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Gender Trouble. **Coming to Terms With Postmodern Feminist Approaches**

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Introduction

In 2005, as a part-time MLitt student I was asked to write reflectively on a previous piece of work. I chose to revisit an extended essay from the previous year, 'The Berdache: Old Ways, New Lessons'. 'Berdache' was the term used to describe a biological male or female that respectively assumed a feminine or masculine gender identity in some Native American tribes. I had sought to examine the motivations behind this practice, effectively why did men or women assume the 'wrong' gender.

Whilst I hinted at the usefulness of a deconstructivist approach, I faltered at the prospect of exploring this analysis thoroughly, unnerved by my own inability to see beyond the sex/gender binaries.

The paper that follows was my attempt at correcting this normative outlook by applying a feminist analysis to some of these problems. Research for this paper was pivotal in informing my subsequent views on sex and gender within my academic work and beyond and I present it here in the hope my tentative analysis may encourage others to seek out the work of theorists such as Judith Butler or Christine Delphy.

Context

'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible differences in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender' however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Oakley, 1985: 16. First edn. 1972).

Stevi Jackson (1996, 1998) credits Ann Oakley with being amongst the first to make the distinction between the sex we are born with and the gender we acquire, revealing that the content of gender categories is social rather than natural. From the 1970s onwards, Anne Cranny-Francis et al (2003) claim that this notion, gender as the cultural or social construction of sex, became implicit in feminist analysis.

This understanding was to inform my research into the American Indian berdache. 'Berdache' was the term used to describe a biological male or female that respectively assumed a feminine or masculine gender identity. Early colonists, ethnographers, anthropologists and historians have tried to explain the motivation and reasoning behind this institution for over half a millennium. Consequently, the berdache have invariably been described as 'hermaphrodites', homosexuals, cowardly warriors, "impotent effeminate", powerful shamans, sufferers of gender dysphoria or members of a third gender. Similarly, I sought a conclusive answer: why would a biological male or female choose to live as the 'opposite' gender? Whilst I accepted that gender roles varied across the vast spectrum of Native American tribes, it still appeared aberrant to assume the 'wrong' gender.

Upon further research, I have come to regard my conclusions as unsatisfactory. In my assignment 'The Berdache: Old Ways, New Lessons' (2004) I was too eager to make twee, sweeping generalisations: "Perhaps that is what the berdache is, a "sacred gift", to help us to question, change and ultimately make sense of the 'dual-sexed' world". Whilst I hinted at the usefulness of a deconstructivist approach, I faltered at the prospect of exploring this analysis thoroughly, unnerved by my own inability to see beyond the binary. Instead, I implicitly relied upon less controversial and therefore more comfortable concepts, such as the immutability of sex and the 'fact' that it precedes gender.

Feminist approaches to sex and gender

As a postmodern transsexual theorist, Sandy Stone investigates the borders and pushes the boundaries of sex, gender and sexuality. Stone (1991) suggests that there are "transsexuals for whom gender identity is

something different from and perhaps irrelevant to physical genitalia". Nonetheless, they find themselves "occulted by ...the medical/psychological establishments". The latter groups being important because they have the final say in what does and does not count as a "culturally intelligible body". Therefore, due to medical advances there is undue pressure to physically conform (as far as possible) to how they feel and/or act. Thus, from Stone's perspective surgical transsexualism is not always an answer to the pre-op transsexual but a reaction to, and resolution of, society's anxiety caused by the prospect of having to think outside the binary.

Stone (1991) claims that it is critical for a transsexual to 'pass' as a woman in the eyes of the medical establishment and "to be accepted as a 'natural' member of that gender". To do this gender reassignment clinics often offer 'charm schools' and 'grooming clinics', whilst the transsexual themselves must deny their past and create fictional lives in exchange for societal acceptability. As a result, Stone suggests that "wrong body" has become "virtually by default" the definitive term for the syndrome. A pejorative phrase, it remains largely unchallenged because both the transsexual and the medical establishment are complicit in the deception of 'passing'. This forecloses the possibility of analysing the role of desire and other complex motivations behind the procedure. Instead of offering a challenge to mainstream perceptions of the sex-gender relationship, transsexuals often unwittingly reinforce "the binary character of gender differentiation". Stone is disappointed that transsexuals' potential for the "disruption of structured sexualities" and production of a "spectra of desire" remains largely unexplored. Thus, she proposes 'posttranssexualism', the rejection of sexual binarism and the acceptance of ambiguity. With regard to 'sex' and 'gender' categories: is ambiguity preferable to a rigid binaristic framework?

This line of enquiry led me to look at the work of the materialist feminist Christine Delphy (1984, 1993) and the postmodern feminist Judith Butler (1990, 1994). Delphy's approach presupposes a 'real' world outside and prior to discourse and therefore appears immediately irreconcilable with Butler. Interestingly, their work does share some basic premises. As Jackson (1996: 136) points out: "Butler's radical deconstruction of gender owes a great deal to materialist feminism". For example, Delphy's radically anti-essentialist suggestion that gender creates sex, which is explored later, has found particular favour amongst postmodernists (Jackson, 1996: 135). Another similarity and one which reflects Stone's call for the 'acceptance of ambiguity', is seen in Delphy's (1993: 1) insistence that "in order to understand reality, and hence eventually to have the power to change it, we must be prepared to abandon our certainties". We must admit, "even if it is contrary to our senses, that something which exists, need not exist" (1993:

9). Thus, the only way we will ever really be able to think about and understand gender, will be “when we can imagine nongender” (1993: 9). Butler (1990: 11) reinforces this need for ‘imagination’ by calling for a “radical rethinking of the categories of identity”; especially those of “*gender...sex...woman...and man*”.

To do this, both theorists advocate that these ‘categories’ are permanently contested. Delphy (1984: 9) argues that moving forward necessitates “critiques of existing work”, including work emanating from fellow feminists. Conversely, bell hooks (1997: 22) claims that a central problem within feminist discourse is its inability to arrive at a consensus on such “definition(s) that could serve as points of unification”. Without which she believes that the feminist movement lacks a “sound foundation on which to construct theory or engage in overall meaningful praxis” (hooks, 1997: 23). This has led to what she sees as a “growing disinterest in feminism as a radical political movement...and the belief that solidarity between women is not possible” (1997: 23). Thus, hooks represents the view that consensus and unity on the major issues, including identity categories, is a prerequisite for political action. Butler (1990: 14) vehemently opposes this perspective: she finds this insistence on ideological unity coercive and exclusionary and would be the cause of “an ever more bitter fragmentation amongst the ranks”. Butler (1990: 14–5) suggests that as long as the contradictions are acknowledged and there is no compulsory expectation for feminists to act from “some stable, unified, and agreed upon identity, those actions might well get a quicker start and seem more congenial” to a number of disaffected and potential feminists. Therefore, the onus from Delphy and Butler is on debate, criticism if necessary, and the acceptance of different stances on identity categories. In fact, Jane Flax (1997: 174) claims that it is this diversity in the movement that brought about the “most important advance in feminist theory”: inability to reach a conclusive answer on the meaning of gender has meant that the very “existence of gender relations has been problematized. Gender can no longer be treated as a simple, natural fact”.

Jackson (1998: 135) points out that materialist and postmodern feminists both dismiss the argument that femininity and masculinity emanate from some ‘natural’, “pre-social biological essence”. ‘Women’ and ‘men’ are social groups that are defined in relation to each other and cannot exist without the opposing category (1998: 135). As Butler (1990: vii) states the masculine subject’s existence is radically dependent on the female ‘Other’ exposing “his autonomy as illusory”. Delphy explores this notion in depth, using a Marxist method of analysis. For example, when the Marxist framework is applied to capitalism, the proletariat could not exist without the bourgeoisie’s employment; whilst the latter could not exist without the proletariat to work for them and produce wealth (in Jackson, 1996: 117).

When materialists apply this mode of analysis to patriarchy, men exploit women's labour within families and benefit directly from this exploitation. Thus, Delphy (1984: 217) argues that they are embroiled in a similar class struggle between "social men" and "social women"; their existence is relational. This infers that men are the 'class-enemy' of women and that their defeat will necessarily lead to the utopian "nongender", "nonhierarchical society" Delphy craves (Delphy, 1993: 14–5). However, Butler (1990: 3) dislikes this notion that the oppression of women has some singular form usually found to be "the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination". She claims that any attempt to identify a single 'enemy' is a "reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor" (1990: 13).

Instead, Butler (1990: 19, 24–5) suggests, "*gender* is not a noun" because "'being'...a gender is fundamentally impossible". She claims that gender should be understood as performative, "always a doing", a set of acts repeated over time to give it a natural, substantive appearance. Butler (1990: 8) uses Simone de Beauvoir's contention that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" to show that this 'becoming' is always under a cultural, as opposed to a biological, compulsion to do so. From this perspective, therefore, if sex and gender are understood as radically distinct then "it does not follow that a given sex is to become a given gender", "*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body" (Butler, 1990: 8, 112). Thus, Butler claims that if gender is formulated separately to sex then there is no reason to limit gender to the usual two. Moreover, Butler supports the materialist feminist position (in particular Monique Wittig's radical views on sexuality and lesbianism) that even sex is only "perceived as *natural*". It is similar to gender in that it is an "artificial (social) fact" (Wittig, 1997: 220).

Delphy (1993: 3) is a strong proponent of the view that sex is a "social classification". She states that sex is no more prominent or distinguishable than any other physical trait. Genitals are given social value and therefore "simply mark a social division" allowing for the recognition of the "dominants" and "dominated" (Delphy, 1993: 4–5). Consequently, Delphy (1993: 1, 5) suggests, "*gender precedes sex*", as sex categories are socially constructed and therefore are the product of a gender hierarchy. Thus, when connecting sex and gender, Delphy (1993: 5) insists that we are in fact "comparing something social with something which is *also* social (in this case, the way a given society represents 'biology' to itself)".

Following this line of consensus between the two theorists, Butler explores the postmodern limits of this anti-essentialist argument. Butler (in Waugh, 1998: 183) sees the term 'woman' as a mere "signifier with no substance, referring to nothing, simply a token in the particular language

game in which it happens to be deployed". Therefore, Butler believes that women do not exist except as a discursive construct; gender has no material basis. Alternatively, Delphy (in Jackson, 1996: 137–8) would agree that there is no natural basis for this category and that women are not defined by their 'essence'. However, they are defined by their location in the gender hierarchy, which materialist feminists would argue has an undeniable material and social reality.

Nonetheless, if sex and gender are not 'natural', innate categories then how have these concepts persisted? It is suggested that the answer lies with the producers and production of knowledge. Materialists recognise that knowledge can never be objective because it is a "human, social construct and...therefore serves the interests of particular social groups" (Jackson, 1996: 149). According to Jackson and Jackie Jones (1998: 1) the latter interest group has historically been white, middle-class, heterosexual men and therefore women have traditionally been the objects of knowledge as opposed to the producers of it. Therefore, no narrative is safe from this subjectivity. By way of example, Butler (1990: 36) points out those theorists seeking the origins of women's oppression even find that the "prehistorical narrative serves to legitimate...naturalize or universalize the subordination of women". Delphy (in Jackson, 1996: 47–8) claims that this is based on the "primordial male provider" myth that suggests all women were more or less incapacitated by motherhood forcing them to rely on the support of men. This version of pre-history is then used to 'explain' the evolution of our present system (Delphy, 1984: 8). As a result, Jackson and Jones (1998: 1) suggest that feminist theory is a means of counteracting male subjectivity in the realm of knowledge: "it is about thinking for ourselves – women generating knowledge *about* women and gender *for* women".

This contention has proved to be a double-edged sword: feminist knowledge cannot claim to be objective because it is founded upon a political understanding of women's situation as one of oppression (Jackson, 1996: 151). Furthermore, this thirst for knowledge has taken feminism into the academic mainstream. This move has been criticised by some for de-radicalising the movement and serving personal professional interests and those of patriarchy. Firstly, energies that should be invested in transforming social and sexual relationships are diverted into "narrow scholastic battles" (Evans, 1997: 17). Secondly, this compromises the movement's commitment to accessible political debates, exacerbated by the fact that much of the theory produced, according to Jackson (1996: 155–6), is incomprehensible "to the average feminist activist". This is often inspired by an attempt to gain the esteem of sceptical male colleagues. However, it leads to an "understandable anti-intellectualism" within the movement (Jackson, 1996: 156). Thirdly, this rise of "femocrats", those who use feminism as a tool to engineer professional success, has led to accusations

that their motivation lies exclusively in the desire for self-aggrandisement of some kind (Kemp and Squires, 1997: 5).

In light of criticisms like these, Delphy asks: how do we “make sure that academia serves feminism and not feminism academia?” Mary Evans (1997: 21) facetiously remarks that if professional interests were feminists’ sole motivation then they would emphatically stay away from feminism. Delphy (1984: 150) emotively suggests that academic feminists must hold onto their “anger”, the outrage and injustice that inspires and maintains their commitment to the movement. It is this ‘anger’ that “connects us to our class as women” and, according to Jackson (1996: 156), will guarantee, “our intellectual work will continue to serve the women’s movement”. Butler (1990: xi) advocates an interdisciplinary, and in keeping with her postmodern framework, a “postdisciplinary” approach should be used in academic programmes focusing on gender and women. She claims that by basing the study of the latter on a range of complimentary and contradictory research and perspectives, the domestication of feminism within the academy will be evaded and it will be given back its radical edge through the provocation of thought and debate.

Conclusion

This ongoing debate is of particular interest: previously, I would have regarded the admission of feminism into academia as progress, a positive step, overlooking the need to strike a careful balance between this and the movement’s commitment to activism and accessible debate. I am thus exemplary of a modern progressive mindset; unquestioningly accepting that what comes next must be better than whatever went before. But Delphy and Butler’s work underlines the importance of leaving “the domain of presupposition”, to question the accepted, in particular, to ‘Rethink Sex and Gender’. In relation to the berdache, I thought it important to explain why a biological male or female would take on the incorrect gender. Thus, I was attempting to give answers without posing questions. Implicit in this research aim was the notion that there is a correct gender to assume which corresponds to a ‘natural’ sex, overlooking the possibility that biological sex might not reflect an innate set of characteristics bound up in the categories we call ‘gender’.

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Ria Snowdon

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