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Gender and Postmodernity

> In a context in which the women's movement came to be criticized by lesbians for privileging heterosexual concerns, by working-class women for reflecting middle-class interests, and by women of colour for being implicitly white, post-structuralist, postcolonial and postmodern theories of gender emerged . . . that rejected perceived simple binary oppositions between men-the-oppressors and women-the-passive-victims. (Mottier 2008: 72)

Véronique Mottier points to some of the factors that led in the early 1990s to a quite dramatic shift in the feminist approach to the analysis of gender. We can refer to this as a 'postmodern turn'. According to Barrett and Phillips (1992), in one of the earliest commentaries on this development, this effectively amounted to a 'paradigm' shift – that is, a complete change in the way theorists began to understand what gender is (ontology) and how gender should be studied (epistemology). What Barrett and Phillips describe as a shift from 1970s' to 1990s' feminism resulted in part from the build-up of critical thinking about some basic feminist premises and concepts (such as the theory of patriarchy) during the 1980s. According to Kuhn (1970), a paradigm shift in scientific thinking occurs when the weight of evidence that there are some central problems with the existing theoretical framework becomes too great to be ignored. That is what the advocates of

postmodernism believe has happened to gender analysis as a result of the criticisms listed by Mottier. However, as we shall see, there is no unanimity over this. Some believe that the insights of modernity on gender remain vital and that the revelatory and progressive thrust of feminist work is in danger of being lost in the 'postmodern moment'.

Indeed, if the watchword of modernist feminism was 'enlightenment', the core impulse of postmodernism is 'deconstruction'. Increasingly, feminist theorists turned attention away from examining gender inequalities in the world around them and began to question and unpick their own assumptions. In Patricia Waugh's words: 'Feminism of late . . . has developed a self-reflexive mode, questioning its own legitimating procedures in a manner which seem to bring it close to a Postmodernism which has absorbed the lessons of post-structuralism' (Waugh 1992: 120).

According to Waugh, this reflexivity has led feminists to discern a contradiction at the heart of their thinking: namely, that the quest for equality, which is the political heart of feminism, is based on the notion of a distinct and separate gendered identity. This in turn is the foundation of a common movement among women, the solidarity of sisterhood built on shared experience. But this idea of women as 'different' from men in some common way is similar, Waugh suggests, to the patriarchal ideology which legitimates different treatment of the sexes through the proposition of 'essential' and 'natural' gender difference. Like Mottier, we can question the idea that all women do share a common identity. Throughout the 1980s women from various ethnic minority backgrounds, in particular, argued that white feminism did not speak to or for them and that they did not feel included in the notion of 'sisterhood': their experiences, they stated, were too different from those of white middle-class women. This internal critique posed a radical challenge to how gender was conceived, moving from a primarily binary category (women/men) to a signifier of diverse and multiple identities.

Ideas of 'difference' and 'multiplicity' are central issues in the postmodernist case against modernism. Before looking in more detail at the key features of a postmodern approach to gender, however, I want to discuss the political context which led to this shift in thinking.

The politics of postmodernity

In the last chapter I linked the development of gender as an academic topic to the growth of the movement of radical protest in the 1960s. It is more difficult to make a firm link between postmodern feminism and particular political events, partly because, as we shall see, postmodernism is a very diffuse and diverse body of thought. However, I have no doubt that one key contextual influence was the break-up of the Soviet bloc, especially that major symbolic event, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The 'deconstruction' of the wall brought together two previously sundered social formations, one successfully capitalist, one (quasi?) socialist, into the new unified German Republic, breaching the frontline confrontation between these two combative ideological and political systems. This triumph of capitalism posed a major challenge to radical political thinking and appeared fatally to damage the legitimacy of Marxist theorizing. Many western Marxist intellectuals sought a new radical home. Along with this blow to Marxism, there evolved a general scepticism to the kind of 'grand theories' or 'big ideas' which the Marxist theory of socialist revolution perfectly exemplified. This is demonstrated in what is seen as the key initial text of postmodernity, Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), in which he explicitly defines postmodernism as 'scepticism towards Grand Narratives'.

The 1980s was also notable for the political and moral ascendancy of the New Right, spearheaded by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and the accompanying deployment on a global basis of neo-liberal economic policies. The idea that there was, in fact, no credible or sustainable alternative to capitalism also bred a climate of disillusion and disenchantment, given that the radicals remained deeply critical of capitalism and acutely aware of its divisive and exploitative nature: the gap between rich and poor people within western societies and the gap between the richest and poorest nations on a world scale continued to grow through the 1980s and 1990s. Ordinary people during this period felt disempowered, as I discovered during the mid-1980s when I was interviewing working people in Newcastle and Sunderland for a project on

gender and trade unions. This feeling of rather helpless powerlessness spread, I think, to academics and contributed to the kind of pessimistic, almost nihilistic, accounts of social relations produced by the influential French thinker Michel Foucault and his followers. Foucault elaborated a vision of extraordinarily powerful systems of domination, orchestrated by the state, facilitated by the 'scientific' ideas of various expert groups (such as clinicians, psychiatrists, social reformers), but in which we were all to some extent complicit, in that power, in Foucault's view, was 'capillary'; that is, it flowed through the whole of the social body to the very fingertips and toes which were ordinary people. This pessimism, it seems to me, fuelled the deconstructionist thrust which led postmodernist and post-structuralist academics to interrogate critically their own concepts and ways of thinking. As Kemp and Squires summarize it, there is a move from the old central question of second-wave feminism, 'what is to be done?', to 'the more reflexive "what is the basis of my claim to knowledge?" and "who is the 'I' that makes such a claim?"' (1997: 8).

I identify two other contextual factors which helped promote the postmodern turn, one much remarked on, the other less so. One relates to the external environment, the other to trends within academe. The first was the rise during the 1980s, to be consolidated after the Soviet collapse, of various well-organized bodies promoting 'identity politics' – that is, a type of politics based on the claims of specific subgroups in society, for example, disabled people, gays, bisexuals and lesbians, or radical Islamists. Sociologists conceptualize this in terms of the increasing salience of 'new social movements' as against the old class-based politics of the labour movement. This was accompanied by a diminishing use, both in the sphere of political action and in the academy, of the notion of class. Notably, in sociology, where class had so long been almost the most central concept, its position was gradually superseded by analytic interest in gender, ethnicity and other forms of social difference (see Bradley 1996). In this scenario, class became no more than one of a long list of sources of division and inequality, rather than the basic organizing principle of society Marxists had proclaimed it to be.

A particularly important result of these processes of change was a burgeoning body of literature in the 1980s in which feminists of minority ethnic origin, under the banner of 'black feminism', attacked white feminists for their ethnocentrism, racism and colonialist assumptions (for example, Amos and Parmar 1984; Carby 1982; Mama 1984). Such writings challenged the notions of sisterhood and unity within feminism, and pointed to the need to consider 'difference' and divisions within the category of 'women'. They showed, for example, that black women, rather than seeing the family as a source of oppression for women, viewed it as a refuge and defence against a racist society. Black women often felt a stronger tie to their menfolk than to white women who, they argued, had benefitted from colonial expansion. These writings were a major contribution to the build-up of explanatory anomalies leading to the paradigm shift noted by Barrett and Phillips.

The second factor was that during this period, academic feminists had to a great extent achieved one of their goals: that is, getting the idea of gender accepted as a key part of the curriculum within the social sciences and humanities. It would have been an odd sociology department that did not, in the 1990s, offer a course or package of courses on gender and feminist research. One can state that from the mid-1980s the analysis of gender was increasingly mainstreamed, that is, that it had at last entered into the 'malestream'. The pioneers of Women's Studies no longer bore the sole responsibility for addressing the activist question 'What is to be done?' about gender inequalities and were able to turn to more complex and academic debates. There was, in effect, a separation between the campaigning and the philosophical and reflective aspects of second-wave feminism. This almost inevitably led gender theorists to draw on the ideas of the currently modish intellectual perspectives. Enter postmodernism!

What is postmodernism?

There is no simple answer to this frequently posed question. This is in part because postmodernism is not so much a

specific theory or set of theories as an intellectual *mood* or *climate*, a type of collective state of mind. Many different things contributed to this state of mind. There were influences from literary theory, from art and from architecture. In literature, postmodern writing was said to be the successor to 'high modernism' – that is, the complex and rather esoteric work produced by writers such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and James Joyce. These texts were possessed of a high seriousness and an attempt to tease out the inner truths of humanity (the analogy to modernist sociology comes in here). They were replaced by more accessible, playful and popular writings, which were often self-referential, with the author playing a part in them or providing a commentary. The novels of Paul Auster or of Alain de Botton would be good examples. Similarly, in architecture, while modernist buildings pay strict attention to function, postmodern artefacts are more playful, designed to appeal broadly to all sorts of people, often parodies of past building styles. Christopher Jencks's books on postmodernism present images of hotels in Disneyland and Las Vegas, built in the style of Egyptian Pyramids or Roman temples (1986; 1991). The theme of self-reflexivity, which we have already associated with feminism's postmodern turn, is a common one here; postmodernism's mood is a knowing, slightly ironic self-awareness.

In the academic turn to postmodern, as already mentioned, the rejection of grand theories, or 'metanarratives', was a starting principle. In his key text, Lyotard argued for the abandonment of 'totalizing' theories, those that attempted to build models of societies as integrated, functioning systems (such as Marxism), and their replacement with a myriad of partial and locally based 'small' narratives. The most social science could aspire to was the description of particular processes of social interaction within a specific context. Here the term 'postmodern' links to the idea of 'post-structuralism', that is, an approach which denies the validity of the concept of structure as a valid metaphor for societies and social life. The term originated within linguistic theory, as a critique of prevailing theories which claimed that languages were based upon some kind of fundamental structural principles which governed usage and meaning. The post-structuralist view is that languages and societies are random, fluid, even

chaotic, rather than governed by discernible organizing principles.

Lyotard set out some basic theoretical principles which have been upheld by adherents of postmodernism, but the ideas of a number of other theorists, who would not necessarily describe themselves as postmodernists or even post-structuralists, have contributed to the popularity of the perspective. In particular, major influences on the development of postmodern and post-structural feminism have been Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, three French social theorists whose work predates the postmodern turn. Barrett concisely explains why:

> Feminist theory has been able to take up a number of issues outside that classically 'materialist' perspective. . . . Post-structuralist theories, notably Derridean deconstructive reading, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucault's emphasis on the material body and the discourses of power, have proved very important in this. Feminists have appropriated these theories rather than others for good reasons: these theorists address the issues of sexuality, subjectivity and textuality that feminists have put at the top of the agenda. . . . It is clear that the classic materialist presuppositions are increasingly harder to apply usefully. (1992: 20)

Derrida is particularly connected with the approach known as deconstruction, which involves unpicking many of the tenets of western thought, in particular the characteristic binary patterns of scientific and rational thinking. Binaries are particularly relevant to the analysis of gender, given that it rests upon the crucial oppositions of man/woman, masculine/feminine, nature/culture, public/private, heterosexual/homosexual, and so on. Post-structural feminists such as Butler, whose work was discussed in chapter 1, argued that modernist feminists had accepted these distinctions as unproblematic, whereas they actually needed to be questioned, challenged and dissolved. Derrida makes play of the 'excluded' middle: all those shades of experience that do not fit the polar opposites. Thus, people are pressured into accepting one or other of binary terms, to be either a man or a woman,

to display either masculine or feminine attributes, when in fact individual experience may locate them at one of a myriad of points along a continuum. Much stress is here put on the various forms of ambiguous sexuality we discussed in chapter 1.

Moreover, the binaries imply fixity, whereas individuals change and move over time; for example, they may fluctuate between homosexual and heterosexual behaviours. In addition, any singly posited binary identity, as being, say, a man or a woman, is cross-cut or intersected by other sources of identity. The attack on notions of fixed identities became an important part of the postmodern feminist critique, and is well expressed in a famous quotation from Donna Haraway's influential piece 'A manifesto for cyborgs' ('cyborg' being a metaphor for transcendence of binaries referring to an organism which is part human, part machine): 'A Chicana or a US black woman has not been able to speak as a woman or as a black person or as Chicano. The category "woman" negated all non-white women; "black" negated all non-black people, as well as all black women' (1990: 197).

This idea of the 'non-fixity' of individual identities or subjectivities chimes well with the work of Foucault, who has perhaps been the most important theoretical influence within large areas of social science over the past decades. One of the most important aspects of Foucault's attack on western rationality and science was his criticism of all approaches which portrayed human subjects in terms of an autonomous, self-directing core self, which remained stable throughout a lifetime of social vicissitudes. Examples of this concept, which are commonly adhered to, are the notions of 'the rational actor', 'economic man' or the 'master of the soul'. The reader will note that these kinds of 'historic agents' are described in masculine terms, which is one of the reasons feminists were so taken by Foucault's 'decentring' of the subject. Dismissing this notion of the 'essential self', Foucault replaced it by the notion of 'discourses', often quasi-scientific, which actually construct human subjects. In the *History of Sexuality* (1980), for example, Foucault argued that Victorian psychologists and sexologists constructed the dominant discourses of the hysterical woman, the masturbating schoolboy and the

perverted homosexual. Such discourses actually change the way people behave, as submersion in these discourses frames their daily ways of thinking and acting. Catherine Belsey summarizes the postmodern feminist position on this:

> Subjectivity is discursively produced and is constrained by the range of subject positions defined by the discourses in which the concrete individual participates. In this sense existing discourses determine not only what can be said and understood, but the nature of subjectivity itself, *what it is possible to be*. (1985: 5–6, quoted in Kemp and Squires 1997: 237; my italics)

This does not imply that women did not lose their tempers and adolescents did not indulge in solitary sexual practices before the nineteenth century! Foucault's argument is that these practices are transformed by discourses into things seen as central to specific identities. The 'paedophile' may be a father, a good football player, a baker, a Christian; but these identities may be submerged by a discursively constructed identity which becomes, in Howard Becker's term, a 'master [*sic*] identity' (1963).

As the quotation from Barrett indicates, Foucault's influence was not just theoretical. His exciting and innovative substantive studies drew attention to issues that were of great concern to feminists and opened up new avenues for exploring gender differences. In particular, his studies of the body, and the way it is controlled and made 'docile' through various disciplinary regimes (ranging from prison sentences to diet and exercise), were seen to be highly relevant to gender analysis and were drawn on by feminists such as Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo to investigate the processes by which bodies were gendered.

The growing trend to consider gender as something inherently discursive as opposed to material, to approach gender analysis in terms of 'words' rather than things, as Barrett (1992) put it, was reinforced by the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan, which incorporated a Derridean approach to language. Feminist literary theorists had had a longstanding interest in psychoanalysis; indeed, Rosemarie Tong, in her study *Feminist Thought* (1989), presents psychoanalytic

feminism as a separate strand of work. Particularly influential were the theories of Juliet Mitchell; in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1985) Mitchell put together her own version of a dual systems approach, using Marxism to explain the material inequalities between women and men, alongside ideas from psychoanalytic theory to explain difference in sexuality and emotions (what Connell referred to as the structures of 'cathexis'), which she saw as the core of patriarchy. However, many feminists had difficulties with the work of Freud, as it seemed to present the feminine psyche as inherently inferior to male. Because the man had a penis, women were negatively defined in terms of a lack, suffering in Freud's view from 'penis envy'. The young boy's fear of castration, which prevented him from realizing his basic desire to have sex with his mother, placed the possession of the phallus at the core of adult masculine identity.

Lacan's contribution was to transpose Freud's ideas of the power of the penis to a symbolic level. Language is phallocentric, portraying men and masculinity as the norm and embodying what Lacan called 'the Law of the Father'. Through entering, as she inevitably must as she learns to speak, into phallocentric discourse, the young girl learns to accept herself as inferior and lacking. Once again, we see how discourses construct gendered identities: in this case, the idea of the man as active, the woman as subordinate and passive in her sexuality. This comes very close, of course, to the ideas of the radical feminists such as Daly and Spender whom we discussed in chapter 2. They similarly stress the exclusionary nature of language which has been shaped by men and renders the world of women invisible.

While Lacan builds on Freud's ideas, his shift from physicality to language is less deterministic. While we cannot feasibly dispose of male and female genitalia if humanity is to survive, we might aspire to alter discourse. In the meantime, Lacan offers a depressing, if powerful, view of gender dynamics. Unlike the penis, the phallus does not actually exist, in the sense that it is a symbol of patriarchal authority; for both sexes, it is something missing, aspired to, the source of what Lacan and his followers call 'desire', the perpetual yearning for something which will give us the sense of completeness. But this is experienced differently by men and

women (see Andermahr et al. 2000). Women feel a lack of the phallus which can only be assuaged (though this is an illusion) through a heterosexual union. But men experience the threat of loss (as expressed through the Oedipus complex), which they counter by continual attempts to assert and reassert their masculine superiority. This explains the negative and aggressive aspects of what Connell called 'hegemonic masculinity' (see chapter 2). As Cranny-Francis et al. put it, 'voyeurism, sadism and fetishism are the little boy's responses to the fear of castration' (2003: 164); these are stages on the road to a resolution of the Oedipus complex and thus to a happy and secure adult male (and heterosexual) identity. However, as studies of contemporary male sexuality show, many get stuck en route; witness the massive burgeoning of fetishistic and voyeuristic entertainment aimed at men: pornography, lap-dancing clubs, manga comics. For women, Freudians and Lacanians see narcissism, hysteria and masochism as equivalent phases (Cranny-Francis et al. 2003), which women are likely to go through. Such forms of behaviour fit well with the stereotypical 'emphasized feminine' personality: passivity, dependency, coquetry and obsession with appearance, leading, for example, to eating disorders and self-harming among young women. They also illuminate some of the problems in sexuality faced by women, for example the difficulty women find in quitting relationships with violent and abusive men.

There seems little hope in the Lacanian universe for happy equal sexual relations between a woman and a man. Indeed, a problem I find with all versions of psychoanalysis is that they seem to focus only on the dangers, not the pleasures, of sexuality and gender relations. Strangely, postmodern feminists who criticized their modernist predecessors for this very reason, arguing that they tended only to portray women as 'victims' and men as 'oppressors' and ignored the complexities of power, do not seem to find this difficulty with the psychoanalytic approach. Other issues are the apparently negative view of homosexuality (as a distorted form of adult sexuality) and indeed of all types of behaviour seen as feminine within the psychoanalytic paradigm. The ideal person appears to be the independent male heterosexual. However, feminists often take insights from psychoanalysis to combine

with more sociological approaches, and it offers a powerful way to analyse what goes wrong between the sexes.

Postmodern and post-structural approaches to gender

It will be noted that the social theorists discussed above are all men and, apart from Lacan, none was explicitly concerned with inequalities between the sexes or the analysis of gender. As with the modernist feminist usage of Marxism, postmodern feminists drew on some of the ideas discussed above and appropriated them for their own use.

What, then, was the distinctive postmodern and post-structural approach to gender? First of all, postmodern feminists saw gender as socially constructed. Thus, gender was not a fixed or stable category. This principle was explored in a rich and influential text by Denise Riley, *Am I that Name?* (1988). In this book she explored how the meaning of being a woman had altered historically over time. There is no universal version of femaleness and femininity. Moreover, individual consciousness of our gender is highly unstable and not a consistent base of identity. We are not perpetually thinking of ourselves as being women (or men). The sense of being a gendered entity is triggered in certain circumstances, for example when a man pays a compliment on one's appearance, when one is attracted to somebody ('you make me feel like a natural woman'), when one is enjoying a 'girls' night out', or, adversely, when one is pestered by somebody in the street (hissing, catcalling, bottom-pinching, etc.) or made to feel inferior by sexist stereotyping (women can't . . . park cars, make tough decisions; women lose their heads and panic, burst into tears when things get tough, etc.).

In *Fractured Identities* (1996), I reworked this as the difference between *passive identity* (a potential which is always there but which, like a 'sleeping' VDU screen, only springs into life when some button or key is pressed) and the *active identity* which springs from negative or positive interactions which forefront our gender. Such a consciousness may then lead on to a *politicized identity*, when gender becomes a basis

for political attachment, either generally as a feminist or by being involved in any of the array of groups that are active on behalf of women, from Women's Aid to the Women's Institute. Where my thinking differs from Riley's is that, while I see gender *identities* as intermittent, variable and fluctuating, they are, for me, underpinned by a substratum or structure of gender *relations*, which is always operating, whether we are conscious of it or not.

It is not entirely clear whether Riley and the post-structuralists see any kind of substratum of this kind because of their unease with the idea of materiality. For many post-structuralists, gender is a discursive phenomenon; thus the objects of study must be the range of competing discourses and counter-discourses (of which feminism is itself one) of femininity and masculinity. The questions here become, 'How do we talk of gender?' and 'How does that in turn affect how we experience ourselves as women and men?' Thus, gendered subjectivities and identities become central topics.

Some readers may at this point pose the question: 'If identities and subjectivities are fluid creations of changing discourses, how come for many people gender relations have the appearance of fixity and stability?'. The answer offered by Judith Butler, the most influential post-structural feminist, is that it is through performativity – that is, the fact that we constantly play out gender, we 'do gender' through the clothes we wear, the words we use, the activities we carry out, the way we relate to our friends and relations. By countless repetitions of these everyday acts, we convince ourselves that our gendered selves are stable.

A characteristic move by postmodernists, which rises from this view of gender as unfixed and variable, is to criticize modernist approaches to gender as being 'essentialist', founded on the notion of some core (essence) to all women's beings which promotes a common identity. For postmodernists, essentialism became the cardinal sin and a reason for rejecting much previous feminist work. This in turn has led to a stress on difference and specificity, which we may see as a second key feature of the postmodern feminist take on gender. It follows Lyotard's dictum that we need to look at very specific contexts to explore 'local narratives'. Researchers influenced by postmodernism and post-structuralism have thus tended

to look at particular groups of women (women from different ethnic minority groups, lesbian women, disabled women, for example) and explore their differentiated experiences of gender relations *in specific contexts*. An important result of the 'postmodern turn', therefore, has been to expand the knowledge of how gender is experienced and to gain a deeper and more detailed understanding of different shades of relations, not only between men and women, but among women themselves.

While there are many different forms of gendered identities, experiences and meanings that could be explored, including, for example, class differences, the two prevailing aspects which have preoccupied feminists following the postmodern turn have been ethnicity and sexual identity. This is partly because of the key role of self-designated 'Black' feminists in deconstructing white feminist orthodoxy by declaring that their own experiences were simply at odds with those seen as typical in the 1970s feminist accounts. For example, modernist feminists such as Firestone or Barrett (before her conversion to postmodernism) had mounted a strongly critical attack on the nuclear family, which was seen as a major basis for patriarchal oppression of women. However, minority ethnic women in both Britain and the United States pointed out that the 'nuclear' model (the tight privatized couple with one or two children) was not necessarily their own family experience. Minority families tend to be larger, more integrated with kin, have non-nuclear unit family members cohabiting with them (uncles, sisters, grandparents, cousins). In the case of African-American and British-Caribbean families, the mother rather than the father is often the pivotal authority figure, and one-parent families are very common. Not only did minority women live in different types of family, they also often experienced their families as supportive not oppressive, as they acted as islands of safety in the white racist world surrounding them. Whereas white women might turn to the welfare state for protection from family violence or poverty, black women's experience of the state was often negative: they experienced racist stereotyping from professionals, and were threatened by views of their families as 'deviant' and in need of intervention. By contrast, these larger, looser family structures were the basis for strong women's networks, which helped women

deal with the trials and discriminations they often faced. It was here that Caribbean, Pakistani and Indian women experienced 'solidarity' and 'sisterhood', not in political links with white middle-class women (Amos and Parmar 1984; Mama 1984).

This is a good example of the need not to take commonalities of gender for granted. Instead, we should explore through careful studies the very different ways in which relations between women and men, between women and women and between men and men are managed in different social contexts. Indeed, this sensitivity to difference can be seen as the great contribution of postmodern feminism. However, at the same time, if this exploration of 'difference' is sited too much at the level of individuals and identities, there is a danger of neglecting the broader dimensions of gender and the patterns of gender disadvantage which spread across the different social groupings. For example, *all* women, of every class, ethnicity, age, nationality and religion, are vulnerable to rape and domestic violence. In all countries, ethnic groups and classes, the bulk of domestic work in the home is carried out by women (rarely less than 70 per cent). This is not to decry the need to understand 'difference', in particular the way that certain groups of women are constructed as 'the Other' (Muslim women, with their choice to cover their heads, for example). It is to suggest that a balance is needed between focus on specificity and identity and a consideration of patterned regularities and common tendencies.

This is one aspect where many feminists exercise some caution over complete espousal of the postmodern stance. Another is in consideration of the political implications of deconstructing a common identity. Nancy Hartsock (1990) makes the point that, no sooner had women discovered a common bond of experience and identity as a basis for a struggle to achieve equality with men, than post-structuralists declared such a movement invalid because it was based on false modernist assumptions. Kate Soper, in a spirited critique of postmodernism, argues that feminist theory has 'pulled the rug from under' feminism as politics: 'theoretically the logic of difference tends to subvert the concept of a feminine political community of women' (1990, quoted in Kemp and Squires 1997: 289). Soper suggests that postmodernism

leads to political conservatism in that the deconstruction of categories leads inexorably to the splitting of women into ever tinier and more distinct groups, and eventually to a kind of 'hyper-individualism' which is prevalent in neo-liberal thinking: 'everybody's different' is the popular version of this. Thus postmodernism, by its very theoretical logic, leads away from the radical perspectives of feminism and Marxism towards, at the best, a liberal pluralism, at the worst a nihilistic individualism: 'anything goes'; every woman for herself.

Judith Butler, performance and the deconstruction of gender

However, the feminists of postmodernity would deny that their position is conservative. Judith Butler, for example, declares that deconstruction holds the potential for a new type of radical politics that is based particularly on a gay and lesbian challenge to 'heteronormativity' (the assumption that it is 'natural' to be heterosexual and the definition of those who transgress as 'Other', unnatural'):

> If a stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the foundational premise of feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite. (1990: 5)

Butler is without doubt the most renowned and influential feminist writing within the post-structural perspective. Her key texts, such as *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993a) have become canonical. She is also seen as a leading light in Queer Theory, an approach developed in the 1980s and 1990s by lgbt (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) thinkers which attempts to denaturalize and dismantle categories of gender and sexuality in order to overturn the Othering of same-sex relations by the category of heterosexuality.

As we have seen, Butler took a distinctive approach to gender, arguing that it was a construction based on the repetition of everyday acts and regulatory practices which reaffirm sexual difference and create a sense of coherence. Thus, she argues, gender is:

> [A]n identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced by and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (1990: 140)

This definition makes clear the everyday nature of the processes of gendering and, importantly, the active way in which gender is constructed: 'Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed' (ibid.: 25). Butler uses the term 'performativity' to describe this process to emphasize that it is not a single performance but a routinized repetition which creates the illusion of a stable self: 'gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core' (1993b: 317).

For Butler, the notion of gender is not a given attribute but must include 'the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established' (1990: 7). This production of gender is accomplished through culture and discourse, particularly through what Butler calls the 'heterosexual matrix', a set of precepts and practices through which our notions of ourselves, our bodies and our sexuality are made intelligible to us within a predominantly heterosexual world. Thus, as stated in chapter 1, Butler does not accept Oakley's distinction between sex and gender as valid. Sex *is* gender, because these are created concurrently.

It is here that Butler's vision of radical change is developed, because she sees non-heterosexuals – lesbians, bisexuals, transvestites, transsexuals – as occupying a 'third space' outside the binaries, which is the basis for the 'transgression' and potential rupture of oppressive rules of gender. As Monique Wittig (1981: 53), puts it: 'lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (man or

woman)'. That is because, in Wittig's view, a lesbian escapes from the condition of being a woman, which is servitude to men. So, for Butler and Wittig, non-heterosexual women and men are placed to challenge the norms of gendering and expose them as constructed rather than natural. Butler presents wearing drag and cross-dressing as subversive acts, a counter-performativity that questions the naturalness of the heterosexual matrix. By the 'iteration' (repetitive performing) of transgressive acts a change to social norms becomes possible. As one of her supporters puts it:

> If typical iterations are disrupted, altered, shifted, then change in the recognized definitive category, the apparent ideal, may be altered as well, opening up possibility for diverse gestures and characteristics, demonstrating contingency, allowing change over time. (Morgerson 2005: 76)

It is pointed out by critics that adopting a non-heterosexual identity does not necessarily involve challenge to ideas of femininity and masculinity. For example, in some lesbian couples, one woman will play the masculine role, 'butch', and the other the 'feminine'. Transvestite and transsexual men often choose to adopt a very traditional presentation of themselves as women (perms, pearls and high heels). To be transsexual often means rejecting an identity in one half of the binary, as a man, and repositioning oneself firmly as a woman; the physical alteration of genital characteristics is an important part of this process. However, influenced by Queer thinking, Cranny-Francis et al. (2003), drawing on the work of Sandy Stone (1996), advocate the notion of post-transsexualism, which rejects any kind of sexual binarism, instead calling for adoption of sexual ambiguity.

Butler's work exemplifies the best of the new feminism and illustrates a different way to approach the analysis of gender. She takes a view of gender as socially constructed, culturally and discursively produced. She uses the techniques of Derridean deconstruction to criticize essentialist views of women and emphasizes differences among women; in her case, the notion of difference is explored predominantly through sexuality, as she sees in gay and lesbian activities the potential for radical exposure of the constructed nature of gender. Such

views are similar to those of other post-structural and post-modern feminists, such as Spelman, Riley and Wittig. Where Butler goes beyond the others is to provide an answer as to why gender appears so stable, inflexible and constraining. She achieves this through the notion of performativity; this also brings the body as a material entity firmly into the picture without falling into an essentialist view of body as destiny.

Yet I find a limitation in the way Butler's work rests so firmly on sexuality and bodily being as the core of gender, and neglects other aspects of the 'doing' of gender, such as the division of labour at work and in the home. Nor does her approach tackle the issues of male power and domination. It is, after all, only men who can rape, while, on the other hand, the ability to make decisions and to hold positions of authority, so largely monopolized by men, is not inscribed on male and female bodies. Butler's account dwells at the level of individuals, neglecting the ways in which social institutions are gendered.

Angela McRobbie and the 'Aftermath of Feminism'

One feminist thinker who is very influenced by Butler but seems to me to combine her ideas with a more institutional approach is cultural sociologist Angela McRobbie. McRobbie made her name studying young women's cultural consumption, such as teenage magazines, and was critical of the 'victimhood' approach of the second wave. She shared in the 'cultural turn' with an early interest in identities and in cultural and textual analysis. However, like Connell (see chapter 2) she developed an approach bringing together elements from modernism and postmodernism. Her continuing interest in the work of Stuart Hall and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies meant that she retained a critique of capitalism in her analysis.

McRobbie's most recent contribution is a powerful and pessimistic account of cultural consumption among young women, which she argues amounts to a virtual destruction of feminism. This is a view of 'post-feminism' which is not

celebrating 'choice', 'individualism' and 'freedom', but which sees these as illusory products of a repressive neoliberalism. This she sees as characterized by 'aggressive individualism, hedonistic female phallicism and obsession with consumer culture' combined with 'a swaggering resurgent patriarchalism' (McRobbie 2010: 7). Drawing on Faludi's (1992) account of the 'backlash' against feminism, she argues that this has now solidified into post-feminism; 'a process by which the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined' (2010: 11). A small but telling example I can point to of this is the assent given by university managers to the setting up of pole dancing societies in universities despite the protests of university feminist groups. At Bristol 'freshers' fair', free tickets for pole dancing clubs were distributed to male undergraduates.

McRobbie bases her views on an account of the rise of 'hypersexualized' cultural activities among young women and men which will be discussed in later chapters of this book: glamour modelling, the spread of pornography, especially via the internet, lap and pole dancing clubs, the glamorized selling of sex and upmarket prostitution. In combination with this she discerns, like Natasha Walter (2010), the growth of a brutal aggressive form of masculinity among young men, fuelled by magazines such as *Nuts* and *Loaded*, which normalize violence and abuse of women.

She draws from Butler's work the idea of 'double entanglement' in reference to the political tendencies which have fostered this post-feminist moment. On the one hand, the state, in many countries, in line with neoliberal values of 'freedom' and 'individual choice', has endorsed sexual permissiveness and the commercialization of sex. Censorship is either relaxed or ineffective. On the positive side, this has removed taboos on individual sexual behaviour and allowed open expression of the range of sexual identities – gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans. But it has also served to divide women nationally and internationally as western societies espouse behaviours seen, for example, by Muslim women and men as deeply reprehensible; and by many old feminists like myself as degrading and demeaning.

The other side of this 'double entanglement' which curiously coexists with it is the neo-conservative moralistic

espousal of the nuclear family ideal, and the condemnation of those who depart from it, such as lone mothers, demonized by the media as McRobbie indicates. We can see this in the behaviour of the UK Coalition government with its punitive attacks on welfare benefits for lone mothers and Schools Minister Michael Gove's offer to give every school a copy of the Bible to counter the impacts of multiculturalism. McRobbie builds here on Butler's account in *Undoing Gender* (2004); Butler argues the state acceptance of homosexual couples co-opts them into the ideology of the nuclear family, thus defusing the radical critique offered by Queer Theory. These two tendencies taken together serve to reinvigorate the idea of men's rights to control women within the family, at the same time as giving them apparent rights to open consumption of women's bodies and body parts. Thence the 'swaggering patriarchalism'.

McRobbie suggests, then, that feminist achievements have been effectively undermined by 'the rhetoric of the confident female', leading to 'apathy and de-politicization' (2010: 43). In relation to this she delineates four new female subject positions, which can be conceived of as a new framework of regulation, in Foucauldian terms – one which works though rhetorics of entitlement and empowerment rather than repression and prohibition. McRobbie also uses the concept, taken from the radical philosopher Giles Deleuze, of 'luminosities', clouds of light which throw particular images into our fields of vision, through their prominence in the media.

First of these images and subject positions is the 'post-feminist masquerade', the *fashionista*, who adopts an exaggerated version of traditional femininity (pencil skirts, high heels and chic accessories), but does so in a spirit of postmodern irony. The *Sex in the City* girls are the perfect embodiment of this, and role models for many young women. McRobbie also points out that the presentation of this form of feminine role in the media is almost exclusively white. The second position is the 'working girl', the confident, assertive, highly educated young woman who is the current 'winner' in the spheres of education and employment. Next, the 'phallic girl' is the ladette type, discussed in several chapters of this book, who emulates the sexual behaviour and lifestyle of men:

smoking, swearing, drink and drugs, casual sex, pornography, clubbing and so forth. Finally, the globalization of capitalism gives us the 'global girl' from developing countries who is gaining more freedom from family control by entering the labour market and who aspires to the lifestyle of her western counterpart.

McRobbie's account is fascinating in fusing different theoretical elements together. A background legacy of cultural Marxism is combined with postmodern and post-structural elements from Butler, Lacan and Foucault, among others. However, the picture painted in *The Aftermath of Feminism* seems to me to be too tinged with a Foucauldian pessimism, a view of women hopelessly trapped in an all-pervasive web of discourse and regulation. As I shall argue in subsequent chapters, there are other ways of being female – and male – which promote rather than destroy feminism and the search for justice and equality.

In conclusion, feminism in the era of postmodernity has raised new issues and set new challenges for the study of gender. The vignette that follows this chapter is a reflection on differentiated identities, one key theme, and other issues will be covered in the next three chapters, which deal with the gendering of social life. The work of Butler and the post-structuralist feminists remains very influential and indeed has become orthodoxy for the study of gender in Arts disciplines, such as philosophy, English and language studies. However, within subjects more grounded in the study of institutions, such as sociology, many feminist researchers use a mix of ideas from modernist and postmodernist frameworks to enable study of material aspects of gendering. The advent of recession in 2009 has also brought a renewed interest in class theory and its intersection with gender. At the British Sociological Conference in 2011 a session on class theory was the best attended I encountered. Younger researchers are exploring the ideas of Marx and, especially Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of different forms of capital in relation to gender. Economic issues are back on the agenda, which is important if the radical quest for gender justice and equality, which was the original motivation for the academic study of gender, is to be maintained.

As Pat Waugh concludes:

> If feminism can learn from Postmodernism, it has finally to resist its arguments or at least to attempt to combine them with a modified adherence to . . . an anchorage in the discourses of Enlightened modernity. Even if feminists have come to recognise in their own articulations some of the radical perspectivism and thoroughgoing epistemological doubt of the postmodern, feminism cannot sustain itself as an emancipatory movement unless it acknowledges its foundation in the discourses of modernity. (1992: 120)