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2 Thinking (through) gender

Part 1

★ Read and Annotate!

* Be prepared to Discuss!

In order to begin to understand masculinity, we need to frame it within a more general understanding of gender, otherwise we are left simply with a shopping list of features, characteristics, and behaviors. Alternatively, we find ourselves looking at a kind of do-it-yourself kit for constructing a predetermined notion of “man,” or a self-help book offering us ways to become more recognizably and acceptably masculine. The title of this chapter is intended to suggest several possible simultaneous meanings and strategies.

"Thinking gender" suggests something along the lines of "having gender in mind," but also "a notion of gender that is self-conscious and self-reflexive." In addition, "Thinking *through* gender" implies first a careful consideration of both the idea of gender and how gender operates socially and culturally. Second, "thinking through gender" suggests that gender provides a lens or lattice by means of which we both perceive and think about the world, and through which we interact with it. Third, "thinking through gender" invites us to transcend gendered ways of thinking – to think *beyond* gender as familiar, comfortable, and, for the most part, invisible because it is simply a part of the way things just *are*.

Gender, sex, and sexuality

We begin with the term “gender” itself. Although this word occurs fairly regularly in everyday usage (for example, it is to be found frequently in official and semi-official questionnaires), its exact sense and implications are not always well understood. “Sex” and “gender” are often used interchangeably, although, as we shall see, there are key meanings that distinguish each from the other. Furthermore, particular formations of “gender” are thought to flow automatically from “sex.” That is, there is an assumption that the body is an irreducible physical, material fact, so that its anatomical configuration (as male or female) necessarily entails the behaviors appropriate to a particular configuration, namely, masculine or feminine behaviors.

We need instead to think of gender not as a freestanding concept, but rather as related in a complex way to two other key concepts: sex and sexuality. One way

of thinking of the relationship between that between raw material and processes generally understood that we may be differing genital configurations (namely, reproductive capacities and functions. However, we subscribe to a two-sex notion of the human called *dimorphism*: having two forms). Men or girls/women. Put another way, we eat the gestures and attitudes that the culture through learning these that we become a raw fact of our individual anatomical sex, a social product (behaving as a man or a woman). The distinction of a man and the manner and degree to which we understand as *masculinity*; the other compliance with them, we think of as

One way of understanding this is to think of gender as overdetermined, and indeed overwhelming, in that although we commonly think of “male” as the anatomical bedrock on which gender is founded, it is difficult to separate anatomy from gender. (This is an idea we will return to later.) Butler’s notion of gender performativity is useful in a sense ambiguous. They each encompass two notions of anatomical sex difference; the second, the social constructions of each sex (namely, its gender) and how a particular sex measures up to and meets the

However, we should note that there is a morphology of sex (male or female) and that we call gender (masculinity or femininity) sonate the feminine, just as a woman makes the culture ensures through a number of men subscribe to such a connection. These are other possibilities, and the ridiculing, humiliate who do not comply with those cultural own interests, in order to survive and function as seamless the connection between nature and imposed gender, we make simple equations: $\text{woman} = \text{femininity}$; $\text{male} = \text{masculinity}$. These assumptions (for the time) then become *naturalized*. That is, they are things, logical, necessary, and the way that everyone.

So, when we encounter any disruption or equivalences, we may tend to react with

contempt, or violence, among other responses. This is the case not only often with women whose behavior is perceived to be "mannish" or with men who seem to be effeminate, but also with individuals whose bodily morphology may not easily fit into the two-sex, two-gender system that has developed in most Western societies. For example, the hermaphrodite, now usually called an *intersex* person, is someone born either with indeterminate sexual characteristics (for instance, a rudimentary penis or vagina) or with ambiguous ones (both a penis and a vagina, although commonly one may be less developed than the other). Such an individual is not easily classified within the existing sex/gender system. Accordingly, then, infants who are identified as hermaphrodite or intersex are often subjected to surgical "correction" or "gender reassignment," their sex often determined by parental choice as well as the reliance on the judgment and experience of the medical team in attendance. This, in turn, often means a compliance with cultural assumptions about what constitutes "boyhood" or "girlhood," which refers us back, in a loop, to cultural notions of masculinity and femininity.

To take another example, the condition in males known as androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) may cause the body to fail either to trip the necessary hormonal signals at puberty or to respond to those signals as the hormones flood the body. Those males with AIS may find that their voices do not break at puberty; one or both of their testes may fail to descend from the body into the scrotal sac; they may not develop facial or body hair; they may develop female-looking breasts; and so on. The condition is usually treated with injections of androgens (male hormones), especially testosterone. The point to grasp here is that *our two-sex, two-gender system does not allow for such individuals*, any more than it accommodates the intersex individual: indeed, *these identities disrupt the system itself*. Defined as anomalies and therefore as "abnormal" or "unnatural," their very anomalousness serves to confirm the authority of the two-sex, two-gender system in place.

To our understanding of that system we must add another component: sexuality. Just as the words "man" or "woman" embrace both the genital and reproductive configuration of individuals as well as the set of behaviors and attitudes expected of either sex, so "sexuality" as a term is ambiguous. It too covers a range of possible meanings. Chief among these are sexual orientation and sexual behavior. The latter in turn includes such factors as the degree of sexual activity in an individual's life, and the sexual practices that an individual finds erotically arousing as well as emotionally and psychologically satisfying.

Of the various possibilities available to men and women in the culture, the overriding assumption about sexual orientation is that it is, or should be, heterosexual, namely, oriented toward the opposite sex. The poet Adrienne Rich has called this "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1993: 227–54). After all, male and female genitals are formed as anatomically complementary with each other. Moreover, there is both an instinctual and a cultural need to propagate young, in order to ensure the future of the family, the community (or nation), and, beyond both of these, the species. Thus, not only is heterosexuality "natural," in the sense

of being the means, shared by most living organisms, by which life is perpetuated, but it also structures social and cultural relations between men and women.

The fact that women are the child-bearers and child-rearers in most societies, and that women have traditionally been in additional roles, such as housework, which include that of homemaker. However, as Rubin notes:

Although every society has some sort of division of labor, the assignment of any particular task to one sex or the other is not universal. In some groups, agriculture is the work of men. Women carry the heavy burdens of child-rearing and child-care tasks. In other societies, women are even examples of female hunters and warriors.

Thus, from the perspective of the cultural system, heterosexuality is called it "obligatory heterosexuality"; see, for example, Rubin's discussion of heterosexual orientations, inclinations, and practices. Yet, as Rubin observes,

Hunger is hunger, but what counts as hunger is culturally determined. ... *Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is culturally determined and obtained*. Every society has its own arrangements by which the biological sex of individuals is determined. The way in which sex is shaped by human, social interaction is shaped by human, social interaction in a particular manner, no matter how bizarre some of the arrangements may be.

She earlier defines "sex/gender system" as the set of relations in human society that transform biological sex into gender, and in which these transformed sexual relations are organized. The relationship, therefore, between sex and gender is not universal, one, and, moreover, varies from culture to culture and social needs of each.

We should, therefore, be cautious about assuming that the heterosexual norm refers to the attitudes, practices, inclinations, and orientations of *most* members of the culture; a norm is something that the *normal* tends to become the *normative*, that is, what meets the relevant norm or standard. This is not necessarily self-evident. Because the threats and punishments to be meted out to those who do not conform to the norm, as people in the culture move toward the consequences of noncompliance.

Activity 2.1

- Think about some instances in your own life, whether gained through observation, direct experience, the reading of books or the viewing of movies and TV, in which you have been able to detect a difference between normality and normativity.
 - On what criterion (or criteria) of behavior did the distinction depend (for example, a norm of gender behavior or sexual practice)?

Essentialist versus constructionist views

We need, therefore, to be careful about assuming a simple relationship between the human sex–gender–sexuality triad and the sex–sexuality dyad of other creatures in our world. In the first place, gender appears to be chiefly a social and cultural phenomenon, in so far as it is not governed simply by instinct, implanted by the process of evolution. Gender requirements and assigned behaviors differ not only across cultures, but may also change across historical periods within a single culture.

If we look beyond Western cultures, we find that other cultures may have more complex sex/gender systems. For example, some Native American peoples structure into their sex/gender system a third gender, the so-called *berdache* or Two-Spirit person, that is, someone anatomically of one sex who identifies with the other gender. Many Native Americans object to the term “berdache,” used widely in anthropological work on North American indigenous peoples (see, for example, Greenberg, 1988: 40–56). The term originates in a Spanish word that suggests male effeminacy and/or sexual submissiveness. For the cultures concerned, “Two-Spirit individual” is the preferred term, and does not necessarily define the individual so described by sexual orientation or role (Stryker, 2004). Although Two-Spirit persons may have sometimes been made objects of ridicule or contempt (often ritualized) within their particular cultures, at the same time they have also been regarded as revered shaman figures who have escaped the division into one sex or another, or who have embodied both sexes in the one body and identity. Likewise, in Greco-Roman culture, hermaphrodites may have been reviled by those around them, but they also inspired awe because of the twinned sex identities that they literally embodied.

A still more nuanced gender-system exists in Sulawesi, in the Indonesian archipelago, where among the Bugis people there are “three sexes (female, male, intersex), four genders (women, men, calabai [false woman], and calatai [false man], and a fifth meta-gender group, the bissu [literally ‘transvestite priest,’ but in fact hermaphroditic]” (Graham, 2001). In addition, such complexity implies an equal richness in cultural notions of and possibilities for sexual orientation and activity, whereas historically in most Western cultures heterosexuality has

been the only officially sanctioned one, innate and the inevitable result of anatomy, and considered among Native Americans as impossible.

Theories of gender and gender behavior and the observed behavior of animals are often based on *essentialist* theorizations. That is, they are based on the idea that gender is reproduced genetically. Such theories are an important and influential idea of the evolution of gender and anthropological findings; and they are based on the idea that man is the hunter whereas woman is the gatherer. The often ruthless cut-and-thrust of modern gender theory is often based on the idea that our collective ancestors did on the African savanna in the past. These theories are founded on the idea that our collective way people lived in those days are based on the idea that, for instance, aggressive or violent behavior is based on bodily factors as the larger, more muscular male, and the powerful male hormone testosterone, and the idea that man and clan or primitive community from it.

Essentialist theories of gender also often based on the idea that animals in terms of social and sexual behavior are based on the idea that gathered from experiments with animals in their natural habitats may be applied to human behavior, responses, or ways of behaving. The argument that animals overlooks or willfully ignores the differences between identical kinds of society. For example, the idea that the idea of hierarchy, as a way of organizing society, has been as diverse as, say, ants and wolves, where the idea of hierarchy preserve the notion of democracy or to be organized according to the lights of democracy as a way of being organized.

Perhaps the paradigmatic case is that of the condemnation of homosexuality (especially in the Bible). The condemnation of homosexuality in many cultures has been justified by reference to the scriptural text of those cultures. Although the New Testaments speak disapprovingly of homosexuality, the key passages are generally taken to be 18:22 states, in the King James Version (KJV), “Whosoever shall lie with mankind as with womankind: it is abomination,” and “Whosoever shall lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman: that shall surely be put to death. The Hebrew *to'evah* is here translated as transgression but something that both God and man are against, whereas the rendering “sin” in most translations is anodyne, and suggests an offence to God.

Hebrew word “does not usually signify something intrinsically evil, like rape or theft (discussed elsewhere in Leviticus), but something which is ritually unclean for Jews, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation, both of which are prohibited in these same chapters.” He infers from this that “Leviticus 18 is specifically designed to distinguish the Jews from the pagans among whom they had been living, or would live . . .” Boswell goes on to argue that the injunction against male homosexuality was therefore intended to preserve the ritual cleanliness of the Jews as a people, rather than being simply a moral condemnation of sexual transgression (Boswell, 1980: 100–101).

Nevertheless, by the Middle Ages, homosexuality came to be understood as *peccatum contra naturam*: the (not merely a) sin against nature (Boswell, 1980: 103, note 42), a sense perpetuated by the King James English translation of the Bible, the standard in English-speaking cultures for several centuries. However, Boswell cautions us to treat the notion of “nature” with care, because the term is a philosophical as well as semantic minefield. It may refer, among other things, to that which is the essence of something, and hence characteristic of it. It may signify a generalization for the “observable universe”; or for that which “does or would occur without human intervention” (Boswell, 1980: 11). Boswell notes that the condemnation of homosexuality as unproductive and therefore unnatural is selective:

Nonreproductivity can in any case hardly be imagined to have induced intolerance of gay people in ancient societies which idealized celibacy or in modern ones which consider masturbation perfectly ‘natural,’ since both of these practices have reproductive consequences identical with those of homosexual activity. This objection is clearly a justification rather than a cause of prejudice.

(Boswell, 1980: 12)

He also points out that the assumption that homosexual behavior is absent among animals

is demonstrably false: homosexual behavior, sometimes involving pair-bonding, has been observed among many animal species in the wild as well as in captivity. This has been recognized since the time of Aristotle and, incredible as it seems, has been accepted by people who *still* objected to homosexual behavior as unknown to other animals.

(Boswell, 1980: 12; original emphasis)

Boswell argues further that this assumption

is predicated on another assumption – that uniquely human behavior is not “natural” – which is fundamentally unsupportable in almost any context, biological or philosophical. Many animals in fact engage in behavior which is unique to their species, but no one imagines that such behavior

is “unnatural”; on the contrary, it is a species in question and is useful to take from other types of organisms. If male homosexual desires and behavior, theorizing them as “unnatural.” Most of the admire is unique to humans: this is No one imagines that human society unknown among other animals.

Essentialist theorizations of sex and gender have contributed a good deal to our understanding and concepts, and the behaviors to which because of their scientific nature, grounded edge, chiefly the idea that the world and weighed, quantified, and analyzed according procedures. However, as we have seen, for of “nature” and same-sex behaviors, the approaches may highlight weaknesses or blind spots.

Moreover, essentialist arguments can be For example, essentialist notions of “women” to argue against feminism and the increased women, and essentialist arguments from verbal and physical on homosexual men and with essentialist theory is that, effectively change. If it were true that today we are scripts by which our remotest ancestors the containment, rather than the change and iors deemed antisocial – although how the becomes problematic, if they are indeed the

Constructionist (or constructivist) theories that, rather than *structuring* social relations, *society develops*. Whereas essentialist theories and relate it to both physiological factors species development, constructionist theories cultural influences that operate in and around whatever its evolutionary history. Those into the world. Consequently, we must, first accommodate ourselves to them and how that they create. In other words, *we cannot* is predetermined for us by a vast, complex irresistible array of forces, pressures, and patterns.

Thus, even before an infant is born, one of to know is its sex. Once this has been determined starts up, setting in place patterns of expectations.

such apparently innocuous items as the kinds of color deemed appropriate for the baby's clothing, the sorts of toys that it will be given to play with, and the like. Even when the child has parents who are sensitive to issues of gender and who seek to neutralize conventional expectations of boys and girls, social and cultural influences still play a powerful role, through playgroups, friendships, schooling, television programs, advertising, and so on. Later, of course, the individual who was the child might decide to contest the way in which she or he has been gendered. However, that contestation is not an absolutely new formation. It is, rather, a reaction to and a resistance of a structure of gender that was always-already in place and that has already situated and formed the individual in important and indelible ways.

Nevertheless, constructionist theories do make space for such re-formations of gender to occur, unlike essentialist theories, which tend to see gender as embedded in the body and as in effect immutable. Moreover, because constructionism addresses social histories and configurations as well as cultural practices, its theorizations of gender and sexuality, and the relation between them, are more fluid. Put another way, essentialist theory seeks to fix sex, gender, and sexuality as both unchanging and universal, whereas constructionist theory perceives these as historically and culturally specific.

However, this does not mean that constructionist theory bypasses or ignores questions of the body and its workings; to do so would be foolhardy, because, for example, it is clear that biochemical functions such as the production of hormones *can* affect behavior. Rather, constructionism seeks to understand how the culture makes meaning of such behavior and how it valorizes (gives value to) it. For instance, rather than simply accepting that male aggression or violence is inevitable because of the presence of high levels of testosterone in the male body, constructionist theorists ask such questions as: "What value or values in this culture, at this time, are attributed to male aggression and violence?" "Is it possible that male aggression and violence are socially and culturally encouraged, and if so, in what ways, and toward what ends?" "Is aggressive and violent male behavior always produced simply by hormonal influences, or can those influences be triggered by social situations and circumstances?"

Activity 2.2

- Explore and examine the articles and the advertisements in women's or men's magazines:
 - Can you identify any elements of these that can be categorized as generated by either an essentialist or a constructionist understanding of gender?
 - How does such identification affect your understanding of the "gender project" of the publication in question?

The essentialist/constructionist debate is as the opposition between nature and nurture, but it is clear that the issues are more complex than a simple opposition. However, these two extremes are often overlooked or neglected in a consideration of the issues, and explained by different kinds of theories. The debate is in terms of a tension chiefly between *discursive*.

Theories of ideology and of discourse are different versions of the same thing. Both kinds of theory are concerned with the social and historical forces as the cause of the individual, rather than ascribing these to individual choice, or to the individual as external to the social. Both are concerned with the way we understand in particular ways the relations with others in that world; and both are concerned with language, knowledge, and power. However, they are significantly different ways, and they have been powerfully influential in contemporary thought and dynamics, power and its distribution, and gender: much feminist theory, for example, is based on Foucauldian thought.

Contemporary theories of ideology, which are based on the nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel (among other intellectual functions) who saw the state as their ultimate goal the betterment of society, and as their understanding of the way modern, Western societies work, in order to devise a more rational socio-economic function. Marx identified the organization of labor, wealth, and social relations as the system that overthrew the entire system was the cause of the system.

Current theories of discourse derive from the twentieth-century French philosopher and sociologist (and of history). Compared with Marxist theory, the elaboration of discursive formations is more concerned with the way power circulates and how it determines our understanding of ourselves and the world. Foucault's project, which is really a project of resistance upon us, and thereby to encourage us to resist.

The theorizations of both ideology and of discourse are complex, and a full account of either would be a long book. Instead, what is presented below is a brief of each, intended as a way of working with the concept of masculinity – a sort of "Super-Lite" version. Readers are therefore strongly encouraged to read the full accounts.

for themselves (see, for instance, "Suggested further reading" at the end of this chapter).

Ideology and gender

"Ideology" is often misunderstood as signifying a system of belief that is outmoded, clumsy, or different from or opposed to one's own set of beliefs. So, whereas one's own belief system appears self-evident, natural, and "correct," in the sense that all right-thinking people would "of course" agree, the belief system of another person (especially someone of a different background, race or ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation) seems wrong-headed, out of touch with reality, deluded, and/or perverse. However, the theorization of ideology argues not only that the ideology and the structure of *any* society or group are closely connected, but also that *it is impossible to escape ideology*. The very ways we observe and understand, think and talk are not only ideologically saturated but also themselves articulate and circulate ideology.

Catherine Belsey, for example, observes that

ideology is both a real and an imaginary relation to the world – real in that it is the way in which people really live their relationship to the social relations which govern their conditions of existence, but imaginary in that it discourages a full understanding of these conditions of existence and the ways in which people are socially constituted within them. It is not, therefore, to be thought of as a system of ideas in people's heads, nor as the expression of a higher level of real material relationships, but as the necessary condition of action within the social formation.

(Belsey, 1986: 46)

Put otherwise, ideology develops out of the reality of people's relation to the social: to social classes, their dynamics and relationship to one another; structures of employment and labor; patterns of social interaction; and so on. However, at the same time, ideology overlays and masks that relation so that contradictions, inconsistencies, and inequities are smoothed over and naturalized: "Ideology obscures the real conditions of existence by presenting partial truths. It is a set of omissions, gaps rather than lies, smoothing over contradictions, appearing to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades, and masquerading as coherence ..." (Belsey, 1986: 46). Thus, the existence of the members of a society is constituted by the structure of the society and the conditions of existence permitted by that structure, but is framed by "a system of representations (discourses, images, myths) concerning the real relations in which people live" (Belsey, 1986: 46).

However, Belsey warns:

It is important to stress ... that ideology is in no sense a set of deliberate distortions foisted upon a helpless working-class by a corrupt and cynical

bourgeoisie (or upon victimized women). If there are groups of sinister men in society, in the public these are not the real makers of ideology in that sense, since it exists necessarily.

Ideology, then, emerges out of social structure, but it *disguises* those relations of power and operation. It becomes naturalized, and in turn shapes social existence. It "exists in commonplaces, in philosophical and religious systems. It is apparent in the way things appear to be are understood and have always been (Belsey, 1986: 46).

One powerful agent of ideology is advertising, which thereby also maintains production, of course, and circulates ideology by circulating it through the cultural imaginary. It is not merely to inform us about what is on offer, such as goods or services for sale, but in fact to *create* desire for things. Accordingly, therefore, we are made aware of our health, our sex appeal, our ability to appeal to others, our fashions, our possession of "labor-saving" devices (of it), and so on, so that we focus, not on our needs, services in terms of actual need or of the cost to them and what it costs us to acquire them, but on *a desire that is represented to us as real need*.

Advertising operates through *interpellation*. The twentieth-century French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser argues that ideology works by interpellating (that is, "addressing") the "us" (or "me") that ideology addresses as a social identity or individual than a *subject*, an individual with a culture, and gender. Whereas it seems only as if we are autonomous, unique individuals who, free to move freely in and on the world around us, theorized as such (and later, also of discourse) by contrast postulated as autonomous agents possessed of free will, in fact we are beyond our control and, indeed, even beyond our imagination, we imagine our own uniqueness and autonomy.

subjectivity isn't a property that we possess, but we are subjects of various agencies. Our individuality is regulated and reproduced as a structure of power, and we be subjects of (subjected to) parental authority, social compulsion; commercial enterprise/expression of characteristics/stereotypes; and so on.



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