

SEX OR GENDER? DOUBLE-CROSSES, DOUBLE-BINDS¹

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There is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses.
Monique Wittig

There are two sexes [...] and no measure in favour of equality will eliminate differences.
Antoinette Fouque

We cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.
Jacques Derrida

I. Difference and its Others (Essence, Sameness, Equality)

Since the early days of the women's liberation movements, feminist theorists (both in Europe and the United States) have sought to define the specificity and the apparently ineluctable historical fact of women's oppression, the perenniality of women's subordination. An instance of such a move is the following declaration by the editorial collective of *Questions féministes*:

We consider as theoretical *any discourse, whatever its language may be*, that attempts to explain the causes and the mechanisms, the *why* and the *how* of women's oppression in general or of one of its particular aspects. 'Theoretical' means any discourse that attempts to draw political conclusions, that offers a strategy or tactics to the feminist movement. (EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE, 1981: 213)

To answer woman's question has meant vexed attempts to define what it is to be a woman, which itself has led to the opposition between 'woman', the concept or the myth, and 'women', those human beings gathered under that heading.² To make matters deceptively simple, such theoretical undertakings always entailed thinking, analysing, exploring the complex interactions between power relations and sexual identity, between biology (anatomy, nature, sex) and social constructions ('destiny', culture, gender). Pell-mell, the recurrent interrogations have always been: why is nature immediately apprehended as divided into two sexes? Are there two sexes?³ Why are women subjected to the dominant group of men? Why and how does culture perpetuate sexual difference, and its corollary, the sexual, and unequal, division of social roles? The questioning of 'identity', the theoretical developments on power and discourse, the Lacanian rereading of Freud, the evolution of Marxist thought have all given these questions new turns and opened up new tensions.

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² The editorial collective offered two definitions of 'woman': the 'anti-feminist' women's and theirs: 'The word "woman" we don't have the right to use it alone any more, we don't have the right to conceive it alone. The reality "women" is sociological (political), the product of a relation between two groups, and of any oppressive relation. The real group of women is defined by its very position in this relation [...]'. (EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE, 1981: 224).

³ This is also subject to doubt since the one-sex model once prevailed over the two-sex model, as Laqueur has demonstrated (LAQUEUR, 1990). There are Two Sexes is the title of a recently published collection of essays by Antoinette Fouque (FOUQUE, 1995), the leader of the French Women's Liberation Movement (MLF) and founder of the 'Psychanalyse et Politique' group.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to retrace the various theoretical positions, the diachronic evolution of the theoretical stakes and the national, cultural as well as political, differences among feminist positions.⁴ Broadly speaking, from the start debates have raged between the upholders of a definition of woman who sought to isolate and define her difference. Woman's difference can be worded as the 'female principle', those elements which make up 'womanhood' and which women must retain and cultivate as what distinguishes them from men. In the United States, for instance, this debate opposed radical feminists and cultural feminists (Adrienne Rich, Andrea Dworkin, Kathleen Barry, Mary Daly, cf. ECHOLS (1983)). The question of difference can equally and somewhat paradoxically revolve around an apprehension of woman's essence: motherhood, or rather the maternal, the specificity of the mother-daughter bond and its symbolic valency. It will lead, among other developments, to an injunction to write the female body and a celebration of '*écriture féminine*' with Joyce, Colette, Duras and Genet as exemplary exponents. The opponents of such essentialist views of woman condemned them for overlooking the reality of women's oppression within social relations: their economic status, their actual exploitation as child-bearers and labour force. In France the debate pitted the 'naturalists' against the 'materialists',⁵ an opposition which has been recently re-viewed in the United States as confronting essentialists and constructivists (FUSS, 1989). A certain conceptual confusion prevails, since the upholding of difference by Derridean feminists takes as its premise the undoing of 'identity,' the dismantling of essence in line with a 'deconstructionist' critique of Western metaphysics. Poststructuralism, postmodernism and deconstruction are often oddly amalgamated.

Not all feminists were and are supportive of the concept of 'difference', for difference was also seen as a means of blurring the repressed sameness of the two sexes which, if recovered, should translate into economic and symbolic equality. Difference and discrimination are linked in a reciprocal deadlock. Colette Guillaumin's 'The Question of Difference' claims that a vindication of the right to be different always emerges from politically dominated groups: it stigmatises a *flight* of the oppressed. Her opening paragraph is unequivocal:

The notion of difference [...] is heterogeneous because it masks on the one hand anatomico-physiological givens, and on the other socio-mental phenomena. This permits a double-cross, conscious or not, and the use of the notion on one level or another depending upon the moment or the needs. It is ambiguous in that it is a manifestation of the false consciousness (and politically disastrous) and *at the same time* the mask of a real repressed consciousness. (GUILLAUMIN, 1995: 239)⁶

⁴ To this day the oppositions are entrenched among materialist feminists (indebted to Marxism), radical feminists (separatists), and cultural feminists; Kristeva and Antoinette Fouque, among others, have been labelled 'anti-feminist' women. See an extremely vehement review article by Australian critic Bronwyn Winter, forthcoming in Women's Studies International Forum. Attempts are now made to find out what has been lost in the translation of French feminism to the United States (and to Britain), see Sherry Simon's chapter, 'Missed Connections: Transporting French Feminism to Anglo-America', in her book (SIMON, 1996); Gayatri Spivak's chapter 'The Politics of Translation' in Spivak (1993). I would like to venture that the imperatives and the motivations of academic discourse (as any discourse) in the United States are driving forces which to a certain extent escape those who necessarily participate in it.

⁵ Oppositions and divisions run in the plural: materialist feminism is itself divided between radical materialists (revolutionary feminism) and the class-struggle tendency. Monique Wittig's point of view, which called into question 'heterosexuality' and advocated the creation of a 'new category' was labelled 'radical lesbianism' in the 80s (EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE, 1981: 216-18).

⁶ Guillaumin is the author of an earlier work on race (GILLAUMIN, 1972). As Brigitte Lhomond remarks, 'genre' and 'race' are etymologically linked (LHOMOND, 1997: 33-39).

The majority does not need to ask to be regarded as different: ‘difference’ is a concession of the oppressor to the oppressed.⁷

The feminism of difference violently critiqued by Guillaumin immediately brings to mind the whole range of Cixous’s work (CIXOUS, 1981, 1994), from her groundbreaking manifesto ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1976) to her 1991 dialogue with Derrida on tales of the goddess, ‘*la D. S*’ (sexual difference whose initials read in French as ‘*la déesse*’, the goddess). It also recalls Irigaray’s critique of Freud, her *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* and her subsequent analyses of language and the neuter (IRIGARAY, 1984, 1985). Another recent endeavour to think difference — and the ‘differend’ — in relation to the notion of subject is Geneviève Fraisse’s *La Différence des sexes* (FRAISSE, 1996).⁸ This is an attempt to interrogate the presence/absence of sexual difference in philosophical texts. In so doing, she confronts the othering at the centre of difference, the other sex and the other discourse. Retranslated as alterity, difference is opposed to sameness. The making of an other sex leads Fraisse to posit the historicity of sexual difference; two different philosophical traditions share a representation of sexual difference: the one that thinks vertically (inferior vs. superior) and the other that thinks horizontally in terms of same and other. Woman is inferior, or other, or both at the same time. Within the historical development of discourses on sexuality, otherness and othering have been privileged over sameness. Fraisse insists on the fact that otherness has always been linked to inferiority, contrary, she claims, to Thomas Laqueur’s analysis of the difference between the one-sex and the two-sex models in *Making Sex*, which, to her mind, fails to qualify the power relations at work within these discursive constructions.⁹ Another more recent attempt to articulate the inherent contradiction between sameness and difference in feminism’s attempts to overcome women’s oppression on the basis of an understanding of women’s political and historical struggles is American feminist historian Joan Scott’s:

[Women] have needed to prove sameness in order to qualify for equality if they are to meet the singular standard (of masculine individuality) held out for inclusion, but they have had to argue for equality as women, thus raising the issue of their difference. The equality versus difference dilemma does not admit of resolution. It is built into feminism, which at once embodies and protests against the contradictions of liberal political theory. (SCOTT and CONNELL, 1997: 698)

In contrast, Antoinette Fouque’s recent intervention at the 1991 conference ‘*Lectures de la différence sexuelle*’ attempts to isolate ‘*la femelle*’ (female), an essence of womanhood from the point of view of both psychoanalysis and politics, for she refuses the word ‘*féminin*’ (feminine) (NEGRÓN, 1994). The woman-being, or rather, as she puts it, the daughter’s nonbeing (‘*n’être fille*’) is reread as to be born woman (*naître femme*). In a gesture which recalls earlier maternal configurations in Cixous’s, Irigaray’s and Kristeva’s works (while obviously bearing in mind the particulars of their individual intellectual and artistic projects), Fouque upholds ‘gestation’ in so far as it forecloses men and can define women:

The first and ultimate experience of women’s narcissistic development and accomplishment, gestation constitutes the experience of the beginning, primary thought, the

⁷ For a similar attack on ‘difference’, see WITTIG (1992: 2).

⁸ See also her *La Muse de la raison. La Démocratie exclusive et la différence des sexes* and *La Raison des femmes* (FRAISSE, 1989, 1992). Another important contribution to feminism from a philosophical perspective is Michèle Le Doeuff’s *L’Etude et le rouet; Des femmes, de la philosophie, etc.* (LE DOEUFF, 1989, 1991) not to mention the late Sarah Kofman’s works.

⁹ It should be remarked that, relying mainly on medical treatises, Laqueur’s analysis sharply specifies that the one-sex model presented women as inferior, contrary to Fraisse’s assertion. (FRAISSE, 1996: 114).

core itself of knowledge, the paradigm of ethics, the thinking of the other as subject ... the love of one's neighbour and democracy. (FOUQUE, 1995: 175-6)¹⁰

An extremely controversial figure of the French Women's Liberation Movement (she and her followers deposited MLF as a trademark), a deputy at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Fouque symbolically reinstates the female body and its biological difference at the centre to stretch it metaphorically towards thinking as gestation, the gestation of thought, an opening to the other (the next one, the one close to you, the biblical '*prochain*', neighbour) in a relationship of equality ultimately understood in political terms (democracy).¹¹

The major criticisms across the diverse theoretical spectrum bore in the 70s and the 80s on the feasibility of a political agenda which would set matters right and effect a subversion of the oppressive system. Looking at recent feminist texts means facing a similar unabated controversy, for an analysis of the causes of women's subjugation must point, at best, to a sexual 'revolution'. As Gayle Rubin put it: 'The analysis of the causes of women's oppression forms the basis of an assessment of just what would have to be changed in order to achieve a society without gender hierarchy'.¹²

Kristeva's *Sens et non-sens de la révolte*, a transcription of seminars given at the University of Paris VII or 'direct discourse', tries to answer this encounter of the political ('*la révolte*') with language and the un-conscious (psychoanalytical discourse and praxis) from the point of view of psychoanalysis. The subtitle of the book, *Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, indicates a provisional answer which would explain how a certain conceptualisation of politics falls outside psychoanalytical praxis (when it cannot be read and treated as a symptom) (KRISTEVA, 1996).¹³ Kristeva's notion of '*révolte*' goes back to its myriad acceptations, and its etymology, for she wants to salvage the concept from its narrow political use, that of uprising. The term involves sub-version, re-revolution, a re-turn towards the invisible, a refusal and a displacement; she insists on both its pliability and its dependence on the historical context. The demise of ideology, the vacancy of power, the promotion of the patrimonial person (the subject is reduced to an ownership of his/her organs) lead her to replace the notion of 'text' by that of 'experience', which contains the pleasure principle as well as the re-birth principle of one meaning for another, and which could only come about as the outcome of a re-revolution-experience (*expérience-révolte*) (KRISTEVA, 1996: 22). Experience is an unknown, a shock, a surprise, a rapture, and then an understanding of that shock.

Reading Aragon, Sartre and Barthes, she locates a revolt against identity, identity of sex and meaning, of idea and politics, of being and the other in their poetic, literary and critical texts. The rebellion against the One calls for a restructuring of subjectivity, for another humanity/mankind. Kristeva sums up her programme as follows:

It is no longer a question of conforming to the 'universal' (everybody aspiring to the same values in the best cases; to human rights, for instance), nor of affirming one's untouchable, sacred (ethnic, religious, sexual) 'difference'; even less of fighting one tendency with the other, nor of simply and intelligently combining them. It is a question

¹⁰ Translation mine. The translation cannot help being deficient; for instance, 'knowledge' in French contains 'birth', '*co-naissance*', whereas its English counterpart plays with biblical knowledge and sexuality!

¹¹ See Lev. 19:18: ' [...] love thy neighbour as thyself'.

¹² RUBIN (1975: 147). Christine Delphy ranks Rubin among the theorists who believe that biological sex induces the sexual division of labour (DELPHY, 1991: 93).

¹³ The book now has a sequel, KRISTEVA (1997). The English connotation of 'revolting', i.e. 'nauseating', is absent from the French, although Kristeva offers to think *La Nausée* together with her concept of revolt.

of bringing to their limits the demand for the universal *and* that for the singular in each individual, thus making this simultaneous motion the moving forces of both thought and language. (KRISTEVA, 1996: 44-45)¹⁴

She contends that contemporary claims for ‘identity’ which are disrupted in the texts she studies do not stem from Cartesian rationalism, but find their root in the protectionism of the speaking subject, a biological and psychic necessity which religious monotheism helps bring to completion and sanctifies. Unlocking the enclosure of such notions as ‘proper’, ‘identical’, ‘true’ and ‘false’ then becomes a question of survival. Yet rebellion runs the risk of falling back into new forms of protectionism as pernicious as the old ones. Her universal will be that ‘there is meaning’, and her difference that ‘I’ takes the words of the tribe to inscribe in them ‘my’ singularity.¹⁵ In Rimbaud’s wake she proclaims that ‘I is an other’, Kristeva’s development, which stems from her definition of ‘the subject in process’ — on trial as well as in motion — and of ‘the signifying process’ in contradistinction to meaning conceived as a sign-system, runs counter, or parallel, to the materialists’ terminology of consciousness, itself indebted to the powerful concepts of alienation and class (cf. Guillaumin, Wittig and Mathieu, below).

II. Abolition v. Proliferation (‘Genre’, Gender, Sex)

The present reflection on the concepts of sex and gender has been triggered by the following remark: since their emergence in the 1980s as full-fledged academic programmes, Women’s Studies have gradually given way to newly delineated fields of research, namely: ‘Gender Studies’, ‘Gay and Lesbian Studies’, ‘Men’s Studies’, ‘Masculinity Studies’. Such an evolution prompts the question: why has the currency of the concept of gender occulted that of ‘woman’, or of ‘women’? What are the political motivations and implications of such a shift? If the pluridisciplinary field of Women’s Studies left room for the questioning of the notion of sex and gender, Gender Studies marginalises such a question, bearing as it does on the social construction of sex roles. The emphasis on women’s position qua women risks disappearing in this intrinsically dialogic understanding of the two sexed groups. The interrogation of sexuality, notably in the field of psychoanalysis, is at best relegated to the margins.

Conversely, the emergence of specific fields devoted to the study of homosexualities could point to a displacement of the problematic, to a foregrounding of the repressed within Women’s Studies. The relationships between Lesbians and ‘straight’ women have always been strained within the women’s movements. It is as if the progressive delineation of new fields of research finally echoed these tensions to give rise to specific domains of Gay and Lesbian Studies, as well as what is known as ‘queer theory’.¹⁶

The difficulty of a clear-cut definition of the two concepts of sex and gender is obvious, as is a description of their mutual relation: does sex create gender? Does gender

¹⁴ Kristeva’s notion of female bisexuality would deserve a longer development which exceeds the limits of this essay. (See KRISTEVA, 1996: 222).

¹⁵ It could be fruitful to oppose Kristeva’s solution to Wittig’s conclusion: ‘when it comes to the conceptual level [...] one must assume both a particular and a universal point of view, at least to be part of literature. That is, one must work to reach the general, even while starting from an individual or from a specific point of view’ (WITTIG, 1983: 69).

¹⁶ On queer theory and ‘queering’, see Judith Butler’s last chapter ‘Critically Queer’ in *Bodies that Matter* (BUTLER, 1993: 223-242), as well as SEDGWICK (1993). On gay and lesbian theories, see among others FUSS (1991).

produce sex? What comes first? Will gender disappear?¹⁷ Can we dismantle such a chain of causality? Is there a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ gender? Should we, with Christine Delphy, think the non-gender (DELPHY, 1991)? An example taken at random, the introduction of a sociology text-book on gender, presents from the outset a reassuring distinction between the two concepts, while quickly acknowledging unresolved contentions among feminist theorists:

The term sex refers to biological differences between males and females, namely ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. Sex and gender are clearly related although the exact nature of this relationship is the subject of much heated debate among sociologists and others .(GARRETT, 1991: 9)

As is evident even in such a minimal account, the terms tend to shift: can ‘masculinity’ be equated with male sexual identity and ‘femininity’ with female sexual identity? While the text starts with a seemingly unquestionable assertion, ‘One is either born male or female’, the back cover reinterprets this biological ‘truth’ as ‘One is born a woman or a man’, and every feminist cannot but disagree and mentally recite De Beauvoir’s opening sentence to Part II of *The Second Sex*: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’. (BEAUVOIR, 1972: 295)¹⁸

The shifting grounds of the theoretical debate are made even clearer by the difficulty one encounters in translating the terms. Can gender be translated as ‘*rappports sociaux de sexe*’, a term coined by French feminist theorists which foregrounds the discrepancy between the Anglo-Saxon and the French traditions?¹⁹ The French are reluctant to do away with the notion of sex (‘*sexe*’) as is evident in Guillaumin’s use of the term ‘*classe de sexe*’ (GUILLAUMIN, 1995 100). Guillaumin also coined the word ‘*sexage*’ — in accordance with the morphologic derivation of ‘*esclavage*’ (slavery) — which turns women into living things (GUILLAUMIN, 1995: 80). Gender might also be translated by ‘*genre*’ as the title of HURTIG, KAIL and ROUCH (1991), an anthology of feminist articles, *Sexe et genre*, suggests. Another telling example of resistance to gender is Nicole-Claude Mathieu’s concept of social sex (‘*sexe social*’) which she developed as early as the ‘70s. Monique Wittig, for her part, elaborated the notion of ‘*classes de sexe*’ and calls for the abolition of the ‘category of sex’.²⁰

From the complexities and the perplexities engendered by the concept of difference, notably in the 1980s, the debate has evolved in the direction of a more thorough probing of epistemological positions in the 90s. The concepts of sex and gender have been analysed in their interrelation; marginalised and occulted positions, such as radical critiques of the concepts themselves, have moved centre-stage.²¹ Judith Butler’s philosophical essays *Gender*

¹⁷ BADINTER (1986) exemplifies such a utopian trend.

¹⁸ The English translation has been heavily criticised for its distortion of De Beauvoir’s scholarly underpinnings (SIMON, 1996: 90-91).

¹⁹ This opposition is culturally (nationally, geographically) grounded, as Australian critic Winter points out (ms : 2). I am well aware of oppositions between British feminism and American feminism. If materialist feminism has been obfuscated by an American (British?) academic canon which focused on major individual figures, Marxist British feminist thought has equally been ignored by academic feminism as the marginalisation of Marxist feminist journal, *m/f*, makes clear.

²⁰ WITTIG (1992: 1-8). For a critique of Wittig, see FUSS (1989: 39-53), and BUTLER (1990: 111-28).

²¹ The debate is ongoing as the Spring 1997 issue of *Signs* testifies. See HAWKESWORTH (1997a: 649-85) and the replies to her article: MCKENNA and KESSLER (1997), SMITH (1997), SCOTT and CONNELL (1997). Hawkesworth’s article (HAWKESWORTH, 1997a: 657) is a critique of four feminist attempts to ‘move from the use of gender as an analytic category to an explanation of gender as lived experience’: BUTLER (1990), SMITH (1992), CONNELL (1987) and KESSLER and MCKENNA (1978).

Trouble and Bodies that Matter (BUTLER, 1990, 1993) constitute a highly sophisticated attempt at testing the validity of these two concepts from a postmodern perspective.

Before summarising Butler's contribution, together with some of the major attacks on her endeavour, it is useful to recall an earlier attempt to think the two concepts jointly, Gayle Rubin's essay, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex' (RUBIN, 1975). Rubin coined the expression 'sex/gender system' for the 'part of social life which is the locus of the oppression of women, of sexual minorities, and of certain aspects of human personality among individuals' (RUBIN, 1975: 159). The sex/gender system is 'the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied' (RUBIN, 1975: 159). In her often quoted demonstration, Rubin attempted an exegetical reading of both Lévi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology and Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis (kinship and the individual psyche). Her conclusion was that the economic oppression of women was derivative and secondary: 'it is a product of the relationships by which sex and gender are organised and produced'. (RUBIN, 1975: 177)

Pushing Lévi-Strauss's analysis further, Rubin claimed that at the most general level the social organisation of sex rests upon gender, obligatory sexuality and the constraint of female sexuality. Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes. It is the product of the social relations of sexuality. Further, she saw gender as enforcing heterosexual desire and as excluding homosexual relations. She nonetheless granted that things are always not as simple as that and quoted examples of certain societies in which homosexuality is institutionalised. She also mentioned that the Mohave allowed a person to change from one sex to another to demonstrate how a given biological sex does not translate into the corresponding gender category. An anatomical man could become a woman by means of a certain ceremony. In sum, while emphasising the necessary suppression of female homosexuality, she stated that the organisation of female sexuality can be derived from the incest taboo, compulsory heterosexuality and an *asymmetric* division of gender (my emphasis).²²

Butler's *Gender Trouble* pays due tribute to Rubin's groundbreaking reflection and notably to her subsequent essay, 'Thinking Sex: Notes on the Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' (RUBIN 1984). She nonetheless ponders the reasons which led Rubin to the conclusion that gender is merely a function of compulsory heterosexuality, which, once overthrown, would lead to the breakdown of gender. Butler critiques the recourse to a state of happiness before the law, an unlimited universe of sexual possibility (BUTLER, 1990: 72-76).

Butler's language has irritated some of her readers and critics for the unnecessary complexity of her critical jargon which she variously borrows from Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida. A case in point are her introductory questions, such as the following (BUTLER, 1990: X): 'What happens to the subject and to the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and reifies these ostensible categories of ontology?' To put it simply, the question bears on the displacement of gender categories by a critique of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (I borrow the term from RICH, 1983) which unveils its relation to the grounding of the gendered subject. Such a displacement is the task that Butler sets up for herself in her work. What she achieves

²² See HÉRITIER (1996), for a similar attempt to add 'the differential valency of the sexes' to the incest taboo, compulsory sexual union, and the social division of labour as the founding pillars of society. Héritier considers herself a materialist, yet starts from an elementary biological given.

is indeed a critique of feminism as an identity politics, which dismantles in true Derridean fashion the binary opposition the heterosexual imperative constructs and consolidates through repetition, so that, in the end, sexual identity appears as ‘natural’, ‘evident’, ‘unquestionable’. Beyond the brilliance of the deconstructive *tours de force*, the deft manipulation of different discourses on feminism and sexuality (Foucault for instance is used to critique Kristeva; Foucault is in turn critiqued for his blind-spot on female homosexuality), the question of politics emerges, as it invariably does. What change can be envisaged and what are the modalities of that change? The aim, according to Butler, is a ‘denaturalisation’ of gender and a proliferation of ‘cultural configurations of sex and gender’ (BUTLER, 1990: 149). Contrary to the first feminists, who saw the abolition of gender as the utopian horizon of women’s struggle, a plurality of gender and sex configurations will effect the demise of the system: ‘The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself’ (BUTLER, 1990: 148). Later, however, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler states that ‘there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalised status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion’ (BUTLER, 1993: 231).

Together with ‘repetition’, the term ‘performance’ is crucial to Butler’s demonstration. It is the performativity of gender which brings the political solution. *Bodies that Matter* clarifies her position: ‘It is in terms of a norm that compels a certain “citation” in order for a viable subject to be produced that the notion of gender performativity calls to be rethought’ (BUTLER, 1993: 232). Butler’s intellectual agility is undeniable. But her espousal of postmodernism as an analytical tool leaves her open to the criticism which is usually levelled at this school of thought: the emphasis bears so much on symbolisation (the Symbolic, ‘performance’, the endless play of signification) that the reality of women’s and men’s lives in their daily interaction is overlooked and other differences, such as race, class and ethnicity, are not taken into account.²³

French anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu brings to the fore the ‘repressed’, the obfuscated in such a discourse: ‘What is left aside is sex, not only in its sole meaning of sexuality, but in the sense of biological categorisation which carries on functioning in the social sphere: social sex’ (MATHIEU, 1994: 56). Mathieu sees as postmodern the reduction of all issues to style. Her irritation at postmodernism is aimed precisely at the way in which it moves away from an analysis of power relations (in which women are the subjugated group) in favour of epistemological word-plays and the Symbolic. She claims in an essay on Madonna that:

postmodernism appears to [her] as a new nominalism, an individual self-centredness. It is not the death of the Subject, it is the death of the political, relational Subject. Although it aims at ‘situating’ discourses (true, only in relation to... other discourses), it is the death of all sociological and historical thinking; in brief, a new obscurantism, which seems to me particularly serious when it comes to women’s position. (MATHIEU, 1994: 56)²⁴

²³ See Hawkesworth’s critique of Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, (HAWKESWORTH, 1997a: 663-9). ‘By interpreting gender in terms of the cultural production of heterosexual desire and psychoanalytic production of gender identity, Butler’s account makes gender too much a matter of the self — a self that appears peculiarly unmarked by race, class, or ethnicity’ (HAWKESWORTH, 1997a: 668). ‘Despite the virtuosity of Butler’s account of gender as performativity, it does not provide a conception of gender that breaks definitely from the problematic presupposition of an ideology of procreation’ (HAWKESWORTH, 1997a: 669).

²⁴ ‘Nominalism’ seems to be substituted for the recurrent accusation of ‘essentialism’ levelled by American feminists.

Mathieu, for her part, in a logical evolution from earlier theoretical debates and in conjunction with the current and past interest in the third gender, the third sex, has tried to theorise the ways in which such phenomena ‘differ as regards the articulation between sex and gender, and how they themselves often revert to systems of binary thinking’ (MATHIEU, 1989).²⁵ She thus set out to study striking examples of conformity and transgression between conceptions of sex and conceptions of gender in various societies and offers a grid which helps classify the different combinations. The complexity of her theoretical construction leads me to reproduce her demonstration almost verbatim. In her theoretical elaboration, she distinguishes three ways of thinking about the relationship between sex and gender in which can simultaneously be made out the four following elements: (1) a problematic of personal identity in relation to the sexed body and sexuality, but also in relation to the status of the person in the social organisation of sex; (2) a strategy of relation between the sexes; (3) an understanding of the relationship between biological sex and social sex; (4) a definition of the relationship between hetero- and homosexuality.

These three modes of thinking about the interrelation of sex and gender are: (1) ‘sexual identity’ based on an individualistic consciousness of sex, where sex and gender are homologically connected. Gender translates sex; (2) ‘sexed identity’ based on sex group consciousness, where sex and gender are anatomically connected. Here gender symbolises sex, and vice-versa; (3) ‘sex-class identity’ based on class consciousness, where sex and gender are sociologically connected. Here sex constructs gender (MATHIEU, 1989). Ultimately, Mathieu wants to rescue the ambivalence, the heuristic duplicity of the word ‘sex’, which she sees as functioning as parameter both in concrete social relations and in symbolic elaborations. Preferring the concept of ‘social sex’ and acknowledging the existence of third genders or man-woman genders, she denounces the current use of the word gender, which has tended to mask the reality of gender hierarchy.²⁶ For, at the bottom of the social ladder, one finds ‘females whose social sex is “women”’ (MATHIEU, 1989: 32). She restores and foregrounds power relations.

III. The Ethics of Intervention (Representation, Reality, Relationality)

The terms of the debate are clear and complex for they mobilize two very different systems of thinking, two irreducible epistemological frameworks: where Butler insists on the fact that ‘reality’ is not ‘out there’ but an ‘effect of discourse’, Mathieu’s materialism — which Butler might reread as essentialism — leads her to insist on ‘concrete’ social relations, on the reality of women’s exploitation. Butler’s inquiry into bodily matters, the materiality of the body, a logical evolution for anyone who researches the philosophical implications of configurations of sexuality, poses the problems of limits: the limits of philosophical investigation when confronted with what could be termed the political imperative of a feminist position.²⁷ Discourse as ideology, the ideology of discourse and a critique of ideology.

²⁵ Reprinted in MATHIEU (1991). For a shortened and updated version of Mathieu’s models, see MATHIEU (1997).

²⁶ On the current investigations on third sexes and third genders, see HERDT (1996). For a critique of Trumbach’s use of the terms sex and gender, see LHOMOND (1997). See also her earlier LHOMOND (1991).

²⁷ See BUTLER and SCOTT (1992). They, however, question the relationship of discourse to the real. This concern is one of the points they wish the contributors to address: ‘Some feminists have argued that poststructuralism forbids recourse to a “real body” or “a real sex” and that such recourse is necessary to articulate moral and political opposition to violence, rape, and other forms of oppression. [...] By problematising

The political agendas which derive from each position are radically different. In the early days of my own feminist research, I wrote an ill-fated essay on Juliet Mitchell and Jane Gallop entitled 'One Laughs, the Other doesn't' (RAYNAUD, 1986). The opposing and irreconcilable political positions represented here by Mathieu and Butler echo this earlier debate with a displacement: Mathieu salvages a 'reality' obfuscated by Butler's relentless epistemological interrogations, and questions the short-term political consequences of such a deconstruction, Their definitions of the real differ, as do their perceptions of the relations between theory and politics.

Gayatri Spivak's repeated answer to this apparent deadlock is that 'one must raise a persistent critical voice while making a strategic use of essentialism; in other words, here one comes up against the decisive scene of the usefulness of catachresis' (SPIVAK 1992a 80).²⁸ Derrida's own settling of accounts in the controversy which opposed him to materialist critics Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon, following the publication of his essay 'Racism's Last Word', is also worth noting (DERRIDA, 1985²⁹; MCCLINTOCK and NIXON, 1985: 53). Having been said to 'go *beyond* the text' [sic] in his indictment of *apartheid*, Derrida reiterates his formulation that there is no beyond the text.³⁰ His revaluation of the concept of text brings together theoretico-philosophical necessities with 'practical', political, and other necessities of what is called deconstruction:

The text is always a field of forces: heterogeneous, differential, open, and so on. That's why deconstructive readings and writings are concerned not only with library books, with discourses, with conceptual and semantic contents. They are not simply analyses of discourses [...]. They are also effective or *active* (as one says) *interventions*, in particular political and institutional interventions that transform contexts without limiting themselves to theoretical and constative utterances even though they must also produce such utterances (my emphasis). (DERRIDA, 1985: 367)³¹

To go back to Butler, she might not focus on economic exploitation or on sexual exploitation, such as pornography in her earlier work; she nonetheless insists on the historicity of discourse and does away with the notion of free will.³²

Are these oppositions fruitful? Do they point to possible resolutions? Is 'strategic essentialism' a way forward? It seems hardly convincing to ask theoreticians to subscribe to a position which they later disavow on the basis of its temporary usefulness in a certain context.

the political construction and deployment of the "real", do feminist arguments informed by poststructuralism end up in positions of moral relativism and political complicity?' (BUTLER and SCOTT, 1992: xvi).

²⁸ Part of this article is reproduced in SPIVAK (1992b), which focuses on 'the mother' in de Beauvoir, Cixous and the Islamic family code.

²⁹ This article is a translation of 'Le Dernier mot du racisme' written for the catalogue of 'Art contre/against Apartheid' (Paris, November 1983).

³⁰ The earlier reference of Derrida's intervention on sex (DERRIDA, 1983) is his question about Heidegger's failure to take it into account.

³¹ His scathing rebuttal of McClintock and Nixon's attack on his failure to historicise the word *apartheid* is taken up by Diane Fuss in the context of the Derridean use of 'always already', which Fuss reads as being in turn 'essentialised' (FUSS, 1989: 16-18). Fuss sums up her argument as follows: "'Contradiction" emerges as the "always already" of deconstruction, its irreducible inner core without which it could not do its work. It is *essential* to deconstruction, and as such runs the risk of reification and solidification' (FUSS, 1989: 18). As such an example makes evident, her own definition of essence is extremely slippery.

³² See BUTLER (1995: 197-227). The question of pornography — the sexual exploitation of women — surfaces as a long postscript to an essay in which Butler positions herself vis-à-vis feminist lawyer and theoretician Catharine MacKinnon. MacKinnon contends that pornography constructs women's reality without leaving them the option of opting out (MACKINNON, 1995). Although intrinsically linked to the issues raised in this essay, a thorough discussion of the debate on pornography falls outside its scope.

A more thoroughgoing deconstruction of the opposition between sex and gender, nature and culture is needed. Perhaps we might locate 'woman' in the continuously reciprocally renegotiated relationship between 'body' and 'culture' and question that relationship from both a psychoanalytical and a materialist perspective, aware of the blind-spots and conscious of the limits of these heuristic discourses, knowing that exclusion does not imply a refusal of accountability. Interrogating the articulation between the cultural construction, production and representation of sex and gender as interrelated analytical categories — conceptual tools which in a functionalist perspective become prescriptive — will contribute to a clearer understanding of the nature and the persistence of women's oppression. Political action is both part of, and follows from, these epistemological quests.

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