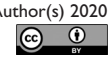
The Sociological Review Monographs

Article

Sex wars and (trans) gender panics: Identity and body politics in contemporary UK feminism

The Sociological Review Monographs
2020, Vol. 68(4) 699–717


Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0038026120934684
journals.sagepub.com/home/sor


Sally Hines
Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, UK

Corresponding author:
Sally Hines, Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, 805 Ecclesall Road, Sheffield, S11 8TH, UK.
Email: sally.hines@sheffield.ac.uk

Clarifying note
The author acknowledges that A Woman's Place UK (WPUK) is not a membership organization and does not have any affiliated groups. The author acknowledges that WPUK contest their involvement and organisation of the meeting described in the paper. The article has been updated accordingly on pages 706–707.

Woman and the feminist subject

Conceptualisations of the differences between sex – as biological – and gender – as cultural – were crucial to second wave feminist thought. The sex/gender binary thus became principal. Through the 1960s and 1970s studies of gender – as separate from sex – materialised through feminist work. Gender, it was stressed, was a social category, which was imposed and internalised across multiple sites – the family, education, work, the media, politics, health and medicine, consumerism – with the effect of limiting women's experiences and reducing power. As Florence Binard reflects, through the British Women's Liberation Movement (BWLM): 'women became aware that their subordinate position to men was not determined by so-called natural traits but mostly due to conditioning through unequal social structures' (Binard, 2017, p. 3). She continues:

> They were realising that there are no fundamental differences between the sexes bar those concerned with reproduction and this growing awareness that the 'feminine destiny' was a myth led them to question their positions on both political and personal grounds. The BWLM was a national movement that gathered its strength from its grassroots at local level, through the creation and existence of thousands of women's groups throughout the country. It was characterised by a myriad different type of public actions led by women that ranged from demonstrations, protest marches, strikes to music festivals, artistic events or drama performances; from workshops to conferences, that were heavily publicised and analysed thanks to a flourishing multifaceted feminist press. (Binard, 2017, p. 3)

What became known as 'anti-essentialism' importantly untied gender from biological characteristics. Yet, although the biological basis of 'gender' was seriously disrupted through these interventions, the biological premise of 'sex' remained fixed within much feminist thought; as reflected in Anne Oakley's distinction of sex and gender at the time:

> 'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender' however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine.' (Oakley, 1972, pp. 21–22)

Indeed, the understanding of gender as culturally constructed appeared through a binary model wherein the biological basis of sex was reinforced. As subsequent discussions in this article will address, the argument that sex arrives from biology has haunted feminist politics around trans issues in the 21st century.

As 'woman' was untied from biology, she became rooted in culture; as Simone de Beauvoir (1953, p. 283) famously insisted: 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman'. A woman, then, was someone who had been socialised from birth into the restrictive structures of patriarchy and had endured subsequent oppressive life-experience. Later, feminist scholar and anthropologist Gayle Rubin explicitly articulated a framework in which sex and gender were distinct. In Rubin's work, the 'sex/gender system' marked 'a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention' (1975, p. 165).

Rubin's distinction between sex and gender became the cornerstone of second wave feminism, though that is not to say that sex remained de-politicised. American radical feminist writer Shulamith Firestone (1970), for example, argued that women's oppression arose from their reproductive capacity and positioned reproductive technologies as a feminist utopia that would free women from the burdens of pregnancy. While in the UK socialist feminism emerged as the dominant feminist framework, reproduction was also central. Here concerns about reproduction were around the medicalisation of childbirth, the lack of childcare provided by the state, and the unwillingness of male partners to carry out childcare and domestic labour. The inequalities brought by reproduction, a socialist feminist school of thought also maintained, were the remnant of unenlightened thought that tied women to their biology. Equality in social and intimate spheres, and the development of law and policy to better support women in the public sphere were stressed as the way forward. Yet feminist understanding that sex, as well as gender, was culturally shaped soon began to emerge. French feminist theorist Christine Delphy (1984) was a forerunner in a feminist rethinking of sex – and its relationship to gender. Delphy questioned what lay at the crux of the sex/gender binary – the presumption that gender arises from the natural essence that is sex:

> We have continued to think of gender in terms of sex: to see it as a social dichotomy determined by a natural dichotomy. We now see gender as the content with sex as the container. . . . the container is considered to be invariable because it is part of nature, and nature 'does not change'. (Delphy, 1984, p. 52)

For Delphy, this model represented upturned thought. Instead, Delphy theorised sex as coming from gender: sexed differences are read through gender, not the other way around. As Diane Richardson explains, 'without the concept of gender we could not make sense of bodies as differently sexed' (2015, p. 210). This, Delphy suggested, creates a paradox for feminism:

> Feminists seem to want to abolish hierarchy and even sex roles, but not difference itself. They want to abolish the contents but not the container. They all want to keep some elements of gender. Some want to keep more, others less, but at the very least they want to maintain the classification. Very few indeed are happy to contemplate there being simply anatomical sexual differences which are not given any social significance or symbolic value. (Delphy, 1984, p. 52)

As feminist theory entered the 1990s, more scholars joined Delphy in her task to eradicate the container as well as spilling its contents. Judith Butler's work thus explored sex, not just gender, as a socially constructed concept:

> When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler, 1990, p. 6)

Subsequently – and critically – Western feminist understandings of the categories of gender and sex as distinct enabled the recognition that gender was not binary. As the sex/gender binary was disturbed so too was the binary of male/female, leading to the acknowledgement of gender as potentially plural and allowing for gender expressions that were non-binary. Gender*s* were thus made visible in feminist thought. Elsewhere in the world, though, the variation of sex was not a novel idea and there is, as discussed, much historical and anthropological work that indicates the variable characteristics of sex, which takes account of intersex conditions as well as the many distinct conceptualisations and practices of sex and gender in non-Western cultures. Foucault's work (1976), in particular, has been instrumental in exploring how bodies come into being through historical processes. His notion of 'bio-power', whereby bodies are subjugated and regulated by modern nation-states, was taken up by feminist scholars to theorise the social control of women's bodies (Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994). In their work on intersex, scholars such as Katherine O'Donovan (1985), Alice Dreger (2000) and Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) have provided an explicit illustration of bio-power; bringing to light the ways in which medical intervention on babies with ambiguously sexed bodies are *made* male or female. This body of work is also important in illustrating how medical discourse and practice has fluctuated with regard to characterising sex. Thus:

> . . . what biological 'facts' determine sex have been the subject of much debate. Chromosomes, hormones, gonads (ovaries/testes), internal reproductive structures and genitalia have variously been seen as the basis for defining a person's sex. For instance, studies of medical responses to 'doubtful sex' – people who in the past were often referred to as third sex or hermaphrodites or more commonly nowadays intersex – suggest that definitions of what constitutes the male and the female body have changed. (Richardson, 2015, p. 210)

Steven Rose's (1998) analysis of the development of the mind–body dichotomy as it emerged through Enlightenment thinking is relevant here. As the body became tied to biology, Rose suggests, biology became separated from the social. Accompanying the male/female binary, then, from this reading, the sex/gender binary is a product of a specific historical time and circumstance. In countering sex/gender as an eternal or natural

fact was also the vibrant work of feminist socio-biologists such as Myra Hird (2002) and Joan Roughgarden (2004), who documented the sexed variation of the natural and animal world to insist on the naturalness of diversity itself – including that of the human. Moreover, much important work has pointed to the ways in which the sex/gender binary model was constructed as a part of a colonial project. Tom Boellstorff et al. (2014) thus argue for 'decolonising transgender' by centring the gendered histories, identities, languages and understandings of indigenous peoples and people of colour. From a decolonial perspective, the category of transgender itself is a product of white colonial rule in which local understandings and practices of gender diversity were disappeared. A project of trans decolonisation thus starts with a critique of Western and white gender theory and seeks to explore the impact that colonialism, racism and whiteness have had on the gendered understandings and practices of indigenous peoples and people of colour (see Binahohan, 2014).

None of this is to argue that the body – or sex – does not matter. As feminist thought and politics have undeniably argued, the gendering of bodies means that women are subject to discrimination because of, and through, their bodies in ways that men are not. The contention, then, is not around whether the sexed body is material. The question in point surrounds the material nuances of the sexed body: an issue that became more vital – and increasingly vexed – as feminism turned its attention to transgender matters.