

theorizing gender

Rachel Alsop

Annette Fitzsimons

Kathleen Lennon



theorizing gender

Rachel Alsop,
Annette Fitzsimons
and
Kathleen Lennon

*With a guest chapter on psychoanalysis
by Ros Minsky*

polity

Copyright © Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, Kathleen Lennon and Rosalind Minsky 2002

The right of Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, Kathleen Lennon and Rosalind Minsky to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2002 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Reprinted 2003, 2005, 2006, 2012

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Alsop, Rachel.

Theorizing gender / Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, and Kathleen Lennon ; with a guest chapter on psychoanalysis by Ros Minsky.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7456-1943-6 — ISBN 0-7456-1944-4 (pbk.)

1. Sex role. I. Fitzsimons, Annette. II. Lennon, Kathleen. III. Title.
HQ1075 .A435 2002
305.3—dc21

2001006332

Typeset in 10.5 on 12.5pt Bembo
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in the USA by Edwards Brothers, Inc.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.politybooks.com

theorizing gender

In memory of Ros Minsky

Acknowledgements

We would first of all like to acknowledge the contribution of Ros Minsky. We have all learnt a great deal from her work and were delighted when she agreed to contribute to this project. We were very sad to hear of her death before the book reached publication. Secondly we would like to thank each other. The mutual planning and execution of this book has benefited all of us. Thirdly we would like to thank participants in the Hull Centre for Gender Studies and also our graduate and undergraduate students for discussions over many years. Special thanks to Paul Gilbert, Minae Inahara, Gill Jagger, Lawrence Nixon, Michael Peckitt and Jay Prosser, for discussion, comments, references. Our editors from Polity have been supportive and very patient. The anonymous readers helped improve the book enormously.

Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders. However, if any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 Natural Women and Men	12
2 Psychoanalysis and Gender	39
3 The Social Construction of Gender	64
4 Judith Butler: 'The Queen of Queer'	94
5 Gender and Sexuality	114
6 Theorizing Men and Masculinities	130
7 Bodily Imaginaries	165
8 Sexual Difference	182
9 Borderlands and Gendered Homes	201
10 Gender and the Politics of Identity	220
<i>Notes</i>	240
<i>Bibliography</i>	243
<i>Index</i>	268

Introduction

This book emerges out of more than ten years of teaching and researching gender in an interdisciplinary way. In 1986 the Hull Centre for Gender Studies was set up by academics of the universities of Hull and Humberside and interested parties from the town. Over the years it has hosted innumerable speakers from Britain and abroad and spawned gender studies courses and modules at both institutions as well as a journal on gender studies.¹ When the Centre was launched the use of the term 'gender studies' was controversial, deemed by some in women's studies as a political sell-out. (We are glad to report that relations are now harmonious and the Centre hosted the Women's Studies Network conference in 1998.) Our choice of title for the Centre was prompted not by a desire for institutional disguise – but by certain theoretical and practical concerns. The main theoretical concern at the time was based simply on the conviction that it was impossible to theorize women and the construction of femininity without also theorizing men and the construction of masculinity. The practical concerns arose from the involvement many of the founding members had had with activist women's groups. A challenge in some groups had been negotiating across divisions of class, sexuality and cultural and national locations, among a myriad of other differences leading often to uneasy compromises around the category 'woman'. By focusing on the study of gender rather than the study of women we hoped to be able to interrogate the ways in which constructions of femininity and masculinity related to and were constituted by other social divisions, without assuming the priority of gender over

other axes of social inequality. At that time there was also a men's group in Hull and many people wanted a forum in which we could listen to what they had to say. Then, about the time of the setting up of the Centre, there was a dispute in a local women's centre about the inclusion of transsexual women. The unease that many of us felt about their exclusion served to problematize further the use of the term 'woman'. Transsexual men and women have been regular contributors to the Centre since that time and we are very much indebted to them for their contributions, which have helped inform the approach to theorizing gender which is explored here.

This book aims to provide an examination of the different ways in which we can theorize gender. Through the analysis of different modes of theorizing our aim is to interrogate the processes whereby people generally become divided into the two categories, male and female, and to explore what the ensuing content of these categories is. As Scott (1988: 49) so succinctly remarks, "'man" and "woman" are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendent meaning. Overflowing because, even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions.' We suggest that we cannot simply take for granted what it is to be a man or a woman, or that the world is simply found with these divisions in it.

This project is thus distinct from accounts of gender which take the division of people into male and female groups for granted and which seek instead to explain the specific and unequal interrelations between these two groups socially. In this vein liberal feminists traditionally have looked to a lack of equal opportunities for women as the root of inequality, Marxist feminists have identified the workings of capitalism as a prime cause of women's subordination, while radical feminists have explored the machinations of patriarchy in both personal and social relations. Such accounts share some common ground in that they tended to assume *a priori* that the human race is divided into the categories men and women. From this basis they then try to make sense of what difference gender makes in terms of social structure and norms of behaviour.

Although it is an oversimplification to suggest that none of the above accounts acknowledge or take into account the heterogeneity of women's experiences (Segal 1999) it is the critique from black and Third World feminists (among others) which brought to the fore the question of differences among women (and by implication differences

among men), challenging as they did the false universalism of much white feminist criticism. These critiques called into question the terms 'woman' and 'man', so that it was no longer possible to take for granted what it was to be a man or a woman. In this book we aim to investigate just that. We are concerned with the myriad of things which it can be to be male or female and thereby with the processes by which we become *gendered* selves. Our discussion is informed by the constraint that an analysis of our gendered selves cannot be detached from other aspects of subjectivity and social positionality, such as race,² class, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness and so on. In so doing we wish to avoid an additive model of difference, which considers race, sexuality, class and so on in addition to gender, but instead to put forward an analysis which sees such categories of difference and inequality as mutually constitutive – to recognize that gendered categories are, for example, always raced, always class-specific.

In this book we are approaching the question of how we become male or female with the use of the term 'gender'. In this we are motivated by many of the concerns which led to the naming of the Centre, but our theoretical commitments to it have become more extensive. As we use the term it has several interconnected aspects. First, gender is a feature of subjectivity. We identify and make sense of ourselves as men and women or boys and girls. Secondly, gender refers to the cultural understandings and representations of what it is to be a man or a woman. For example, the belief that girls like sitting playing with dolls whereas boys like rough-and-tumble play has traditionally formed part of some cultures' understanding of gender difference in childhood. Thirdly, gender operates as a social variable, structuring the pathways of those so classified within society. In the field of work, for instance, there is still a tendency for men and women to be channelled into doing different jobs and by consequence to earn different rates of pay. All these three aspects of gender are interrelated and it is these interconnections we aim to explore through the course of this text.³ For example, the division of labour within the public sphere (as in the home) is dependent upon our cultural understandings of men and women being different and thus more suited to different types of work. In turn how we make sense of ourselves as men and women is contingent upon the ways in which such cultural representations and social structures are gendered.

Often the theory that is explored brings into question the very language we are using to investigate. Although in the text we employ

the term gender to refer to the production of male and female selves this does not mean that we either accept or endorse a simple sex-gender distinction or gender as a straightforward polarity between men/women and masculinity/femininity. Conventionally sex has been seen as distinct from gender in that sex has been taken to relate to a biological division between men and women and gender to refer to the social constructions masculine and feminine. In other words gender has been regarded as that which society makes out of biological sex difference. Our analysis of gender theory, however, also questions the rationale for splitting humans into male and female kinds and the limitations and boundaries the categories themselves produce.

The use of the term gender to conceptualize the production of masculinity and femininity is as controversial within feminist theory today as it was in the mid-1980s when the Centre was established. Gender has come under fire from within the feminist community for suggesting a false symmetry between men and women (Braidotti with Butler 1994), for being unable to convey inequality and power, and for being politically benign (Evans 1990). The main alternative to gender put forward to conceptualize the relations between men and women is that of sexual difference. Here the exchange between Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler (1994) in *differences*, which is explored more fully in chapter 8, is useful in examining the merits and disadvantages of each term. For Braidotti the use of the term gender is at 'crisis-point in feminist theory', under attack, in her opinion, for its 'theoretical inadequacy and for its politically amorphous and unfocused nature' (1994: 36). She sees the term 'sexual difference' as able to convey the asymmetry between the sexes, and it allows space for women's redefinition of femininity, operating as the primary site of identification and resistance.

Our decision to take gender as our point of focus – to write a text entitled *Theorizing Gender* rather than one entitled *Theorizing Sexual Difference* – is rooted first and foremost in our questioning of the assertion prominent in the 'sexual difference' framework that sexual difference is foundational to identity. As Butler argues in response to Braidotti's defence of sexual difference, 'part of the suspicion toward the "sexual difference" framework is precisely that it tends to make sexual difference more hallowed, more fundamental, as a constituting difference of social life more important than other kinds of differences' (Braidotti with Butler 1994: 41). While acknowledging that gender can convey a false symmetry between men and women, it does at the

same time release us from the idea that asymmetry between men and women is unavoidable.

We also challenge the argument that the use of gender as a concept to explore the production of masculine and feminine selves, and indeed the establishment of 'gender studies' as opposed to 'women's studies' (or 'feminist studies') within the academy is *necessarily* depoliticizing (Braidotti with Butler 1994; Evans 1990; Richardson and Robinson 1997). Evans, in a discussion of the shift from women's studies to gender studies in British academia, argues that 'gender studies' does not automatically invoke questions of power in the way that 'women's studies' does:

it is acceptable . . . to study such things as gender and sexuality because they do not pose inherent questions about power and can take the form of descriptive accounts of aspects of social life. Without the integration of concepts of power and inequality, the world remains full of people who are just different in much the same way as the people in a children's encyclopaedia. (1990: 460)

While taking on board Evans's concerns, we suggest that an analysis of gender does not foreclose the possibility of a radical and transformative political agenda, and can in fact open up modes of resistance and transformation denied within a sexual difference framework.⁴ The ways in which gender is conceptualized and deployed vary enormously between texts. As Hawkesworth (1997) illustrates in some depth, gender has a 'multiplicity of meaning' within feminist theory. The radical potential of gender (and indeed gender studies) depends therefore on the particular theoretical framework in which gender is conceptualized. This is not to dilute attention to the specific power relations in which *gendered* inequalities are constructed and embedded. Indeed our critique of the theories explored in this text is informed by a political and personal commitment to the reworking of gender in a more equitable, less oppressive manner. To this end we acknowledge that contemporarily relations between men and women are structured in a manner which tends to subordinate and devalue women. At the same time, however, we also recognize that current norms of gender marginalize many men and that cultural constructions of gender exclude and alienate those who do not fit neatly into the categories male/female. Although feminist analyses (in their many guises) feature widely within our analysis of gender theory, the

theories with which we engage in this text also include the recent work on gender to emerge from queer analysis and transgender narratives. This is not in any way to set up gender studies in opposition to women's studies, to deny their considerable overlap or to dismiss out of hand the concept sexual difference in favour of gender.

While our discussion will take into account how debates within gender theory develop in relation to each other we wish to avoid an account which charts the development of theory primarily chronologically. As has been noted elsewhere (Segal 1999) there has been a tendency in so-called 'nineties feminism' to homogenize the past, failing to take adequate account of the diversity of ideas in early second-wave feminism or the specific context in which ideas were produced. 'Seventies feminism' has been uniformly castigated for being unable sufficiently to take account of differences among women, a propensity to universalize and a blind acceptance of the binary division male-female. While such criticisms hold some validity they ignore not only the heterogeneity of past (and present) theorizing but also the continuity of ideas over time. Instead this text is primarily divided into chapters which examine varying theoretical approaches to the study of gender, assessing how they complement, contradict and interconnect with each other.

In doing this our aim is twofold. First, we attempt to map out different ways in which gender has been theorized. Here the main approaches are naturalizing approaches, reliant on biology and psychology; psychoanalytic approaches; and social constructionist approaches. This last category is divided into those who prioritize material relations and those who place priority on the realm of language and discourse, the domain of the cultural meanings of gender. Again for those who place a premium on cultural meanings there is a division between theorists to whom gender is the central organizing concept and those who employ the notion of sexual difference. Our second aim is to evaluate these approaches and undermine the polarities which have been set up between them. Although there are inevitable tensions we none the less argue that we need to employ resources from psychoanalytic, materialist and discursive accounts to accommodate the complexities of gender and other aspects of identity. The focus throughout is with the shape of theory. There is therefore little reference to historical or empirical resources. We see our project as an evaluation and clarification of approaches to gender theory which could then inform empirical research within a gendered frame.

In the course of this discussion we look at particular theorists who exemplify particular approaches. This is not to say that such writers are necessarily the only theorists to develop such ideas. We have not had the space to consider comprehensively all the important contributors to the field of gender theory. Many we have not discussed are signalled in the references. Perhaps, however, we need to explain some of our decisions. The work of Judith Butler is given extensive attention. Partly this reflects the central position she has come to occupy in gender theory. She represents perhaps the most sophisticated development of discursive accounts of gender construction. Clearly, however, the amount of attention we pay to her work also reflects a judgement on our part as to the productiveness of her approach. The discussion of Butler, however, continually points to the need to supplement her account with insights from psychoanalytic and materialist theorists and the later chapters of the book attempt to weave these strands together in the discussions of sexuality, the body, transgenering and the politics of identity. There are some omissions which we particularly regret. The work of post-colonial feminists, including that of Gayatri Spivak, does not get as much attention as we would like, and of post-Lacanian French feminists we only discuss Irigaray in any detail. We can only plead time and space to explain but not to justify this.

We write this book not only as an aid for anyone studying gender and seeking to make sense of the different ways in which we can conceptualize how we become gendered selves, but also as a stimulus for debate. The development of our ideas as expressed in this text has occurred over time through our interactions and exchanges in both teaching and research and continues beyond the publication of this book. To this end we welcome constructive responses from readers. We aim throughout to make the work as accessible as possible, while recognizing the complexities of many of the ideas. We hope it will be of use to students from undergraduate level onwards, our own as well as others. Our past students have played a crucial role in informing the perspectives explored here.

The book is organized into ten chapters.⁵ In chapter 1 we examine the ways in which gender divisions are naturalized in certain strands of theory. Sex difference research tends to assume a division of bodies into male and female and suggests that such a division generates distinct psychological and behavioural divisions between men and women. This chapter explores the problematic assumptions that

underpin such accounts. Through the work of writers such as Nelly Oudshoorn and Anne Fausto-Sterling the *a priori* assumption that there are two sexes, which preconditions naturalizing accounts of gender, is interrogated.

In chapter 2, we move on to look at psychoanalytic accounts of gender and the ways in which psychoanalysis has developed our understanding of the unconscious dimensions of gender formation and the importance of early interactions within the family on the construction of our gender identities. This chapter discusses the development of ideas on gender within psychoanalysis, taking into account the contributions made by Freud, Lacan, the 'French feminists' (Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray) and the object-relations school of psychoanalysis (most notably, Chodorow). Here we are introduced to the idea that our gendered subjectivities are unstable and precarious, that our unconscious thoughts and desires are potentially disruptive of our conscious actions. It also highlights the significance of bodily difference in the process of subject formation, an issue to which we return later.

In chapter 3 we begin our exploration of social constructionist accounts of gender. Here our discussion centres on the debate between materialist feminist and discursive accounts of gender as a means to illustrate the different ways in which gender can be interpreted as socially constructed. Whereas materialist feminist accounts look to structural and material features and patterns to understand what it is to be gendered, discursive accounts pay attention instead to the construction of meaning and significance in language and representation. Looking in particular at the influence of Foucault's ideas on discourse, and the appropriation of Foucault within feminism, this discussion explores the idea that we make sense of ourselves as men and women through the discourses on gender we encounter. We note that while earlier materialist feminist accounts placed emphasis on our positioning within social institutions and structures to explain gender they paid less attention to gender as an aspect of subjectivity, a move made prominent within discursive accounts. We conclude by looking at the ways in which later materialist feminists, most notably Hennessy, have sought to integrate attention to language, culture and meaning within the materialist framework. This chapter introduces the importance of the recognition of difference among women within feminist thought and the impact of it on feminist accounts of gender. Through analysis of the concept of patriarchy the chapter

highlights the problems of defining women and men as collective, internally homogeneous groups with shared interests and needs, and considers the necessary modes of theorising needed to accommodate difference. The discussion resists totalizing theories of gender and the polarization of debates around the material and the discursive. Instead, we argue for contextual analysis which pays attention to the interweaving of discursive and materialist accounts.

In chapter 4 we move on to a specific consideration of the work of Judith Butler. Butler's account forms the limit of social constructionism. For Butler there is no real authentic gender; instead the performance constitutes the real. There is therefore no necessary link between masculinity and femininity and 'male' and 'female' bodies. For her it is the demands of the heterosexual imperative which force a cultural division into male and female. The critique of Butler begins an exploration of the limitations of her analysis, questioning, in particular, the place of the body within her work and the types of political action to which her theory gives rise. These issues are taken up again in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 5 explores in particular the interconnections between the categories of gender and sexuality. Through a discussion of the debate between Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler we consider whether sexuality should be in relation to a distinct category of analysis seen as both subjectivity and political collectivities. We conclude that, although these categories are discursively interdependent, there may be purposes for which they require separate analysis.

Chapter 6 takes as a case study the recent work to emerge on men and masculinities, looking in particular at the ways in which discourse theory and psychoanalysis as well as naturalizing accounts have been employed to analyse masculinities. This chapter assesses what this body of work contributes to our understanding of gender, exploring in some detail the construction of and interrelationship of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, the interconnections between masculinity and homophobia and men's contradictory relationship to power.

Chapter 7 deals with the question of the body and the different ways in which theories tackle the issue of corporeality. After exploring the idea of a docile body as outlined in Foucault's work and its implications for understanding gender, the discussion questions the way in which Butler's account of gender, as influenced by Foucault, deals with the issue of bodily materiality. Butler's argument that

materiality is a discursive effect is interrogated through the work of disability theorists, which questions the limitations of such a socially constructed view of the body. The chapter then provides an account of the role of the body utilizing a concept of bodily imaginaries, derived from both psychoanalytic and phenomenological thought. In this way the emotional salience of our relationship to our bodily identities is made evident.

The insistence within Butler's account that sexual difference is constructed culturally (that our understanding of biological sex differences is mediated via culture) is interrogated further in chapter 8 through an analysis of sexual difference theory. Irigaray's analysis of sexual difference and her project to develop different imaginaries of the body, ones which allow femininity to be lived in a less damaging way, is explored in some detail. But, while the work of Irigaray is given particular attention, the discussion is mindful of the varying accounts of sexual difference put forward by theorists in this field (Braidotti, Gatens, Grosz). Here we explore further the debates within feminist thought on the use of the term sexual difference over the term gender, looking in particular at the interchange between Braidotti and Butler.

In chapter 9 we consider the debates on transgendering and transsexuality, and the recent work that has emerged from queer theorists, taking as a thread through the chapter the notions of 'borderlands' and 'home'. This chapter outlines the different readings of transgendering and transsexuality for gender. We consider the challenge made by transgendering to the categorization of gender into male-female, and the limitations and boundaries constructed via such gender categories. By destabilizing the links between sex and gender, queer strategies open up the possibility for multiple and indeterminate sex-gender-sexual positionings. On the other hand, transgendering that seeks bodily modification raises questions again about the significance of the sexed body for gender identity. Through the work of Jay Prosser on transsexuality we consider the claim that queer is unable to account for transsexuals' desire for sexual embodiment. Prosser, using the concepts of borderlands and home to explore the contradictions raised by transgendering, makes a contrast between those who seek to live in the borderlands (where gender categories are destabilized and gender divisions are blurred) and those who seek a gendered 'home' (however mythical this home actually is). His claim in his earlier work that we need narratives that make sense of