

Chapter 2

From Gender to Queer

Abstract The theories of gender intersections constitute the first theoretical step towards the postmodern fragmentation of the concept. The gender category undergoes a further profound transformation of meaning in the context of the postmodern deconstructionist perspective. This line of thought radicalises the premises of social constructionism: it interprets the outcome of social construction as a structure produced and organised by power, which should therefore be deconstructed and de-structured ('un-do', according to J. Butler). Gender is considered a fictional construction, without any basis or foundation. According to this perspective, it is therefore necessary to dismantle structures, expose power, cancel each organisation and hierarchy, in order to allow free expression to the multiple, fragmented, contingent individual's will or desire. It is in this context that the category of gender gives way to the queer theory. There are two elements that connote in an innovative way 'queerness' or 'queering': polymorphism and pansexualism, that deny sexual binarism and heterosexism.

Keywords Gender intersections • De-constructionism • Post-structuralism • Pansexualism • Heterosexism • Queer • J. Butler

2.1 Gender Between Modern and Postmodern

2.1.1 A Paradigm Shift in Gender

The reconstruction of the origin and use of the term *gender* across different disciplines (sexual psychology, psychoanalysis, social psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology and feminist philosophy) reveals how, even in the heterogeneity of thematisations, a theoretical common thread emerges: the progressive removal of gender from sex. One may, indeed, speak of a real and increasingly

evident separation of the two categories. This separation is justified by a gradual but growing determination to move away from biological determinism and philosophical essentialism, parallel to a progressive estrangement from nature. At first the reference to 'nature' remains in the background, then it becomes irrelevant; finally it tends to be reabsorbed more and more into society and culture.

This separation is introduced with arguments, for different reasons and purposes. Gender is increasingly being characterised as the category of malleability and variability as opposed to the fixity and immobility of sex. Gender is presented as a product of education in psychosexology and psychoanalysis or as social and cultural construction in feminist sociological and philosophical reflection in order to highlight, in a progressively more evident manner, the irrelevance of nature and the significance of the external environment (but also of inner preferences) in sexual identification. The reasons for this trend are attributable on the one hand to the explanation of empirical complexity (in the problematic cases of sexual ambiguity and transsexualism), and on the other to the configuration of different social scenarios for women who claim different roles than those traditionally considered to be discriminatory. The estrangement from nature, therefore, assumes different meanings: that of being the solution to empirical problematicity, but also of liberation from the female condition.

However, until now, apart from occasional brief and marginal signs in the context of psychosexology treatises and in some theories of radical feminism, the existence of nature (although in view of its tendency to irrelevance), and sexual oppositional duality (that is, the existence of two sexes, male or female) are not challenged. Gender is therefore a category we could include in a conceptual horizon described as 'modern'. Modern conceptual horizon is understood as a thought that shares at least one assumption, even in the heterogeneity of elaboration and the different emphasis placed on certain elements: confidence in the ability of reason to develop an explanation of the possibility to know ontological truth, accepted as given and whose existence is not questioned. Dual male or female nature does not constitute a problem, if not only secondarily. With specific reference to emancipationist feminist reflection, both socialist and radical, the modernity of this horizon is further outlined in the acceptance of the knowability of the mechanisms of society and power relations. It identifies patriarchy as the power of the male group over women. There is a negative view of power as domination in the sense of oppression/repression. The self is conceived as having an essence that can/must be freed from the oppression of power, in the optimistic view of the possibility of changing social positions and in the conception of history as progressive and linear.¹

The paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of gender is evident in the 'postmodern' horizon. A horizon that takes to the extreme what has already partly been developed conceptually in the modern horizon.

¹ Cf. C. BEASLEY, *Gender and Sexuality. Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers*, Sage, London 2005, p. 62.

The reference to the postmodern literally contains the sense of posteriority in relation to the modern, not in a chronological sense: but rather, it indicates a different way of relating to the themes developed in the modern, which is neither in opposition (anti-modern) nor beyond it (ultra-modern). The postmodern conceptual horizon² is delineated in different ways, which are traceable in some elements: the lack of confidence in the ability to know a universal or even partial truth, regarding man and society; the denial of the existence and knowability of an order and an essential foundation of human beings (anti-foundationalism and anti-essentialism); the refusal of each foundationalist approach and contempt for a definitive explanation of the real, that unifies the manifold or differences; non-cognitivism as the crisis of reason in the face of acceptance of the complex and contingent shattering of the real. These philosophical premises lead to a chain of conceptual consequences present in postmodern thought: the de-stabilisation of the philosophical structures of Western thought (post-structuralism); deconstruction of the explanations or meta-narratives that claim to know the truth reduced to 'disjointed network' of signs ever-changing and elusive in their dynamicity (de-constructionism); de-centralisation, that is, the peripheralisation of what was believed central and the dehierarchisation of what was considered superior/inferior; the fluidisation and liquefaction of the real; the affirmation of power as productive (power, not as 'power-over' but as 'power-to', namely as constitution), in the context of a sceptical vision of history.³

It is not possible to make rigid distinctions, which might force the nuances of elaboration. But certainly a paradigm shift can be accepted in the context of thematisation of the gender category between modern and postmodern. In this context, the different theories are nuanced in a continuum that from a strong version moves toward a weak version of the modern, which continues in the weak version of postmodernism reaching its strong or extreme version. As part of this shift there is reference to 'academicisation' of gender reflection intended to clarify basic philosophical problems of concepts such as identity, subjectivity, sexuality, corporeity and the like. Some categories used in the modern are shattered as we move towards the 'disintegration' of the real, but also of the gender category itself.⁴

In this direction there are two thematisations of gender: one directed alongside other categories (gender as 'sexual difference' beside and on the same level as other 'differences' such as race, ethnicity, class); and the other in the direction of the always more explicit connection between gender identity and sexual orientation.

² On the postmodern concept of gender L. NICHOLSON, *Interpreting Gender*, "Sign", 1994, 20 (1), pp. 79–105.

³ The philosophers who have shaped the contours of the postmodern horizon are: M. Foucault, G. Deleuze, F. Lyotard, J. Baudrillard, J. Derrida.

⁴ J. LORBER, *Using Gender to Undo Gender. A Feminist Degendering Movement*, "Feminist Theory", 2000, 1, 1, pp. 79–95.

2.1.2 *The Multiplication of Differences: Intersections of Gender*

In the context of recent feminist and postfeminist thought a postmodern orientation is outlined that criticises the centrality of the category of sexual difference in relation to other differences, believing that ‘the’ difference does not exist but rather that there are ‘differences’ declined only in the plural. This thematisation involves the decentralisation of the reference to the dimension of sex/gender in the constitution of identity. The sex/gender combination is not discussed in this context (or only marginally) with reference to the nature/culture dichotomy, but instead it is assumed unproblematically, aiming to demonstrate its non-priority, and equivalence in relation to other elements, such as race, ethnicity and class.

The gender category is added to the other categories, introducing an intersection, but also an in-different confusion of elements. The correlation of the categories gender, race, ethnicity, class, intends to highlight the need to put them on an equal position and avoid privileges that produce undue individual and institutional oppression, and therefore inequality. Ethnicity, social status and gender should never be reasons for treating individuals differently: every differentiation is viewed as discrimination. In this sense, the ‘differences’ cancel out ‘the’ difference understood as a discriminatory category.⁵ The multiplication of differences is intended to divert attention from the centrality of the difference, which is considered the cause of inequality.

In this direction, a postfeminist orientation is REI feminism, acronym for race, ethnicity, imperialism.⁶ This is an orientation of thought that contests the feminism related to women and the revindication of their rights: it presupposes white, middle class women, without taking into account the problem of women belonging to ethnic minorities and those in poverty. Often this orientation is referred to as ‘post-colonialism’, which is a combination of colonialism and postmodernism as an elaboration of a critique not only of patriarchy, but also of the dominant culture, white European and rich, assumed as universal. This orientation is not confined to colonial empires in the factual sense, but in a world of ‘global capitalism’ it does not distinguish between ‘first’ and ‘third’ world, referring to the empire that embraces in a global sense all social, economic, political and cultural inequalities. This approach highlights some elements that traverse gender: racism, ethnocentrism, imperialism.⁷

⁵ Cf. T. CHANTER, *Gender. Key Concept in Philosophy*, Continuum, London 2006.

⁶ Albeit with often disputed terminology (some prefer not to use this term believing that a race in a biological sense does not exist, but only a sociological use of the term), ‘race’ in this context of analysis refers to black or coloured women living in Western countries, therefore, in the intra-national context; ‘ethnicity’ refers to women belonging to ethnic minorities, including women that have migrated to Western countries; ‘imperialism’ indicates women in developing countries who live in Western societies.

⁷ B. ASHCROFT (ed.), *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*, Routledge, London-New York 1998; C. MOHANTY, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Duke University Press, Durham NC-London 2003. This is a movement of thought that goes beyond the question of sex/gender, connecting to the theoretical and political movements for civil rights.

These are elements that affect both men and women, as marginalised and marginal groups.⁸

The rivendications of bell hooks⁹ are encompassed in this direction, believing that we can not speak of gender without referring in addition to sexual difference, also to the difference of race and class. Her goal is to expose the sexism, interconnected with racism and classism, revindicating the right to difference, but also to community, non-exclusion and non-oppression. The author believes that the feminist statement 'all women are oppressed' disguises the monopoly and narcissistic privilege of white, middle-class, conservative women, some of which, perhaps, not even had an authentic experience of oppression and suffering. In her view, the hierarchical relationships of power based on race and class are more oppressive than gender hierarchy. In addition, precisely black women who have experienced slavery and racism as well as sexual discrimination, may offer a vision on which to build genuine and articulate feminist politics. The author questions not only the authenticity of the oppression/suffering of white feminism, but also the authenticity of their politics, criticising liberal feminism but also radical feminism that speaks of a common bond among women, considering it insufficient in theoretical and practical terms. In this sense, black women can share with some black men the oppression of race and class, but not of gender. The focus on the issue of race and class tends to dominate if not cancel the issue of gender.¹⁰

The post-colonial variant of feminism REI is part of the postmodern critique of each homogenising category questioning each and every assumption of a fixed identity, be it of gender, race, ethnicity or class. The criticism is directed against any attempt at universalisation, unification, and standardisation of thought, considered arrogant. On the contrary, this perspective highlights the shattering, particularisation and dynamism. In the context of the critique of European domination of some non-Western countries (in an economic and political sense, but also as regards cultural hegemony) and the binarism that the West opposes to what is 'other', there is criticism introduced to the same category of difference which brings with it the idea that what is different may be inferior. In this sense, it is believed that diversity or otherness ('othering principle') presupposes an oppositional dichotomy between identity or identity groups supposedly fixed and unitary in a hierarchical sense. Difference is perceived negatively, the other/different is

⁸ It is the birth of 'black or ethnic feminism', in which black women of the Third World are becoming aware of the specificity of their condition of subordination and oppression, not comparable to that of white women in Western societies, criticising racism/ethnocentrism in addition to implicit classism in certain feminisms. Cf. P. COLLINS, *Black Feminist Thought*, Unwin Hyman, Boston MA 1990; I. M. YOUNG, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990.

⁹ BELL HOOKS, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, South End Press, Boston (MA) 1990; Id., *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, South End Press, Boston MA 1984.

¹⁰ The author is accused of false unification of categories of class and race and of having introduced in the place of gender essentialism a 'race essentialism', presupposing an approved sisterhood of black women, racial unity, giving no room for other forms of racism, apart from black/white racism.

always marginal. This approach plans to deconstruct any difference and dichotomy, with the aim to destabilize the central notion of universal norm and problematise the terms and notions based on identity, recognising and enhancing the plural, fluid and hybrid character of identity.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak¹¹ expresses his criticism of Western thought that develops categories presupposing them as representative in a universal sense, in truth exclusive and exclusionary. It refers explicitly to the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida, believing that Western thought is based on the recurrence of hierarchically organised dichotomies (man/woman, black/white, good/bad, light/dark), which exclude the other as inferior. Deconstruction is not the reversal of dichotomies overcoming exclusion: the aim is to reveal the mechanisms of their functioning in order to reject them. What is emphasised is the relationship between the dichotomous character of Western thought and the practices of imperialism of gender, rejecting any directive categorisation and pursuing a pluralistic and multiple analysis. There is an emphasis on the hybrid nature of identity, arguing that no strict definition of something is ultimately possible. Each category of identity is provisional and subject to change.

Spivak recognises that the deconstructionist approach, although primarily academic being a theoretical problematisation that fails 'in fact' to give voice to the marginalised, allows an awareness of the privileges and the assumption of ethical responsibility. Deconstruction, eliminating identity and essence, weakens the legal and political practice. The author suggests the notion of 'strategic essentialism', in which the concept of group identity or other homogenising categories can be invoked and used temporarily for pragmatic purposes in a merely nominal and temporary sense, but with a constant perception of limitation and a persistent criticism of their essential status. Essentialism, criticised on a theoretical level, is recovered in terms of pragmatic utility and effectiveness.¹² It is an eclectic perspective that seeks a balance between essentialist/universalist modern thought and deconstructionist/sceptical postmodern thought.¹³

2.1.3 *Un-Doing Gender: The Queer Category*

The thematisations of gender intersections constitute the first theoretical step towards the postmodern fragmentation of the concept. The gender category undergoes a further profound transformation of meaning in the context of the postmodern deconstructionist perspective.

¹¹ G. SPIVAK, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. S. Harasym, Routledge, London 1990.

¹² C. SANDOVAL, *US Third World Feminism: the Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World*, "Genders", 1991, 10, pp. 1–24.

¹³ A. MILNER, J. BROWITT, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney 2002.

De-constructionism, closely related to post-structuralism, leads to extreme consequences of anti-essentialism. The term 'deconstruction' is used as a response to Heidegger's invitation related to the destruction of the concepts of metaphysics. It is not easy to give a definition of deconstruction as the authors of this line of thought intentionally evade all attempts to define any concept. It can be said that to deconstruct takes on the meaning of highlighting implicit presuppositions, hidden biases, the contradictions of the categories of traditional thought. Deconstruction has many faces and no hierarchy: it is configured as a methodology for reading the categories of traditional metaphysics, which aims to highlight the gaps, fractures, discontinuities, ideological structures, in place of the alleged unity and uniqueness of intrinsic meaning. To deconstruct means to capture the dissonances and paradoxes that undermine the claim to the all-encompassing and comprehensive dream of systematic theorisation. From deconstruction there has been a linguistic and semantic shift to 'deconstructionism', which classifies, on the basis of the usual patterns of history of philosophy, a thought that in truth is unclassifiable, as the same classification would ultimately limit scope. Deconstructionism denotes the annihilation of the post-metaphysical claim to systematisation and unification. Deconstruction is the revindication of the 'other', understood as that which is unthought of and excluded from any categorisation. It denies the possibility of elaboration of unique and absolute concepts and meanings; it opens to the multiplicity of meanings never fully understandable and formulable as in constant transformation. Every meaning is only a trace of possible absent meanings, a metaphor for something that is not there.

Post-structuralism is closely related to deconstructionism. The prefix 'post', which distinguishes this philosophical current from structuralism, indicates the extermination of the consequences of the concepts as far as dissolving them in the postmodern deconstructionist direction. This thought goes against every structure (perceived as a hidden form of domain), as an organic whole decomposable into elements, whose functional value is determined by the totality of relationships between each separate level and all the others. Post-structuralism intends to de-structure, that is, expose and shake to its foundations every claim to identify structures, in order to exalt disorder and disorganisation, as liberation from the repressions imposed by the structured system.

Post-structuralist deconstructionism marks a radical change in the way of understanding the gender category, bringing it toward the dissolution of the same meaning. This line of thought radicalises the premises of social constructionism. Social constructionism believed that gender was the product of socialisation, namely the construction of meaning in a given society, in a historical era, within a certain culture. Deconstructionism goes further and interprets this outcome of social construction as a structure produced and organised by power, which should therefore be de-constructed and de-structured. Gender as a social construction is a 'compulsory mask' imposed from above, depending on the creation of social hierarchy: it is a fictional construction, without any basis or foundation. There is nothing either in front or behind: indeed, power hides behind. Nature is only presumed, it also being constructed by power just as society. According to this

perspective, it is therefore necessary to dismantle structures, expose power, cancel each organisation and hierarchy, in order to allow free expression to the multiple, fragmented, contingent individual.

It is in this context that the social construction of gender is de-constructed, to give space to individual construction. If social constructionism has distanced and separated natural sex to socially and culturally elaborate gender, post-structuralist de-constructionism abandons also socio-cultural gender, moving as far away as to deny natural sex, giving way to 'individual gender'. Just as socio-cultural gender might not coincide with natural sex, now even 'individual gender' could also not coincide with 'social gender'. In short: it is the individual that decides the gender personally desired and wanted, regardless of nature and society. The starting point and the root of gender, in the postmodern perspective, is the individual, not nature nor society. The anti-essentialism, already thematised by social constructionism in relation to nature, is further expressed in relation to society and culture. In this context it is argued that gender 'can', indeed 'should', be regardless of sex. The term gender is used not only as descriptive of a socio-historical process that has occurred/occurs as referred to sex in the past and present, but also and especially as prescriptive, that is, as what must¹⁴ (in the future) on the basis of expression of individual desire.

The postmodern theories of gender refer explicitly to the concept developed by Michel Foucault.¹⁵ Although the author has not directly spoken of gender, his writings have set the stage for postmodern theorising in this category. The author denies the natural sexuality and theorizes sexuality as a result of a complex process of social construction. He speaks of the historicisation but also of the socialisation of sexuality. In his view, sexuality is not a permanent essence of human beings, but it is the product of history, society, context, but also and above all of discourse and power, indeed of 'biopower'. As part of the conception of history as a 'continuum' of repressive practices implemented through institutions created by the power to control society, Foucault traces the genealogy or archeology of sexuality. If before modernity sexuality was governed by religious and moral discourse, modernity introduces it into scientific discourse, in the context of natural sciences as a specific and relatively autonomous sphere.

In the Foucauldian perspective it is biopower that has developed discourses on sex to control the human body and the body of the human species, with birth and population control.¹⁶ According to the author, sexuality is a discursive creation

¹⁴ K. BORNSTEIN, *Gender Outlaw: on Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, Routledge, New York–London 1994, pp. 114–115.

¹⁵ M. FOUCAULT wrote *Histoire de la sexualité* in three volumes: *La volonté de savoir* (Gallimard, Paris 1976), *L'usage des plaisirs* (Gallimard, Paris 1984); *Le souci de soi* (Gallimard, Paris 1984). English translation, *The History of Sexuality*, Vintage Books, New York; vol. I, *An Introduction* (1990); vol. II, *The Use of Pleasure* (1990), vol. III, *The Care of the Self* (1988).

¹⁶ Bio-power has developed, according to Foucault, four strategies (techniques and devices of sexuality developed by discourse) of power-knowledge: the hysterisation of the woman's body, the education of the child's body, the socialisation of procreative behaviour, the psychiatrisation of perverse pleasure.

and an artificial invention of power, as an “instrument of domination” or “control mechanism”. Each social group is a regulatory structure, which specifically defines bodies, disciplines behaviours in a prescriptive way, excluding other bodies, acts and desires. Identities have the social function of organising bodies and behaviours and controlling, through a reward/punishment mechanism, the bodies and behaviours considered ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ in relation to those considered ‘abnormal’ and ‘unnatural’, therefore pathological or deviant or even criminal. It is power, through speech, language and society, which gives meaning to bodies, practices and desires.

The French author became the point of reference for the alliance between post-structuralism and feminism. Although Foucault makes few explicit references to women as a specific question or to the issue of gender in his works, his philosophical analysis of the relations between power, body and sexuality has influenced some trends of feminism. Foucault’s idea that both body and sexuality are cultural constructs rather than natural phenomena contributed to the feminist and postfeminist critique of essentialism. In this sense gender theories, in the context of post-feminism and postmodernism,¹⁷ become the objects of application of this method. Many theories intend to deconstruct social sex and gender, considering it an important step to liberate the body, identity and subjectivity of the individual from the claim of natural or social essence, presumed as one, simple, homogeneous, static and stable. This perspective breaks down identity into complex, heterogeneous and dynamic identification as a process. With the consequent rejection of all categories: even the same sex and gender categories. Each category has been emptied of content and is used with reluctance, because it always presupposes conceptual systematisation and semanticisation.

It is worth mentioning—even if it is not the object of the present analysis—some critical reactions of certain feminist theories to Foucauldian perspective. There are affinities and tensions between Foucault’s theory and contemporary feminism. While there is agreement that Foucault’s conception of power contains important insights for feminism, feminists remain divided over the implications of this concept for feminist theory and practice. Some feminists underlined certain limitations in his thought, above all in the political field as regards the promotion of women’s autonomy: the tendency of power to reduce agents to “docile bodies” appears problematic, undermining the emancipatory goals of feminism and women’s capacity to resist power. Foucault’s understanding of the subject as an effect of power threatens the liberation of women, condemning them to perpetual oppression.

The feminist objections to Foucault center around two issues: his view of subjectivity as constructed by power and his failure to outline the norms which inform his critical enterprise, leaving no space for resistance to power.

¹⁷ S. AHMED, *Beyond Humanism and Postmodernism: Theorizing a Feminist Practice*, “Hypatia”, 1996, 11, 2, pp. 71–93; S. BEST, D. KELLNER, *The Postmodern Turn*, Guilford Press and Routledge, New York–London 1997.

If individuals are the effects of power and 'docile bodies' shaped by it, then it becomes difficult, incoherent or even impossible to explain who resists power. Foucault's normatively neutral description on power limits the value of his work for feminism because it fails in providing the normative resources necessary to criticise structures of domination and to guide programs for social change.

Some other feminists used Foucault's concept of power to develop a more complex analysis of the relations between gender and power which avoids the patriarchal assumption. On the basis of Foucault's understanding of power as 'exercised' rather than 'possessed', as 'circulating' throughout society rather than 'emanating' from the top, and as 'productive/constitutive' rather than 'repressive', feminists have sought to challenge accounts of gender relations from the paradigm of domination/victimisation to a new understanding of the role of power in women's lives, exploring new ways in which women's understand, experience and behave inside the transformation of society. If the feminist liberationist political program aimed to total emancipation of women from power, Foucauldian-influenced feminism concentrates at the micro-political level to determine concrete possibilities for social change, focalising the body as the principal site of power in modern society.

It is in the context of de-constructionism and post-structuralism that the category of gender gives way to the queer theory.¹⁸ 'Queer'¹⁹ means strange, weird, oblique. If it was originally used in a derogatory sense, it is now proudly revindicated by those who were looked down upon with such adjectives. The queer theory in some aspects presents a line of continuity with gender theories, for others it introduces new and even more radical elements that break away from previous thought. The queer theory, albeit partly influenced by certain currents of feminism, does not pose the question of the subordination of women as the object of reflection.²⁰ There are two elements that connote in an innovative way 'queerness' or 'queering': polymorphism and pansexualism.

Polymorphism is expressed in the radical problematisation and denial of sexual binarism.²¹ Queer indicates a way of thinking and living sexuality in contrast to the rigid binary male or female classification. This issue is only marginally found

¹⁸ S. SEIDEMAN, *Queer Theory/Sociology*, Blackwell, Oxford 1996; A. JAGOSE, *Queer Theory: an Introduction*, New York University Press, New York 1996; N. SULLIVAN, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, New York University Press, New York 2003.

¹⁹ 'Queer studies' is becoming an academic field of interdisciplinary empirical and theoretical study, similar to 'gender studies'. Queer studies also have a narrative and literary value; that differing from the queer theory developed in a philosophical context; many that claim queer is a mere practice. The expression 'queer' was coined by T. DE LAURETIS at a conference held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in February 1990 (T. DE LAURETIS, *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction*, "Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies", 1991, 3, 2, pp. iii–xviii).

²⁰ R. CAREY KELLY, *Queer Studies*, in J. O'BRIEN (ed.), "Encyclopaedia of Gender and Society", Sage, London 2008, pp. 690–695, esp. p. 693; R.J. CORBER, S. VALOCCHI, *Queer Studies: an Interdisciplinary Reader*, Blackwell, Malden (MA) 2003.

²¹ S. MONRO, *Transmuting Binaries: the Theoretical Challenge*, "Sociological Research Online", 2006, 12, 1.

in the reflection on gender of modern thinking. It is, in some respects, anticipated by Money and radical feminism. Queer takes on the value of an explicit rejection of any oppositional binary code.

Queer explicitly expands the gender category to include in addition to the reference to sex also reference to sexuality,²² as sexual orientation, that is the set of behaviours, attitudes, acts and desires which are aimed at the bond with the other, the attraction towards the other (where attraction is to be understood in an erotic as well as an emotional and romantic sense). The philosophical paths of 'sexuality studies'²³ are outlined in some aspects in a parallel way with respect to gender theories, albeit with certain specificities.²⁴ Queer goes beyond sexuality studies with the theory of pansexualism, which problematises and denies heterosexuality as privilege in society. There is strong criticism of 'heterosexism', 'heteronormativity', 'heteropatriarchy'.²⁵ Queer considers each sexual orientation to be equivalent, whether it is expressed towards the opposite sex or the same sex or to both sexes. It is the exaltation of omnisexuality, polysexuality and mulitsexuality, where every sexual preference is justified by the mere fact that it is expressed, at the moment and in the manner that it is expressed.

Queer is therefore an amorphous and speculatively open term: a flexible, fluid, variable, permeable category against closed, rigid, fixed, impermeable dichotomies. Queer represents everything and nothing. The recurrent expressions 'neither/nor' or 'either/or' show the ambivalence and ambiguity that breaks down the oppositional dichotomies of male and female duality. Queer is often referred to as 'umbrella term' which refers to several theories that have a lowest common denominator: the liberalisation of all sexuality in the 'normalisation' of what was considered 'abnormal'.

A widely used acronym is LGBTI indicating lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual/transgender/transvestites and intersex. Their common feature is the construction of their gender identities in opposition to biological determinism and essentialism. Their intention is to problematise on the theoretical level and to withstand in terms of practice rigid sexual dimorphism and heterocentrism. It outlines within communities a kind of solidarity among individuals and groups, each different from the other, but joined by the will to provoke the traditional paradigm and transgress and

²² The 'sexuality studies' indicate the critical analysis of the social meanings of sexuality, in reference to the object choice and sexual desire. D. RICHARDSON, *Sexuality and Gender*, cit.; P. SCHWARTZ, V. RUTTER, *The Gender of Sexuality*, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks (CA) 1998. The 'sexuality studies' place at the centre of the analysis the issue of homosexuality and lesbianism as opposed to heterosexuality, as well as the 'trans' issue that includes transsexuals, transvestites, transgender, and intersex.

²³ Here reference is made to the issue of homosexuality only in relation to the gender debate. Cf. D. ALTMAN, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971), New York University Press, New York 1996.

²⁴ For the reconstruction of the theoretical paths of 'sexuality studies', see S. JACKSON, *Heterosexuality in Question*, Sage, London 1999, pp. 10-28.

²⁵ Feminists are, in general, critical of the queer theory, because these theories do not centre on women's issues or even lesbianism.

destabilise the usual social rules, with the intention of dismantling any difference, considered inequality, appealing to equality in the sense of equivalence.

The queer theory rejects any hierarchy and distinction between central/peripheral and primary/marginal both in relation to sexual identity as well as sexual orientation: the difference is considered to be the cause of hierarchy that, in turn, circularly reinforces it widening the distance between normal considered superior and abnormal considered inferior. One can be either a woman in a female body and a man in a male body or a woman in a male body and a man in a female body, both by transforming the body (transsexuals) and also by accepting the ambiguity, hybridity, and male/female coexistence (intersex, transgender). One can be either heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual.

Intersexuality is exalted as an intermediate sexual condition 'between' and 'beyond' the condition of male and female, as a variant or variation of bipolar sexual determination, as part of a spectrum of continuity with shades and nuances from male to female, and from female to male.²⁶ The realisation that there are five sexes, in addition to male and female, also hermaphrodites (herms), male hermaphrodite (merms) and female hermaphrodite (ferms), is considered a positive fact that is not necessarily negative or pathological. The non-concordance of hormones, gonads, internal and external reproductive organs, secondary sexual characteristics expands quantitatively and articulates qualitatively the condition and the classification of gender (the so-called 'additional genders'). Masculinity or femininity becomes a 'matter of degree', varying in percentage and intensity from individual to individual, based on the presence or absence of certain characteristics. Queer theory considers it appropriate and indeed a duty to choose to assign the subjects with severe genital ambiguity to a 'third gender', neither male nor female therefore male 'and' female.²⁷ It is the perspective that believes that each individual should be able to make a personal choice regarding sexual re-assignment or even acceptance of one's own condition, be it even intersex without forced 'normalisation', that is the feminisation of the male or the masculinisation of the female. Hormonal treatments or irreversible surgery on children are therefore

²⁶ A. FAUSTO-STERLING, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Basic, New York 2000; ID., *The Five Sexes: why Male and Female are not Enough*, "The Sciences", 2000, 33, 2, July, pp. 20–25. The author believes that the male/female distinction is a social decision and that the distinction between the sexes is a "cultural need". In this perspective, hermaphrodites that incorporate both sexes challenge traditional beliefs. Cf. also ID., *The Problem with Sex/Gender and Nature/Nurture* in S.J. WILLIAMS, L. BIRKE, G. BENDELOW, *Debating Biology: Sociological Reflections on Health, Medicine and Society*, Routledge, London 2003, pp. 123–144. Cf. also I. MORLAND, *Why Five Sexes are not Enough*, in N. GIFFNEY, M.O' ROURKE (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, Ashgate, Farnham 2009, pp. 33–47; J. EPSTEIN, *Either/or—neither/nor: Sexual Ambiguity and the Ideology of Gender*, "Genders", 1990, 7, pp. 99–142.

²⁷ A. FAUSTO-STERLING, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Women and Men*, BasicBooks, New York 1992.

deemed illicit, in order that the individual can grow in the intersex state and as adults can choose (or even not choose) on the basis of individual will.²⁸

Queer is critical of transsexualism, which forces the transformation of the body's sex according to gender, returning to the conformity of sexual binarism. Queer prefers sexual indetermination to determination. The transgender²⁹ condition is preferred to transsexualism. Transgender is someone who expresses in the body and behaviour in a transitory or stable manner a gender identity that is disjointed and not aligned to sex. New types are outlined: trans-woman, an individual that is born male and lives as a female; trans-man, an individual that is born female and lives as a male. But also an individual that combines the traits and attitudes of both male and female at the same time or swings from one gender to another with ease. Transgender denotes an individual who 'passes' from one gender to another, with possible and partial modification of the body (surgically and/or hormonally). Transgender also encompasses transvestites, androgens, drag (i.e. those that excessively and outwardly exhibit their sexual ambiguity) and the so-called intentional eunuchus, that is, those who want intentional castration.³⁰ Some even challenge the prefix 'trans' that indicates and implies a movement from one gender to another, according to polarity to some extent restrictive and limiting.

Queer³¹ is any multiple, plural or variable identity; and any behaviour generally and traditionally considered deviant and transgressive. Queer highlights the differences and at the same time the in-difference. It questions stable fixed and compliant identities; it deconstructs individual and social representations; it enhances the indeterminate and indeterminable, in the dynamic search for polymorphic identity. In this perspective, identity does not exist: only identification exists, as a construction always destined to change and to be overcome in everyday experiences. It is the so-called vision of the body as a 'hook' for identity understood as an ever-changing way of life: the body becomes a place where several meanings overlap, continually changing simultaneously and diachronically.

This perspective is also referred to as 'criss-crossing' or 'mixing up' as it enhances the intersection, the mingling and confusion of combinations between self and other. Anatomically female bodies associated with male genders that relate to bodies and genders with the same combination or opposite combinations; anatomically male bodies associated with female genders that relate to bodies and genders with the same or different combination. In the case of transgender, the

²⁸ The author affirms that parents of intersex children are 'brave pioneers' with the difficult task of changing the social perception of the problem, to encourage social acceptance in future generations.

²⁹ P. CALIFIA, *Sex Changes: the Politics of Transgenderism*, Cleis Press, San Francisco 1997. The term was coined by V. Price. S. HINES, *TransForming Gender. Transgender Practices of Identity Intimacy and Care*, The Policy Press, Bristol 2007.

³⁰ G. SALAMON, *Assuming a Body. Transgender and the Rhetoric of Materiality*, Columbia University Press, New York 2010.

³¹ C. BEASLEY, *Gender and Sexuality*, cit., p. 118.

simultaneous presence of male and female elements confuses the hetero/homo.³² Confusion and sexual complexity are dominant: according to queer theory, these are also present in some cultures,³³ in the past³⁴ and in non-human biology.³⁵

2.2 Post-gender and Post-queer

2.2.1 J. Butler: *Undoing Gender*

Judith Butler³⁶ proposes a theory not easily encompassed within an orientation of thought. She negatively defines herself, as neither feminist nor post-feminist. The systematic reconstruction of her thought is difficult, given the intentional non-linearity of her arguments.

The starting point of her analysis is the rejection of any given, pre-existent and natural element constitutive of an eternal and unchanging essence, at the basis of personal identity. In her opinion there is no absolute truth; no truth in general is knowable in relation to reality, society, power, and in particular with reference to the self. An original, pre-social and pre-cultural male or female sexual identity in this sense does not exist and can not be known: there is no existing starting point of the discourse on sex. The reference to biological-anatomical sex, which seems natural, innate, interior, is produced externally by gender. In this perspective, gender is not derived from sex (according to biological determinism), but on the contrary, gender produces sex.³⁷

³² Is a transgender from female to male who relates to a woman heterosexual or homosexual? The answer depends on whether sexuality is considered from the point of view of anatomical sex or social/individual gender. S. PHELAN, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and Dilemmas of Citizenship*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2001.

³³ G. HERDT, *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, cit.

³⁴ T. LAQUEUR, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1990.

³⁵ M.J. HIRD, *Biologically Queer*, in N. GIFFNEY, M.O' ROURKE (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, cit., pp. 347–362; Id., *Sex, Gender and Science*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke 2004; N. GIFFNEY, M.J. HIRD, *Queering the non Human*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2008.

³⁶ See especially J. BUTLER, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, New York–London 1990 and Id., *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, New York 2004.

³⁷ French materialist feminism has examined the sex/gender contrast in this line of thinking, intervening also in the Anglo-Saxon debate. The usual distinction is reversed: it is not gender constructed on sexual biological difference, but sex has become a perceived category, as gender exists. This is the position adopted by C. Delphy, M. Wittig, C. Guillaum, N.C. Mathieu. Cf. C. DELPHY, *Rethinking Sex and Gender*, “Women’s Studies International Forum”, 1993, 16 (1), pp. 1–9; L. ADKINS, D. LEONARD (eds.), *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism*, Taylor and Francis, London 1996.

In her book on *Gender Trouble*, gender is a socio-historical construction, a “free-floating artifice”,³⁸ the product of the power mechanism by which the notions of feminine and masculine are “naturalised/normalised”. Gender does not express the self, an intrinsic way of being, rather it is the effect of a power. According to Butler’s view the coherence of the categories of sex, gender and sexuality is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylised acts in time. The repetition of stylised bodily acts establish the appearance of an essential and ontological ‘core’ gender. The performance of gender, sex, and sexuality locates the construction of the gendered, sexed, desiring subject within what she calls ‘regulative discourses’. It is the power that produces gender in society, which imposes the repeated association of social roles to sexual characteristics of bodies. Butler believes that having a male or female role, but also being a man or woman, is the effect of power. Power is not intended as negative oppression, but as constitutive production, as it allows the dynamic, non-uniform, variable formation of gender and sex, as well as their connection. The difficulty we have to separate sex and gender comes from the fact that society constantly and repeatedly accustoms us to associate gender to the corresponding sex.

On Butler’s account, it is on the basis of the construction of natural binary sex that binary gender and heterosexuality are constructed as ‘natural’. In this sense, Butler claims that a critique of sex as produced by discourse and of the sex/gender distinction is necessary to point out the constructive bases of binary asymmetric gender and compulsory heterosexuality. By showing both terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ as culturally constructed, Butler offers a critique of both of them. Butler argued that feminism made a mistake in trying to speak about “women” with common characteristics, saying this approach reinforces the binary view of gender relations because it allows for two distinct categories, that is men and women. Butler believes that feminists should not try to define ‘women’ and she also believes that feminists should focus on providing an account of how power functions and shapes our understandings of ‘womanhood’.

The author’s aim is to ‘un-do’ gender, but also sex. The author uses the term ‘un-doing’, declining the verb ‘to do’ in the gerund, to indicate the action as a continuous and unfinished process.³⁹ Un-doing must be understood as de-construction, breaking down, exposing not only natural sexual identity but also the identity of social gender. Sex and gender are both the products of construction: they are fictions that only apparently and outwardly seem real. They must be dismantled in order to realise their non-existence, their artificiality.⁴⁰

In *Bodies That Matter* Butler thematises gender as a ‘performative category’, being constituted by doing and not being, by the actions associated and associable

³⁸ J. BUTLER, *Gender Trouble*, cit.

³⁹ ‘To make’ means to produce, aimed at completion of a final (practical) result; ‘to do’ indicates an activity or a process without a final outcome.

⁴⁰ This is also a thesis of M. WITTIG, *The Straight Mind and other Essays*, Billing and Sons, Worcester 1992. Wittig speaks of nature as an imaginary formation, an idea that “was founded for us”.

with sex.⁴¹ She seeks to clear up readings and supposed misreadings of performativity that view the enactment of sex/gender as a daily choice. To do this, Butler emphasises the role of repetition in performativity, making use of Derrida's theory of iterability, a regularised and constrained repetition of norms. This repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. In this sense 'performance' is not a singular 'act', but a 'ritualised production', a 'reiterated constraint', under and through the force of prohibition. Iterability is that aspect of performativity that makes the production of the 'natural' sexed/gendered subject possible.

Socially constituted gender creates anatomical sex; it is the former that makes the latter significant in social practice. The performative theory redefines gender as a process or set of discontinuous acts that must be repeated.⁴² The sexed body is built from "performed acts", stratified and sedimented. Bodies are passive and receptive instruments of external meanings; they are dynamic facts in a 'growing process'. Butler believes that it is impossible to persist unchanged. Bodies are always becoming; they exceed the norm and reformulate it; they have no limit that confines their development. Bodies, like roles, are constructed by repeated words; they seem natural or social facts, but they are products of regulatory compulsory frames. Men and women, male and female bodies, male or female roles do not exist: there are only 'performances' and 'parodies', repeated and forced by the dominant codes of conduct. One 'is' what one 'does', or rather, what is imposed on the person to 'do'.⁴³ Butler arrives at immaterialism, the denial of matter itself: matter is not outside language, it does not exist independently before language, but rather after it. But if both sex and gender are constructions of language, the same sex/gender distinction ends up losing importance.

Awareness of the non-natural performativity of sex and of gender is the necessary condition to re-build a gender (as well as a sex) that is individual, not on the basis of alleged intrinsic essence or external expectations of society, but on the basis of desires, drives and the internal impulses of the individual. Gender performativity indicates acting which ends in action-interaction, recognising the variable multiplicity of manifestation of action. The notion of the self that acts (doer)⁴⁴ is denied: the self is confined to accomplished acts, it is constructed and at the same time cancelled in the same acts. There is no identity at the basis of the actions, which justifies and motivates them: identity is the product of discursive

⁴¹ J. BUTLER, *Bodies that Matter*, Routledge, New York–London 1993.

⁴² This theory emerges as original Foucauldian rethinking. Foucault in his 'genealogy' traces the origins of the construction of identity and the subject, but he considers the body a natural given. Butler also believes the (material) body to be socially constructed by performative acts.

⁴³ A. HUGHES, A. WITZ, *Feminism and the Matter of Bodies: from De Beauvoir to Butler*, "Body and Society", 1997, 3 (1), pp. 47–60.

⁴⁴ J. BUTLER, *Gender Trouble*, cit. According to the author, there is no gender identity behind the "expressions of gender".

acts, the repetition of actions creates the illusion of the existence of the self (gendered core self).⁴⁵

In Butler's view, social gender forces sex into rigid binary categories and behaviours according to predefined patterns and restrictive grids that are always and only male or female. This is a coercive imposition, a kind of 'violence' on the body and actions, suppressing impulses and inhibiting desires which are hindered or prevented of the possibility of expression.⁴⁶ In this sense, Butler opposes sexual bipolarity (gender binary) adhering to queer polymorphism, exalting 'gender turbulence', as the plural manifestation of sexual identity (sexless or unsexed, but also multigender).

On these theoretical bases, the author denies natural essentialism and goes far beyond social constructionism. Traditional philosophical categories considered fundamental and foundational are dissolved: the unique, real, rational, universal subject breaks into fragments without a center, sequence, or order. In this post-modern perspective, the subject becomes a point where many confused identities converge, a temporary, nomadic, fluid, unstable crossroads which fractures fixed monolithic substance. The unity and stability of traditional substance are only illusions produced by the iterative performative mechanism.

Butler believes oppositional bipolarity and heterosexuality to be an 'invisible privilege': males/females and heterosexuals are unaware of this advantaged position (just for the mere fact that they belong to a dominant group) compared to the disadvantage of trans-individuals and non-heterosexuals who 'deviate' from the 'normal standard'.⁴⁷ In her view, the only possible condition for a 'livable' and publically 'visible' life for the subject, allowing to express the unexpressed and manifest desires and contingent impulses, is to annul what exists in nature before us and which has been constructed socially outside of us. 'Doing' and 'undoing' indicate a circular practise that is never resolved (which recalls the Hegelian dialectic): an "incessant activity in progress", a "productive disintegration" conscious and unconscious; a tool to 'de-naturalise' and 'de-socialise' binarism and heteronormativity. It is the only way to un-learn our natural and social conditions and recognise time and space, to ensure access to the human sphere, free freedom, improvisation of desire expressed in fantasy and imagination, that is always variable, incalculable, unpredictable, by the very fact that it is not rational.

In this context, Butler criticises the Oedipus complex and the incest taboo (that is, the Oedipal-exogamous model), as attempts of psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology to identify a natural structure, that is timeless and meta-social, stable

⁴⁵ M. LLOYD, *Judith Butler. From Norms to Politics*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007.

⁴⁶ Nomadism (taken up by Deleuze) is a category thematized by R. BRAIDOTTI, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York 1994. Nomad indicates the continual mutability of subjectivity; nomadism indicates acentric dislocation, moving 'regardless of the destination'. C.f. also Id., *Patterns of Dissonance*, Blackwell, Oxford 1991.

⁴⁷ G. JAGGER, *Judith Butler. Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative*, Routledge, London–New York 2008.

and universal in structuring society and the family as a scheme a priori of normalisation. In line with G. Deleuze and F. Guattari,⁴⁸ Butler denounces 'oedipalisation' as a form of colonialism and metaphysical imperialism, critical of structuralism. The author, along the lines of Foucault, believes that the norm as social regulation of all behaviour, proposed as an ideal standard for all (expressed in the Oedipus complex and the incest taboo⁴⁹) is nothing but a form of power that transforms constraint into social mechanism, negative prohibitions into positive controls of normalisation. The norm becomes standard and does not know about the outside (abnormal) or the external (abnormal), incorporating everything. Gender is an index of 'proscribed and prescribed sexual relations', by which a subject is socially regulated and produced.

As part of Butler's radical thought, the only path to sexual emancipation is liberation of the difference, beyond sex and gender, beyond the norm and normalisation. The aim is, through a critical and transformative relationship with nature and society, to make 'visible' marginal identities, living in conditions of insecurity and vulnerability. Freedom is a process never fully realised in the context of the "ontology of fragility". In this perspective, law must not intervene upon the body: every discipline of the body is considered a form of subjugation and submission functional to normalisation. All possibilities of expression and choice upon bodies must be guaranteed, to ensure the proliferation of multiform identities. Norms must be modified in order to expand the spheres of freedom. The goal is to cease to legislate for all, imposing something that is viable only for some and, similarly, to stop prohibiting to all what is intolerable only to few. Social norms should make sexual and gender self-determination possible in every possible changing expression that is never definitive but always susceptible to change.

For this reason, Butler is reluctant to use the concept of identity that tends towards fixing and stabilisation, despite considering it useful and politically inevitable. She proposes 'pastiche' and 'parody', not as a caricature of an original, but as imitation of a mixed identity, that resists fixed and predictable identity. Butler's strategy is transgression as 'non-combinatory art' with unforeseen combinations and mimesis. Her intent is to disrupt consolidated and codified roles, favouring the abnormal, the outcast, the excluded, multiplying queer practices that disturb and re-convert 'vile bodies' into 'bodies that matter'. 'Gender outlaw'⁵⁰ is an individual who acts according to gender that does not conform to sex, which does not conform to social expectations, and which is against sexual binarism and

⁴⁸ G. DELEUZE, F. GUATTARI, *L'anti-Oedipe*, Les Éditions de Munuit, Paris 1972.

⁴⁹ C. LÉV-STRAUSS believes that the incest taboo (not as a biological phenomenon but as a cultural one) is the immutable and eternal universal law. In his view, the prohibition of incest constitutes the primary rule of kinship (the prohibition of endogamy and the prescription of exogamy) that defines and codifies family roles in which sexuality is structured, sexed identity and sexual difference (mother/father is someone with whom a son and daughter do not have sexual relations; a mother is someone who only has sexual relations with the father). C. LÉV-STRAUSS, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1947.

⁵⁰ K. BORNSTEIN, *Gender Outlaw: on Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, cit.

heterocentrism. It is someone who behaves in a different way, provoking customs, beliefs and institutions.⁵¹

This is the condition, in Butler's opinion, for a 'radical democracy', where the normal and the normative hegemon are no more, somewhere in which to liberate subjective identity, and to put on and dispose of roles.⁵² She appeals for the right to not interfere upon bodies, demanding the right to recognize freedom, as expression and recognition of every possible possibility. The only path to give expression to the oppressed, relegated to the 'inhuman' and 'less than human', without recognition. Against the binary order of gender, there must be recognition of every sexual gender, without applying any reference measure by which to judge others. New gender politics is called on to formulate new and plural sexual rights. Butler believes that there should be radical change in the legal and economic institutions to recognise how important the acquisition of gender is to one's own sense of personality, well-being and physical prosperity. Social conditions must be radically changed in order to realise and make possible gender acting.⁵³

Butler introduces in this context some applicative proposals.⁵⁴

The author believes that there should not be coercive surgical intervention on children with indeterminate or irregular sexual anatomies. The hormonal and surgical treatment is a form of normalisation of bodies and a coercive assignment of sex. This correction as a regulatory imposition is considered a form of mutilation, a physical and psychological trauma produced by the 'idealisation of the morphology of gender'. If Butler understands the economic reasons of the LGBTI community that want to keep the medical certification of the disorder only in order to have insurance coverage of health expenses (therefore only for instrumental purposes), she stresses that pathologisation may increase stigma. Consideration of this condition as an illness, means to regard it a defect to be corrected, an irregularity to be adapted, leading to internalisation of the sense of social exclusion. The claim to de-pathologise intersexuality becomes public recognition of the freedom of sexual transformations as a personal right. In this sense, society must provide the social means to make possible the realisation of the choice of sexual identity, whatever it may be (even in medical and economic terms), accepting the continuity and discontinuity in human morphology.

⁵¹ T. CARVER, S.A. CHAMBERS, *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics. Critical Encounters*, Routledge, New York–London 2008; S.A. CHAMBERS, T. CARVER, *Judith Butler and Political Theory. Troubling Politics*, Routledge, New York–London 2008; E. LOIZIDOU, *Judith Butler: Ethics, Law, Politics*, Routledge, London 2007; S. SALIN, *The Judith Butler Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford 2004.

⁵² J. BUTLER, *The Psychic Life of Power*, Stanford U.P., Stanford 1997; ID., *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London 2004; ID., *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Routledge, New York–London 2004; ID., *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, New York, Columbia 1987; ID., *The End of Sexual Difference*, in E. BRONFEN, M. KAVKA (eds.), *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century. Gender and Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York 2001.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁵⁴ Cf. M. LLOYD, *Judith Butler. From Norms to Politics*, cit.

In this sense, the author believes that we also need to legitimise transgender status, the moving ‘between’ genders, as ‘interstitial gender’, that is transitional and transversal. In this sense, Butler is critical of transsexualism, which presupposes the acceptance of sexual dimorphism. In her opinion the so-called ‘gender identity disorders’, classified as temporary or persistent discomfort due to a sense of inappropriateness and incongruity between sex and gender, are not psychiatric mental disorders, but merely a ‘change’ of gender identity.

In this perspective, the author defines sexual orientation as ‘the direction of desire’, that may or may not depend on gender identity. In her opinion, orientation and disorientation, changes in orientation, not determinable definitively and exclusively are to be expected. The theory of ‘transposition’ shows that a masculine woman, an effeminate man, a transwoman or a transman desire and may have desires directed to both hetero, homo or bi-sexual⁵⁵. In this context, traditional marriage (relegated to a mere ‘symbolic practice’) leaves room for kinship as a network of relations that are more or less intense, where not only sexual difference, but also duration, stability, exclusivity, monogamy are not necessary requirements. The rights and obligations of kinship can take countless forms, relations of various natures, regardless of sexual orientation. There is revindication of the legitimacy of any possible alternative form of union. In contrast to the monopoly of the State of forms of recognition, Butler asks for public recognition of any critical and transformative relation to the norms.

2.2.2 T. De Lauretis: *Sui Generis*

Teresa De Lauretis⁵⁶ coined the term queer and proposed a post-gender theory, which in some ways recalls Butler’s perspective, although presenting original elements.

Like Butler, the author denies that sex and gender are intrinsic properties or essential inherent qualities of the body, against both biological/social determinism and essentialism.⁵⁷ The author believes that sex is not derived from anatomy or biology, but that it is a symbolic construction, or rather a combined effect of many

⁵⁵ M. SÖNSER BREEN, W.J. BLUMENFELD (eds.), *Butler Matters. Judith Butler’s Impact on Feminist and Queer Studies*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2005.

⁵⁶ The author is Italian, but has lived in the United States for a long time (she has written both in English and Italian). *Sui generis* has only an Italian edition (Feltrinelli, Milano 1996). T. DE LAURETIS, *Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation*, “Theatre Journal”, 1988, 40, 2, pp. 155–177; ID., *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1994; ID., *The Essence of the Triangle; or, Taking the Risk of the Essentialism Seriously*, “Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies”, 1988, I, 2, pp. 3–37; ID., *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities: an Introduction*, “Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies”, 1991, 3, 2, pp. iii–xviii.

⁵⁷ T. DE LAURETIS, *Sui generis*, cit., p. 139.

visual representations and discursive practices, which come from the family, society, and culture.⁵⁸ Even gender is a fictitious category, being the product of social normalisation and its 'concrete effects' in social and material life of individuals. In her opinion, sex and gender are representations of the individual's relationship with belonging to a class, group, or category, according to dual structural opposition. The sex/gender system is a symbolic system that correlates sex to cultural contents according to social values and hierarchies,⁵⁹ where the cultural translation of sex in gender is characterised by a constitutive asymmetry linked to unequal social organisation.

The new element in the theory of De Lauretis concerns the reference to the 'semiotics of gender' (referring to L. Althusser) and to the process of 'engendering'. In her opinion semiotics is essential to address the issue of gender as a social and subjective construction, it permits understanding of the methods of symbolic construction and transmission of gender, in addition to psychoanalysis, which explains the effects of subjectivation in each individual. The author believes that the sex/gender system is not only a social construction, but also a 'semiotic system', a system of representation that gives meaning to individuals living in society. In this sense, the construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation. Semiotics constitutes a chain of meanings produced by the process of semiosis. The meanings that through a continuous process of semantic connections and usual associations, produce the subjects and their bodies, in addition to sex/gender correlations. Representations convey meanings which establish roles and positions, in addition to bodies and subjects.

The representations of sex and gender and their connections become concrete reality when they become self-representations, through the subject's own assumption of identity through 'technologies of gender',⁶⁰ that is theories and systems that articulate discourse on sexuality. De Lauretis considers the construction of gender as the product and the process both of representation and self-representation.⁶¹ In this way the subject is 'engendered', produced by the assumption and adoption of the categories of the social system. Identification becomes the process of self-attribution of the body for the subject and of the subject for the body, of sex for gender and gender for sex. The author speaks of 'gender self-attribution' and of self-constituted 'engendered subject'.⁶² 'Engendering' is the continuous process of attribution of meaning and assimilation that is

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 139. De Lauretis resumes the reference to *sui generis* parodies, emphasising the concept of 'parody' in ever-changing roles. Each identity is not fixed: it is a parody of another, a simulacrum of something that is not there (nothing is given in its natural fixity).

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 136.

⁶⁰ T. DE LAURETIS, *Technologies of Gender*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1986.

⁶¹ T. DE LAURETIS, *Sui generis*, cit., p. 141.

⁶² The author gives a concrete example. When we bar, filling out a form, the box M (male) or F (female) we 'engender': not only do others consider us M or F, but we also represent ourselves as M or F (*ibid*, pp. 144–145).

always reviewable and changeable. It is like a 'wet suit' that sticks to the body.⁶³ This process produces the body: the body is an abstract social form that is realised when individuals take on a representation of their own. Gender self attribution coincides with sexualisation, identification and subjectification, that is never definite but always indefinite.

The author believes it is necessary to dismantle false ideological representations, dissolving the traditional boundaries of heterosexual and homosexual gender identity (homosexuality itself is considered 'traditional'), to allow the representation of multiple identities, to make 'gender oscillation' visible, the metamorphosis that cross genders regardless of sexes, beyond traditional forms and the hegemonic discourses of sexual organisation. The objective is to build, on a micro-political level, new figures and new discourses that may 'engender' new and changing identities within sexual (in) difference as well as subjects who in continuous movement transgress assigned boundaries, freeing themselves from gender ideology. They are 'eccentric individuals' who respond and resist the institutional arrangements that they are summoned and subjected by and who at the same time transcend social determinations, who identify and dis-identify themselves, in an always open and never-ending process.

2.2.3 D. Haraway: Cyborgs

Even the queer category is criticised, as it coincides with the same contradictory claim to rigidly define the indefinable. In short, it is unqueer to define queer. Queer is criticised on the transnational level, being a Western Euro-American concept, but above all it is criticised as it presupposes the binarism which it opposes, referring to—in surpassing them—the boundaries of male/female, hetero/homosexual. Queer is criticised because it assumes bodies, subjects and identity.

For this reason the term post-queer⁶⁴ is introduced, indicating a new direction, a creative elaboration along the lines of the philosophy of G. Deleuze and F. Guattari (which recall but also transcend Foucault), that radicalises the premises already contained in previous theories. Post-queer is not being but becoming (becoming, expressed in the gerund form to indicate a process), as a permanent state of metamorphosis, transformation, transversal movement. This is made possible only in non-material bodies, that are virtual and bio-virtual, posthuman entities not reducible even to meanings or representations. It is a new sphere outlined by tones laden with imagination, fiction, fantasy, but also irony,

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁶⁴ It is proposed not as post-queer that refers to a time after queer, not even as post/queer configuring a going beyond or (post)queer that could favor both 'post' as well as 'queer'. Cf. D.V. RUFFOLO, *Post-Queer Considerations*, in N. GIFFNEY, M.O' ROURKE (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, cit., pp. 379–393; D.V. RUFFOLO, *Post-Queer Politics*, Ashgate, Farnham 2009.

playfulness, provocation and Utopia. Amid science and science fiction, reality and fiction.

Donna Haraway⁶⁵ configures, in a postmodern horizon, post-human scenarios of post-queer, introducing the figure of the cyborg. The cyborg is a 'cybernetic organism', a 'hybrid of machine and organism', a creature that belongs as much to social reality as to fiction, but also 'animals and machines together', creatures that populate worlds ambiguously natural and artificial. The cyborg is a technological construction that reshapes the 'docile' body available for manipulation, and transforms it canceling the boundaries between natural/artificial, and human/animal. It is a mixture of forms of life based on carbon and silicon, a mixture of flesh and technology, a biological or bionic body with implants, prostheses and technological systems, but also a humanoid robot with biological parts. It is the reconfiguration of the subject that is deconstructed and reassembled in the trans-human and post-human sense. It is neither machine nor man, neither male nor female. It has neither sex nor gender, is 'asexed' and 'de-sexed'. It does not reproduce, it replicate. In short it is a creature of a post-gender world.

Next to cyborgs appear 'desiring machines' as streams or currents of energy and desire that 'un-do' organisms, breaking them down and reassembling them in a 'rhizomatic' manner, constituting assemblies of various shapes and connections of one point with any other point. They are 'bodies without organs'⁶⁶ (BwO) that falsify human anatomy in machinic functioning. Haraway denies the existence of man or nature; she affirms only the existence of a process that produces the one within the other and couples machines.

New technological bodies and dis-assembled virtual bodies that are asexual or perhaps multisexual emerge. It is the definitive cancellation of sex, the overcoming of gender and dualism, the inauguration of a new way of thinking about sexual identity that goes beyond difference. Cyberfeminism becomes a model for a heterodoxy that 'authorises' the ways and forms of subjectivity and desire that escape dominant dualisms in contrast to sexual difference. In this sense, the cyber-entity is a representation for minority and transgressive identities that refuse binarism and hetero-centrism, but also, fundamentally, homo-centrism. The cyborg establishes a new ontology, setting up 'an interactive figure' that evokes new cybernetic modes of relationship, it diffuses and confuses quite deliberately and blatantly dualistic distinctions that underlie our culture, and that between the human/mechanical, male/female, Oedipal/non-Oedipal. It outlines a community as 'fluctuating compilation of subjects' that are historically situated and interact as semiotic and material entities, united by the desire to forge links that do not reproduce the sexist and racist matrix of logocentric thought.

⁶⁵ D. HARAWAY, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York 1991; ID., *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, Routledge, London 1997.

⁶⁶ The expression is taken up again by A. Artaud. See E. GROSZ, *Experiential Desire: Rethinking Queer Subjectivity*, in J. COPIEC (ed.), *Supposing the Subject*, Verso, London 1994, pp. 133–157.

Cyborgs, desiring machines and bodies without organs are amorphous entities, acentric, volatile, evanescent. They have neither sex nor gender nor identity. We observe the dissolution of the subject, the destruction of the body, the disintegration of identity that dis-identify, dis-organise and de-territorialise.⁶⁷ They disperse and intersect with other fragments of identity. They are only metaphors that we can imagine that represent 'a world without gender', which is perhaps 'a world without genesis', but maybe it's a 'world without end'.

⁶⁷ A. BALSAMO, *Technologies for the Gendered Body. Reading Cyborg Woman*, Duke University Press, Durham London 1996.



<http://www.springer.com/978-94-007-4990-0>

Gender in Philosophy and Law

Palazzani, L.

2013, XIV, 116 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-94-007-4990-0