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Toril Moi

**What Does It Mean to Claim that Sex, Gender and the Body Are Socially Constructed?**

Moi, Toril. *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Moi, Toril. *Sex, Gender and the Body: The Student Edition of What Is a Woman?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

US law: to discriminate against someone “on the basis of sex.”

Virginia Woolf: “It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex.” (1929)

**“The three critiques”:**

*A recoil against biological determinism:*

From W. K. Brooks, *The Law of Heredity* (1883):

“[T]he ovum is conservative, the male cell progressive” (84).

“The positions which women already occupy in society and the duties which they perform are, in the main, what they should be if our view is correct; and any attempt to improve the condition of women by ignoring or obliterating the intellectual differences between them and men must result in disaster to the race” (263).

Feminist fear: nature = biology = essence = no change = a commitment to the unjust status quo

*A recoil against Descartes' body/mind split*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945):

“Man is a historical idea and not a natural species” (E170/F199).

“Everything is both manufactured and natural in man” (E189/F221).

*A recoil against humanism*

Any classic humanism postulates that in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins (but why not ask the parents of Emmet Till, the young Negro assassinated by the Whites what they think of The Great Family of Man?), one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature. Progressive humanism, on the contrary, must always remember to reverse the terms of this very old imposture, constantly to scour nature its “laws” and its “limits” in order to discover History there, and at last to establish Nature itself as historical. (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*).

***THE SEX/GENDER DISTINCTION***

Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna R. Reiter, 157-210. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975.

The poststructuralist picture of sex/gender:

**SEX /GENDER**  
 biological/political  
 natural/cultural  
 essence/construction  
 essentialist/constructionist  
 body/mind  
 passive/active  
 base/superstructure  
 being/doing  
 substance/performance  
 fixed/mobile, variable  
 stable/unstable  
 coherent/ non-coherent  
 prediscursive/discursive  
 prelinguistic/linguistic  
 presocial/social  
 ahistorical/historical

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*:

"perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (GT, p. 7 old/p. 11 new).

"But 'the body' is itself a construction, as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender." (GT, 8 old/13 new).

A summary of Butler's argument about the materiality of the body in *Bodies That Matter* (1993):

1. Essentialists claim that sex determines gender. Butler opposes them by claiming that 'regulatory discourses' determine biological facts. Sex is the performative effect of gender.

2. In order to explain how this can be, a general theory of "materiality" is required. Butler's project is to produce a "poststructuralist rewriting of discursive performativity as it operates in the materialization of sex" (p. 12).

3. Butler proposes that matter is an effect of power: “What I would propose . . . is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter. That matter is always materialized has, I think, to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed materializing effects of regulatory power in the Foucaultian sense” (pp. 9-10).

4. Thus she has proved that the body is material and constructed.

### ***SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION***

Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (1999)

“The Hacking Test”:

- (0) In the present state of affairs, x is taken for granted; x appears to be inevitable
- (1) x is not inevitable, x could have been otherwise, x is contingent
- (2) x is a bad thing
- (3) the world would be a better place without x.

Degrees of commitment to constructionist claims:

- a. historicists
- b1. reformists and b2. unmaskers
- c. revolutionaries

#### **a. gender (in the sense of oppressive social relations, or normative femininity, etc.)**

- (0) In the present state of affairs, gender is taken for granted; gender appears to be inevitable
- (1) gender is not inevitable, gender could have been otherwise, gender is contingent
- (2) gender is a bad thing
- (3) the world would be a better place without gender

#### **b. gender (in the sense of lived experience, the way we live our sexual embodiment)**

- (0) In the present state of affairs, gender is taken for granted; gender appears to be inevitable
- (1) gender is not inevitable, gender could have been otherwise, gender is contingent
- (2) gender is a bad thing
- (3) the world would be a better place without gender

**c. sex (as opposed to gender)**

- (0) In the present state of affairs, sex is taken for granted; sex appears to be inevitable
- (1) sex is not inevitable, sex could have been otherwise, sex is contingent
- (2) sex is a bad thing
- (3) the world would be a better place without sex

**d. The body**

- (0) In the present state of affairs, the body is taken for granted; the body appears to be inevitable
- (1) the body is not inevitable, the body could have been otherwise, the body is contingent
- (2) the body is a bad thing
- (3) the world would be a better place without the body

Kate Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999)

**Conclusions:**

To avoid universalism, essentialism, and biological determinism:

- revolutionary about gender in the sense of ideology and oppressive social norms
- reformist about gender in the sense of lived experience
- forget about "sex" in the sense of hormones, chromosomes etc.
- historicist about the body

**Beyond sex and gender**

the body is a situation (Simone de Beauvoir)

the pervasive picture of sex (T. Moi, in "What Is a Woman?")

the body is a background (T. Moi reading SdB)

the pervasive picture of gender (ethnicity, race) (T. Moi, in "What Is a Woman?")

the body is not all:

"I'm only interested in her body" vs. "I'm only interested in her." (P. M. S. Hacker)