7 | *Gender and social change*

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H OW IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CURRENTLY DEVELOP-
ING GLOBAL ORDER (and consequent ever-changing local
political frameworks) might feminists most sensibly seek to
transform the gendered features of society in such a manner as to
facilitate a less discriminating scenario than is currently in evidence?
This is a question that motivates much of the thinking behind this
book. But posing it carries certain presuppositions. In particular it
takes for granted the notion that *gender* is a meaningful as well as
useful category of analysis. And it presumes, too, that, whatever the
socio-political context, it is always feasible to identify some forms of
emancipatory practice, at least with respect to gender discrimination.
Or at least there is an assumption that such emancipatory practice is
not ruled out in principle. Both sets of presuppositions have been
found to be problematic. Specifically, various feminist theorists hold
that there are conceptual and political difficulties to making use of the
category of gender in social theorising (see e.g. Bordo 1993; Spelman
1990). And the reasoning behind such assessments tends in its turn to
be destabilising of the goal of emancipatory practice.

In this chapter I focus on these latter concerns rather than the more
specific question posed at the outset. For unless the noted difficulties
can somehow be resolved any further questioning of appropriate local
and global strategies appears to beg too many issues.

I shall suggest that the difficulties in question can indeed be resolved,
but that this necessitates a turn to explicit and systematic ontological
elaboration, a practice that feminists have tended to avoid (see Lawson
2003), but which, I want to suggest, needs now to be (re)introduced to
the study and politics of gender inequality.

By ontology I mean the study of the nature and structure of (a
domain of) reality, including the identification of its most funda-
mental components; and here my concern is primarily with *social*
ontology, the study of social being. I must acknowledge at the outset

that philosophy in the guise of ontology can never be a substitute for substantive theory. However, it can serve a ground-clearing role, facilitating substantive theoretical and political advance and/or clarification. Here, I shall be using ontology to under-labour for substantive socio-political analyses concerned with addressing the question posed at the outset.

Specifically, after suggesting that ontological theorising, as here conceived, can render the category of gender meaningful – and given the relative neglect of ontology in feminist theorising I shall set out in some depth the ontological conception I believe to be the most sustainable – I draw out various optimistic implications of the analysis regarding the possibility of emancipatory change, including change concerned with undermining gender-based hierarchies and forms of discrimination.

Some problems of gender

I start, though, by rehearsing some of the problems often associated with the study of gender. A first difficulty, one frequently raised, is that it is not at all clear what *sort* of thing the category signifies. Within modern feminist thought the standard definition of gender is something like 'the social meaning given to biological differences between the sexes' (Ferber and Nelson 1993: 9–10; Kuiper and Sap 1995: 2–3).[1] Though this is widely accepted, a problem with this sort of formulation is that it allows of various interpretations (for example, gender as a subjective experience, a psychological orientation, a set of attributes possessed, a normative image or ideal, and so forth), whilst a satisfactory elaboration has proven elusive.

Further, whatever the precise interpretation of the category, and despite the significant use made of the sex/gender distinction by early (second-wave) feminists, numerous theorists now appear sceptical about its analytical usefulness. Let me briefly recap.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s feminists began increasingly to emphasise the partiality of all knowledge, and to criticise the tendency

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[1] The distinction between sex and gender on which this conception builds derives from the work of the psychologist Robert Stoller (1968) who first formulated it to differentiate the socio-cultural meanings ('masculinity' and 'femininity') from those of biological sex differences ('male' and 'female') on which they were erected (see Oakley 1972).

of (typically white and male) scientists to presume their views to be uninfluenced by local biases, and personal histories and values. The dominant message of these feminists was that a fuller vision of reality could be uncovered by drawing attention to gendered locations, that a theorising of gender was a useful way of uncovering previously hidden aspects of the social process (see, for example, Chodorow 1978 and Keller 1985). These gender theorists argued that concepts commonly used to evaluate behaviour (such as calculative rationality in economics) do not express universal values or ideals but male ones.

Although insightful, by the late 1980s this early feminist contribution was being challenged by other feminists for making the same sorts of ('essentialist') mistakes that it itself criticised. Specifically, the earlier (typically white, middle-class) feminists were charged with treating their own particular experience of gender differences as universal; they were criticised for taking 'the experience of white middle-class women to be representative of, indeed normative for, the experience of all women' (Spelman 1990: 1x). In so doing, these early feminists were accused of marginalising differences of race, ethnocentricity, culture, age and so forth; women of colour, lesbians and others found their history and culture ignored in the ongoing discussions relating to gender.

As a result of this criticism there emerged an epistemological position often referred to as gender scepticism, characterised precisely by its 'scepticism about the use of gender as an analytic category' (Bordo 1993: 135). Gender sceptics argue that an individual's gender experience is so affected by that individual's experience of class, race or culture, etc., that it is meaningless to consider gender at all as a useful category. For once we are attentive to differences of class, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, and so on, the notion of gender disintegrates into fragments unusable for systematic theory. According to this assessment it is impossible to separate facts about gender from those about race, class, ethnic origin, and so on. Spelman writes:

If it were possible to isolate a woman's 'womanness' from her racial identity, then we should have no trouble imagining that had I been Black I could have had just the same understanding of myself as a woman as I in fact do ... It is thus evident that thinking about a person's identity as made up of neatly distinguishable 'parts' may be very misleading. (Spelman 1990: 135–6).

In short, early feminist (and other) gender theorists were criticised for assuming cross-cultural stability of facts about gender, and a separability of the parts of a person's achieved identity.

If the intent of this criticism was to be corrective, it was soon to be pushed to destructive extremes. Specifically, some 'post-modernists' came to argue that, because of differences of ethnic origin, sexual orientation, culture and so forth, not only is each individual's experience unique but no category can legitimately be treated as stable or separable. The fact of differential historical experiences means that each 'woman' differs from every other and it is impossible or meaningless to talk of the 'authentic woman' and so to unify different individuals under the signifier 'woman'. There is no woman's (or of course man's) experience, situation or point of view. As a result, it is difficult to make sense of feminist projects of collective emancipation. For who is to be emancipated, and from whom? The sort of perspective in question leads to a view of a world only of differences, an individualist perspective in which it is impossible to make much sense of any system or collectivity, whether oppressive or otherwise.

This post-modernist critique of (interpretations of) early gender theorising contains much insight and can indeed be read in part as a corrective of the excesses or errors of naïve essentialist positions. However, the critique itself is ultimately not satisfactory, in that it loses the central insight of the earlier feminist contribution entirely. For according to the logic of this critique there is no basis for systematic forces of societal discrimination.[2] Yet it cannot really be denied that there are systematic forms of domination in society as we experience it, and in particular that biological females are very often dominated or oppressed by males, and in ways that have little if anything to do with sexual as opposed to social differences[3] (see Bryson, this volume).

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[2] As Kate Soper complains: 'the logic which challenged certain kinds of identity thinking and deconstructed certain notions of truth, progress, humanism and the like, has pushed on to question the possibility of *any* holistic and objective analysis of societies of a kind which allows to define them as "capitalist" or "patriarchal" or indeed totalitarian, together with the transformative projects such analyses advocate. It gives us not new identities, not a better understanding of the plural and complex nature of society, but tends rather to collapse into an out and out individualism' (Soper 1991: 45).

[3] This is indeed manifest in the orientations, language, values and priorities of academic disciplines, as economics, my discipline, illustrates as well as anything else (see e.g. the contributions in Ferber and Nelson 1993).

Put differently, the post-modernist critique, in highlighting the problems of essentialism, loses the insight for which gender analysis was originally formulated, namely the discrimination of individuals classified as 'women' in ways that have little directly to do with the quality of being female.[4] If it is widely recognised that there are many types of differences between members of society, specifically between those classified as men and women, we need to attend to ways of disentangling rather than neglecting the types that there are.[5]

Such considerations suggest that what is needed is a conception of gender that can sustain both (1) the insights underpinning the noted criticisms of early gender theorising, specifically the fragmented experiences of us all and the difficulties of partialling out the gendered aspects of our experiences, as well as (2) the (widely recognised) feature of our world that gender is an objective category that (currently) marks the site of the domination of one (gendered) group by another.

We need a conception that can sustain the insight that we all are different, that our experiences and identities are historically, culturally and socially, etc., variable and indeed unique, as well as the deep intuition that there is a need for, and legitimacy to, collective organisation and struggle.

We need, in short, a conception that transcends the opposition of difference and unity with a clear basis for achieving both, a conception precisely of unity in difference. I now want to indicate that ontological elaboration can facilitate a conception of the sort required.

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[4] As Susan Bordo summarises the situation: 'Assessing where we are now, it seems to me that feminism stands less in danger of the totalizing tendencies of feminists than of an increasingly paralysing anxiety over falling (from what grace?) into ethnocentrism or "essentialism" ... Do we want to delegitimate a priori the exploration of experimental continuity and structural common ground among women? ... If we wish to empower diverse voices, we would do better, I believe, to shift strategy from the methodological dictum that we foreswear talk of "male" and "female" realities ... to the messier, more slippery, practical struggle to create institutions and communities that will not permit *some* groups of people to make determinations about reality for *all*' (Bordo 1993: 465).

[5] As Anne Phillips has observed: 'Notwithstanding the conceptual difficulties feminists have raised around the distinction between sex and gender, we will continue to need some way of disentangling the differences that are inevitable from those that are chosen, and from those that are imposed' (Phillips 1992: 23).

Ontology

By social ontology, let me recall, I mean the study (or a theory) of the basic nature and structure of social being.[6] And by the social, I just mean the domain of those phenomena whose existence, at least in part, depends on us. Thus the domain includes artefacts, technology, wars, pollutions, social relations, institutions, and so forth.

Now a first fundamental feature of the social realm, one of significance to the issues being addressed here, is that it is *structured* in the sense of comprising more than one ontological level. Specifically, it consists in far more than actualities such as (actual) human behaviour including its observable patterns. It also comprises features

[6] It is no secret (though somewhat puzzling) that feminist theorists have tended to fight shy of ontology/metaphysics. Sally Haslanger's recounting of her own experience captures this situation: 'Metaphysics has never been without critics. Plato's efforts have repeatedly been a target of attack; Hume ranted against the metaphysicians of his day; and one of the founding missions of logical positivism was to show that metaphysical claims are meaningless. More recently, feminist theorists have joined the chorus. To reveal among academic feminists that one's specialization in philosophy is metaphysics is to invite responses of shock, confusion and sometimes dismissal. Once after I gave a presentation at an American Philosophical Association meeting on social construction, a noted senior feminist philosopher approached me and said, "you are clearly very smart, and very feminist, so why are you wasting your time on this stuff?" Academic feminists, for the most part, view metaphysics as a dubious intellectual project, certainly irrelevant and probably worse; and often the further charge is levelled that it has pernicious political implications as well' (Haslanger 2000: 107).

Why should ontology be so treated? Some seem to suppose ontology must be foundationalist. But ontology is just an epistemological project, and like any other must be recognised as situated, practically conditioned, partial, and in parts at least probably transient. Sandra Harding (1999: 132) suggests that existing ontological/realist presuppositions of science can be entrenched, and that epistemic standards are an easier target for criticism. But surely the insights of recent feminist theorising have stemmed from the fact that almost all claims suppositions, no matter how entrenched, have been regarded as legitimate targets of deconstruction or other forma of criticism. Harding (1999: 132) also gives a Kuhnian argument as to why implicit and naïve ontological presuppositions may be worth persevering with anyway. Whether or not this can be shown to be provisionally the case with regard to some branches of natural science, it is certainly not so with regard to studies of the social realm, as I have shown at length elsewhere (Lawson 2003). A final explanation is that ontology may reveal objective grounds for identifying groups, and so group-memberships, whereas such a finding does not help the overriding cause of being non-exclusive (see Fricker 2000 or Haslanger 2000). As Donna Haraway (1985: 372) puts it, 'Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute.' This is a line of reasoning I briefly address in the main text below.

such as social rules, relations, positions, processes, systems, values, meaning, and the like, that do not reduce to human behaviour. Nor do features such as these exist just in their instantiation or manifestation in behaviour. Rather they are mostly ontologically distinct from behaviour. Such features that do not reduce to behaviour can be termed *social structures*, constituting, in their entirety, *social structure*.

How do I defend the claim that social reality includes structure that is ontologically irreducible to human agency or behaviour? I go into this at length elsewhere (e.g. Lawson 1997, 2003). Basically the argument is that a conception of social reality as structured is required if we are to explain numerous widespread features of everyday life.

Most clearly the distinction is required if we are to make sense of the widespread observation of a gap between cultural norms or stipulations and patterns of individual behaviour. More precisely, the distinction is necessitated if we are to explain the fact of practices in which rules affect action, but are systematically contravened in it. For example, workers in conflict with their employers or management could not threaten to 'work-to rule', as they do in the UK, if any rule (or set of rules) in question just reduces to the norm or average form of the work activities that are already being undertaken. Nor could the workforce sensibly make such 'threats' if they did not have the power or agency to do so, a power that is not reducible to what in the event happens (whatever the outcome).

Also in the UK, not all, but some, motorway drivers regularly exceed the legal speed limit. In some cities of the world (for example Naples) most drivers pass some (but rarely all) red lights, and so on.

In short, rules and the practices upon which they bear are sometimes aligned but at other times are systematically out of phase. This is a feature of reality we can render intelligible only by recognising that social structures and the practices they condition, though presupposing of each other, are irreducible each to the other. For it is only because they are ontologically distinct and irreducible that they can be aligned on occasion, or that any 'threat' (promise or request) to align them makes sense.

Human beings too are structured. Individual agents have capacities and dispositions, for example, which are irreducible to the behaviour patterns we produce. Each of us has capacities that may never be exercised. And, individually, we are continually reflexive, even having ('inner') conversations with ourselves as well as other first-person

experiences that are not open to inspection by others. These clearly have their conditions of possibility, presumably including processes in the brain. But the subjective aspects appear irreducible to any neurobiological activity. Most clearly, what we can do does not reduce to the patterns of behaviour that others can observe; and nor even does all of what we actually do.

Notice that this irreducibility of social structure and human subjectivity can be rendered intelligible only if we further recognise the reality of processes of *emergence*, underpinning *emergent* social and psychological realms in particular (see e.g. Lawson 1997, especially chapters 6 and 13, 2003). Let me briefly elaborate.

A stratum of reality can be said to be emergent, or as possessing emergent powers, if there is a sense in which it (1) has arisen out of a lower stratum, being formed by principles operative at the lower level; (2) remains dependent on the lower stratum for its existence; but (3) contains causal powers of its own which are both irreducible to those operating at the lower level and (perhaps) capable of acting back on the lower level. Thus organic material emerged from inorganic material. And, according to the conception I am defending, the social realm is emergent from human (inter-)action, though with properties irreducible to, yet capable of causally affecting, the latter. For example language systems have emerged from human interactions, and bear powers that act back upon, but remain irreducible to, the speech acts which they facilitate.

So interpreted, the theory of emergence commits us to a form of materialism which ultimately entails the unilateral ontological dependence of social upon biological upon physical forms coupled with the taxonomic and causal irreducibility of each to any other. Thus, although, for example, the geohistorical emergence of organic from inorganic matter and of human beings from hominids can be acknowledged, when we come to explain those physical and biological states that are due, in part, to intentional human agency it is necessary to reference properties, including powers, not designated by physical or biological science (again see Lawson 1997).

So the social realm consists, in part, of (emergent) social structures and human subjects that are reducible neither to each other nor to human practices. It may already be clear how I am going to argue that the category gender can be retained as a meaningful object of reality with a degree of stability. For I will argue that gender is in large part a

feature of (emergent) social structure, i.e. something that is irreducible to human practices or experiences. First though let me say something more about the forms of social structure as well as its (processual) mode of being.

Social positions and relations

In emphasising the structured nature of social life I have so far focused upon social rules. But this is not all there is to social being. For society is also constituted in a fundamental way by both *social relations* and *positions*. These features are essential to understanding the precise manner in which human agency and structure come together.

The significance and fact of social relations and positions are easily recognised once we take note (and inquire into the conditions) of that general feature of experience that there is a systematic disparity across individuals regarding the practices that are, and apparently can be, followed. Although most rules can be utilised by a wide group of people it by no means follows that all rules are available, or apply equally, to everyone, even within a given culture. To the contrary, any (segment of) society is highly differentiated in terms of the obligations and prerogatives that are on offer. Teachers, for example, are allowed and expected to follow different practices from students, government ministers to follow different ones from lay-people, employers from employees, landladies/lords from tenants, and so on. Rules as resources are not equally available, or do not apply equally, to each member of the population at large.

What then explains the differentiated ascription of obligations, prerogatives, privileges and responsibilities? This question directs attention to the wider one of how human beings and elements of social structure such as rules come together in the first place. If these elements such as rules are a different sort of thing from human beings, human agency and even action, what is the point of contact between human agency and structure? How do they interconnect? In particular how do they come together in such a manner that different individuals achieve responsibilities and obligations available to some but not all others, and thereby call on, or come to be conditioned in their actions by, different social rules and so structures of power?

If it is clearly the case that teachers have different responsibilities, obligations and prerogatives from students, and government ministers

face different ones from the rest of us, then it is equally apparent that these obligations and prerogatives exist independently of the particular individuals who happen, currently, to be teachers, students or ministers. If I, as a university teacher, were to move on tomorrow, someone else would take over my teaching responsibilities and enjoy the same obligations and prerogatives as I currently do. Indeed, those who occupy the positions of students are different every year. In short, society is constituted in large part by a set of *positions*, each associated with numerous obligations, rights and duties, and into which agents, as it were, slot.

Internal relations

Something more about this system of societal positions can be expressed if we take note of the additional observation that practices routinely followed by an occupant of any position tend to be orientated towards some other group(s). The rights, tasks and obligations of teachers, for example, are orientated towards their interactions with students (and vice versa), towards research funding bodies or governing institutions, and so forth. Similarly the rights and obligations of landladies/lords are orientated towards their interactions with tenants, and so on.

Such considerations indicate a causal role for certain forms of *relation*. Two types of relation can be distinguished: *external* and *internal*. Two objects or aspects are externally related if neither is constituted by the relationship in which it stands to the other. Bread and butter, coffee and milk, barking dog and mail carrier provide examples. In contrast, two objects are internally related if they are what they are, or can do the sort of thing they do, by virtue of the relationship in which they stand to one other. Landlady/lord and tenant, employer and employee, teacher and student, magnet and its field are examples that spring easily to mind. In each case it is not possible to have the one without the other; each, in part, is what it is, and does the sort of thing it does, by virtue of the relation in which it stands to the other.

Now the intelligibility of the rule-governed and rule-differentiated social situation noted above requires that we recognise first the internal relationality of social life, and second that the internal relationality in question is primarily not of individuals per se but of

social positions; it is the positions (say of teachers and students) that are relationally defined.

The picture that emerges, then, is of a set, or network, of positions characterised by the rules and so practices associated with them, where the latter are determined in relation to other positions and their associated rules and practices. On this conception the basic building blocks of society are *positions*, involving, depending upon or constituted according to social rules and associated tasks, obligations and prerogatives, along with the practices they govern, where such positions are both defined in relation to other positions and are immediately occupied by individuals.

Systems and collectivities

Notice further that notions of social *systems* or *collectivities* can be straightforwardly developed using the conceptions of social structure as rules, practices, relationships and positions now elaborated. Most generally, social systems and collectivities can be viewed as ensembles of networked, internally related positions with their associated rules and practices. All the familiar social systems, collectivities and organisations – the economy, the state, international and national companies, trade unions, households, schools and hospitals – can be recognised as depending upon, presupposing or consisting in internally related position-rule systems of this form.

Sub-distinctions can be drawn. If a social *system* is best conceived as a structured process of interaction, a social group or *collectivity* can be understood as consisting in, or depending upon, or as a set of people distinguishable by, their current occupancy of a specific set of social positions. Notice that at any one time a particular individual will occupy any number of positions. That is, the same person may be a parent and a child, a worker and a boss, a teacher and a student, immigrant and native, old and young, a member of religious or political or community organisations and so on. The resulting conception then is one that (1) renders intelligible the often noted, but reputedly difficult to sustain, sense of a group or collective interest and thus the basis for a theory of collective action, and yet (2) allows the possibility of a conflict of interest at the level of individuals.

Put differently, on this relational conception any specific collectivity can be understood in terms both of its relations to other groups,

especially those against which it is defined and/or is opposed, and of the complex of internal relationships within the collectivity itself. Amongst the many advantages of this conception is the feature that it allows a meaningful focus not only upon production and exchange activities but also upon a range of distributional issues as well, such as resources to groups as well as people to positions (or positions to people).

To anticipate the discussion of gender that follows shortly, my contention will be that gender is usefully viewed as intimately bound up with nexuses of internally related positions to which perceived-to-be biological females and males are (differentially) assigned in any context (or which are assigned (differentially) to individuals identified as biological females or males), along with the associated rules, rights and obligations and so forth. This enables us to locate the site of domination (and recognise that feminist distributional studies ought indeed to be concerned with the allocation of positions) whilst allowing that every individual's path is unique, just as her or his occupancy of positions is variable and complex and again unique. This conception thus allows uniqueness at the level of the actual, including experience, the focus of post-modernists, whilst maintaining the ability to locate the forces of discrimination so many also regularly experience.

Social being as process

If the above account is to prove sustainable, it clearly follows that the societal positions that individuals occupy and the rules associated with them be (or can be) relatively *enduring*. Yet the whole question of the fixity or otherwise of social structure, as well as of the human individual, is a topic that has yet to be broached. These are issues that must be addressed, especially if we are ultimately concerned with questions of emancipatory change.

It is instructive at this point to consider the mode of being of social structure. To focus the discussion, let me again consider the example of a system of language. Clearly we are all born into language systems; none of us creates them. At the same time, being social phenomena, language systems depend on us, and specifically on transformative human agency. So they do not determine what we do, they do not create our speech acts; they merely facilitate them. So in theorising the

relationship of agency and structure, the categories of creation and determinism are out of place here. Rather we must view matters in terms of the categories of *transformation* and *reproduction*. For any given language system, its structure of rules, etc., is given to the individual when he or she comes to speak, and it is reproduced and/or transformed through the sum total of individuals engaging in speech acts. The social structure in question, then, is the (typically unacknowledged) condition of a set of practices; just as its reproduction and/or transformation is the (typically unintended) result of these practices.

Now what is true of the mode of being of a language system holds for all social structure; social structures exist as processes of reproduction and transformation. A market or a university or a language system does not exist in a primarily static form, subject at most to moments of change (owing to new technology or whatever). Rather change is essential to the mode of being of such structures; they exist as continuous processes of transformation and/or reproduction. Even where aspects of certain social structures appear a posteriori to remain intact, this is only and always because they have been actively (if mostly unintentionally) reproduced. On this conception, which has elsewhere in economics been systematised as the *transformational model of social activity*, no aspects are fixed and out of time. All are subject to processes of transformation. So there is no ontological prioritisation of continuity over change (or vice versa); continuity and change are ontologically equivalent. And each, when it occurs, is open to, and for understanding necessitates, (a causal) explanation (see e.g. Lawson 1997, 2003).

Social structure, then, is reproduced and transformed through human practice. But so is each individual human agent. For, as we have seen, the human individual too is structured. To speak a language such as English presupposes the capacity to do so. To possess the capacity to speak English presupposes the more basic capacity for language acquisition, and so on. Human individuals are far more than their behaviours. And the ways in which capacities and dispositions are developed and maintained or transformed, depends on individual practices. The same applies, of course, to tastes, or preferences, long-term and short-term plans, other features, psychological make-up, and so forth. So the individual agent, just like social structure, is continually reproduced and transformed through practice.

The social world, including both structure and human agency, then, turns on human practice. Social structure and human agency each condition the other, although neither can be reduced to the other, nor to the practices through which both are reproduced and/or transformed.[7]

The foregoing is a brief overview of aspects of a transformational model of social activity. It is a model that is seen to be appropriate once social reality is conceptualised as being structured. And a conception of social reality as structured is found to be a requirement of explaining familiar aspects of everyday experience. The overall transformational conception is a thoroughly non-reductionist account of linked or co-development. Neither structure nor agency has analytical priority, for each depends irreducibly on the other. And although each develops at its own ontological level, it does so only in

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[7] One further component of this transformational conception is that there are both synchronic and diachronic aspects to agency–structure interaction. It is, of course, human beings that make things happen. And it is only through the mediation of human agency that structures have a causal impact. Now if a person who speaks only English makes a short (possibly unplanned) visit to a region where English is not spoken, the inability to speak the local language (or the existence only of languages other than English) will be experienced by the traveller as a constraint. It forces her or him to seek a translator or whatever. If, however, English is spoken as a second language, this will be experienced by the traveller as an enabling (as well as constraining) feature of the local social structure. Here, with the momentarily enabling and/or constraining aspects of social structure we have the *synchronic* aspect of agency–structure interaction.

However, if the individual who speaks only English decides to settle in a non-English speaking region, then, if he or she is to become competent it will be necessary to acquire the local language (and indeed become competent in numerous aspects of the local culture). The process through which this happens is the *diachronic* aspect of agency–structure interaction. If at a point in time structure serves to constrain and enable, over time it serves more to shape and mould. As new practices are repeatedly carried out they become habitual as dispositions are moulded in response. This, of course, cannot happen without the collusion of the individual in question (and the mediation of his or her practices). If the individual remains for a long time in the new language or culture zone, he or she may even loose the capacity to speak English, or at least to do so competently. Just as human capabilities, etc., can be transformed via the relocation, so the maintenance of those previously held may require active reproduction. Experience suggests that individuals can lose a significant degree of competence in languages with which they once were fluent (also, of course, what is true of capabilities and dispositions applies equally to tastes, preferences, and the like).

conditions set by the other. Thus each is significantly dependent on, though not created or determined by, the other. Social life, then, is intrinsically dynamic, and interdependent.

Theorising gender

So how does all this help with theorising the category of gender? Let me stress once more that ontology cannot do the work of substantive social theorising. Although I now want to suggest an interpretation of gender consistent with the ontological framework elaborated, it will not be the only possibility. Even so, in that the interpretation provided evades the charges levelled by gender sceptics whilst retaining the ability to explain domination and discrimination, it is one that does seem worth considering seriously.

The key to combining the insights both of gender theorists and of gender sceptics lies in recognising ontological distinctions between social structure, human agency and practice. These distinctions allow that individuals can indeed have unique, including fragmented, experiences and social identities, and yet be conditioned (and facilitated) by relatively enduring, if always space-time specific, social structures, including internally related positions, and associated rights and practices that allow the systematic subjugation or oppression of some by others.

For if the continually reproduced and transformed social structures, comprising networks of internally related positions and associated rights and obligations, provide the sites, the objective bases, for forms of discrimination, it warrants emphasis that there is no one-to-one mapping from social structure to individual pathways, experience or personal identities.

Furthermore, each individual occupies many positions simultaneously, and life is a unique path of entering and exiting. So the perspective sustained is quite consistent with the insight of multiple or fragmented experiences.

Of course, the fact of systematic discrimination presupposes there is nevertheless a way or sense in which some individuals, whatever their experiences, are nevertheless marked as similar (and different from some others). The markers can be age, skin colour, language, accent and a host of other (actual or perceived) human qualities.

Gender, I suggest, is bound up with one such system of identification and differentiation, one that (as it happens in seemingly all societies so far) serves to privilege some over others.

Essential to such a system are the following two components:

(1) a distinction repeatedly drawn between individuals who are regularly/mostly observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction and others who are regularly/mostly observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male's biological role in reproduction;

(2) a set of mechanisms or processes which work in any given society or locality to legitimise/motivate the notion that individuals regarded as female and those regarded as male ought to be allocated to, or to have allocated to them, systematically differentiated kinds of social positions, where the nature of the allocations encouraged need not, and typically does not, reflect any commonalities or differences located at the biological level.[8]

Currently, as I say, in seemingly all societies, the positions characterised as being for women are in fact mostly subordinate along some prominent set of axes, whilst those for men are typically privileged.

What precisely is gender on this conception? I would define it neither as a substance, nor *simply* a category of analysis, but rather as a social totality, a social system. It is a system of processes and products (of processes in product and products in process). The processes in question (which are always context specific) are precisely

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[8] I hope it is clear that in advancing this conception I neither assume fixity, nor deny variability (if within limits), at the biological level, and nor do I suppose that any biological sex form, or for that matter form of sexuality, is more natural than any other (nor, of course, do I endorse any such differences as there are, or perceptions of them, being used to legitimate social inequalities). I do hold that if biological differences/commonalities, as they are perceived, affect emergent social structure, then equally the (emergent) social structure can act back on the biological. However, the two domains, the biological and the socio-structural, remain ontologically distinct, though causally interacting; neither is reducible to, or explicable completely in terms of, the other. It will be clear, then, that however I suggest we conceptualise gender as an aspect of social structure (see below), I am accepting the reality (and the explanatory significance), of maintaining the sex/gender distinction.

those that work to legitimise/motivate the notion that individuals regarded as female and those regarded as male ought to be allocated to, or to have allocated to them, systematically differentiated kinds of (relationally defined) social positions. The products are the (equally transitory and spatially/culturally limited) outcomes of these processes. If the processes serve *to gender*, i.e. are gendering processes (or processes of genderation), the products (aspects of social relations, positions (with associated rights and norms) practices, identities) must be regarded as *gendered*.

Where precisely is the gender system? So conceived, I do not think the gender system can be isolated from the rest of social reality; rather it is the whole of social reality considered under a particular (albeit only one[9]) aspect. That is, the gender system comprises all social processes/products viewed under the aspects of gendering/being rendered gendered. In all our practices we draw upon the structures of society as we (momentarily) find them, including their gendered aspects. And through our acting, these structures–whether bearing on issues of material distribution, status, power or whatever[10] – are, wittingly or not, continually reproduced and/or transformed. This transformational activity is the mode of being of all social processes. And all structures and their processes of reproduction seemingly have gendered aspects.

Often processes of gendering are intended/fully conscious. Such processes will include not only overtly sexist practices of some adults but also perhaps the differentiating practices of rival siblings responding to the 'trauma' of discovering differences.[11]

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[9] In viewing gender as everything considered under only *one* aspect (but without wishing to detract from the emphasis on *everything*) I concur with Fraser (this volume) in viewing 'gender struggles as one strand among others in a broader political project aimed at institutionalizing democratic justice across multiple axes of social differentiation'.

[10] See Fraser (this volume) on the need to hold distributional and status issues together in considering matters of gender inequality.

[11] This view is advanced by Juliet Mitchell who argues that 'sibling trauma instigates the construction of gender difference. Gender is engendered in the sibling (or sibling equivalent) relationship' (2003: 216). When 'the child is overwhelmed by the trauma of one who, in the mind, was supposed to be the same as itself inevitably turning out to be different, it finds ways to mark this difference – age is one, gender another' (216). This trauma ensures that violence is latent and always possible between either the actual siblings or their replacements in the wider world. 'The cradle of gender difference is both

But mostly, I suspect, gendering processes are implicit and unnoticed; with specific gendered structures or features being the typically unacknowledged conditions as well as the usually unintended outcomes of our practices[12] (where gendering processes of this sort will include, significantly, those in which already prevalent gendered categories – e.g. leadership (male), dexterous (female) – are reinforced through being used in turn to signify relationships of power – e.g. though being used to signify typical characteristics of, respectively, employers and employees).[13]

If gender is a (intrinsically dynamic and open) system comprising processes of gendering and the (again always open and dynamic) products of such processes, it is the forces for continuity and change, along with the changing nature of gender, that are analytically interesting.

Personal identities

Parenthetically, I might note that nothing in this analysis undermines the possibility of our establishing personal identities, albeit identities which are always unique, changing and relational.

Such identities, if and where established, will be conditioned by our experiences, fallible knowledge of situations, perceived possibilities, normative ideals, plans and constraints. As such they are open to evaluation. Indeed, in that we continually reproduce and transform our identities, they are something of an (ongoing) achievement.

An individual's experiences will of course vary according to social positions entered and retained and others previously exited. But there is no strict correspondence between the structures experienced and

narcistic love and violence at the traumatic moment of displacement in the world. Gender difference comes into being when physical strength and malevolence are used to mark the sister as lesser' (219–20).

[12] And more subtly gendering will probably be implicated even within discussions of gender discrimination, such as this chapter, so that the successful eradication of gender inequalities will require that, amongst other things, we continually challenge the frameworks within which equality is debated (see Bryson, this volume).

[13] As such the conception advanced here encompasses the distinction between sexual difference and gender advanced elsewhere in this volume by Juliet Mitchell. However, in emphasising how siblings reveal how crucial a force is sexuality in a psycho-social dynamics, Mitchell is wary of any conception of gender that does not place sex or sexuality at the centre.

identities formed. Like everything else, experiencing is fallible. Moreover we mostly recognise this. Just as we each regularly find we experience a given situation differently from others, we can also come to reinterpret our experiences over time.

But, if the reduction of identities to conditions experienced is a theoretical error, it remains the case that the conditions we experience do nevertheless make a difference. If we ultimately make our own identities, we do so only with the resources available, and in conditions not all of our own choosing. In particular the nature of gender positions we occupy or have occupied, along with all other features of our specific social situations, many of which have been allocated to us, causally impinges on our experiences and so constitutes conditioning factors of our identities.[14] Our identities are themselves a form of emergent, relationally conditioned, social structure in process.

Overview

My overall contention, then, is that the conception defended here retains the insights both of the early gender theorists and of their post-modernist critics. It retains the latter's emphasis on multiple or fragmented experiences, whilst also sustaining the wider feminist insight that our societies provide an objective basis for the discriminating tendencies already noted.

The central idea underpinning my arguments is that there is an ontological distinction between (emergent) social structure and human agency, whereby neither can be reduced to the other, though each is continually transformed through practice in a process of linked or co-development.

In the light of the perspective defended we find that gender sceptics portray early (supposedly essentialist) feminists as, in effect, reducing agency to specific (gender) structures, or at least to specific aspects regarded as fixed, whilst gender sceptics themselves have responded by more or less cutting the individual free of structural forces of determination entirely. However, we can now recognise the initial

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[14] Although the conception here is derived by way of first elaborating the ontological conception discussed above and defended more fully elsewhere, others have reached a similar position on certain aspects via alternative routes. See for example, Mohanty 2000, and Moya 2000.

(essentialist) form of gender theorising as well the out and out deconstructive response to be polar degenerate cases of the range of real possibilities, with the deconstructive response in particular achieving its credibility only by situating essentialism as the only alternative. There are additional possibilities. And once the conception elaborated above is accepted we have a basis for sustaining the insights of both essentialist and post-modernist perspectives, whilst avoiding the limit weaknesses of each.

The broad implications for theorising are clear: the study of gender requires attention not just to individuals and their experiences but equally to explaining specific networks of internally related position-practice systems, including their conditions and how they are reproduced and/or transformed over time and space. The focus is precisely on specific examples of social reproduction and social transformation (methodological aspects of this are discussed elsewhere – see Lawson 2003, especially chapter 4).

The possibility of emancipatory practice

Of central interest here is that implications also follow at the level of emancipatory practice. Specifically, the ontological conception sustained allows us to acknowledge the relativity of knowledge as well as the uniqueness of experiences and yet still entertain the possibility of progressive, including emancipatory, projects. For it is now clear that there is no contradiction in *both* recognising each of us as a unique identity or individuality, resulting (in part) from our own unique paths through life, and *also* accepting that we can nevertheless stand in the same or similar positions and relations of domination to those of others around us, including gender relations. From this perspective there is no contradiction in recognising our different individualities and experiences *as well as* the possibility of common interests in transforming certain forms of social relationships and other aspects of social structure. Fundamental here once more is the fact that human subjectivities, human experiences and social structure cannot be reduced one to another; they are each ontologically distinct, albeit highly interdependent, modes of being.

I re-emphasise that I make no presumption that any aspects of social structure, including its gendered features, are other than intrinsically dynamic, or are everywhere the same. It is evident that

gender relations in most places (still) serve to facilitate (localised) practices in which men can dominate/oppress women, or appear in some way advantaged. But the extent of commonality/difference across time and space is something to be determined a posteriori.

This conception also allows that although the individualities/ personalities of people from quite diverse backgrounds may be quite different, when they arrive in the same location they are likely to be subject to, or forced to stand within, similar, i.e. *local*, gender (and other) relations, whether or not they are aware of this, and whether or not they learn to become locally skilful. For example, it seems that currently in parts of the UK any (person identified as a) woman going alone to a pub in the evening is likely to meet with harassment by some 'men' whatever the former's previous experiences, realised capacities, acknowledged needs, expectations, self-perceptions or understandings of the local gender relations, and so on.

Gender relations with a degree of space-time extension along with practices they facilitate can be *transfactually* operative irrespective of the knowledges or understandings and wishes of those affected. The existences of multiple differences in manifest identities and individual experiences is not inconsistent with this insight – any more than the unique path of each autumn leaf undermines the hypothesis that all leaves are similarly subject to the transfactual 'pull' of gravity.

In short, once a structured ontology is recognised, multiplicity in the course of actuality is found to remain coherent with a degree of uniformity at the level of underlying causes or structure. The conception defended thus secures the basis for an emancipatory politics rooted in real needs and interests. In so doing it provides grounds, in particular, for feminist projects of transforming gender relations, in an awareness that the existence of multiculturalism or of differences in general need not in any way undermine or contradict such emancipatory practice. It also preserves, without strain, the possibility of strategies of solidarity or meaningful affiliated action between groups. In short, it transcends the sorts of tensions that currently seem to pervade much of feminist epistemology and political theory.

Social transformation and the good society

A more specific implication of the framework is that emancipatory social change is found to be a matter not only just of ameliorating

events but also, and especially, of social transformation. Now given that social structures depend on our practices, then, whatever the appropriate feminist orientation to the state, we can recognise that social change may be brought about not just through central state action, but equally though each of us changing the conceptions which guide our practices. Radicals of all sorts have always understood this, that we can transform social reality by increasing our awareness and understanding of it, and in turn change the practices via which existing structures are reproduced.

What more can be said? I think the framework defended here bears implications, albeit still at a very abstract level, about the (conception of the) sort of society that might reasonably inform our emancipatory structural transformations. I think it is an inescapable conclusion that the ultimate goal of emancipatory practice *is* a form of society. Moreover, given the interconnectedness of social life, entailing that all actions are affecting of others, the basic unit of emancipatory analysis is presumably (at least) the whole of humanity. However, emancipatory practice must equally recognise our differences. My suggestion here is just that (given both our (structured) interrelatedness as well as differences at the level of each individual) the concern of emancipatory action must be with the possibility of a society so constituted as to allow that the flourishing of each is a condition of the flourishing of all and vice versa; or, as Marx put it: 'an association in which the free development of each is a condition of the free development of all' (Marx and Engels 1952 [1848]: 76).

I emphasise that in proposing this formulation of the 'good society' I do not presuppose any fixity; the formulation allows for the openness of everything to the future, including human 'nature', society, knowledge, technology, science, and all else. But anything short of this formulation, as a goal, it seems to me, is likely to beg the questions of the sort as to whose interests are to be met.

Is the above conception of the good society consistent with one constituted in large part by social positions? Now in the light of the analysis sustained it appears feasible that society will for a long time, if not always, be in large part constituted by networks of internally related social positions, marking divisions of labour, or of age or of political, religious or other attachments. But there is no obvious reason to suppose that a structuring of society cannot be achieved that, though in some part constituted by objective (though

always transient) positions, nevertheless avoids being hierarchically organised. That is, (always transient) positions can conceivably be facilitating without providing the basis for the unreasonable privileging of some over subjugated others. Also, social positions can be rotated amongst the population. Perhaps participating first as a speaker, then as a member of the audience, and later perhaps as a chair, at a feminist meeting is a relevant illustrative model; objective positions all, but surely non-discriminatory in any necessarily excluding fashion and acceptable.[15]

A sustainable conclusion, then, is that the theorising of strategy for a developing global order, including the adoption of an appropriate orientation to the state, is reasonably informed by such an (open) conception of the good society. Specifically, in proposing measures to transform social reality it seems that a criterion of relevance is whether such measures appear capable of moving us in the direction of a society in which the flourishing of each is consistent with, and a condition of, the flourishing of all others, and vice versa.

From this perspective the strategy adopted by some post-modernists of emphasising an ontology of mere difference – on the reasoning that if no objective basis is admitted for including only some individuals, there is equally no basis admitted for excluding any[16] – can be seen

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[15] This seems consistent too with Nancy Fraser's 'status model' which encourages a politics aimed at overcoming subordination by recognising all individuals as full members of society whatever their socio-cultural positions, or perceived identities, etc. (see Fraser 2000). This conception of justice is advanced in the current volume with Fraser's formulation of 'the principle of *parity of participation*' according to which 'justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another *as peers*'. See Fraser (this volume) for a discussion of the preconditions for such 'participatory parity'.

[16] Miranda Fricker (2000: 148) captures the motivation of the latter well: 'Postmodernists typically advocate a social ontology of fragmentation not on grounds of social accuracy, but on the political ground that any other ontology would be exclusionary ... In feminist postmodernism ... to recognise difference is to meet an obligation to political inclusiveness rather than empirical adequacy'.

Sally Haslanger (2000: 122) summarises how this works in the arguments of Judith Butler in particular: 'Remember how the move to nominalism functions in the structure of Butler's strategy: if there is no objective basis for distinguishing one group from another, then no political regime – especially the dominant one – can claim authority by grounding itself in "the way the world is"; instead ... the choice will have to be made on normative argument. The

not only as based on an unrealistic assessment of the nature of social reality, but also as marking a scenario that is but a degenerate special case of the above conception of the good society, one in which all positions, all divisions of labour and of other practices, have all but disappeared.

Even where the latter scenario is believed to constitute a real possibility, there is, to put it differently, little reason to suppose it is the only feasible structure of an emancipated society, and even less reason to suppose that we have reached it already, or can achieve it just by denying the objective structures including positions of gender system in which we currently live. Though we can change the world by becoming more aware of the way it is constituted, and thereby adjust our practices, it does not follow that we can achieve a particular social structure merely by wishing that the (thought-to-be) desirable features are already in place (or undesirable ones absent). More to the point, by focusing on only one version of the good society, we unnecessarily constrain our options for bringing an emancipated society about.

Conclusions

I have defended a conception that preserves and endorses, indeed itself incorporates, the impulse behind the 'deconstructive' turn in recent feminist theory, but which simultaneously, through its emphasis on ontology, avoids complete self-subversion, maintaining, amongst other things, the basis for an intelligible account of gender as well as the possibility of emancipatory action.

The particular theory of reality defended is of a structured and open world. It is a conception which recognises that in our everyday practices we, all of us, as complexly structured, socially and culturally situated, purposeful and needy individuals, knowledgeably and capably negotiate complex, shifting, only partially grasped and contested structures of power, rules, relations and other possibly relatively enduring but nevertheless transient and action-dependent social resources at our disposal. Ontological analysis provides an insight into this reality.

worry seems to be that if we allow objective types, then we are politically constrained to design our social institutions to honour and sustain them.'

My primary focus here has been gender and the possibility of transforming gender aspects of society that are found to be discriminatory. In the light of the framework sustained, gender can be understood as turning on a positioned feature of human life, specifically a network of internally related positions with associated rule-governed rights and practices. In fact, according to the conception defended, gender is very likely a feature of everything social. It is nothing less than the social system as a whole viewed under a particular aspect, that whereby social discriminations are made between individuals solely on their being identified or perceived as being of different biological sexes, discriminations that mostly have nothing to do with any differences that may be found at the biological level. Transforming the undesirable gender features of society, then, amounts to a generalised project of social transformation.

In discussing the specific implications of the analysis for projects of social emancipation, I have argued that whatever the orientation of feminists and others to the state, the goal of a society in which the flourishing of each is a condition of the flourishing of all is appropriately brought to bear in formulating substantive measures or political strategies. It is the task of formulating the latter measures or strategies that now requires our attention.

I re-emphasise, finally, that the orientation of the chapter has been ontological. It is noticeable that the study of gender, and indeed feminist theorising quite widely, has tended to neglect ontology in favour of epistemology. My own view is that this is an error, and that the two activities, along with all other forms of theorising – ontology, epistemology and substantive analysis – need to be co-developed. Indeed, it seems quite possible that if feminists allow explicit ontological analysis more fully out of the margin the opportunities for advance thereby opened up will prove to be quite significant.

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