

Chapter 2

Sex and Gender

The term *gender* has permeated common speech so thoroughly that it has become part of everyday language. It seems as if it had always been there and as if everyone used it to refer to the same things. However, this term can designate a wide range of ideas (Scott 1986; Cobo 2005), with very different theoretical, political, and methodological connotations. And although some authors still treat it as an exclusively grammatical concept and define it as a mere “correspondence” (see, e.g., Roca 2005: 25), the term *gender* is generally used “as a way of referring to the social organization of the relationships between the sexes” (Scott 1986: 1053).

About the term’s origins, it is worth pointing out that, while in French and Spanish it has traditionally been used almost exclusively to refer to grammatical differences, in English (where grammatical gender is practically irrelevant), the term *gender* began to be used to refer to masculinity and femininity as early as the fourteenth century.¹ In fact, the sex-gender word pair seems to have evolved alongside other opposing pairs where one of the terms comes from either Latin or French and the other from Saxon, expressing physical *vs* symbolic or concrete *vs* abstract values of the same concept: other examples of these would be *dark vs obscure*, *deep vs profound*, or *shallow vs superficial*.² So, when it was taken up by John Money in 1955, the term *gender* spread rapidly and easily within English and from there to all other languages.

John Money was a US psychiatrist from the Psychiatry and Pediatrics Department of the Johns Hopkins Hospital (Baltimore, Maryland), who was put in charge of defining what were then called “hermaphrodite”—and now “intersex” babies’ sexes. In his opinion (and in that of the greater part of society), it was essential to define a person’s sex if they were to enjoy an adapted and psychically healthy life, for—as has been critically pointed out by Queer Theory (Butler 2004)—conforming to this norm was seen as a prerequisite of social recognition. As he explored the

¹According to the Oxford English Dictionary.

²I am grateful to philologist José Manuel Bueso for this information.

issue in depth, Money isolated five biological components (Money 1965: 11), the interplay of which defined each person's sex:

- (a) Genetic sex: determined by X and Y chromosomes
- (b) Hormonal sex: the balance between estrogens and androgens
- (c) Gonadal sex: the presence of testicles or ovaries
- (d) Internal reproductive organ morphology
- (e) External reproductive organ morphology

In principle, most people present aligned orientations of these five components, so we are born with a sex which is defined by society as male or female. But in the case of intersex people (or "hermaphrodites" in Money's time), combinations can vary a great deal, so Money had to decide about the dominating features and enhance them so that each particular person could become a fully accepted member of society. He soon discovered that if he mistakenly began a treatment, for example, to strengthen a female sexual identity, and then, in the course of the baby's physical evolution, their male features developed more, it would become impossible for the person to return to the dominant male identity. Both that person and her entire family and social context had, by this point, become so used to considering them(selves) a woman, that this conviction was of far greater importance than birth, genetic, or any biological traits (ibid.: 12). Although this theory has later been questioned (Haraway 1991: 133; Butler 2004: Chap. 3), the experience caused Money to adopt the term *gender* to refer to a person's "psychosexual identity," which, according to him, becomes fixed in the first few months of a person's life as a result of social interaction. The study of hermaphrodites persuaded Money that society identified a man's body with certain attitudes, beliefs, and potentials and a woman's body with certain others, making each one of them develop differentiated identities as they grew up and fixing traits so strongly and permanently that society could not possibly suspect that they did not "stem from something innate, instinctive, and not subject to postnatal experience and learning" (Money 1965: 12). The concept was later developed into the notion "gender identity" by Robert Stoller, who imported it to psychoanalysis, from his discussions with Ralph Greenson. At the XXIII International Psychoanalytical Congress, published in 1964 (Dio Bleichmar 1998: 79), Stoller used the terms *masculinity* and *femininity* to designate attitudes and not the bodies themselves. In this way, the concept which allows us to differentiate *sex* and *gender* was established and later on imported to the social sciences. Sex refers to the biological fact and the physical characteristics of bodies, whereas gender designates the meanings that each society attaches to this differentiation (Burin 1996: 63).

The question is that the differences between "beliefs, character traits, attitudes, feelings, values, conducts, and activities that differ between men and women" (ibid.: 64)—which define gender—also describe the way in which both sexes are organized in their social relations, so the concept always refers to a relationship. This relationship has been defined as a "power relationship," which, according to many, lies at the very core of the concept of gender (Scott 1986: 1067; Molina Petit 2000: 281). I cannot but agree that close links exist between gender and power in societies

with a certain division of functions—and where there are different positions of power—which are previous or separate from modernity. But I would like to keep open the debate about this category and its associations with power, both in so-called *egalitarian* hunter-gatherer societies and in modernity, an issue to which we shall return below.

In any case, the concept of gender always designates a relationship defined by the sexes' mutually complementary social functions. However, researchers often lose sight of this relational aspect and use gender as a synonym for *woman*, simply identifying *gender studies* with *studies about women* or *gender identity* with *women's identity*. Used in this way, the concept of gender does not involve analysis of the power relations in which women are involved, much less any theoretical interpretation of the causes that gave origin to and supported those power relations. Such usage vitiates the analytical and critical capacity that should be inherent in the concept of gender (cf. Cobo 2005; Engelstand 2007).

This already difficult question is further complicated by the fact that, with notably rare exceptions,³ the concept of gender is considered in such close association to sex that a binary categorization emerges—like the one used by Money himself—, implying that talking about gender nearly always implies talking about the masculine/feminine dichotomy associated to male-/female-sexed bodies. Overall, the concept of gender is so broadly identified with a closed set of traits, that according to some authors (such as Herdt 1994, or Gilchrist 1999: 58–64) we ought to talk about a wider range of genders than those considered by the more traditional—*masculine* and *feminine*—dichotomy. This could include cases where people whose sex is not so well defined adopt nonconventional identities in premodern societies, or when despite having a well-defined sex, they—willingly or forcibly—dress and act according to different rules from those that might be expected of them, bringing about variations. I will try to prove, however, that using the concept of gender as a fixed set of traits prevent us from understanding gender as a dynamic and flexible, and therefore transformable, interplay of identity traits.

Furthermore, associating certain attitudes and behavior patterns strictly to either men or women entails the risk of *naturalizing* them, which in turn leads to reinforcing the patriarchal order instead of combatting it. This could be one of the consequences of, for example, the arguments defended by what is known in Europe as *feminism of sexual difference*, and in the United States as *cultural feminism*, which proposes that gender differences stem from maternity and other alleged *essences* that differentiate the sexes (cf. Posada Kubissa 2007a, b). The problem is that defending the existence of some essential link between *the masculine* and men's sex and between *the feminine* and women's sex only complicates the already difficult struggle for equality, for assuming the existence of natural laws or unalterable essences seems to preclude the kind of dialogue that might support such a struggle.

³ *Queer* theory has questioned the very concept of sex. See Butler (2004). Biologist Fausto-Sterling has also developed interesting studies along the same lines.

The same *naturalization* often seems to underpin theories that explain inequality as a result of women's reproductive capacity, without even explaining the origins of so direct an association between maternity and subordination. Thus, materialist theories, for example (Nicholson 1990; Jónasdóttir 1994; Sanahuja 2002), take for granted men's appropriation of women's reproductive labor or the sexual objectification of women by men, without explaining how men could have initially created the conditions for such an appropriation, why women didn't resist it, or why it should be assumed that the reproductive function was ascribed as a lower social value than productive ones from the very start of all historical trajectories. The point of arrival (the lower value attached to functions carried out by women) is seen in these arguments as a *natural* basis, a given which merely reinforces the very notions they are supposed to combat.

In Lacanian quarters, gender is considered an expression of the psychic human need to classify the world symbolically in order to better organize and conceptualize it. Thus, following Lévi-Strauss's reasoning, Lacanian authors see gender as inscribed in the very symbolic patterning of language. Again, this fails to explain why language should have been configured in this particular way and not in any other that did not imply inequality (cf. Butler 2004: 43). Lévi-Strauss himself had proposed the incest taboo as one of the foundations of society, which, in his view, turned exogamy and the exchange of women—and therefore their objectification by men—into a constituent part of all social orders. Although it has been some years since Roy Wagner (1972) proved this argument to be untenable, and despite subsequent criticisms (Rubin 1975; Amorós 2009), this view continues to gather support to this day.

Equally problematic in considering *natural* every historical starting point based on inequality—and therefore giving up any attempt to explain it—the most brilliant representatives of contemporary structuralist anthropology (Descola 2001; Viveiros de Castro 2001; Vilaça 2002; Taylor 2001) have, over the past few years, defended the convenience of ignoring the concept of gender altogether. These authors consider that gender should be subsumed into two wider and more significant categories of social organization: female gender traits would be a function of the characteristics that define consanguinity (bonds cultivated with relatives and people within our own social circle), while male gender traits would define relations of affinity (links kept with strangers). In these authors' view, the fact that in most known societies women seem to be in charge of the former, while men look after the latter, would have determined female subordination. This is so because affinity is hierarchically superior and constitutes the "given dimension of the cosmic relational matrix," whereas the scope of consanguinity is limited to human relationships (Viveiros de Castro 2001: 19 and 26). In fact, Viveiros de Castro affirms that consanguinity can be seen essentially as the absence of affinity, renovating the well-established and resonating definition of the feminine as the *absence* of the masculine. Although it would appear that women's reproductive function is at the basis of this association, these authors do not explicitly state why they think this should cause men and women to specialize in these different types of relationships, and in any case, they fail to explain why these relationships should be read hierarchically and not in complementary or egalitarian terms (cf. Hernando 2010).

As presented above, all of these arguments seem to share the assumption that men's domination (in the case of materialists) or the prevalence of the masculine (in the case of Lacanians and structuralists) is *natural* and that it neither has an origin nor requires further explanation, for it is seen as inherent to the very constitution of society. Throughout this book, I shall defend a very different approach to this question as, in my opinion, the concept of *gender* refers to nothing but *differences in men's and women's respective degrees of individuation*. As we shall see, departing from an identity I call *relational* (non-individuated) and which is typical of both sexes in hunter-gatherer societies, our group's historical trajectory has gradually become defined by an increase in men's individuating traits, whereas, until late modernity, women maintained the same relational identity which had so far been shared by all group members. Men's and women's varying degrees of individuation reached a maximum difference (and became more widespread than ever before) at the time John Money carried out his study (the mid-1950s in US society). Throughout the entire previous historical process, however, it had been less acute the less socio-economically complex society had been. This means that the concept of *gender* refers to different degrees of difference between men's and women's identities, although, from a certain point in history, this difference came to imply a power relation in all cases. I write "a certain point in history" because I don't believe that sexual relations had always entailed power relations, which makes me question whether it makes sense to use the term *gender* in societies where power did not (or does not) define any social relation, that is, in the societies that Fried (1967) dubbed as "egalitarian societies." This historical process must have been one of such a subtle and gradual increase in men's traits of individuation/power that women themselves might have participated without noticing the subordination this would eventually bring about. And once it actually took place, the relationship was irreversible. This means that I do not consider the subordination of women to be universal but the result of a historical process which should be explained in cultural terms and not as the *natural* product of women's reproductive function (however much that function can be its condition and its point of departure).

First, let us examine our origins as a species in order to understand our biological foundations. Then we shall analyze the construction of identity in societies without any division of functions—except for the one resulting from the complementarity of the sexes—or work specialization, so as to enable a more profound analysis of such a problematic point of departure.

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