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NEW GENDER SCHOLARSHIP: BREAKING OLD BOUNDARIES

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Harvard Law School
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Women, Men, and Others

Beyond Ethnocentrism in Gender Theory

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How many genders are there? From a contemporary Western perspective, the answer is definite: There exist two—and only two—"opposite sexes." This pattern of structuring reality into paired opposites is quite typical of Western thought. By this view, all the world is black versus white, good versus evil, savage versus civilized, homosexual versus heterosexual, men versus women. Yet, we all know that everything that exists is not "sheep and goats," that no matter how hard we try we cannot neatly pigeonhole every fact into its own dichotomous relationship with a naturally exclusive and contradictory group.

Fortunately, the world is more complex than that. We can be thankful that the diversities and complexities of life provide a more exciting existence as a result. Feminist scholarship has forced academia to recognize the social nature of gender roles, and from that to critique the politics of knowledge based solely on the perspective of those who hold power.

Yet despite a few pioneering works, like M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies's *Female of the Species* (1975), and Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (1978), most gender scholarship has left unquestioned the notion that gender and sex are always congruent. Though we attack the notion that "biology is destiny," we remain imprisoned by the idea that one's morphology—specifically that one's genitalia—determines one's gender role.

As I discovered in my research among American Indian traditionalists, not all cultures agree with Western society's notion that all people are either men or women. The idea that various societies can and do construct alternative gender roles, independently of an individual's

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physical body, is so different from our society's view that we find it difficult to conceive. Feminist scholarship has developed "Women's Studies," and recently that has inspired a complementary emergence in "Men's Studies." But this emergence of another near dichotomy leaves out certain people. Maybe some scholars can accommodate in allowing for "transsexual" studies, with the idea that a certain person can *trans*-form herself or himself from one gender category to the other— but such an intellectual exercise leaves unquestioned the original dichotomy.

Certain groups of people are still left out, in this newly modified scheme. What about individuals who have no desire to fit into either "opposite sex" category? As our society is undergoing revolutionary changes in gender roles, prompted by postindustrial economic changes and by women's wholesale moves into the patriarchal centers of power, we are seeing more and more females and males reacting against the constraints of traditional either/or gender roles. Popular culture, as reflected by contemporary fashion and music, is moving in a more gender-bending direction. Certain individuals clearly do not want to limit their sexuality by labels of "gay" or "straight." Others do not want to fit into a tight box of defining themselves as "men" or as "women." Sexuality and gender are closely related in this respect. It is time that academia recognizes these trends and attempts to reconceptualize our analysis of gender beyond two simplistic opposites.

When I was working on my book *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (1986), it seemed that the more research I did on the aboriginal *berdache* tradition, the more confusing the subject became. Berdaches had been described by early white explorers on the frontier, and by early anthropologists, variously as "hermaphrodites," "sodomites," "homosexuals," "transvestites," or "transsexuals." None of these terminologies proved to be adequate by itself. At one point I despaired of even being able to make sense of it all, and I put aside my work on this topic to complete another book on men's and women's roles as leaders in twentieth- century American Indian society.

When I came back to this topic, it finally dawned on me that my difficulty in categorizing berdaches was due to my attempts to force all the data into ethnocentric Western norms. Traditional Native American societies did not divide people into paired opposites, with only two alternatives. At least before the impact of Western acculturation, many of those societies offered other socially accepted gender alternatives for males and females, besides the standard roles for men and women.

Berdaches, and their female counterparts that early explorers called *Amazons*, were not usually physically hermaphroditic, and they did not completely transsexualize themselves into "the opposite sex." Instead, they combined elements of both femininity and masculinity, with some other characteristics unique to their position, into another role that was distinct from either women or men.

Knowledge of such alternatives requires us to be more precise in our definitions of gender. We must be careful in our choice of words, to distinguish "female" and "male" as biological entities from the socialized categories of "woman" and "man." On the other hand, the tendency to see the biological and the cultural as opposites is also a fallacy. The debate currently raging between "essentialist" scholars, who propound a biological base for gender and sexuality, versus "social constructionists," who emphasize cultural origins, is perhaps more accurately viewed from the perspective that human lives are shaped by the interaction of both of these factors. Gender, in short, is better described as an ongoing *process* rather than either an inborn biological trait or a completed social construction handed to the individual by the established order.

There is much need for additional cross-cultural study of gender variance and alternative genders. Anthropologists should be at the forefront of a new stage of study, going beyond gender stereotypes to expand our awareness of the many possibilities for women and men beyond the usual roles that we associate with each sex. That anthropology as a discipline has done this only in a limited way is mainly due to homophobia that currently exists within the discipline, and the fact that lesbian, gay, or transsexual graduate students are seldom encouraged to pursue their unique advantage in fieldwork situations with alternative gender people in other cultures. Indeed, in 1975 the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association even voted "not to endorse anthropological research on homosexuality across national borders." And it was not until 1986 that the American Anthropological Association voted to add a clause on sexual orientation to its antidiscrimination bylaws, a full decade after most other major social science organizations had done so.

The fact that it took anthropologists so long to enact this change, despite constant pressure from the Anthropology Research Group on Homosexuality, demonstrates the continuing resistance to such research in academia. In contrast with its beginnings, when some of the leading early anthropologists were actively involved in homosexual relationships and attempted to offer a relativistic approach to sexuality, in recent

decades anthropology as a discipline has probably the worst record among the social sciences. Ironically, the field of psychology, which had previously been the most homophobic, has made amazing progress in the last decade. There is now an entire division of the American Psychological Association devoted purely to gay and lesbian concerns.

Sociology as a discipline is in between. While numerous sociologists have changed their attitudes toward a more accepting view, in a recent survey of Departments of Sociology, sponsored by the Sociologists Gay Caucus, many Department Heads commented that faculty members and graduate students would not be encouraged to pursue research on alternative sexualities and alternative genders in their departments. In terms of the practical realities of American colleges, it is not yet a question of researchers outside the mainstream crowding out mainstream perspectives, but of getting equal consideration. Arguments that suggest such a supposed crowding out serve only to justify further discrimination and to cloud the real issue.

Certainly there is room for many perspectives on a topic, and a researcher's mainstream identity does not negate the possibility for valuable contribution. But it must be explicitly and publicly recognized that in certain topics a researcher outside the gender mainstream can offer special contributions. In a dichotomous-gender and homophobic society, people who are forced to grapple early on with gender desires or erotic feelings that are different from what this society says they should have, in constructing their own identity must ask themselves questions that are not required for someone who fits in neatly to our society's mainstream. The simplistic dualistic model does not apply; husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend, and other social roles are inapplicable. The person is forced to think independently, to come up with her or his own solutions in relationships, and in thinking regarding gender and sexuality issues.

This factor is particularly important in Men's Studies, and it explains why gay men and others out of the masculine mainstream have made so many contributions to this emerging field. Masculine heterosexual men are often reluctant even to admit that their masculinity is a social role rather than a natural given, because if they can conceive of it as "natural" then they can more easily repress those aspects of themselves and others that do not conform to the norm. It is the male with a certain sense of being marginal who is most aware of this socially imposed standard. Gender nonconformity and sexual nonconformity provide a particularly salient means for males to come to this level of awareness.

Further, researchers who are perceived by their subjects to be connected to or internal to the identity of the group being studied have advantages in gaining access to information. In my own research, I found over and over again that my Indian informants told me they would not be divulging information on the berdache tradition if I had not been openly gay myself. Knowing how their culture has been maligned by outsiders, they are hesitant to talk about things contrary to Western values for fear that such matters would be treated disrespectfully by the typical heterosexist white person. If we are going to gather further accurate cross-cultural data on the topic of gender boundaries, it is going to be necessary for researchers who are outside the heterosexual norm not to be just tolerated in academia, but to be given particular encouragement to pursue such research.

As represented by these articles, some of the most innovative and creative new scholarship on gender focuses on alternative gender ideologies and gender variance. Attention to the variable boundaries of gender—both within Western culture and by contrasting cross-cultural examples—can lead us to a better understanding of the many potentials for changing women's and men's roles in this society. Such a perspective, added to those we already possess, can provide scholars with a more complete analysis of the nature of gender as a whole.

From this perspective of the marginalized person, let me suggest just two possible reconceptualizations of gender issues. Our society attaches great importance to one's sexual preference, defining people by two opposite categories labeled "heterosexual" and "homosexual," based solely on the biological sex of their sexual partner. In the interest of promoting social harmony, perhaps we in academia should attempt to redirect this definition toward factors other than sex. Many of us have been teaching that intimacy is more important in a person's well-being than sex, yet we allow to stand unchallenged the Catholic Church's ridiculous notion that the only purpose of sex is reproduction. As is obvious to any person who stops to think about it, there are other functions of sex that are equally important. Indeed, the nonprocreative functions of sex are now more important, in our current world where we have already over-reproduced ourselves to population levels that are quite dangerous to a balanced ecology.

Besides the happiness and emotional well-being that sexual behavior can provide, an often overlooked but critically important function of erotic attraction is its promotion of intimate bonding between individuals. In this context it might make more sense for the study of gender

to categorize people into "homosocial" and "heterosocial" relationships rather than homosexual/heterosexual patterns. A homosocial relationship is one in which an individual's closest intimate associations are with a person of the same sex. Heterosocially inclined persons get their intimate needs met primarily by a person of the other sex. Such relationships might or might not involve sexual behavior, but the focus is on the intimacy generated rather than the fact of intercourse. In our society, we usually study intimacy in the context of the companionate marriage. Perhaps it is time to give equal attention to a gender analysis of same-sex friendships.

A more radical departure is to categorize people on grounds of their gender identity/role rather than on the basis of their biological sex. Under this reconceptualization, a masculine female paired with a feminine male, a masculine male with a feminine male, a masculine female with a feminine female, as well as a masculine male with a feminine female, all share a "heterogender" type of relationship. They may be homosexual or heterosexual, but each person is fulfilling a distinct gender role that is complementary to the other. On the other hand, a masculine male who is in an intimate relationship with a masculine female, two masculine males, two feminine males, two masculine females, two feminine females, or a feminine male with a feminine female, are all involved in a "homogender" relationship.

Our society seems to be moving toward homogender relationships, as traditional sex-roles boundaries are breaking down and androgynous personality attributes are becoming more common. Scholars of gender studies need to be studying the relative merits of heterogender and homogender relationships. If we continue to focus our studies on the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, we may be in danger of missing some of the most important trends of our time. It is true that gay/lesbian intimate relationships are often at the forefront of directions in which mainstream heterosexual relationships are headed, but that is because they are more often homogender. A heterogender same-sex relationship might be entirely different.

We need to be doing research on the relative emotional health of people who draw their intimate friendships and relationships from only gender, as opposed to those who develop intimacy with another person on grounds other than gender. As gender boundaries are breaking down in modern society, as "the masculine" and "the feminine" become increasingly problematic, such questions become particularly important. Yet they are almost completely ignored by scholars. If gender is only

equated with "Women's Studies," these larger patterns of relationships may be missed. Even if we allow for the expansion of feminist perspectives to incorporate "Men's Studies," that will not necessarily cover all people. In our society today, where revolutionary changes are occurring in gender-related issues, where issues of gender and sexuality are among the most controversial topics with which modern humanity must grapple, it is necessary that a new all-encompassing gender scholarship be encouraged.

Certainly such a study should have women at the center, because academia continues to propound an androcentric emphasis in most disciplines. There is still much catch-up work to be done in revising the politics of knowledge beyond the world of white heterosexual men. Still, while Women's Studies has been a most valuable beginning, it cannot be the only focus of the new Gender Studies.

In addition, such scholarship must be interdisciplinary at its core. The traditional disciplines have been responsible for the compilation of a massive amount of information in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. But as we can already see, the most important breakthroughs of knowledge in coming decades are going to be in those areas on the frontiers of the traditional disciplines. The most valuable scholarship is going to be that which brings together insights from different disciplines in new and unique ways. While Women's Studies has directed much of its attention to making an impact on the various traditional disciplines, it has had its most striking successes precisely because it arose with an interdisciplinary vision. Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies have been among the most exciting intellectual developments of our time, not because they fit into a particular discipline, but because they challenge the boundaries.

It is time for a new Gender Studies to emerge, incorporating into its core topics that have previously been marginalized. Specifically, as represented by the essays in this volume, important insights can be gained from a focus on the boundaries of gender, on cross-cultural views of women's and men's roles, on alternative gender roles and sexualities, and on the transcending of traditional gender categories altogether. Only by taking this larger view can we begin to understand the incredible changes occurring all around us, and appreciate the benefits that come with the acceptance and celebration of human diversity.