

WHAT IS GENDER?

Sara Abdel Malak

CVSP 230

Dr. Nadia Abou Ali

What is gender? This question has been the topic of many works in philosophy, sociology, psychology, anatomy, politics, etc. Some say that it does not exist, and others say that it is as real as its effects. Some say that it is essential, and others say that it is fluid. The consensus among gender scholars today is to separate the concept of gender from that of biological sex, as not to simplistically conflate anatomical features with a perception and expected behavior of gender or delegitimize any gender “deviations”. However, that is still not enough to provide us with the reasons behind the perceived and expected differences between men and women, the history and purpose of the general discourse on gender, the arbitrariness and performativity of gendered behavior, and the history of gender itself. Therefore, I am going to be revisiting the work of four prominent figures in gender theory- Michel Foucault, Simone De Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Joan Scott- and describing their specific accounts on gender.

Foucault: Gender as a discursive fact

Foucault is known for his historical method of study which uses philosophical tools, also known as the Foucauldian method. He views sexuality as a discursive fact, meaning that there is no truth or knowledge to sex, but simply a will to discourse which tells us what we need to know about the systems of power that control it. The Foucauldian method is mostly interested in understanding the techniques and mechanisms of power, so his fundamental objective in “*The History of Sexuality*” is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in the western world. He does this through refuting the “repressive hypothesis”. The “repressive hypothesis” is the popular belief that western society started

repressing sex and sexuality after the 17th century. Through confining sex to reproduction and limiting pleasure and conversations on sex, sexuality was viewed as a repressed truth that had to be unearthed in the modern times – which is what caused the rise in the eager discourse on sex that saw itself as “liberated” from power’s repression. This modern eager discourse was not only constructed through literature and religious practices, but also in areas like medicine and demography as well as new fields that are completely dedicated to the study of repressed sexuality- such as psychoanalysis. Foucault believed that these two opposite attitudes on sex are mutually reinforcing since power does not only work to prohibit and limit, but also to incite. In other words, power in modernity is productive; it equally acts to incite discourse and can discipline through knowledge instead of repression. In conclusion, Foucault was not interested in the idea of gender itself but on how it is studied and talked about. This had a big effect on gender studies because it showed that power has “amorphous polyvalent techniques” which need to be properly analyzed and that progressive fields of study can have a disillusionment of liberation, which I believe is a major problem in neoliberal and colonial academia.

De Beauvoir: Gender as a social construct

In her book “*The Second Sex*”, De Beauvoir aims to understand what it means to be a woman and why women have always been subjugated and considered secondary to men. She is an existentialist and a phenomenologist, so she believes that being a woman is a phenomenon that exists in the way it does now (subjugated) due to conditions and experiences that can be studied. This means that she rejects the essentialist biological/psychological argument which

claims that being a woman is natural and due to anatomy and physiology. However, she acknowledges that women and men¹ are not the same, because each experiences their bodies differently in the world and they experience it only through each other (there is no Man=Subject without Woman=Other). De Beauvoir aims to disrupt the “oneness” of womanhood that we have in our heads by recounting the catalogue of experiences that are forced on women. Marriage, motherhood, prostitution, etc. are described in detail as socially imposed boxes that women are placed in, often with no choice of their own. In other words, women are socialized in such a way that they feel that marriage and motherhood are what defines them as women. De Beauvoir sees gender, whether it be man or woman, as something that can be transcended. Even though becoming a “woman” is done through cultural interference, it also requires one’s own effort at self construction. So De Beauvoir believes that in some ways, women choose to submit to this subjugation by accepting these roles and that we should instead free ourselves from them.

Butler: Gender as performative

Judith Butler also believes that gender is socially constructed and not innate or natural, and she focuses a lot on how the notions of gender norms served to keep women subjugated and any gender “non-performing” people, such as homosexuals or transgender” oppressed. In “Gender Trouble”, which is considered one of the fundamental works on queer theory, Butler

¹ It is important to note that Simone de Beauvoir’s book “The Second Sex” is considered a classic of feminist literature and one of the first books that any gender scholar will study. Due to its context of being at the start of sociological and political conversations on gender, the term gender-nonbinary was not used and instead binary language such as man and woman were used. Although the term was not in use, De Beauvoir’s work aimed to destroy the binary by showing how it is constructed- so it set the stage for the understanding of gender nonconformation.

states that “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.” which is the same as the existentialist idea of “existence precedes essence”

that De Beauvoir explained. Butler focused a lot on performativity: you “perform” your gender by repeating the expressions that are said to be the result of the gender, which gives the illusion that it is natural. She even suggests a link between our biological sex (being male or female) and subsequently our gender and sexuality as things that we also perform. Biological sex is determined by something arbitrary (reproductive organs rather than blood type, for example) and the performance of distinctive expressions (such as gender binary speech or sexual actions, for example) serve to impose the normative gender expressions. This affects homosexuals as well, since they are perfect example of how breaking what is seen as the natural link between sex/gender/sexuality (referred to as heterosexual coherence) can lead to oppression.

Scott: Gender as a category of historical analysis

Just like Butler is influenced by De Beauvoir in her focus on what constitutes gender as a social construct, Joan Scott is influenced by Foucault in her use of gender as a way of looking at the history of "male institutions". Scott was one of the first theorists in the field of studying the history of gender. In her article “*Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*”, she provides a definition for gender as consisting of two parts; “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes [part 1], and gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power [part 2]”. The main focus of her article, however, is

not to use gender to explain a phenomena about the sexes. She wants historians to use gender to see how this phenomena was related to historical change. In other words, she wants to use gender as an analytic tool for studying history. She describes the use of other theories as analytical tools to study history, although she believes that some of them somehow support the view materialistic view of gender as natural. These include using economic factors (Marxism), biological determinism (patriarchy), lived experiences (psychoanalytic object-relations theory), and language (post-structuralist theory). We cannot believe that there has always been man and woman in the way they are understood today, or use a historical analytic tool that is essential (such as biological sex role) - since that only corroborates a view of gender as something natural. In order to understand gender as an imposed social category (first part of her gender definition), she suggests that historians “examine the ways in which gendered identities are substantively constructed and relate their findings to a range of activities, social organizations, and historically specific cultural representations”. In order to understand how gender signifies power (second part of her gender definition), she suggests that historians “develop insight into the particular and contextually specific ways in which politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics”. In conclusion, she thinks we should use gender history to understand how society is gendered and how the needs of the state gender society.

In conclusion, the concept of gender has been explained in many ways as was shown in the description of the works of the four philosophers which I have presented. If there is one thing that joins all their theories together, it is the refusal to accept the essentialist or “natural” view of gender. They also all seem to agree on the fact that society’s firm dictation on the history,

appearance, and purpose of normative genders seeks to benefit the overarching systems of power and subjugate women and people who do not conform.

References

Beauvoir, Simone de. 1989. *The second sex*. New York: Vintage Books.

Butler, Judith. 2006. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge Classics. London, England: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel, 1926-1984. *The History of Sexuality*. New York :Pantheon Books, 1978.

Scott, Joan W. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986)

