

Gender: Still a Useful Category of Analysis?

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In 1986, when I wrote the article that has apparently become a classic, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,”¹ I began with a citation from Fowler’s *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*:

Gender. n. a grammatical term only. To talk of persons or creatures of the masculine or feminine gender, meaning of the male or female sex, is either a jocularly (permissible or not according to context) or a blunder.

My argument then was that the term could not be controlled by the linguistic police; gender had been usefully appropriated by feminists to talk about the ways in which differences of anatomical sex had come to mean different things at different times. We used the term cultural construction a lot in those days, by which we meant that meanings were attributed, not inherent in bodies, and that there was a history and politics to those attributions of meaning. The idea of cultural construction rested on the notion that sex and gender could be carefully distinguished, the one referring to biology, the other to culture. Some critics (Judith Butler, Donna Haraway) pointed out that the distinction was a false one, since if gender could be culturally constructed, so could the biological meanings of sex. Indeed, it was gender that attributed to biology its supposedly inherent significance.

But even without the writings of theorists (or perhaps, in part because of them), the line between gender and sex became blurred in popular usage. Hence, the entry for “gender” in the 1992 (3rd) edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* reads as follows:

traditionally, *gender* has been used primarily to refer to the grammatical categories of “masculine” and “feminine,” and “neuter”; but in recent years the word has become well established in its use to refer to sex-based categories, as in phrases such as *gender gap* and *the politics of gender*. This usage is supported by the practice of many anthropologists, who reserve *sex* for reference to biological categories, while using *gender* to refer to social or cultural categories. According to this rule, one would say *the effectiveness of the medication*

appears to depend on the sex (not gender) of the patient, but in peasant societies, gender (not sex) roles are likely to be more clearly defined. This distinction is useful in principle, but it is by no means widely observed, and considerable variation in usage occurs at all levels. (754)

Indeed for some people, gender became a polite way of referring to anything that had to do with sex, while sex was reserved for physical acts of love-making and/or copulation. But for others, gender had radical implications that needed to be stopped. This was the case in the prelude to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China in 1995. In the weeks before the meeting convened, a subcommittee of the US House of Representatives (1996) held hearings at which republican congressmen and delegates from right-to-life groups pointed to the subversive implications of "gender." The speakers warned that morality and family values were under attack by those who believed that there might be as many as five genders (men, women, homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals). And they insisted that the UN program for the Beijing Conference had been hijacked by "gender feminists, who believe that everything we think of as natural, including manhood and womanhood, femininity and masculinity, motherhood and fatherhood, heterosexuality, marriage and family, are only culturally created 'fixes,' originated by men to oppress women. These feminists profess that such roles have been socially constructed and are therefore subject to change." (ibid. 43). Within the UN, the controversy was such that the Commission on the Status of Women had earlier set up a contact group to seek agreement on the "commonly understood meaning of 'gender,'" and to convey its conclusions "directly to the Conference in Beijing." Disagreement between those who insisted on a strictly biological definition and those who wanted to refer to the "socially constructive [sic] roles of men and women" (ibid. 107) led to an entirely uninformative resolution which was offered as an appendix to the Program of Action of the conference. The "Statement on the Commonly Understood Meaning of the Term 'Gender'" reads as follows:

Having considered the issue thoroughly, the contact group noted that 1) the word 'gender' had been commonly used and understood in its ordinary, generally accepted usage in numerous other United Nations forums and conferences; (2) there was no indication that any new meaning or connotation of the term, different from accepted prior usage, was intended in the Platform for Action. ... Accordingly, the contact group reaffirmed that the word 'gender' as used in the Platform for Action was intended to be interpreted and understood as it was in ordinary, generally accepted usage. (United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 1996)

What is striking about this attempt at clarification is that there is no explication of "generally accepted usage." It was as if the meaning were self-evident, free of ambiguity and all possible misinterpretations. The wording of the statement attempted to settle controversy by denying that it existed.

Still, some participants at the conference felt pressed to spell out their understanding of the term. The representative of Guatemala, for example, wrote that "in conformity with the ethical, moral, legal, cultural and natural criteria of the Guatemalan people, Guatemala interprets the concept of gender solely as female and male gender in reference to women and men" (United Nations 1995: v, 11). A similar state-

ment came from Paraguay. Peru took matters further, anticipating the dangerous implications “gender” seemed to have by insisting that “sexual rights refer solely to heterosexual relationships” (United Nations 1995: v, 28). And the representative of the Vatican interpreted the common meaning of “gender” as “grounded in biological sexual identity, male or female [. . .]. The Holy See thus excludes dubious interpretations based on world views which assert that sexual identity can be adapted indefinitely to suit new and different purposes” (United Nations 1995: v, 12: “Statement of interpretation of the term ‘gender.’”) Not that biology determined sex roles statically. The Pope was all in favor of “a certain diversity of roles ... provided that this diversity is not the result of an arbitrary imposition, but is rather an expression of what is specific to being male and female” (ibid.). The implicit message was that homosexuality was not only intolerable because unnatural, but that it represented a corruption of the natural order of things upon which social order was thought to be based.

Although these debates demonstrated how profound an effect feminist thinking had had in the years prior to Beijing – “gender” was a term that seemed to carry threats of feminist disruption and subversion – they also showed how much it had been recuperated, deprived of its significance as a radical challenge to the status quo. As the *American Heritage Dictionary* had pointed out several years before, in ordinary usage, “gender” had become simply a synonym for the differences between the sexes, both ascribed and “natural.” It still could provoke heated debate, it is true, as the Beijing preparatory deliberations suggest, but for the most part, in the final report from Beijing, it was an innocuous term, often simply a substitute for “women.”

There is no question that by 1995 “gender” gave proponents of women’s equality a way of arguing that social roles were “culturally constructed” and therefore open to change, but its more far-reaching questioning seemed to have been diverted or tamed. In the 1970s and 80s “gender” did important theoretical work for feminists; it provided a way of rethinking the determinants of the relationships between the sexes; there was no “generally accepted usage” for the term. “Gender” opened a whole set of analytic questions about how and under what conditions different roles and functions had been defined for each sex; how the very meanings of the categories “man” and “woman” varied according to time, context, and place; how regulatory norms of sexual deportment were created and enforced; how issues of power and rights played into definitions of masculinity and femininity; how symbolic structures affected the lives and practices of ordinary people; how sexual identities were forged within and against social prescriptions.

My 1986 essay was written with those issues in mind. It was, for me, a way of posing questions that I associated with the influence of Michel Foucault, about how the certain knowledge of “natural” sexual difference was established, and about how and when one “regime of truth” was replaced by another. Gender provided a way of investigating the specific forms taken by the social organization of sexual difference; it did not treat them as variations on an unchanging theme of patriarchal domination. Instead it required careful reading of concrete manifestations, attention to the different meanings the same words might have. “Gender” might always refer to the ways in which relationships between men and women were conceived, but neither the relationships nor the “men” and “women” were taken to be the same in all instances. The point was to interrogate all the terms and so to historicize them.

By the mid-1990s, in the US at least, the term gender seemed to me to have lost its critical edge precisely because its meaning seemed to be able to be taken for granted. The word no longer was disconcerting, it didn't offer a challenge to fixed grammatical usage; instead it was one more commonly understood term in the feminist lexicon. I began to wonder if it had lost its efficacy and its usefulness for feminist thinking. This wasn't the case, of course, in other parts of the non-English-speaking world. In those places the very difficulty of translating the word provided the kind of radical interrogation associated with feminism. It also occasioned the adamant refusal of authorities, who condemned the word as inappropriate, unacceptable, even uncouth because it fell outside the national boundaries of "ordinary usage." So, the Commission générale de terminologie et de néologie (2005) ruled that "gender" was not a French word; this despite its increasing frequency in the titles of books and articles. Only a few years later a commentary on the impotence of this prohibition appeared in the form of a manual of gender studies – in French – the first of its kind.²

Whether or not gender continues to be a useful category of analysis – historical and otherwise – seems to me to rest not on the word itself, but on the critical uses we continue to make of it. Too often, "gender" connotes a programmatic or methodological approach in which the meanings of "men" and "women" are taken as fixed; the point is to describe differing roles, not to interrogate them. I think gender continues to be useful only if it goes beyond that approach, if it is taken as an invitation to think critically about how the meanings of sexed bodies are produced in relation to one another, how these meanings are deployed and changed. The focus ought to be not on the roles assigned to women and men, but on the construction of sexual difference itself.

In my field of history, there are far too many books that take the meaning of "women" for granted – the physical commonality of females is a synonym for a collective entity designated "women." Gender is said to be about the relationship between women and men, assumed to be not only hierarchical, but invariably so; the particular terms used to depict the relationship are seemingly less important than the asymmetry itself. And, despite much innovative research on sexuality, gender – at least in historical discourse – most often refers to an enduring male/female opposition, a normatively (if not distinctly biological) heterosexual coupling, even when homosexuality is the topic being addressed. It's not that women aren't given a history, of course they are. Ideas about them are said to change, as do their experiences; these vary in time and by class, ethnicity, culture, religion and geography. The bountiful literature of women's social history is full of important distinctions that insist on the particularity of working or peasant or lesbian or medieval or Jewish or African-American or Muslim or Latino or Eastern European or African women. But however much they attend to the quotidian lives of diverse populations, these differences take for granted an "underlying continuity of real women above whose constant bodies changing aerial descriptions dance." (Riley 1988: 7). Paradoxically, the history of women has kept "women" outside history. And the result is that "women" as a natural phenomenon is reinscribed, even as we assert that they are discursively constructed. To put it another way, the sex/gender binary, which defined gender as the social assignment of meaning to biologically-given sex differences, remains in

place despite a generation of scholarship aimed at deconstructing that opposition. (As I've already mentioned, the deconstruction insisted that sex, like gender, had to be understood as a system of attributed meaning; neither was about nature, both were products of culture. Sex was not a transparent phenomenon; it acquired its natural status retrospectively, as justification for the assignment of gender roles.) As long as "women" continue to "form a passive backdrop to changing conceptions of gender," (ibid.) our history will rest on a biological foundation that feminists – theoretically at least – want to contest.

This was the argument, already two decades ago, of Denise Riley's *"Am I that Name?" Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*. The book was published in 1988, the same year as my *Gender and the Politics of History* (Scott 1988). Both books share a similar concern with feminism and history; both turn to poststructuralist theory for help; each speaks to the other. While my book addresses the question of gender as an analytic category, Riley's takes on the task of treating "women" in the same way. She offers a Foucauldian genealogy of "women" – a term more often treated as a transparent description. Even as she distinguishes "female persons" from "women," her reading has often been mistaken for "a sort of Woman through the Ages approach" – something she specifically wanted to avoid (Riley 1988: 7). That this has been the case is a measure of how resistant history as a discipline has been to Foucault's radical epistemological challenge and also how well-disciplined history's seemingly rebellious daughters have turned out to be.

Riley's book is addressed to feminists and to the difficulty posed for us by the need at once to insist on and refuse the identity of "women." This, she maintains, is not a liability, but the condition that gives rise to feminism. "'Women' is indeed an unstable category, ... this instability has a historical foundation, and ... feminism is the site of the systematic fighting-out of that instability ..." (5) It is not only that there are different kinds of women assembled under the term, but also that the collective identity means different things at different times. Even for individuals, one is not always conscious of "being a woman." The identity, Riley says, does not pervade us and so is "inconstant, and can't provide an ontological foundation." (2) "The body" doesn't provide that foundation either, since it is itself a concept that must be "read in relation to whatever else supports and surrounds it." (104) "For all its corporeality," Riley points out, the body is not "an originating point nor yet a terminus; it is a result or an effect." (102)

The absence of an ontological foundation might suggest the futility of women's history; if there are no women, some of her critics have complained, how can there be women's history or, for that matter, feminism?³ In fact, Riley makes "women" the object of historical investigation. She asks when the category comes under discussion and in what terms, and she points to the ways in which, at different historical moments, there have been different kinds of openings created for feminist claims. "The arrangements of people under the banners of 'men' or 'women' are enmeshed in the histories of other concepts too, including those of 'the social' and 'the body.' And that has profound repercussions for feminism." (7) Riley shows how, in early modern Europe, notions of the androgynous soul defined one kind of relation of "women" to humanity, whereas by the eighteenth century, attention to nature and the body led to an increasing emphasis on women as "the sex." As "the social" found

a place between “the domestic” and “the political” in the nineteenth century, it “established ‘women’ as a new kind of sociological collectivity.” (50) And, of course, until individuals were defined as political subjects, there could be no claim for citizenship or political rights for women. It’s not just that women have different kinds of possibilities in their lives, but that “women” is something different in each of these moments. There is no essence of womanhood (or of manhood) to provide a stable subject for our histories; there are only successive iterations of a word that doesn’t have a fixed referent and so doesn’t always mean the same thing.

It was feminist politics that brought “women” into view as an object of historical investigation. But, ironically, the project of creating a subject for contemporary feminism (an active, protesting collectivity, asserting its rights, seeking emancipation from oppression) tended to blur the lines of difference, whether temporal, cultural or social. “Gender” was meant to historicize and relativize women and to conceive of them as integral to history, not simply as agents, but as “women.” The point was that the current subject of feminism (our collectivity) could not be projected retrospectively or laterally. Global feminism is an imaginary unity, a political vision, not an entity that pre-exists its articulation. “Gender” suggested that we had to problematize the very notion of how we came to think of ourselves in the way we did. It was not self-evident that women were conscious of themselves as “women,” not at all clear that “our bodies” defined “ourselves.” There was no “false consciousness” about what it meant to be a woman (even if consciousness-raising was a mobilizing technique). Rather there were appeals to specific interests and experiences that, at a particular moment, got organized under the sign of “women.” The questions were how and when that happened and under what conditions? To understand feminism (in its current and its historical manifestations) one had to think of it as a strategic intervention in a set of discourses that were not restricted to “women.”

Although there was a great deal of concern voiced about the whether gender, added to or substituted for women (in book titles and course curricula), would weaken feminist claims, in fact gender signaled a deepening of the commitment to the history both of women and “women.” I am now arguing that no history of women is complete without a history of “women.” “Gender” was a call to disrupt the powerful pull of biology by opening every aspect of sexed identity to interrogation, including the question of whether or not male/female, masculine/feminine was the contrast being invoked. Riley reminds us that the insistence on the fixity of that opposition (on the essential “truth” of sexual difference) is itself the product of a certain history and not one we should consider inviolate.

Perhaps it is sexual difference that now needs to be problematized so that gender can be freed to do its critical work. For this I’ve found it useful to turn to psychoanalytic theory, not to its conservative articulations (which have, among other things, been used to shore up the heterosexual family as the key to normal psyches and stable cultures), but to the places where it addresses the difficulties associated with establishing the boundaries and meanings of sexed identities. On the one hand, “the psychic knowledge of sexual difference ... is something one cannot not know.” (Weed 2007: 6) On the other hand, there is no certain knowledge of what it means. Its meanings are offered in the realms of individual fantasy and collective myth and these aren’t necessarily in synch with one another, nor do they determine the ways in

which subjects relate to masculinity or femininity (assuming it, refusing it, rejecting the divide between them). Psychoanalysis sees no necessary correspondence between the psychic positions of masculinity and femininity and a physical body; indeed it is “the body that comes to represent the psychic realization of sexual difference and not the reverse” (ibid.). The theory posits no fixed definition for masculine/feminine or for the differences between them; rather it requires analysis to get at what they mean.

Of course, the analysis aims at uncovering the idiosyncratic meanings developed by individual psyches, but these are not forged independent of the conscious awareness of normative categories and their enforcement. Nor are the normative categories simply rational statements of desirable identification. They are (often ineffective) attempts to eliminate the psychic confusion that sexual difference generates, to bring individual fantasy into line with cultural myth and social organization. Gender is, I would argue, the study of the vexed relationship (around sexuality) between the normative and the psychic, the attempt at once to collectivize fantasy and to use it for some political or social end, whether that end is nation-building or family structure. In the process, it is gender that produces meanings for sex and sexual difference, not sex that determines the meanings of gender. If that is the case, then (as some feminists have long insisted) there is not only no distinction between sex and gender, but gender is the key to sex. And if that is the case, then gender is a useful category of analysis because it requires us to historicize the ways sex and sexual difference have been conceived.

The “language of gender” cannot be codified in dictionaries, nor can its meanings be easily assumed or translated. It doesn’t reduce to some known quantity of masculine or feminine, male or female. It’s precisely the particular meanings that need to be teased out of the materials we examine. When gender is an open question about how these meanings are established, what they signify, and in what contexts, then it remains a useful – because critical – category of analysis.

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Notes

1. See the forum on this article in *the American Historical Review*, 113, December 2008.
2. For an important overview, see Bereni *et al.*, 2008.
3. See, for example, Modeleski (1991).

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