Gender & Sexuality

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Gender & Sexuality

CRITICAL THEORIES, CRITICAL THINKERS

Chris Beasley



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Gender & Sexuality

To my colleagues in trying times, Carol Bacchi, Heather Brook, Jean Duruz, Carol Johnson, David Hollinsworth and Doug McEachern; to Peter Hall for his immensely generous provision of childcare and design input; and to my darling girl, Perry.

In memory of Paul Thewlis and James Falkenberg Thewlis. We remember you with love and laughter.

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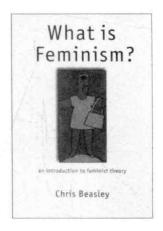
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Chris Beasley University of Adelaide

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Introduction

What is this book about? What does it cover or do?

This book focuses on sex and power. In other words, it is about exploring and questioning every aspect of the organisation of our social life – from a kiss to the framing of states and international relations. More specifically, this book is about the ways in which contemporary thinkers have understood the dynamics of power in current social arrangements regarding sex. In order to consider thinkers who attend to the socio-political analysis of sex, their field of analysis must be briefly clarified. What does the terrain of this field include? The term 'sex', throughout much of English-speaking history has covered both

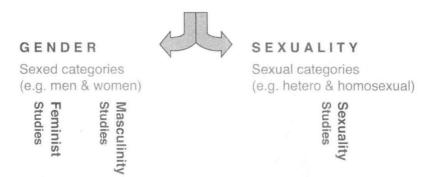
- sexed regimes, identities and practices which typically involve binary and hierarchical categories such as men and women, usually associated with an account of biology and reproductive function as well as
- sexual regimes, identities and practices, which also commonly involve binary and hierarchical categories such as heterosexual and homosexual, usually linked to conceptions of biology and reproduction. (Edwards, 1989: 1–12)

Since this book is about critical theories dealing with sex – with sexed and/or sexual – you might expect that this would be the term of choice for the title. The word 'sex' is certainly still used in everyday language to refer to one's sexed identity (one's 'sex') as well as to the sexual. However, for the most part, its meaning within scholarship on the political construction of identities and self/other relations has increasingly narrowed. Sex has become more strictly a reference to sexual activity (Abelove et al., 1993: xv–xvi) or a language for the biological, for the material body.² Because of these developments in academic debate, it is now rarely used as a blanket term for the sexed and sexual. For this reason I have employed instead the most common shorthand terms currently used in scholarly analyses for sexed and sexual – that is, gender and sexuality respectively. These terms are employed in the three major subfields of Feminist, Masculinity and Sexuality Studies (Figure I.1).

Although (as I shall indicate in Chapter 1) use of the terms gender and sexuality may be the subject of some dispute, the content of this book can best be summarised as an analytical overview of contemporary critical socio-political theories and thinkers concerned with gender and/or sexuality. My concern is to provide a reasonably comprehensive account of theoretical directions in the ever-expanding field of gender/sexuality,

Figure I.1 The gender/sexuality field and subfields

Sex and Power



to offer a 'compendium' that is both accessible and not too lengthy. These somewhat competing aims mean that the book is focused in particular ways.

First, the theories and theorists I discuss foreground discussions concerning gender and/or sexuality, though a number of them see these terms as constructed through and within other relations of power such as class, 'race'/ethnicity or imperialism/ colonialism. Secondly, because the scope of the book is already large, I have chosen to limit the content to critical theories and thinkers circulating in the English-speaking world. These theories and thinkers may nevertheless draw upon wide-ranging sources – for example, upon the work of continental European or Third World writers or hybrid perspectives that defy distinctions between English-speaking and non-Englishspeaking. Thirdly, the theories and thinkers covered are critical in two senses. They operate from a critical stance in which the organisation of sex (gender/sexuality) is not taken as given but seen as potentially problematic and associated with power,³ and these theories/thinkers are also deemed to be critical in the sense of being influential. Fourthly, given my interest in keeping the book to a manageable length, I have been required to limit the number of major theories mentioned and to focus in more detail on a smaller number of writers whose works are taken as indicative of significant directions in these frameworks. The book attempts to balance comprehensive coverage (the demands of a compendium or survey overview) against the provision of analytical depth and contextual specificity by combining schematic discussion of theoretical frameworks with a closer reading of particular writers dealing with particular issues. There are of course methodological questions that can be raised regarding this mode of presentation, which I shall consider shortly.

The intention is to provide an *analytical overview* of critical frameworks in the field. I stress the analytical or constitutive nature of the enterprise here because, as you might expect, a book covering the sizeable field of gender/sexuality theory cannot be merely descriptive. Frameworks in this field deal with complex matters

which are of intense interest to us all, are often sensitive, and may be passionately interpreted in sharply different ways. The project of providing an overview of such a fraught terrain therefore requires the development of an interrogatory approach regarding the nature of field and how to present it. I noted in an earlier book on Feminism that overview texts written in an environment of lively dispute demand both argument and survey (Beasley, 1999: xvi). This point is perhaps even more appropriate here, where the 'field' itself is not as self-evident, necessitates some explanation and is certainly a looser assemblage.

The analytical demands of an overview of the field of gender/sexuality theory are compounded by the fact that it is difficult to find texts that actually attend to the full range of major subfields of gender/sexuality theory - that is, Feminist, Masculinity, and Sexuality Studies. While theorising drawn from the gender/sexuality field is frequently deemed to be at the 'cutting edge' of contemporary social and political thought, publications about theory in this field are generally Feminist in focus and, more specifically, continue to be largely concerned with the position of women. Moreover, accounts that consider theoretical and practical interconnections between all of the main subfields within gender/sexuality theory remain undeveloped, despite the likelihood of these interconnections. In short, most publications concerned with theory in the gender/sexuality field explore only one of the subfields, while a smaller number refer perhaps to two but usually fleetingly. It is especially hard to find generalist4 (rather than discipline-based) explanatory overview texts which offer even passing attention to two, let alone three, of the major subfields of Feminist, Sexuality and Masculinity Studies.⁵ The effect is to place both the writer and readers of this book in the challenging position of negotiating and interpreting the landscape of the field in the absence of a ready-made and wellestablished view on the subject. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that, at the time of publication, the project of this book remains unique. Certainly, exploring and analysing gender/sexuality theory as a field remains a work in progress rather than a matter of reconsidering well-trodden ground.

Rationale for the book: why write or read it?

This book provides an explanatory overview of a highly significant field of thought. It is significant because it deals with thinking about two crucial elements in all areas of human life, sex and power. The book focuses upon the field of critical socio-political analysis of sex (gender/sexuality). This interdisciplinary field of gender/sexuality theory assumes that sex is ineluctably a matter of human organisation – that is, it is political, associated with social dominance and subordination, as well as capable of change. Theoretical frameworks and writers in this field are concerned with how power is constituted and perpetuated in the formation of sexed and sexual differences. Such theories and thinkers hence also offer a revaluation of 'mainstream' knowledges, which, by contrast, almost invariably marginalise the significance of sex in social relations while taking it for granted. Gender/sexuality in this setting is shorthand for the politics of gender/sexuality, and theories/thinkers in the gender/sexuality field are understood as engaged in theorising about this politics.

My central concern in writing this book is to enable readers who are interested in questions of sex and power to access a text attending to gender as well as to sexuality, and which outlines the range of main 'clusters' or subfields in this field – that is, Feminist, Sexuality and Masculinity Studies. Rather than offering a specialist focus on only one aspect of these questions or one subfield, my intention is to present in a condensed fashion the immense vitality and range of theoretical approaches in this arena in a deliberate attempt to work against insularity. It seems to me that there are considerable advantages in gaining a sense of the possible interconnections or even overlaps between theorising about gender and sexuality and their associated subfields, as well as a sense of their points of divergence. Hence, I endeavour to provide, within the evident limits of a single text, a comprehensive overview that takes as its starting point the notion of gender/sexuality theory as a field.

This field, I suggest, is marked by some recognisable elements (such as, a particular subject matter, a critical and change-oriented positioning). However, it must also be recognised that the field is neither self-evident nor accepted in any straightforward sense by all of the writers I have chosen to represent it. Some brief examples may illustrate the debate that arises in relation to my account. For instance, it was common for Feminist theorists in the 1960s and 1970s to argue or presume that sexual politics did indeed constitute a recognisable subject or field. Gender hierarchy (marked by systemic male privilege) was inextricably linked in these analyses to the organisation of sexuality and heteronormativity (systemic heterosexual privilege) such that it typically appeared that one followed from the other. 6 Michel Foucault, a writer who has strongly influenced the field of gender/sexuality theorising, uses the terms 'sex' and 'technologies' of power in ways that also make connections between gender and sexuality (Foucault, 1978: 141, 153). Micaela di Leonardo and Roger Lancaster, editors of The Gender/Sexuality Reader (1997), describe a broad field under the rubric of 'sexual embodiment' which attends to critical analyses of 'gender and sexual relations'. Furthermore, it can be argued that the vast majority of gender theorists (in Feminist and Masculinity Studies) continue to perceive gender and sexuality as strongly linked, historically if not intrinsically (Jackson, 1998b; Nielsen et al., 2000). On the other hand, some writers, most often though not exclusively those located in Sexuality Studies, are much more wary of this presumption. Queer theorists, in particular, dismiss any assertions that gender and sexuality are inevitably joined, and tend to ignore or reject gender (Martin, 1996; Hausman, 2001).

These disputes indicate that the gender/sexuality field is by no means a foregone conclusion. Indeed, Diane Richardson (2001) has suggested that the relationship between gender and sexuality has been theorised in at least five different ways, ranging from views that subsume one to the other or do not regard them as distinguishable, through to those that consider them as analytically separate. All the same, I suggest that there are several important reasons for claiming it as a field *in process*. This province of theorising can be discovered in the continuing linkages which many writers, including those mentioned above, make between gender and sexuality. For example, Queer theorists – who dispute any *intrinsic* connection between the two terms – do so in the context of social practices that simply assume that normative gender and sexual categories naturally go together 'like a horse and carriage' to produce heterosexuals attracted to the 'opposite' gender. In the process of undertaking a critique of notions of an inevitable or ontological connection between the terms,

Queer Theory constantly invokes references to gender as well as sexuality. An example of this continuing interplay arises in Stephen Whittle's lively refutation of gender in 'Gender fucking or fucking gender?' which is found in a book entitled Blending Genders (Ekins and King, 1996).

The strong linkages between gender and sexuality, at least in existing social practices, are acknowledged even in approaches that develop an alternative politics based upon a disavowal of their intrinsic connection. However, such linkages do not exhaust their many interconnections. For example, Hausman (2001) argues that while transsexual/ transgender issues are now often discussed in the terms of Queer Theory, these issues are also focal points of theorising within Gender Studies. Califia (1997: 245–80) notes that within Sexuality Studies many commentators on transsexuality, in particular, strongly reject Queer arguments on the issue of abandoning gender. Some writers attending to transgender issues in Masculinity Studies echo the point (see Halberstam, 1998). Moreover, Feminist and Masculinity scholars regularly draw upon the insights of Sexuality writers, including Queer theorists, in questioning heteronormativity.8 More tellingly, certain schools of thought simply do not distinguish between gender and sexuality. Psychoanalytic theorists and those influenced by French theory often use the terms 'sexuality' or 'sex' to encompass what others would term 'gender' (Jackson, 1998b: 132). It would seem that the intimate and complex connections between gender and sexuality theorising are longstanding, productive - even in moments of disavowal - and materially sustained by ongoing conversations between and within the three subfields of Feminist, Sexuality and Masculinity Studies.

Finally, gender/sexuality theory may be deemed a field in process by examination of institutional forms such as tertiary teaching programmes. After researching these programmes in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and Australia, it is evident to me that gender and sexuality are almost invariably, albeit unevenly, linked. Departments or centres that focus on critical analyses of gender or sexuality offer some attention to both. Because these departments or centres mostly grew out of and indeed remain dominated by Feminist work and, in particular, theorising about women, they generally offer analyses which may be described as under the rubric of 'gender' but retain, and have thankfully often expanded upon, a longstanding tendency to attend to sexuality. Teaching programmes centrally focused on Masculinity under the rubric of Gender Studies also pay increasing attention to sexuality, while Sexuality Studies programmes discuss writers who, at the very least, debate gender matters. In this climate it would amount to a dismemberment of existing theoretical linkages and a significantly narrowed, more exclusionary political 'conversation' if Feminist, Sexuality or Masculinity Studies were entirely disengaged from one another. This compendium is intended to address their present engagement, as well as points of conflict between them.

Methodological approach and organisation9

The aim is to provide a comprehensive, yet concise and lively explanatory guide to the whole field of gender/sexuality theory through an analytical survey. The method I employ in undertaking this analysis involves using both the notion of a continuum along a theoretical range and a notion of major directions/trajectories. The account of a theoretical continuum and of significant directions is contextualised by reference to specific approaches, thinkers and debates. Sometimes this will involve a closer focus on individual texts and/or particular issues. I am guided in developing such a format by the twin demands of accessibility and a concern to enable readers to make their own judgements. Like Steven Seidman (1993: 135-7; 1998: 11), I consider that writings on gender/sexuality can contribute to scholarly and public intellectual life. Moreover, I share with Patrice McDermott (1998) an optimistic view of the potential of texts like this one, a view that conceives such texts as dynamic products which translate the tensions of theorising alternative social perspectives and which, far from settling issues, can enable broader collective reflection and debate. On these grounds I have employed a methodological approach and organisational structure that is strongly shaped by a concern not simply to inform but, more importantly, to assist you the reader in weighing up and assessing different directions in the gender/ sexuality field. I examine the critical agendas of theories and thinkers with the object of providing space for your critical reflections. For this reason I deliberately adopt an open-ended style, rather than an overly judgmental or directive mode which suggests prescribing what you should think. I will now briefly outline the three main methodological tools used in the book - that is, a continuum, major directions, and an interrogatory accessible style.

I employ the methodological device of a notion of continuum within gender/sexuality theory, ranging from strongly Modernist to strongly Postmodern thinking, as a means of distinguishing between and yet simultaneously underlining connective relationships between different theoretical directions. The continuum is employed as a continuing theme, which provides a means of mapping out the terrain of this field. The usage of a continuum from Modernist to Postmodern approaches is similar to what many writers do when they signal major theoretical divides within large fields of thought. My intention in using the notion of a continuum is similarly to distinguish large frames of reference, but hopefully to avoid or displace the sense that these broad distinguishing frames are necessarily neatly separated. The continuum also enables readers to perceive the ways in which the Feminist, Masculinity and Sexuality subfields draw upon a broadly similar terrain with similar main directions. In other words, it enables the depiction of an overview map of gender/sexuality theory upon which each subfield can be overlaid rather in the manner of three related colour transparencies.

In this book I have combined the continuum format with an account of major directions/trajectories which can be found in the three subfields, as well as giving some attention to more specific approaches and key authors/key texts. I outline five main directions that focus respectively on (1) The Human, (2) (Singular) Difference, (3) (Multiple) Differences, (4) Relational Social Power, and (5) Fluidity/Instability. These directions range from the firmly Modernist to the strongly Postmodern, and some include within them approaches that work across the border of the continuum. At the beginning of the sections of the book dealing with Feminist, Sexuality and Masculinity Studies, I indicate how approaches within the subfields take up these directions. In order to avoid overly repetitive analysis, I will not cover all of the possible five directions in each subfield, though I usually cover most of them. In order to flesh out the meaning of these directions and to indicate the unique detail

of different points of view, specific approaches, authors, issues and texts will be examined and debated. This 'directions' methodology refuses any account of the field as a singular unity or as a set of incommensurable types of framework between which one must decide (see Young, 1997a: 17).

Relatedly, I have undertaken this analytical overview of gender/sexuality theory with an eye to examining debates between subfields, theories and theorists rather than merely describing different perspectives. Such debates show very clearly that there is no single answer or point of view available in the overall field. Given this complexity, it is all the more important that an overview of the field be presented in an accessible fashion. For this reason I have employed language intended to be understandable to those who are unfamiliar with the field as well as to specialists. I have also adopted an 'incremental' mode, such that complex approaches, concepts and labels are not introduced at only one point in the book. While the 'one-stop shop' method can provide a thoroughgoing account on the first occasion new elements are mentioned, this method tends to lead to the presentation of often overwhelming lumps of information. By contrast, the incremental mode builds up successive layers of analysis in order to make the information more digestible and context-specific. This means, for example, that a term like 'Postmodernism' may be discussed in many different places and contexts in the book, adding levels of complexity along the way. Those who also wish to access condensed definitions may turn to the Glossary and/or check the Index to find a shortcut to the several usages of names/terms. Glossary terms appear in bold the first time they appear in the main chapters.

The book attempts to balance and combine an emphasis upon interrogation of multiple perspectives with a focus on providing an informative, systematic and relatedly accessible overview. My aim is to draw attention to the usefulness of developing and maintaining a critical unease towards rather than a ready acceptance of all views, including my own characterisation of the field.

Conclusion

The content, rationale and methodology of this book, far from advancing a final answer, necessarily offer a selective window into the field of gender/sexuality theory. It is intended to be a window that enables a wide variety of perspectives to be visible and which does not preclude other windows. In The Use of Pleasure, Michel Foucault (1990: 8) comments that 'there are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think ... and perceive differently ... is absolutely necessary'. For me the field of gender/sexuality offers precisely the opportunity to think differently. I hope that this compendium conveys at least something of its vitality to you.

Notes

- 1. See Tickner (2001) on gender and international politics and Johnson (2000) on gendered and heteronormative features of national government leadership and policy.
- 2. Sex in this usage represents a distinction between nature and society, which may be taken as largely self-evident, or more commonly as indicating the site of boundaries of cultural

malleability, and/or a significant social distinction which some would argue should be displaced. See Stoller, 1968; Oakley, 1972; Keller, 1989; Phillips, 1992; Butler, 1990; Gatens, 1991; Andermahr et al., 2000.

- 3. My use of 'critical' is rather like that outlined by Evan Willis. He argues that the discipline of Sociology is characterised by a critical sensibility, but in this context the term 'critical' is 'used somewhat differently from its common meaning of being negative'. Rather the term is used to mean 'being reflexive or sceptical about the social world, and ... being engaged in a critique of the existing social world' (Willis, 2004: 105).
- 4. While this book is generalist rather than discipline-based, it does not of course float free of knowledge typologies. The book reflects my training and interests in the Humanities and Social Sciences. My academic background consists of an undergraduate degree almost entirely devoted to Humanities subjects (English, Drama) and postgraduate studies largely within the Social Sciences, with some emphasis on Cultural Studies. I have taught in the disciplinary and interdisciplinary areas of Philosophy, Sociology, Politics, History, Aboriginal Studies, Women's Studies, Political Economy, Cultural/Media Studies and Education. While all writers have disciplinary/interdisciplinary limits, my research training and employment experience have been relatively broad. I suspect this breadth fuels my desire to write in ways that 'speak' across knowledge boundaries. Within the Humanities and Social Sciences I have taught gender/sexuality theory and politics/policy largely in relation to women for well over a decade, and in the last five years have focused more specifically on research and teaching in the area of Masculinity/Men's Studies.
- 5. Genders, by Kaplan and Glover (1998) is one of the few overview texts that attend to all three subfields, in this case within the disciplinary boundaries of the area of literary and cultural theory.
- 6. See the work of Adrienne Rich and Catherine MacKinnon in Chapter 4. See also Rich, 1980b; and MacKinnon, 1982.
- 7. Richardson (2001: 5491-3) describes five competing perspectives which variously depict gender as subsuming sexuality, sexuality as subsuming gender, their inherent co-dependence, the complex character of their interplay, and their analytical separation, citing the work of Stevi Jackson, Catherine MacKinnon, Tamsin Wilton, Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin respectively. See also Jackson, 1996a; MacKinnon, 1982; Wilton, 1996: 5491-3; Butler, 1997a; Rubin, 1984.
- 8. See Segal (1999) and Connell (2002) for examples of interplay between Gender and Sexuality theorising. For an account of 'heteronormativity', see Warner (1993b: xxi-xxv).
- 9. For a more detailed discussion of debates about methodology relevant to this book and, specifically, debates about the form of overview texts, see Appendix: Methodological Issues.
- 10. For instance, Karen Offen and Elizabeth Grosz have distinguished two major groupings or strands within the field of Feminist Studies. Offen (1988: 134-6) distinguished between 'relational' and 'individualist' feminisms, while Grosz (1988: 92-104) referred to 'equality' and 'difference' feminisms.

PART1

Gender/Feminist Studies