, bodies and psychologies than men's. The feminist assault on male-centric drunkenness and domestic violence was a rare exception. The illegalization of male homosexuality that gendered sciences provoked – and that heteronormative religions and moralities reinforced – was also a rare exception to a general practice of presuming males to be unproblematic. This presumption was general, because masculinity was already promulgated as normal to humanity as such, and indeed as a zone where the highest accomplishments of civilization uniquely rested. Commonplace understandings of gender as masculinity and femininity thus create not just a binary, but an overt hierarchy of oppression (Butler, 1990).

Gender hierarchy plays out as double standards through which men are generally exalted in virtue of their supposed strengths, and their weaknesses excused, and women are generally relegated to bear their burdens, and to pay heavily for their weaknesses. Genderism is thus an ideology of power, rather like orientalism: while orientalism argues a binary and creates a hierarchy of West over East, it is also to some extent internalized as an ideology by the colonized and oppressed. It thus

becomes self-confirming of a superiority that might otherwise be contested (Said, 2003). Feminist consciousness-raising is a strategy directed at exactly this issue, namely addressing the subjectivities of those who have grown up with an identity that is authentically felt, but which – with effort – could be questioned and changed.

Gender science – pursued from the privileged perspective of white, heterosexual, well-off males – was wholly complicit in the exclusion of women from many aspects of political life (such as voting and office-holding), economic activity (on grounds of marriage or childcare), moral probity (such as unmarried mothers and sex-workers), physical and sporting activities (on grounds of supposed weakness), scientific and cultural life (on grounds of insufficient intelligence or talent), and business and political leadership (on grounds of emotional and psychological unsuitability). The liberation of women since the mid-twentieth century has largely consisted of rolling exclusion back to positions of varying marginalization, with only rare instances of female control. International declarations of rights, national legal acts and policies of anti-discrimination often result in a substitution of fictive equalities of principle for real equalities in practice. Even in societies where principles and practices of gender equality are in place and exercised without undue hindrance, there are religious and other exemptions that preserve male exclusivity and therefore dominance in practical and representational terms.

Gender equality itself is highly problematic conceptually precisely because gender constructs a hierarchy, not simply a binary. Gender presumptions arise from a supposedly universal binary of bodily difference. However, since an equality-challenge presumes the conditions through which masculinity and femininity arise as the two categories of behaviour which supposedly exhaust and express two kinds of humanity, it is difficult to see what common factor of humanity is being equalized between the two. On the one hand feminist thinking of gender has exposed masculinity as a power-structure serving the interests of some men over others, and all men over women (Hearn, 1987). On the other hand, strategies of inclusion and reversal, rather than transformative change, often fail to challenge the stereotyping and identity-forming processes through which the concept of gender – and the gender-technologies which construct masculinity as privilege – has arisen in the first place (Squires, 2005).

GENDER AND THE HUMAN NORM

Masculinity and femininity are asymmetric in another way, too. Feminist theorizing has identified ways in which men and masculinity merge with a generically human norm. When this happens, the individual, the citizen and the person are all conceived as *not* women, since they appear unencumbered with female-specific phenomena, notably menstruation, pregnancy, parturition and lactation. Thus the generic human appears as apparently de-gendered, but in practice always covertly gendered masculine. However, in practical contexts men and masculinity often appear as overtly gendered, but as masculine in ways that are politically and morally presumed to be admirable, or at least unproblematically respectable. These include designations such as husband, father, lover, son and brother, whereas reprehensible aspects of men occupying these roles are presumed non-existent or projected into deviant cases and unaccountable departures from a beneficent norm. Feminists have anyway argued that these roles often or very considerably define and produce the oppression of women.

Feminist activism and researchers have exposed the self-serving incuriosity, widespread hypocrisy and political obduracy that masculinity thrives on, as well as the crucial intersections with race/ethnicity, class, citizenship and numerous other socio-political categorizations that often disguise the gender hierarchy involved. Once the destructive aspects of masculinity begin to appear, often men or males disappear as a named category, and apparently de-gendered criminals, rapists, perpetrators, armies, insurgents, terrorists and the like ‘people’ appear instead. This is not to say that women never do destructive things, and that women never participate in structures of masculine oppression (against other women and many men). Rather this is to note that common locutions identify women as such and in negative ways more than they do men, who are undoubtedly the authors of far more individual and collective violence and destruction (Howe, 2008). Many men respond to feminist work on gender by presuming that it is merely a synonym for women, and doesn’t name anything about them that requires engagement.

Analytically masculinities have been arranged into various typologies and hierarchies, often with respect to the damage they cause to women in precisely the way that feminists have indicated. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been coined to indicate the way that the hierarchical elaboration of masculinities mirrors the Gramscian concept of domination by consent. This concept refers to the social structures that are widely accepted as traditional or natural or normal through which

individuals understand themselves and their social position. These self-understandings and socially validated institutions are hard to shift, even when it might otherwise be clear that they are damaging to the individuals concerned, as well as to others. This influential analysis of masculinity defuses allegations that feminists blame men as such and *in toto* for women's oppression – allegations that are very largely untrue. Instead this view of masculinity focuses on a type that is not merely dominant but dominating, and over many men – who might come to object – as well as over women (as publicized by feminists) (Ashe, 2011). However, even approached in this way the analysis itself apparently de-centres women as subjects and objects of knowledge, even when some feminist women undertake research and activism in the area. Also, any thorough investigation of perpetrators of oppression and violence (as opposed to victims) inevitably has a humanizing – and therefore disturbing – aspect to it, as opposed to a simple ascription of moral and political opprobrium to a less well-defined 'other' taken to be generic (Cohn, 1987).

POLITICS AND GENDER

Sex, gender and sexuality have a long and complicated history in theory and in practice and can never be taken in some purely or merely descriptive sense suggesting an unproblematic object of reference in the body. These concepts have been most thoroughly developed within a feminist frame. Centring sex, gender and sexuality as major concepts challenges the masculinist presumptions through which world politics has been understood.

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