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RETHINKING SEX AND GENDER

Despite further elaboration of the concept of gender its relationship to sex remained problematic. Arguing from a materialist feminist perspective, Delphy seeks to establish the priority of gender over sex. Having charted the emergence of the concept of gender, she goes on, in the extract reprinted here, to explain why the concept has not yet been fully exploited and to suggest ways of furthering the social analysis of gender.

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Sex and gender

WITH THE ARRIVAL OF the concept of gender, three things became possible (which does not mean they have happened):

- 1 All the differences between the sexes which appeared to be social and arbitrary, whether they actually varied from one society to another or were merely held to be susceptible to change, were gathered together in one concept.
- 2 The use of the singular ('gender' as opposed to 'genders') allowed the accent to be moved from the two divided parts to the principle of partition itself.
- 3 The idea of hierarchy was firmly anchored in the concept. This should, at least in theory, have allowed the relationship between the divided parts to be considered from another angle.

As studies have accumulated showing the arbitrariness of sex roles and the lack of foundation for stereotypes in one area after another, the idea that gender is independent of sex has progressed. Or rather, since it is a question of the

content, the idea that both genders are independent of both sexes has progressed, and the aspects of 'sex roles' and sexual situations which are recognised to be socially constructed rather than biologically determined has grown. . . .

What is problematic, however, is that the ongoing discussion around this question has presumed epistemological and methodological paradigms which should actually have been questioned. We have continued to think of gender in terms of sex: to see it as a social dichotomy determined by a natural dichotomy. We now see gender as the *content* with sex as the *container*. The content may vary, and some consider it *must* vary, but the container is considered to be invariable because it is part of nature, and nature, 'does not change'. Moreover, part of the nature of sex itself is seen to be its *tendency to have a social content/to vary culturally*.

What should have happened, however, is that recognising the independence of the genders from the sexes should have led us to question whether gender is in fact independent of sex. But this question has not been asked. . . . Even the neutral question 'We have here two variables, two distributions, which coincide totally. How can we explain this covariance?' does not get considered.

The response is always: sex comes first, chronologically and hence logically – although it is never explained why this should be so. . . . [S]uggesting or admitting the precedence of sex, even implicitly, leads to one being located, objectively, in a theory where sex causes, or explains, gender. And the theory that sex causes gender, even if it does not determine the exact forms gender divisions take, can derive from only two logical lines of argument.

- 1 In the first line of argument, biological sex, and particularly the different functions in procreation between males and females which it provokes, necessarily gives rise to a minimal division of labour.

I would include in this line of argument, with its naturalist premises, most contemporary anthropological accounts, feminist as well as patriarchal, from George Murdock (1949) to Martha Moia (1981) by way of Gayle Rubin (1975) [with just a few notable exceptions, such as Mathieu (1991) and Tabet (1982)]. It fails to explain satisfactorily: (a) the nature and the natural reason for this first division of labour; and (b) the reasons it is extended into all fields of activity, that is, why it is not limited to the domain of procreation. It therefore fails to explain gender other than by suppositions which reintroduce upstream one or more of the elements it is supposed to explain downstream.

- 2 The second line of argument sees biological sex as a physical trait which is not only suitable, but destined by its intrinsic 'salience' (in psycho-cognitive terms) to be a receptacle for classifications.

Here it is postulated that human beings have a universal need to establish classifications, independently of and prior to any social organisation; and that they also need to establish these classifications on the basis of physical traits, independently of any social practice.¹ But, these two human needs are neither justified nor proven. They are simply asserted. We are not shown *why sex* is more prominent than other physical traits, which are equally distinguishable, but which do not give birth to classifications which are (i) dichotomous and (ii) imply social roles which are not just distinct but hierarchical.

I call this latter line of argument 'cognitivist', not because it is particularly held by the 'Cognitivists', but because it presumes certain 'prerequisites' of human cognition. The best-known academic version of such theories is that of Lévi-Strauss, who, while not a psychologist, bases all his analyses of kinship and (by extension) human societies on an irrepressible and presocial (hence psychological) need of human beings to divide everything in two (and then in multiples of two). Lévi-Strauss (1969) was very much influenced by linguistics, in particular by Saussure's phonology (1959), and he devised by analogous construction what the social sciences call 'structuralism'.

A rather more recent version of this thesis has been presented by Derrida (1976) and his followers, who say that things can only be distinguished by opposition to other things. However, while Saussure is concerned purely with linguistic structures, Derrida and his clones want to draw philosophical conclusions about the importance of 'différence'.

. . . We may agree things are only known by distinction and hence by differentiation, but these differentiations can be, and often are, multiple. Alongside cabbages and carrots, which are not 'opposites' of each other, there are courgettes, melons, and potatoes. Moreover, distinctions are not necessarily hierarchical: vegetables are not placed on a scale of value. Indeed, they are often used as a warning against any attempt to hierarchisation: we are told not to compare (or to try to add) cabbages and carrots. They are incommensurable. They do not have a common measure. Therefore, they cannot be evaluated in terms of being more or less, or better or worse than one another.

Those who adhere to Derrida's thesis thus fail to distinguish between the differences on which language is based and differences in social structures. The characteristics of cognition, in so far as they can be reduced to the characteristics of language, cannot account for social hierarchy. This is external to them. They therefore cannot account for gender – or they can do so only at the expense of dropping hierarchy as a constitutive element of gender.

Hence, neither of the two lines of argument which might justify a causal link from sex to gender is satisfactory. The presupposition that there is such a causal link remains, therefore, just that: a presupposition.

But if we are to think about gender, or to think about anything at all, we must leave the domain of presuppositions. To think about gender we must rethink the question of its relationship to sex, and to think about this we must first actually ask the question. We must abandon the notion that we already know the answer. We must not only admit, but also explore, two other hypotheses:

- 1 That the statistical coincidence between sex and gender is just that, a coincidence. The correlation is due to chance. This hypothesis is, however, untenable, because the distribution is such that the coincidence between so-called biological sex and gender . . . is stronger than any correlation could be which is due to chance.
- 2 That *gender* precedes sex: that sex itself simply marks a social division; that it serves to allow social recognition and identification of those who are dominants and those who are dominated. That is, that sex is a sign, but that since it does not distinguish just any old thing from anything else, and does not

distinguish equivalent things but rather important and unequal things it has historically acquired a symbolic value. . . .

Since society locates the sign which marks out the dominants from the dominated within the zone of physical traits, two further remarks need to be made:

- 1 The marker is not found in pure state, all ready for use.
As Hurtig and Pichevin (1986) have shown, biologists see sex as made up of several indicators which are more or less correlated one with another, and the majority are continuous variables (occurring in varying degrees). So in order for sex to be used as a dichotomous classification, the indicators have to be reduced to just one. And as Hurtig and Pichevin (1985) also say, this reduction 'is a social act'.
- 2 The presence or absence of a penis² is a strong predictor of gender (by definition one might say). However, having or not having a penis correlates only weakly with procreational functional differences between individuals. It does not distinguish tidily between people who can bear children and those who cannot. It distinguishes, in fact, just some of those who cannot. Lots of those who do not have penises also cannot bear children, either because of constitutional sterility or due to age.

It is worth pausing here, because the 'cognitivists' think sex is a 'prominent trait' because they think physical sex is strongly correlated with functional differences, and because they assume that the rest of humanity shares this 'knowledge'. But they only think biological sex is a 'spontaneous perception' of humanity because they themselves are convinced that it is a natural trait that no one could ignore. To them, it is self-evident that there are two, and only two, sexes, and that this dichotomy exactly cross-checks with the division between potential bearers and non-bearers of children.

To try to question these 'facts' is indeed to try to crack one of the toughest nuts in our perception of the world.

We must therefore add to the hypothesis that gender precedes sex the following question: when we connect gender and sex, are we comparing something social with something natural, or are we comparing something social with something natural, or are we comparing something social with something which is *also* social (in this case, the way a given society represents 'biology' to itself)?

One would think that this would logically have been one of the first questions to be asked, and it is doubtless the reason why some feminists in France (e.g. Guillaumin, 1982, 1985; Mathieu 1980; and Wittig, 1992) are opposed to using the term 'gender'. They believe it reinforces the idea that 'sex' itself is purely natural. However, not using the concept of gender does not mean one thereby directly questions the natural character of sex. So economising on the concept of gender does not seem to me the best way to progress.

'Sex' denotes and connotes something natural. It is therefore not possible to question 'sex' head on, all at once . . . We must first define and lay claim to a territory for the social, having a different conceptual location from that of sex but

tied to the traditional sense of the word 'sex', in order to be able, from this strategic location, to challenge the traditional meaning of 'sex'.

To end this section, I would say that we can only make advances in our knowledge if we initially increase the unknown: if we extend the areas which are cloudy and indeterminate. To advance, we must first renounce some truths. These 'truths' make us feel comfortable, as do all certainties, but they stop us asking questions – and asking questions is the surest, if not the only way of getting answers.

Divisions, differences, and classifications

The debate on gender and its relationship to sex covers much the same ground as the debate on the priority of the two elements – division and hierarchy – which constitute gender. These are empirically indissolubly united, but they need to be distinguished analytically. If it is accepted that there is a line of demarcation between 'natural' and socially constructed differences, and that at least some differences are socially constructed, then there is a framework for conceptualising gender. This means, or should mean, recognising that hierarchy forms the foundation for differences – for all differences, not just gender.

However, even when this is accepted as an explanation, it is not accepted as a politics nor as a vision of the future, by feminists. It is not their Utopia. All feminists reject the sex/gender hierarchy, but very few are ready to admit that the logical consequence of this rejection is a refusal of sex roles, and the disappearance of gender. Feminists seem to want to abolish hierarchy and even sex roles, but not difference itself. They want to abolish the contents but not the container. They all want to keep some elements of gender. Some want to keep more, others less, but at the very least they want to maintain the classification. Very few indeed are happy to contemplate there being simple anatomical sexual differences which are not given any social significance or symbolic value. . . .

This is especially clear in the debate on values. Feminist (and many other!) theorists generally accept that values are socially constructed and historically acquired, but they seem to think they must nonetheless be preserved. There are two typical variants on this position: One says, we must distribute masculine and feminine values through the whole of humanity; the other says that masculine and feminine values must each be maintained in their original group. The latter view is currently especially common among women who do not want to share feminine values with men. . . . [W]e might well ask how women who are 'nurturant' and proud of it are going to become the equals of unchanged men – who are going to continue to drain these women's time? This is not a minor contradiction. It shows, rather, that if intellectual confusion produces political confusion, it is also possible to wonder, in a mood of despair, if there is not a deep and unacknowledged desire *not* to change anything at work behind the intellectual haze.

In any case, both variants of the debate show an implicit interpretation of the present situation which contradicts the problematic of gender:

- 1 On the one hand, there is a desire to retain a system of classification, even though (it is said) it has outlived its function of *establishing* a hierarchy between

individuals – which would seem to indicate that people do not *really* think that gender is a social classification.

- 2 On the other, there is a vision of values . . . which can be summarised as: All human potentialities are already actually represented, but they are divided up between men and women. 'Masculine' plus 'feminine' subcultures, in fact culture itself, is not the product of a hierarchical society. It is independent of the social structure. The latter is simply superimposed upon it.

Hierarchy as necessarily prior to division

This last view is contrary to everything we know about the relationship between social structure and culture. In the Marxist tradition, and more generally in contemporary sociology whether Marxist or not, it is held that the social structure is primary. This implies, as far as values are concerned, that they are, and cannot but be, appropriate to the structure of the society in question. Our society is hierarchical, and consequently its values are also hierarchically arranged. But this is not the only consequence. . . .

Rather, if we accept that values are appropriate to social structures, then we must accept that values are *hierarchical* in general, and that those of the dominated are no less hierarchical than those of the dominants. According to this hypothesis, we must also accept that masculinity and femininity are not just, or rather not at all, what they were in Mead's (1935) model – a division of the traits which are (i) present in a potential form in both sexes, or (ii) present in all forms of possible and imaginable societies. According to the 'appropriateness' paradigm (i.e. the social construction of values), masculinity and femininity are the cultural creations of a society based on a gender hierarchy (as well, of course, as on other hierarchies). This means not only that they are linked to one another in a relationship of complementarity and opposition, but also that this structure determines the content of each of these categories and not just their relationship. It may be that together they cover the totality of human traits which exist today, but we cannot presume that even together they cover the whole spectrum of human potentialities. If we follow the 'appropriateness' paradigm, changing the respective statuses of the groups would lead to neither an alignment of all individuals on a single model, nor a happy hybrid of the two models.

Both the other sorts of conjecture presuppose, however, that these 'models' (i.e. the 'feminine' and the 'masculine') exist *sui generis*, and both imply a projection into a changed future of traits and values which exist now, prior to the change in the social structure.

To entrust oneself to this sort of guesswork, which moreover is totally implicit, requires a quite untenable, static view of culture. Even if it was progressive when Margaret Mead (1935) was writing just to admit that cultures varied and that values were arbitrarily divided between groups, this view is no longer tenable because it assumes the invariability of a universal human subject, and this has been invalidated by historians' studies of 'mentalities', and by the social constructionist approaches inspired (even if generally unwittingly) by the Marxist principles discussed above.

This vision of culture as static is, however, fundamental to all the variants of the notion of positive complementarity between men and women . . .

. . . The fear that a generalised sameness, or absence of differentiation, would be provoked by the disappearance of what is apparently the only kind of difference that we know (for this view point ignores all other sorts of variance)³ is, of course, not new; though currently the fear that the world will align on a single model often takes the more specific form that the single model will be the current masculine model. This (it is said) will be the price we shall have to pay for equality; and (it is said) it is (perhaps) too high a price. However this fear is groundless since it is based on a static, hence essentialist, vision of women and men, which is a corollary to the belief that hierarchy was in some way added on to an essential dichotomy.

Within a gender framework such fears are simply incomprehensible. If women were the equals of men, men would no longer equal themselves. Why then should women resemble what men would have ceased to be? If we define men within a gender framework, they are first and foremost dominants with characteristics which enable them to remain dominants. To be like them would be also to be dominants, but this is a contradiction in terms. . . . [T]o be dominant one must have someone to dominate. One can no more conceive of a society where everyone is 'dominant' than of one where everyone is 'richer'.

It is also not possible to imagine the values of a future egalitarian society as being the sum, or a combination, of existing masculine and feminine values, for these values were created in and by hierarchy. So how could they survive the end of hierarchy?

This vision of a society where values existed as 'entities', prior to their being organised into a hierarchy is, as I have said, static and ultimately naturalist. But it is also not an isolated idea. It is part of a whole ensemble of ideas which includes:

- 1 commonsense and academic theories of sexuality which involve a double confusion: a confusion of anatomical sex with sexuality, and sexuality with procreation; and
- 2 a deep cultural theme to which these theories themselves refer back: viz. that each individual is essentially incomplete in so far as he or she is sexed. Emotional resistance and intellectual obstacles to thinking about gender both originate from this: from the individual and collective consciousness.

This is what I earlier called 'a set of confused representations turning around a belief in the necessity of close and permanent relations between most males and most females' (Delphy 1980). I wanted to call this set (or representations) 'heterosexuality', but it has been suggested it would be better called 'complementarity'. Its emblem is the image of heterosexual intercourse, and this gives it a social meaning and an emotional charge which is explicable only by its symbolic value. It could therefore equally be called a set of representations of 'fitting together'.

Imagination and knowledge

We do not know what the values, individual personality traits, and culture of a nonhierarchical society would be like, and we have great difficulty in imagining it. But to imagine it we must think that it is possible. And it is possible. Practices produce values; other practices produce other values.

Perhaps it is our difficulty in getting beyond the present, tied to our fear of the unknown, which curbs us in our utopian flights, as also in our progress at the level of knowledge – since the two are necessary to one another. To construct another future we obviously need an analysis of the present, but what is less recognised is that having a utopian vision is one of the indispensable staging-posts in the scientific process – in *all* scientific work. We can only analyse what *does* exist by imagining what does *not* exist, because to understand what is, we must ask how it came about. . . .

In conclusion, I would say that perhaps we shall only really be able to think about gender on the day when we can imagine nongender. . . .

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Archer and Lloyd (1985), who say gender will continue because it is a 'practical way of classifying people'.
- 2 This is 'the final arbiter' of the dichotomous sex classification for the state, according to Money and Ehrhardt (1972, quoted by Hurtig and Pichevin 1985).
- 3 This would mean that I would only talk to a male baker since I would no longer be able to distinguish a female baker from myself.

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