

## The Question of Social Transformation



It was a jarring moment, the moment in which I received this invitation. Would I have to write some essays making plain the relationship of my view of feminist theory to the question of social transformation? In a way, the very question caught me by surprise, since how could it be that anything called "feminist" could not in advance have an inherent relationship to social transformation? After all, feminism is about the social transformation of gender relations, and we could probably all agree on that, even if "gender" is not the preferred word for some. And yet, the question that is posed to me and my colleagues is what this relationship is. And so we are asked to make clear what we already assume but which is not at all to be taken for granted. Among us, we may imagine social transformation differently. We may have our own ideas of the world as it would be, or should be, transformed by feminism. We may have very different ideas of what social transformation is, or what qualifies as a transformative exercise. But we must also have an idea of how theory relates to the process of transformation: whether theory is itself a transformative task or whether it has transformation as one of its effects.

In what follows, I will argue that theory is itself transformative, so I will state that in advance. But you must also understand that I do not think theory is sufficient for social and political transformation. Something besides theorizing must take place: interventions at social and political levels which involve actions, sustained labor, and institutionalized practice, which are not quite the same as the exercise of theory. But I would also add that

in all of these practices, theory is presupposed. In the very act of social transformation, we are all lay philosophers, presupposing a vision of the world, of what is right, of what is just, of what is abhorrent, of what human action is and can be, of what constitutes the necessary and sufficient conditions of life.

There are many questions that form the various foci of feminist research, and I would not want to identify any one of them as the essential or defining one. I would say, however, that the question of life is in some ways at the center of much feminist theory and, in particular, feminist philosophy. The question might be posed in various ways: What is the good life? How has the good life been conceived such that women's lives have not been included in its conceptualization? What would the good life be for women? But perhaps there is, prior to these questions, all of which are important, another one: the question of survival itself. And when we consider what feminist thought might be in relation to survival, a different set of questions emerge: Whose life is counted as a life? Whose prerogative is it to live? How do we decide when life begins and ends, and how do we weigh one life against another? Under what conditions should life come into being, and through what means? Who cares for life as it emerges, and who tends to the life of the child? Who cares for the life of the mother, and of what value is that life ultimately? And to what extent does gender—coherent gender—secure a life as livable? What threat of death is delivered to those who do not live gender according to its accepted norms?

That questions of life and death have always figured in feminist thought means that feminism has always, to some extent and in some way, been philosophical. That it asks how we organize life, how we accord it value, how we safeguard it against violence, how we compel the world and its institutions to inhabit new values means that its philosophical pursuits are in some sense at one with the aim of social transformation.

It would be easier if I could lay out for you what I think the ideal relation between genders should be, how gender should be experienced, in what equality and justice in relation to gender would consist. You would then know the norms that guide my thinking, and you could judge whether or not I have achieved the aims that I have set for myself. But I will not be that easy to read. And my difficulty will emerge not out of stubbornness or a will to be obscure. It will emerge simply out of the double truth that

although we need norms in order to live, and to live well, to know in what direction to transform our social world, we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us and that, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose. There is perhaps a confusion here, since many will say that the opposition to violence must take place *in the name of the norm*, i.e., a norm of nonviolence and respect, a norm that governs or compels respect for life itself. But consider that normativity has this double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the aims and aspirations that guide us, the precepts by which we are compelled to act or speak to one another, the commonly held presuppositions by which we are oriented and which give direction to our actions. On the other hand, normativity refers to the process of normalization, the way that certain norms, ideas, and ideals hold sway over embodied life and provide coercive criteria for normal "men" and "women." And in this second sense, we see that norms are what govern "intelligible" life, "real" men and "real" women, and that when we defy these norms, it is unclear whether we are still living, or ought to be; whether our lives are valuable, or can be made to be; whether our genders are real, or can ever be regarded as such.

Now, a good Enlightenment thinker will simply shake her head and say that if one objects to normalization, it is in the name of a different norm. But that critic would also have to consider what the relationship is between normalization and normativity. It may be that when we talk about what binds us together as humans—what forms of speech or thinking we seek recourse to in an effort to find a common bond—we are, inevitably, seeking recourse to socially instituted relations, ones that have been formed over time and which give us a sense of the "common" only by excluding those lives that do not fit the norm. In this sense, we see the "norm" as that which binds us together, but we also see that the norm creates unity only through a strategy of exclusion. It will be necessary for us to think through this problem of the double nature of norms. But in this essay, I start by asking about the kind of norms that govern gender, and to ask in particular how they constrain and enable life, how they designate in advance what will and will not be a livable existence. I proceed with this first task through a review of *Gender Trouble*, the text through which I originally offered my theory of gender.<sup>1</sup> I consider this theory of gender explicitly in terms of the questions

of violence, and the possible transformation of the scene of gender violence into a future of social survival. Secondly, I consider this double nature of the norms, showing how we cannot do without them, and how we do not have to assume that their form is given or fixed. Indeed, even if we cannot do without them, it will be seen that we also cannot accept them as they are. I pursue this paradox toward the end of my remarks in order to elucidate what I take to be the political stakes of feminist theory.

### Reflections on Gender Trouble

When I wrote *Gender Trouble*, I was eleven years younger than I am today, and I was without a job. I wrote it for a few friends of mine, and I imagined maybe one or two hundred people might read it. I had two aims at the time: The first was to expose what I took to be a pervasive heterosexism in feminist theory; the second was to try to imagine a world in which those who live at some distance from gender norms, who live in the confusion of gender norms, might still understand themselves not only as living livable lives, but as deserving of a certain kind of recognition. But let us be more honest than that. I wanted *Gender Trouble* not only to be understood and accorded dignity, according to some humanist ideal, but to disturb—fundamentally—the way in which feminist and social theory think of gender, to make it exciting to understand something of the desire that gender trouble is, the desire it solicits, the desire it conveys.

So let me consider these two points again, since they have both changed in my mind and, as a result, compel me to rethink the question of change.

In the first instance, feminist theory. What did I understand its heterosexism to be then, and how do I understand it now? At the time, I understood the theory of sexual difference to be a theory of heterosexuality. And I also understood French feminism, with the exception of Monique Wittig, as perceiving cultural intelligibility not only in terms of assuming the fundamental difference between masculine and feminine, but of reproducing it. The theory was derived from Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Saussure, and there were various breaks with those masters which one could trace. Julia Kristeva said that Lacan made no room for the semiotic, and she insisted on offering that domain not only as a supplement to

the symbolic, but as a way of undoing it. It was Hélène Cixous who saw feminine writing as a way of making the sign travel in ways that Lévi-Strauss could not imagine at the end of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. And Irigaray imagined the "goods [women as male-perceived commodities] getting together," and even implicitly theorized a certain kind of homoerotic love between women when those lips were all entangled and you couldn't tell the difference between the one and the other (and where not being able to tell the difference was not equivalent to "being the same"). The high at the time was to see that these French feminists had entered into a region considered fundamental to language and culture, an assertion that language came into being through sexual difference; that the speaking subject was one who emerged in relation to the duality of the sexes; that culture, as outlined by Lévi-Strauss, was defined through the exchange of women; and that the difference between men and women was instituted at the level of elementary exchange, an exchange which forms the possibility of communication itself.

To understand the exhilaration of this theory for those who were working within it, and for those who still do, one has to understand the sea change which took place when feminist studies went from being the analysis of "images" of women in this or that discipline or sphere of life to being an analysis of sexual difference at the foundation of cultural and human communicability. Suddenly, we were fundamental. Suddenly, no human science could proceed without us.

And not only were we fundamental, but we were changing that foundation. There was a new writing, a new form of communicability, a challenge to the kinds of communicability which were fully constrained by a patriarchal symbolic. And there were also new ways for women as "goods" to get together: new, poetic modes of alliance and cultural production. We had as it were the outlines of the theory of patriarchy before us, and we were also intervening in it, to produce new forms of intimacy, alliance, and communicability which were outside of its terms, but were also contesting its inevitability, its totalizing claim.

All well and good, but it did produce some problems for many of us. In the first place, it seemed that the model of culture, in both its patriarchal and feminist modes, assumed that there was a constancy of sexual difference; but there were those of us for whom gender trouble was the contestation of sexual difference

itself. There were many who asked whether they were women—some asked it in order to become included in the category, and some asked it in order to find out whether there were alternatives to being in the category. Denise Riley wrote that she did not want to be exhausted by the category<sup>2</sup> but Cherrie Moraga and others were also beginning to theorize butch-femme categories, which called into question whether the kinds of masculinities at stake for a butch were always determined by an already operative sexual difference, or whether they were calling sexual difference into question.<sup>3</sup> And for a femme as well, was this a femininity defined in relation to a masculinity already operative in the culture, part of a normative structure which could not be changed, or was this the challenge to that normative structure, a challenge from within its most cherished terms? What happens when terms such as *butch* and *femme* emerge not as simple copies of heterosexual masculinity and heterosexual femininity, but as expropriations that expose the nonnecessary status of their assumed meanings? Indeed, the point that *Gender Trouble* made, and it is the point that is most widely cited (and will probably be on my tombstone one day) was that categories like butch and femme are not copies of a more originary heterosexuality, but show how the so-called originals—men and women within the heterosexual framework—are similarly constructed and performatively established. So the ostensible copy is not explained through reference to an origin, but the origin is understood to be as performative as the copy. Through performativity, dominant and nondominant gender norms are equalized. But some of those performative accomplishments claim the place of nature or of symbolic necessity, and they do this only by occluding the ways in which they are performatively established.



I'll return to the theory of performativity in a moment, but for now, let me explain how my account of this particular rift between high structuralist feminist theory and poststructuralist gender trouble has become reformulated for me.

In the first instance, you can see at work in my exposition of this transition—the transition, one might say, from sexual difference to gender trouble, or indeed, from sexual difference to queer theory—that there is a slippage between sexual difference as a category

which conditions the emergence into language and culture, and gender as a sociological concept figured as a norm. Sexual difference is not the same as the categories of "women" and "men." Women and men exist, we might say, as social norms, and they are, I think, ways in which sexual difference has assumed content. Many Lacanians, for instance, argued with me that sexual difference has only a formal character, that nothing follows from the concept of sexual difference about the social roles or meanings that gender might have. Indeed, some of them evacuate sexual difference of every possible semantic meaning, allying it with the structural possibility for semantics, but leaving it no proper or necessary semantic content. Indeed, they even argue that the possibility of critique emerges when one comes to understand not only how sexual difference has become concretized in certain cultural and social instances, but how it has become reduced to its instance, which constitutes a fundamental mistake, a way of foreclosing the fundamental openness of the distinction itself.

So this is one way of answering me, and it comes from the formalist Lacanians, such as Joan Copjec, Charles Shepherdson, and also Slavoj Žižek. But there is a stronger feminist argument that implicitly or explicitly takes issue with the trajectory I have laid out. And it is articulated perhaps most buoyantly and persuasively by Rosi Braidotti.<sup>4</sup> I think the argument goes something like this: We must maintain the framework of sexual difference because it brings to the fore the continuing cultural and political reality of patriarchal domination, because it reminds us that whatever permutations of gender there may be, they do not fully challenge the framework within which they take place, for that framework persists at a symbolic level which is difficult to intervene upon. Critics such as Carol Anne Tyler argue, for instance, that it will always be different for a woman to enter into transgressive gender norms than it will be for a man, and that *Gender Trouble* does not distinguish strongly enough between these very different positions of power within society.

Others suggest that the problem has to do with psychoanalysis and with the place and meaning of Oedipalization; the child enters desire through triangulation, and whether or not there is a heterosexual pair who are functioning as the parents, the child will still locate a paternal and a maternal point of departure, and this will have symbolic significance for the child and become the structure through which desire is given form.

In a sense, there are important alternatives to be thought about together here. And I do not say that they should be reconciled. It may be that they stand in a necessary tension to one another—a necessary tension which now, structures the field of feminist and queer theory—which, we might say, is an inevitable tension, but which necessitates their dialogue as well. It is important to distinguish between theorists of sexual difference who argue on biological grounds that the distinction between the sexes is necessary (the German feminist Barbara Duden tends to do this<sup>5</sup>) and those who argue that sexual difference is a fundamental nexus through which language and culture emerge (as do the structuralists and non-gender-troubled poststructuralists). But then there is a further distinction: There are those who find the structuralist paradigm useful only because it charts the continuing power differential between men and women in society and gives us a way of understanding how deeply it functions in establishing the symbolic order in which we live. Among these last, I think, there is a difference still between those who consider this symbolic order inevitable, and thus ratify patriarchy as an inevitable structure of culture, and those who think that sexual difference is inevitable and fundamental but that its form as patriarchal is contestable. Rosi Braidotti belongs to this last, and you can see why it would be most probably her with whom I have had useful conversations.

So it is when we try to understand whether sexual difference is necessarily heterosexist. Is it? Again, it depends on which version you accept: You can claim that Oedipalization presupposes heterosexual parenting or a heterosexual symbolic that supersedes whatever parenting arrangement is at work, if any; or you can hold that Oedipalization produces heterosexual desire and that sexual difference is a function of Oedipalization—in either case, it seems that the matter is closed. And there are those, such as Juliet Mitchell, who continue to be troubled by the question. If you recall, she is the one who, in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, declared the patriarchal symbolic order not to be a changeable set of rules but “primordial law.”<sup>6</sup>

I take the point that the sociological concepts of gender, women, and men cannot be reducible to sexual difference. But I worry still about how to understand sexual difference as the operation of a symbolic order. What does it mean for such an order to be symbolic rather than social? And what happens to the

social-transformation task of feminist theory if we accept that sexual difference is orchestrated and constrained at a symbolic level? If it is symbolic, is it changeable? I ask Lacanians this question and they tell me that changes in the symbolic take a long, long time. I wonder how long I will have to wait. Or they show me a few passages in what is called the Rome Discourse, and I wonder if these passages are the ones to which we are supposed to cling. And is it really true that sexual difference at the symbolic level is without semantic content? Can it ever be? And what if we have indeed done nothing more than abstracted the social meaning of sexual difference and exalted it as a symbolic and hence presocial structure? Is that a way of making sure that sexual difference is beyond contestation?

You might wonder after all of this why I want to contest sexual difference at all, so let me remind you: *Gender Trouble* starts with the assumption that gender is complexly produced through identificatory and performative practices, and that gender is not as clear or as univocal as we are sometimes led to believe. I wanted to combat forms of essentialism which claimed that gender is a truth that is somehow there as a given, undeniable and interior to the body, as a natural core. On the other hand, the theory of sexual difference makes none of the claims that natural essentialism does. These were the two different kinds of challenges that *Gender Trouble* needed to meet. I see now that I needed to separate the issues and I hope that I have begun to do that in my subsequent work. But I still worry that the frameworks we commit ourselves to, because they describe patriarchal domination, may well recommit us to seeing that very domination as inevitable. Is the symbolic eligible for social intervention? Does sexual difference really remain Other to its instituted form, the dominant one being heterosexuality itself? Let me turn now to the question of what it was that I imagined, and what I now imagine, and how the process of change, and the question of politics, has changed.

*Gender Trouble* ends with a discussion of drag, and the final chapter is in fact called “From Parody to Politics.” A number of critics have scrutinized that chapter in order to find wherein lies the transition: How do we get from parody to politics? There are those who think that the text belittles politics, reducing it to parody, while others claim that drag becomes a model for resistance or for political intervention and participation more generally. So

let us reconsider this controversial closing, a text I probably wrote too quickly and whose future I did not anticipate at the time.

Why drag? Well, there are biographical reasons, and you might as well know that the only way to describe me in my younger years was as a bar dyke who spent her days reading Hegel and her evenings, well, at the gay bar, which occasionally became a drag bar. So there I was, undergoing a cultural moment in the midst of a social and political struggle. But I also experienced in that moment a certain implicit theorization of gender: It quickly dawned on me that some of these so-called men could do the feminine turn much better than I ever could, ever wanted to, ever would. And so I was confronted by what can only be called the transferability of the attribute. Femininity, which I understood never to have belonged to me anyway, clearly lay elsewhere, and I have always been much happier being the audience to it than I could ever be as an embodiment of it. Indeed, whether we follow the framework of sexual difference or of gender trouble, I would hope that we would all remain committed to the ideal that no one should be forcibly compelled to occupy a gender norm that is experienced by that person as a violation. And it is a violation, one that not only is there in the culture, as an interpellation that you refuse only by accepting the consequences—which can be your life—but also as a set of laws, as criminal and psychiatric codes for which imprisonment or institutionalization are still possible options. Gender dysphoria can still be used in many countries to deny you a job or to take away your child. The consequences can be severe. It won't do to call this "play" or "fun." And I don't mean to say it is not sometimes play, pleasure, fun, fantasy. I mean to say only that we continue to live in a world in which you can risk serious disenfranchisement and physical violence for the pleasure you seek, the fantasy you embody, the gender you perform.

For the most part, I am known for the discussion that takes place in about eight paragraphs of *Gender Trouble*, i.e., those on drag performances and their subversive potential. I have been criticized for reducing politics to drag performances and for thinking that all drag performances are somehow subversive. I have been asked, subversive of what? And is there more to politics and to gender than drag? I would like to take a moment to clarify this view, and to clarify, in particular, how my current

thinking on this issue has changed. Let me begin by offering a few propositions to consider:

(A) What operates at the level of cultural fantasy is not finally dissociable from the ways in which material life is organized.

(B) When one performance of gender is considered real and another false, or when one presentation of gender is considered authentic and another fake, then we can conclude that a certain ontology of gender is conditioning these judgments, one that is also put into crisis by the performance of gender in such a way that these judgments are not easily made or become impossible to make.

(C) The point to emphasize here is not that drag is subversive of gender norms, but that we live with received notions of reality and accounts of ontology which are implicit and determine what kinds of bodies and sexualities will be considered real and true, and what kinds will not.

(D) This differential effect of ontological presuppositions on the embodied life of individuals has consequential effects. And what drag can point out is that (1) this set of ontological presuppositions is at work and (2) it is open to rearticulation. →

The question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge. But it is also, as Foucault makes plain, a question of power. Having or bearing "truth" and "reality" is an enormously powerful prerogative within the social world—one way in which power dissimulates as ontology. According to Foucault, one of the first tasks of critique is to discern the relation "between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge." Here we are confronted with the limits of what is knowable, limits which exercise a certain force but are not grounded in any necessity, limits which one interrogates only at a risk to one's secure and available ontology: "[N]othing can exist as an element of knowledge if, on the one hand, it . . . does not conform to a set of rules and constraints characteristic, for example, of a given type of scientific discourse in a given period, and if, on the other hand, it does not possess the effects of coercion or simply the incentives peculiar to what is scientifically validated or simply rational or simply generally accepted,

etc." (52). Knowledge and power are not finally separable, but work together to establish a set of subtle and explicit criteria for thinking about the world: "It is therefore not a matter of describing what knowledge is and what power is and how one would repress the other or how the other would abuse the one, but rather, a nexus of knowledge-power has to be described so that we can grasp what constitutes the acceptability of a system" (52-53).

If we consider this relation of knowledge and power in relation to gender, it seems we are compelled to ask how gender is organized such that it comes to function as a presupposition about how the world is structured. So, there is no merely epistemological approach to gender, no simple way to ask, what are women's ways of knowing? or what might it mean to know women? On the contrary, the ways in which women are said to "know" or to "be known" are already orchestrated by power precisely at that moment in which the terms of "acceptable" categorization are instituted.

In Foucault's view, the critic thus has a double task: to show how knowledge and power work to constitute a more or less systematic way of ordering the world with its own "conditions of acceptability of a system," but also "to follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence." So it will not be enough to isolate and identify the peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things, but one must also track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility it promises. What this means is that one looks for both the conditions by which the object field is constituted and the limits of those conditions, the moment at which they point up their contingency and their transformability. In Foucault's terms, "schematically speaking, we have perpetual mobility, essential fragility or rather the complex interplay between what replicates the same process and what transforms it" (58).

What this means for gender, then, is that it is important not only to understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalized, established as presuppositional, but to trace the moments at which the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories are put into question, where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable.

The turn to drag performance was, in part, a way to think about not only how gender is performed, but how it is resignified, and what the collective terms are by which its resignification can and does take place. Drag performers, for instance, tend to live in communities, and there are strong ritual bonds, such as those we see in the film *Paris Is Burning*, which make us aware of the resignification of social bonds that gender minorities can forge. Thus, we are talking about a cultural life of fantasy that not only organizes the material conditions of life, but also produces sustaining bonds of community, which offers recognition and works to ward off violence, racism, homophobia, transphobia. We see this threat of violence, and it tells us something about what is fundamental to the culture in which they live, a culture which is not radically distinct from the one in which many of us live, a culture which is not one, singular, even though it is not the same as that in which any of us probably live. But there is a reason we understand it, if we do; there is a reason that *Paris Is Burning* has achieved notoriety in mainstream channels—because its beauty, its tragedy, its pathos, its bravery, its pleasure has a way of crossing cultural boundaries; because what also crosses those boundaries, and not always in the same way, is the threat of violence, the threat of poverty, the struggle to survive. And here it is important to note that the struggle to survive is not really separable from the cultural life of fantasy. It is part of it. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise. Fantasy is what establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home. And this brings me back to the question of politics. How is it that drag or, indeed, much more than drag, transgender itself, enters into the political field? It does this, I would suggest, by not only making us question what is real, and what has to be, but by so doing, showing us how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and new modes of reality instituted. And it shows that we can do this in our very embodiment and as a consequence of being a body that is in the mode of becoming. In becoming otherwise, it exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone. We should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those who have survived as a burning question.

So this is one way in which the matter is and continues to be

political. But there is something more, since what the example of drag sought to do was to make us question the means by which reality is made, and to consider the way in which being called "real" or "not real" can be not only a means of social control, but dehumanizing violence. Indeed, I would put it this way: To be called not real, and to have that label institutionalized as a form of differential treatment is to become the Other against which the human is measured. It is the unhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the other side of the border which secures the human in its ostensible reality. To be called a copy, to be called not real, is thus one way in which one can be oppressed. But consider that it is more fundamental than that. For, to be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed Other for the master subject, as a possible or potential subject. But to be not real is something else again. To be oppressed you must at least be intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility) is to have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking but that your language is hollow, as if you were human but with the sense that you are not, to find that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor.

If gender is performative, then it follows that reality is itself produced as an effect of the performance, that although there are norms which govern what will and will not be real, what will and will not be intelligible, they are called into question and reiterated at the moment in which performativity begins its citational practice. One surely cites norms that already exist, but these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation. And they can be exposed as nonnatural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through an embodying that defies normative expectation. What this means is that through the practice of gender performativity, we not only see how the norms that govern reality are cited, but we also see one of the mechanisms by which reality is reproduced and altered in the course of that reproduction. The point of drag is not simply to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle, but to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested. And this has consequences for how gender presentations are criminalized and pathologized,

how subjects who cross gender risk imprisonment and institutionalization, why violence against transgendered subjects is not recognized as violence, why it is sometimes inflicted by the very states which should be offering such subjects protection from violence.

I take this to be essential to politics, and, in ending this section, I will try to say why. I am sometimes asked the following question: So what if new forms of gender are possible; how does this affect the ways that we live, the concrete needs of the human community? And how are we to distinguish between forms of gender possibility which are valuable and those which are not? First, I would say that it is not a question merely of producing a new future for genders which do not yet exist. The genders I have in mind have existed for a long time, but they have not been admitted into the terms which govern reality. So it is a question of developing, within law, within psychiatry, within social and literary theory, a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity we have always been living. Because the norms governing reality have not admitted these forms to be real, we will, of necessity, call them new. But I hope we will laugh knowingly when and if we do. And if we think that this is a theory of mere indulgence, then consider that the necessary background for gender trouble is the question of survival, the question of how to create a world in which those who understand their gender and their desire to be nonnormative can live and thrive not only without the threat of violence from the outside, but without the pervasive sense of their own unreality, which can and has led to suicide, i.e., self-destructiveness and literal suicide. Lastly, I would ask what place the thinking of the possible has within political theorizing. One can object and say, ah, but you are trying only to make gender complexity possible, but that does not tell us which forms are good or bad—it does not supply the measure, the gauge, the norm. And that is right. It does not supply the measure, the gauge, the norm. But there is a normative aspiration here, and it has to do with the ability to live and breathe and move, and would no doubt belong somewhere in what is called a philosophy of freedom. The thought of a possible life is an indulgence only for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity.

Let me offer a story here, before moving on to consider the



→ double character of norms. As you probably know, there is a new and important movement of individuals who are opposing corrective genital surgery of infants. Approximately 2-3% of infants in the world population per year are born with genitals which are not readily identifiable as male or female. They may be mixed; they may be indeterminate. A recent case highlights the social vulnerability that intersexed people endure. In a heavily publicized case in the United States, a young boy who lost his penis in a botched surgery was raised as a girl and lived uneasily with his feminine gender for most of his early years. At school, he still had the impulse to stand while urinating, even though he did not have a penis, and in the bathrooms, the girls, who noticed this, threatened to kill him if he continued to do that. We have to wonder about this threat of violence. Where does it come from? What is so terrible for those who see this act that they are inspired to threaten violence and death? What is its purpose? And how might it be transformed?

story  
The desire to kill someone for not conforming to the gender norm by which he or she is "supposed" to live suggests that life itself requires this norm, and that to be and live outside it is to court death. The person who threatens this violence emerges from the anxious and rigid belief that a sense of world and of self will be radically undermined if such a being, uncategorizable, is permitted to live within the social world. The negation, through violence, of that body is a vain effort to restore order, to renew the social world on the basis of intelligible gender, and to refuse the challenge to rethink that world as something other than natural or necessary. This is not far removed from the threat of death or murder of transsexuals in various countries, and of gay men who read "feminine" or gay women who read "masculine." I can give you many graphic examples, and they are widespread—sometimes countered by police, sometimes aided and abetted by police,<sup>8</sup> sometimes denounced by governments and international agencies, sometimes not included as legible or "real" crimes against humanity by those very institutions.

But if we oppose this violence, then we do so in the name of what? What is the alternative to this violence? And for what transformation of the social world do I call if we understand this violence to emerge from a profound desire to keep the order of binary gender natural or necessary, to make of it a structure, either natural, cultural, or both, which no "human" can oppose and

still remain human? If someone opposes these norms, not just by having a point of view about them, but incorporating this opposition into the body and a corporeal style which is legible, then it seems that violence emerges precisely as the demand to counter that opposition. But this is not a simple difference in points of view. To counter that opposition by violence is to say, effectively, that this body, this challenge, to an accepted version of the world is and shall be unthinkable. It is an effort to expunge what renders the gendered order of intelligibility contingent, frail, and open to fundamental transformation.

So the ethical task that emerges in light of such an analysis is: How might we encounter the difference that calls our grids of intelligibility into question without trying to kill or foreclose the challenge that the difference delivers? What might it mean to learn to live in the anxiety of that challenge, to feel the surety of one's epistemological and ontological anchor go, but to be willing, in the name of the human, to allow the human to become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be? This means that we must learn to live, and to embrace, the destruction and rearticulation of the human in the name of a more capacious and, finally, less violent world, not to know in advance what precise form our humanness will take, but to be open to its permutations, in the name of nonviolence. Emmanuel Levinas has taught us, wisely, that the question to be posed is simple but unanswerable: "Who are you?"<sup>9</sup> The violent response to the Other knows that it does not know, and does not want to not know. It wants to shore up what it takes for granted and expunge what threatens it with not knowing, what forces it to reconsider the presuppositions of its world and their contingency and malleability. The nonviolent response lives with its not knowing in the face of the Other, since sustaining the bond which the question opens to is finally more valuable than having a surety in advance about what defines the human and what its future life will most likely be.

### *Norms and Normativity: A Double Bind*

Normativity sometimes does mean social norms, or more particularly, the normalizing effects of social norms, as is the focus of cultural theory (e.g., that of Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant). →

For Habermasians, it carries a quite different valence, signifying the domain of justificatory practices and referring always to the question of grounding. I very much accept the thesis of François  
 → Ewald that social norms are not reducible to law or, indeed, to Law (in a Lacanian sense).

For Ewald, norms emerge as part of the sociological effort to approximate averages, to calculate what most people do under so-called normal circumstances. They are implicit ideals or notions which inform common practices of normalcy. Ewald  
 → makes clear that a norm is not the same as a rule or a law.<sup>10</sup> A norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization. Although a norm may be analytically separable from the practices in which it is embedded, it may prove to be recalcitrant to any effort to decontextualize its operation. Norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce.

For gender to be a norm suggests that it is always and only tenuously embodied by any particular social actor. The norm governs the social intelligibility of action, but it is not the same as the action that it governs. The norm appears to be indifferent to the actions that it governs, by which I mean only that the norm appears to have a status and effect that is independent of the actions governed by the norm. The norm governs intelligibility and allows for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable, imposing a grid of legibility onto the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within its domain. The question of what it is to be outside the norm poses a paradox, for if the norm renders the social field intelligible, i.e., normalizes that field for us, then to be outside the norm is in some sense to still be defined in relation to it: To be not quite masculine or not quite feminine is still to be understood exclusively in terms of one's relationship to the quite masculine and the quite feminine.

To claim that gender is a norm is not quite the same as saying that there are normative views of femininity and masculinity, even though there clearly are such normative views. Gender is not exactly what one "is," nor is it precisely what one "has." Gender  
 → is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial

forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative embodiment which gender assumes. To assume that gender always and exclusively means "the matrix of the 'masculine' and 'feminine'" is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender that do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance. To conflate the definition of gender with its normative expression is inadvertently to reconsolidate the power of the norm to constrain the definition of gender. Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized. Indeed, it may be that the very apparatus that seeks to install the norm also works to undermine that very installation, that the installation is, as it were, definitionally incomplete. To keep the term "gender" apart from both masculinity and femininity is to safeguard a theoretical perspective by which one might offer an account of how the binary of masculine and feminine comes to exhaust the semantic field of gender. Whether one refers to "gender trouble" or "gender blending," "transgender" or "cross-gender," one is already suggesting that gender has a way of moving beyond that naturalized binary. The conflation of gender with masculine/feminine, man/woman, male/female thus performs the very naturalization that the notion of gender is meant to forestall.

Thus, a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of "man" and "woman" as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a regulatory operation of power, naturalizing the hegemonic instance, foreclosing the thinkability of its disruption.

For Ewald, a norm operates as an ideal point; indeed, as an elaboration of what Foucault, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, termed "a regulatory ideal."<sup>11</sup> It is the point of reference, implicit, abstract, and speculative, by which human activity orients itself and which, in turn, supplies human activity with its sense of givenness and intelligibility. This sense of the norm is clearly quite different from what is meant by "normative" philosophy or, indeed, a "normative" account of social theory.

If we consider Habermas' argument in *Between Facts and Norms*, it is clear that he relies on norms to supply a common

understanding for social actors and speakers: "Participants, in claiming validity for their utterances, strive to reach an understanding with one another about something in the world. . . . The everyday use of language does not turn exclusively or even primarily on its representational (or fact-stating) functions: here all the functions of language and language-world relations come into play, so that the spectrum of validity claims takes in more than truth claims."<sup>12</sup> He goes on to explain that "in explicating the meaning of linguistic expressions and the validity of statements, we touch on idealizations that are connected with the medium of language" (17). He makes clear that without these idealizations at the heart of language, we would not have the resources by which to orient ourselves to disparate kinds of claims made by any number of social actors. Indeed, the presumption of a common set of idealizations is what gives our action order, what orders it in advance, and what we take into account as we seek to order ourselves in relation to one another and a common future:

With the concept of communicative action, which brings in mutual understanding as a mechanism of action coordination, the counterfactual presuppositions of actors who orient their action to validity claims also acquire *immediate relevance for the construction and preservation of social orders; for these orders exist through the recognition of normative validity claims.* (17, my emphasis)

Here we can see that norms, which orient action toward the common good and belong to an "ideal" sphere, are not precisely social in Ewald's sense. They do not belong to variable social orders, and they are not, in Foucault's sense, a set of "regulatory ideals" and, hence, part of the ideal life of social power. On the contrary, they function as part of a reasoning process which conditions any and every social order and gives that order its coherence. We know, though, that Habermas would not accept the "ordered" characteristic of any social order as a necessary good. Some orders clearly ought to be disrupted, and for good reason. Indeed, the order of gender intelligibility may well qualify as one such order. But do we have a way to distinguish here between the function of the norm as socially integrative and the value of "integration" under oppressive social conditions? In other words, is there not an inherently conservative function of the norm when it is said to preserve order? What if the very order is exclusionary

or violent? We might respond, with Habermas, that violence goes against the normative idealizations functioning, implicitly, in everyday language. But if the norm is socially integrative, then how will it actually work to break up a social "order" purchased and maintained through violent means? Is the norm part of such a social order, or is it "social" only in a hypothetical sense, part of an "order" which is not instantiated in the social world as it is lived and negotiated?

If the Habermasian point is that we cannot hope to live in consensus or in common orientation without assuming such norms, my question is whether the "common" in this instance is not instituted precisely through the production of what is uncommon, what is outside the common, what disrupts it from within, what poses a challenge to its integrity. What is the value of the "common"? And do we need to know that, despite our differences, we are all oriented toward the same conception of rational deliberation and justification? Or do we need to know precisely that the "common" is no longer there for us, if it ever was, and that the capacious and self-limiting approach to difference is not only the task of cultural translation in this day of multiculturalism, but the most important way to nonviolence?

The point is not to apply social norms to lived social instances, to order and define them (as Foucault has criticized), nor is it to find justificatory mechanisms for the grounding of social norms that are extrasocial (even as they operate under the name of the "social"). There are times when both of these activities do and must take place: We level judgments against criminals for illegal acts and so subject them to a normalizing procedure; we consider our grounds for action in collective contexts and try to find modes of deliberation and reflection about which we can agree. But neither of these is all we do with norms. Through recourse to norms, the sphere of the humanly intelligible is circumscribed, and this circumscription is consequential for any ethics and any conception of social transformation. We might feel that we must know the fundamentals of the human in order to act in such a way that we preserve and promote human life as we know it. But what if the very categories of the human have excluded those who should be operating within its terms, who do

not accept the modes of reasoning and justifying "validity claims" that have been proffered by Western forms of rationalism? Have we ever yet known the "human"? And what might it take to approach that knowing? Should we be wary of knowing it too soon or of any final or definitive knowing? If we take the field of the human for granted, then we fail to think critically—and ethically—about the consequential ways that the human is produced, reproduced, deproduced. This latter inquiry does not exhaust the field of ethics, but I cannot imagine a "responsible" ethics or theory of social transformation operating without it.

Let me suggest here by way of a closing discussion to this essay that the necessity of keeping our notion of the "human" open to a future articulation is essential to the project of international human rights discourse and politics. We see this time and again when the very notion of the human is presupposed; it is defined in advance, and in terms which are distinctively Western, very often American, and therefore parochial. The paradox emerges that the "human" at issue in human rights is already known, already defined, and yet is supposed to be the ground for a set of rights and obligations that are international. How we move from the local to the international is a major question for international politics, but it takes a specific form for international feminism. And I suggest that an anti-imperialist or at least nonimperialist conception of international human rights must call into question what is meant by human, and learn from the various ways and means by which it is defined across cultural venues. This means that local conceptions of what is human or, indeed, of what the basic conditions and needs of human life are must be subjected to reinterpretation, since there are historical and cultural circumstances in which "human" is defined differently, and its basic needs and, hence, basic entitlements are also defined differently.

I do not mean to offer a reductively relativist argument. I think that a reductive relativism would say that we cannot speak of the human or of international human rights, since there are only and always local and provisional understandings of these terms, and that the generalizations themselves do violence to the specificity of the meanings in question. This is not my view. We are compelled to speak of the human, and of the international, and to find out in particular how "human rights" do and do not work in favor of women, of what "women" are and what they are not. But

to speak in this way, and to call for social transformations in the name of women, we must also be part of a critical democratic project, one which understands that the category of "human" has been used differentially and with exclusionary aims, that not all humans have been included within its terms, that the category of "women" has been used differentially and with exclusionary aims, and that not all women have been included within its terms, and that women have not been fully incorporated into the human, and that both categories are still in process, under way and unfulfilled. This means that we must follow a double path in politics: We must use this language, and use it to assert an entitlement to conditions of life in ways that are sensitive to the question of gender, and we must also subject our very categories to critical scrutiny, find out the limits of their inclusivity, the presuppositions they include, the ways in which they must be expanded to encompass the diversity of what it is to be human and gendered. When the UN conference at Beijing met a few years ago and we heard there a discourse on "women's human rights," the term struck many people as paradoxical. But think about what this term, coined by Charlotte Bunch, actually says. It says that the "human" is contingent, that it has in the past and continues in the present to define a variable and restricted population, which may or may not include women. It says that women have their own set of human rights, that what "human" comes to mean when we think about the humanness of women is perhaps different than what "human" has meant when it has functioned as presumptively male. It also says that these terms are defined variably, in relation to one another. And we could certainly make a similar argument about race. Which populations have qualified as the "human" and which have not? What is the history of this category? Where are we in its history at this time?

I would suggest that in this last process, we can rearticulate or resignify the basic categories of ontology—of being human, of being gendered—only to the extent that we submit ourselves to a process of cultural translation. And the point here is not to assimilate foreign or unfamiliar notions of gender or humanness into our own, as if it were simply a matter of incorporation. It is also a process of yielding our most fundamental categories, that is, of seeing how and why they yield to a rupture and a resignification when they encounter what is unknown, or not yet known. It is crucial to recognize that the notion of the "human" will be

built only over time in and by the process of a cultural translation that is not between two languages that stay self-enclosed, distinct, unified. But rather, *translation will compel each language to change in order to apprehend the other*, and this apprehension, at the limit of what is familiar and parochial, will be the occasion of both an ethical and a social transformation.

There are questions about the strategy of resignification as politics. One might well say that politicians on either the right or the left can use this strategy. And we can surely see how "multiculturalism" and "globalization" have their right-wing and left-wing variants. In the United States, the word "compassionate" has been recently linked to conservatism, which strikes many of us as an abomination of resignification. One can point out, with full justification, that National Socialism was a resignification of socialism. And that would be right. So it seems clear that resignification alone is not sufficient as a descriptor of politics. One can argue both that the Nazis appropriated power by turning the language and concerns of democracy against democracy and that the Haitian revolutionaries appropriated power by using the terms of democracy against the slave-owning powers that would deny it for blacks. And so the work of appropriation can be used by either the right or the left, and there are no necessarily salutary ethical consequences inherent to it. There is the queer appropriation of "queer," the rap/hip-hop appropriation of racist discourse, the left-wing appropriation of an anti-big government discourse, and on and on. Appropriation by itself leads to a myriad of consequences, some of which we might embrace and some of which we might abhor.

But if resignification does work in the service of radical democratic politics, how might it work? I want to suggest here that as we extend the realm of universality, becoming more knowing about what justice implies and providing for greater possibilities of "life"—which itself is a term contested by both reactionaries and progressives—we need to assume that our already established conventions regarding what is human, what is universal, what the meaning and substance of international politics might be, are not sufficient. For the purposes of a radical democratic transformation, we need to know that our fundamental categories can and must be expanded, to become more inclusive and more responsive to the full range of cultural populations. This does not mean that a social engineer plots at a distance how best

to include everyone in his or her category. It means that the category itself must be subjected to a multiple resignification, that it must emerge anew as a result of the cultural translations it undergoes.

What moves me politically is the moment in which a subject—a person, a collective—asserts a right or entitlement to a livable life when no such prior authorization exists, when no clearly enabling convention is in place. One might hesitate and say, but there are fascists who invoke rights for which there are no prior entitlements. It cannot be a good thing to invoke rights or entitlements to what one considers a "livable life" if that very life is based on racism or misogyny or violence or exclusion. And I would, of course, agree with this last. A better example to consider is when, prior to the overthrow of apartheid, some black South Africans arrived at the polling booths ready to vote. There was then, at that time, no prior authorization for their vote. They simply arrived. They performatively invoked the right to vote even when there was no prior authorization, no enabling convention in place. On the other hand, we might say that Hitler also invoked rights to a certain kind of life for which there was no constitutional or legal precedent, local or international. But there is a distinction between these two invocations, and it is crucial to my argument.

In both of these cases, the subjects in question invoked rights to which they were not entitled by existing law, though in both cases, existing law had international and local versions which were not fully compatible with one another. Those who opposed apartheid were not restricted to existing convention (although they were, clearly, invoking and citing international convention against local convention). The emergence of fascism in Germany, as well as that of constitutional government in postwar Germany, was also not limited to existing convention. These political phenomena involved innovation. But that does not answer the question of which action is right to pursue. Which innovation has value and which does not? *The norms that we would consult to answer this question cannot themselves be derived from resignification.* They have to be derived from a radical democratic theory and practice, and so resignification has to be contextualized in that way. One must make substantive decisions about what will lead to a less violent future and a more inclusive population, what will help to fulfill the claims of universality

and justice that we seek to understand in their cultural specificity and social meaning. It will then be crucial to ask: What forms of community have been created, and through what violences and exclusions? Hitler sought to intensify the violence of racism and exclusion, while the anti-apartheid movement sought to counter them. And that would be the basis on which I would condemn the one and condone the other. The task of a radical democratic theory and practice will thus be to ask what resources it must have in order to bring into the human community those humans who have not been considered part of the recognizably human, thus extending to previously disenfranchised communities the norms that sustain viable life.

So I have concluded it seems with such a call to extend the norms. Let me consider as a final gesture, then, the relation between norms and life, since that has been crucial to my inquiry thus far. The question of life is a political one, although perhaps not exclusively so. The question of the "right to life" has affected the debates on the legalization of abortion. Feminists who are in favor of abortion rights have been called "anti-life," and they have responded by asking, whose life? And when does "life" begin? If you were to canvass feminists internationally on the question of what life is or, perhaps more simply, when life begins, you would get many different views. And that is why, considered internationally, not all women's movements are united on this question. There is the question of when "life" begins, and then the question of when "human" life begins, or when the humanity of the human begins. Who knows? Who is equipped or entitled to know? Whose knowledge holds sway and functions as power here? Feminists have argued that the life of the mother should be equally important as that of the fetus—then it is a question of one life versus another. They have argued that every child should be wanted and have a chance at a livable life, and they have also argued that there are conditions for life that must first be met: The mother must be well; there must be certainty that the child will be well fed; and there must be some chance of a future, of a viable and enduring future, since a human being with no futurity loses its humanness and stands a chance of losing its life as well. Here we see the term "life" functioning both within feminism and between feminism and its opponents, as a site of contest, an unsettled term, whose various meanings are being proliferated and debated in different ways in the context of

different nation-states with different religious and philosophical conceptions. Indeed, some of my opponents may well argue that if one takes as a paramount value the "extension of norms that support viable life," it might follow, depending on your definitions, that the "unborn child" should be valued above all. This is not my view, and not my conclusion.

My argument against this conclusion has to do with the very use of "life," as if we know what it means, what it requires, what it demands. When we ask what makes a life livable, we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life. And so there are at least two senses of life: one which refers to the minimum biological form of living, and another which preexists to establish minimum conditions for a livable life.<sup>13</sup> And this implies not that we can disregard the former in favor of the latter, but that we must ask, as we did about gender violence, what humans require in order to maintain and reproduce the conditions of their own livability. And what are our politics such that we are, in whatever way is possible, both conceptualizing the possibility of the livable life and arranging for its institutional support? →

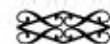
There will always be disagreement about what this means, and those who claim that a single political direction is necessitated by virtue of this commitment will be mistaken. But this is only because to live is to live politically, in relation to power, in relation to others, in the act of assuming responsibility for a collective future. To assume responsibility for a future is not to know its direction fully in advance, since the future, especially the future with and for others, requires a certain openness and unknowingness. And it also implies that a certain agonism and contestation will and must be in play. It must be in play for politics to become democratic. Democracy does not speak in unison; its tunes are dissonant, and necessarily so. It is not a predictable process; it must be undergone, like a passion must be undergone. It may also be that life itself becomes foreclosed when the right way is decided in advance, when we impose what is right for everyone without finding a way to enter into community, and to discover there the "right" in the midst of cultural translation. It may be that what is "right" and what is "good" consist in staying open to the tensions that beset the most fundamental categories we require, to know unknowingness at the core of what we know, and what we need, and to recognize the sign of life—and

its prospects—in the contestations which are ours to undergo with one another.

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## Dialogic Feminism: "Other Women's" Contributions to the Social Transformation of Gender Relations



### Introduction

Like many other academic women, I was first introduced to feminist literature when I began attending university. On March 8, 1992, having recently graduated, I was fortunate enough to participate in an encounter of over 1000 rural women in El Bierzo (Leon, Spain). This trip had a decisive impact on both my personal and intellectual life.

I discovered the strength and transformative possibilities of these women who did not have a university education, their capacity for organization in women's movements and their conviction that they could change the course of their lives. I learned that their reflections on the social transformation of gender relations were more profound than those I had had with other colleagues in the university. I was amazed by the procedures of their meetings and their tolerance for inclusion of everyone in the fight for common goals. I felt like an equal, talking and searching with them for shared victories.

I was invited on the trip by the women of the adult education center where I was collaborating and volunteering (Sánchez 1999). I had already begun experiencing the contrast between the feminist literature I had read and the problems of those "other women." Their protests were about more than just wage