



## Written version of the lecture on Gender Theory

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This is the written version of my lecture that briefly introduces gender theory. Gender theory is a huge theoretical field, so in this lecture I will just highlight a few important concepts, give you some examples of discussions and mention some important theorists. If you are new to gender theory and interested in knowing more, I recommend that you read Raewyn Connell's *Gender*, originally from 2002 but now available in a third edition: Connell, Raewyn & Rebecca Pearse, *Gender in a World Perspective* 2014.

I am sure that you are all familiar with the concept of gender as social construction of femininity and masculinity. This concept is coined by Gayle Rubin in the article "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" from 1975 in Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York, Monthly Review Press. Now, naturally we had discussed gender as a social construction before that, but during the 1970s and the second wave of feminism, feminist theory is advancing and a lot of concepts are coined and created and then used as tools to understand society. Before I go on, let me just say that when we are discussing gender, we also need to discuss power and hierarchies. How we do gender, the norms and stereotypes in society govern the way we do gender affects our place in society.

Let us just quickly go through the waves:

1. The First wave happens in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, from ca 1880 and onwards. It consists mainly by middleclass women who fought for the right of education, for the right to govern themselves, to work, to own property etc. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One important name from the first wave is Charlotte Perkins Gilman. See Linda West, "Herland: The Forgotten Feminist Classic About a Civilisation Without Men" in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/mar/30/herland-forgotten-feminist-classic-about-civilisation-without-men>

2. The Second wave is the famous “bra burning” wave from the 1960s and onwards (the bra burning is a bit of a myth ☺ ) where a lot of feminist theory is developed.
3. The Third wave takes place from the 1980s and onwards and usually, we say that it consists of a critique and development of the second wave. Now, a lot of theorists and activists during the second wave talked about Women with a capital W but actually meant white, middleclass, heterosexual women. People were blind to ethnicity, for example and there was quite a lot of homophobia. Lesbian women were at one point called “the lavender menace” and this has of course been critiqued by theorists like bell hooks and many more. It is important to say that this critique started early. I am thinking about Audre Lorde’s open letter to Mary Daly, for example.<sup>2</sup>

In the lecture about feminist fantasy, I talk a bit about how fantasy in comparison to a genre like science fiction, has generally not been seen as a genre that authors use to critique society. Now, that statement is one that we can question, and I do that in the lecture, but let me just give you a few titles of feminist science fiction, from the second wave of feminism, that became important texts and that, in different ways, were fictional texts that became a vanguard for quite a lot of feminist theory. I am thinking about Ursula LeGuin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* from 1969 with the famous phrase “The King was pregnant”. In this novel LeGuin imagines a world where gender isn’t fixed and you can be both a mother and father during your lifetime. I am also thinking about Joanna Russ’ novel *The Female Man* from 1975 that has inspired theorist like Donna Haraway. And I must mention Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It* from 1991 as it is one of my favourites. Now, these novels and many more like them, discussed sexuality, gender, body and how we define the human body<sup>3</sup> and in fiction a lot of the concepts that later became important in feminist theory was introduced and “tested”.

Before I move on, let me just say one thing. We should talk about feminist theories in plural as this is a huge theoretical field with different and diverse ideas connected to it. We should also talk about femininities and masculinities in plural as in every society we see different ways to “be” a man or a woman. Having said that, it is important to point out that every society has ideals and norms of how we should “be”, behave, as men or women and even if we today think that we have a lot of freedom to choose, if we stray too far from the norms and ideals of the society in which we live, there will be consequences.

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<sup>2</sup> You can read it here: <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/lordeopenlettertomarydaly.html>

<sup>3</sup> One of the important texts are, of course, Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” from 1985. A recorded lecture with Donna Haraway can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9gis7-Jads>

When I am visiting schools talking about gender and popular culture (usually with examples from *World of Warcraft* (yes, I still play) and *Buffy – the Vampire Slayer*) I will almost always be asked the question: How important are biological differences and how important is social construction? What influences us more? It is an interesting question and very easy to answer: We don't know. We know that there are biological differences between a male and a female body, more on that later in this lecture, and we know that the social construction, how we learn to be male or female is very important. Anne Fausto Sterling, who has written the important and very interesting book: *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* from 2000 says that it is the wrong question. We should ask how biology and social construction work together instead, how they influence each other.

Thinking about bodies – what is a female or a male body? If you ask a child, you will get a quick answer, but if we start to discuss this, it is not so easy to define what a male or a female body is. An interesting study that talks about how we interpret and understand the human body is Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* from 1992. Did you know what before the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Western world, we only had one gender? And that gender was male. From philosophers like Aristoteles to theologians like Thomas Aquinas, the human was male and a woman, a female, was a less perfect human, a version of the male with a lot of faults. Laqueur calls this a “one sex system”. This changed from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and onward into a “two sex system” where men and women were seen as very different. Think: Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus or when Harry and Ron ask Hermione to explain how girls think as she is one ☺ Laqueur's point is to say that the way we think about gender governs the way that we understand and interpret the biological body. During the “one sex system” all bodies were male, and the female bodies were an imperfect version of the male body. Today, as we talk more openly about transgender, for example, and more people correct their bodies to match their gender, the “borders” between what is a male and a female body are maybe becoming more blurred?

It is impossible to talk about gender theory without mentioning Judith Butler. Her book *Gender Trouble* from 1990 has had a huge impact on the field. Now, a lot of my student think that Butler's texts difficult to read. There are a lot of lectures with Butler on YouTube and I am especially fond of a site that explain Butler with the help of cats.<sup>4</sup> Butler's theories on gender are vast and it is impossible to do them justice in a short lecture, but let me just say a few things. Butler points out that gender is something we do, something we perform. From

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<sup>4</sup> <https://binarythis.com/2013/05/23/judith-butler-explained-with-cats/>

(almost) the second we are born, we learn to imitate those around us, and when we quickly start to learn to behave according to the rules and ideals of our surroundings. Butler says:

[...]the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration”, (Butler 1990: xv).

What we are imitating, however, are in itself imitations. Butler is anti-essentialism. She means that there is no “female” or “male” core inside is that never changes. We create gender every day in many different ways and how we create gender changes with time and place. And this performance, this imitation has consequences on our status, our role in society. Again, it is always important to talk about power when discussing gender as the way we construct femininities and masculinities will have an effect in society.

Judith Butler is also connected to queer theory as she talks about the heterosexual matrix. In Sweden, where I live, in order to be a “real” woman, it is still implied that you need to desire a man, you need to be heterosexual. The society is heteronormative – to be heterosexual is to be “normal”. Queer theory, and here we need to mention Teresa de Lauretis whose work has been very important, focuses on how heteronormativity works and how it can be challenged in different ways. Queer theory is also a huge theoretical field.

Now, as this is supposed to be a short lecture, I do rush through a lot of important concepts and I need to mention one more before I stop and that is: intersectionality. The term is coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in the 1980s and focuses on how, for example, gender, sexuality and ethnicity interrelate with each other. I am not just a woman, I am middleclass, I am Swedish (even if my father was from Finland, but you can’t guess that as I have a Swedish name and I don’t talk with an accent), I am middle-aged etc. All of these aspects interrelated with each other in different ways. I have a “strong” position in the society I live in as I am “white”, highly educated, heterosexual, but as I grow older, my position weakens (it is still difficult to be an older woman in many circumstances). It is not easy to explain intersectionality quickly, but let us move to one of the texts that you have to read in this module.

You will read Sanna Lehtonen's article: "If you thought this story sour, sweeten it with your own telling'. Cross-cultural intertextuality and a feminist poetics of rewriting in Susan Price's *Ghostdance*" in *Barnboken. Journal of Children's Literature Research*, vol. 33, no. 1 2010.<sup>5</sup> You will also read the first chapter of Price's novel that is available online.<sup>6</sup> In this article, Lehtonen talks about how Price problematizes and discusses gender and power in the novel from several different aspects, but how Price fails to see how gender and ethnicity is interrelated. Lehtonen argues in her reading that Price falls into the trap of repeating very traditional and stereotypical ways to present so called indigenous people. In the novel there are Sami people and Native Americans and they are described in a way that Lehtonen finds problematic. They are "exotic", they are "closer to nature" and they are "more intuitive", to give a few examples. Her argument is that if Price challenges traditional norms and ideals about gender, she, in a way, fails to do so when it comes to ethnicity. I am not sure that agree completely with Lehtonen's analysis but she raises an interesting point that we can connect to intersectionality. If we are blind to, say ethnicity or sexuality, in problematizing gender, we will only "go half way". In order to understand hierarchies and power relations, we need to see how complex we are and include that complexity in our analysis. And that is not always easy as you need to discuss several different aspects and try to understand how they interrelate which each other. I generally tell my students to be very precise when they introduce what they are going to do in an analysis of a fictional text. If you are going to focus on, say, gender and age, mention that you will not focus on, say, ethnicity and sexuality in this particular analysis but you are of course aware of the importance of these aspects.

I want to end this short lecture where I have tried to talk about big and complex issues very quickly which is always difficult, with a quote by Raewyn Connell that I find very useful:

Whenever we speak of 'a woman' or 'a man', we call into play a tremendous system of understanding, implications, overtones and allusions that have accumulated through our cultural history. The 'meanings' of these words are enormously greater than the biological categories of male and female (Connell 2002: 89).

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<sup>5</sup> You will find the article here: <http://www.barnboken.net/index.php/clr/issue/view/2>

<sup>6</sup> You will find the chapter here: <https://susiesothersite.jimdo.com/ghost-dance-chapter-1/?logout=1>

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