

## Sex/Gender

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All societies make the distinction between two sexes, male and female, a fact that begins from the recognition that men and women occupy different bodies. This recognition of bodily difference results in all cultures marking the difference in various ways; men and women assume distinct characteristics and perform different roles. How the line is drawn between men and women varies a great deal from culture to culture and so too the different characteristics and roles that get assigned to men and women. In the West this process starts from the moment a baby is born and continues throughout the lifespan. As well as being dressed differently, pink for a girl and blue for a boy, baby boys and girls are almost immediately assigned distinct traits and characteristics: boys in our society are frequently described as 'aggressive' and 'assertive', whilst girls are frequently described as 'passive' and 'gentle'. Western society makes a sharp distinction between men and women and brings into play a number of other binary oppositions: reason/emotion, culture/nature, mind/body; in each case, man is identified with the former and woman with the latter. These characteristics are assumed to predispose men and women to special roles later in life; in the West, for example, men's assertive nature is supposed to make them better able to operate in the world of business and politics whilst women's gentle and nurturing characteristics would seem to make them the 'natural' carers of babies and children in the home and predispose them to the so-called 'caring professions', jobs such as nursing and teaching. However as well as acknowledging a difference between the sexes, it would seem that a feature of most if not all cultures is that they give more value to the characteristics and roles associated with men than those that are associated with women.

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Thus as Sherry Ortner has noted, 'the secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. Yet within that universal fact, the specific cultural conceptions and symbolizations of woman are extraordinarily diverse and even mutually contradictory' (1974: 72).

This dividing of the sexes raises two important questions. First, are these differences the result of fundamental biological differences between men and women, i.e. are they *natural*, or are they the result of social organization, and in effect *cultural*? Second, why is it that, in almost all cultures, the things associated with women are given lower social status than the things associated with men? (Tong 1994).

These questions have resonated in many areas of academic and social life and been the source of much intellectual debate. However they are of particular interest to feminists who are concerned to explain and challenge the low status of women in society. How these questions concerning sexual difference are answered is of fundamental political importance to feminism. Any account which calls on biology or nature to explain the position occupied by men and women in the social world is seen as problematic to a great many feminists who argue that this can lead to the assumption that sexual inequality is a 'natural' thing. Biology limits the possibilities for change because nature itself is largely impermeable to change; as Steven Rose et al. put it, 'there can be no argument with biology, it is unchangeable' (1984: 6). Accounts which focus on culture and not biology offer greater possibility for change in the status of women. Drawing a distinction between biology and culture is therefore one way for feminists to proceed in their analysis of women's subordination, and this is the purpose of the sex/gender dichotomy. A large number of feminists, including Ann Oakley (1974) and Michelle Barrett (1988), would argue therefore that a distinction needs to be drawn between the biological facts of difference, namely *sex*, and the social meanings that come to be attached to this fact, namely *gender*. Thus as Oakley puts it,

'sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender' however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classifications into 'masculine' and 'feminine'. (1974: 16)

In this way, biological material determines sex, making us male and female, but does not determine the traits of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' which are the products of culture. Thus as Oakley argues, a fundamental task of her book *Sex, Gender and Society* is to 'disentangle "sex" from "gender" in the many fields where the existence of natural differences between male and female has been proposed' (1974: 17). Those adopting this position point to the fact that there is no natural link between biological characteristics and social ones. Whilst all societies refer to biology in their accounts of gender difference and all believe their definitions of gender are natural, no two

cultures would agree on exactly what distinguishes men from women. Anthropological evidence from across the world has shown the great degree of difference in how biology is interpreted, with characteristics ascribed to men and women different from our own. Margaret Mead in her classic study *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) looked at three New Guinea tribes, the Arapesh, the Mundugumor and the Tschambuli and gave evidence of the degree of cultural variability in the interpretation of sexual difference. In the Arapesh tribe, she found men and women adopting characteristics which Western cultures would recognize as 'feminine'; in the Mundugumor, both sexes adopted characteristics which we would see as 'masculine'; whilst in the Tschambuli she found that women adopt 'masculine' traits and men 'feminine' ones. This lack of any universal correspondence between sex and gender means that there is no 'natural' link between the biological categories of 'male' and 'female' and the cultural characteristics of 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Further evidence that sex does not determine gender in a 'natural' way can be found in studies of people who have biological disorders, sometimes referred to as hermaphrodites. Oakley (1974) summarizes the findings of some of these studies. Boys born without penises can go on to assume typical 'masculine' characteristics whilst girls born with 'penises' but without ovaries go on to acquire 'feminine' characteristics and traits. Studies of hermaphrodites give us evidence that the acquisition of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' is not 'natural' or purely 'biological' but is the result of socialization – parental and cultural expectation. Similarly, the existence of transsexuals gives further evidence of the discontinuity between sex and gender. Transsexuals are born with the biological characteristics of one sex but identify with the gender characteristics of the opposite sex. As Oakley notes, 'to be a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, is as much a function of dress, gesture, occupation, social network and personality, as it is of possessing a particular set of genitals' (1974: 158).

The dichotomy of sex and gender has not been adopted by all feminists and in recent years the issue of whether a clear line can be drawn between biology and culture has been questioned. However, it still remains a good starting point for the 'denaturalization' of gender roles and characteristics, which, as will be discussed, 'common-sense' and sociological theories have tended to take for granted as natural.

### **FEMINISM, BIOLOGY AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE**

At the centre of debates about sexual difference is the body. What status does the body have in the social world? What is the significance of the fact that men and women occupy different bodies and play different roles in the reproductive process? The body, according to B. Turner (1984), has

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occupied a 'cryptic' place within sociology: as an object of sociological investigation it has been largely neglected but, given the fact that the social world is a world of bodies, it has been implicit within sociological theory. There are also examples within philosophical and social theory where the body is evoked explicitly as a way of explaining social phenomena. Explanations of social phenomena which depend on biology are commonly referred to as *biological determinism* or *biologism*. In the 1970s sociobiologists such as E.O. Wilson attempted to bring biology and sociology into direct contact. Books such as Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (1975) and Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape* (1976) have been popularly received partly because they have a 'common-sense' appeal. Many sociologists, however, are sceptical of sociobiology. Barrett (1988) gives some examples of these accounts within the social sciences, as well as outlining the problems endemic to them. Criminal behaviour, intelligence quotient or IQ, mental illness, the 'capabilities' of different races and sexes, have all been studied with reference to biological characteristics and body types: hormones, genes, chromosomes, and sometimes even facial and scalp formations. This analysis usually results in the classification of 'human nature' into 'types'. Rose et al. (1984) argue that biologist explanations are problematic and can be challenged on a number of grounds. Biologism is philosophically reductive and often methodologically crude: biological determinists subsume complex social and historical relations under biology, directly correlating biological evidence with the social world to explain the differences found there. A further problem is that biological accounts are conservative: they tend to result in things being seen as 'natural' and unchanging, 'you can't change human nature.' They have also been discredited by many sociologists on political grounds: biologism has sometimes led to discrimination against particular races, in particular Jews and blacks, and indeed against women.

Despite the problems with biologism, the biological facts of the body and more particularly the different reproductive abilities of men and women have been frequently evoked in everyday life and in philosophy and the social sciences to explain social differences in men and women. Biology is the edifice upon which ideas about men and women are built. Biology as 'this is how things are' is also a powerful way of legitimating existing social divisions between men and women. Differences in chromosomes, hormones and genitalia are given as 'facts' which make men and women what they are. McNay summarizes the ways in which the body has been held responsible for character traits in men and women, noting that often 'masculine characteristics can be seen to be related to dominant perceptions of the male body, i.e. firmness, aggression, strength' (1992: 17). Often male hormones are held responsible for men's aggression, thereby making aggression a 'natural' feature of masculinity rather than something social. The characteristics attributed to femininity also correspond to dominant perceptions of the female body: the 'feminine' is seen as 'soft', 'gentle'.

Along with this, the possession of ovaries and a womb which produce the female hormones are held responsible for women's so-called 'maternal instinct' and supposedly produce a feminine nature which is 'gentle', 'sensitive', 'nurturing' and better suited for the primary care of children.

The question of what importance to give sex or biology as an explanatory factor in the making of men and women is a particularly difficult one for feminists. On the one hand, feminists must recognize the body and its biology since bodily difference is the foundation upon which the oppression of women is built. On the other hand, many feminists do not wish to resort to biological arguments to explain women's oppression because such arguments are generally conservative and provide fewer options for social transformation. The ways in which feminists have taken account of the body are varied, and the degree of status accorded to the body as an explanatory factor in women's oppression is one source of division amongst feminists. Whilst all feminists recognize the importance of social and symbolic forces in the construction of men and women, some do give biology a certain degree of importance as a factor, whilst others focus on the cultural symbols of masculinity and femininity. A fundamental division within feminism has opened up between those feminists who call themselves or have been called *social constructivists* and those who call themselves or have been called *essentialists*. Social constructivists are sceptical of any account of gender difference which relies on biology, whilst essentialists make claims that 'true womanhood' is located in female biology. The difference between this form of essentialism and the biological arguments discussed above is the political desire of radical feminists to alter women's status rather than use biology to legitimate the low status of feminine traits and characteristics. Given that feminist theory and philosophy have developed not in a vacuum but in response to mainstream (male) theory and philosophy, this discussion will first consider the ways in which sexual difference has been constructed within classical social theory today before discussing feminist theory in more detail.

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The body has been at the centre of the sociological tradition's account of men and women in society, sometimes 'cryptically', sometimes referred to directly by philosophers and sociologists to explain the characteristics and roles of men and women in the social world. In particular, a woman's reproductive role has been very often given as the reason for her confinement to the home. There are many examples in this intellectual tradition of how male/female difference in reproductive function (sex) is used to explain and to justify social differences between men and women (gender). R.A. Sydie notes:

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The appeal to a 'natural' difference between men and women based on the reproductive capacity of women has provided the framework for dichotomised views of the nature of the sexes and the assumption that hierarchical relations of male superiority and female subordination are justified by the dichotomy. (1987: 2)

If women's subordination is universal but is not due to any biological or 'natural' inferiority on the part of women, the explanation needs to be found elsewhere. Ortner (1974) locates the problem of sexual asymmetry at the level of cultural ideology and symbols and asks, what is common to every culture which might explain the ubiquitous nature of female oppression? The answer she comes up with is that of 'nature': all cultures make a distinction between culture and nature and all see women as closer to nature than men. Moreover, the products of culture are generally considered superior to those of nature. Ortner gives two reasons for these associations of women with nature. First, because of their role in reproduction, women appear closer to nature and women's creativity is seen to be fulfilled through the process of giving birth; whereas men, on the other hand, have to find other outlets for the creativity, through the making of things, invention, technology, etc. Second, because of their role in reproduction, women have found their social functions limited to those of the domestic sphere, in particular childrearing, a role which is seen as 'natural' and 'animal' rather than social. Like women, children are also posed as closer to nature since they start out as unformed and uncultured beings unable even to talk. Since women spend so much time in the company of these unsocialized beings, the role of being a mother appears to bring them closer to the 'natural' and 'animal' world. The net result is that women are thought to be confined by their biology and are positioned in the private/domestic realm for longer periods than men who are free to operate in the public domain. Ortner's account does not argue that women actually *are* closer than men to nature, but that cultures produce symbols and ideas that make them appear so.

Sydie (1987) argues that understanding how this dichotomous view of the world has underpinned European thought is essential if one is to produce a critique of sociology. From Aristotle to the Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Rousseau, and sociologists such as Durkheim and Weber, male and female reproductive roles have been evoked to explain the positions men and women assume in the social world. Moreover, the Enlightenment, out of which sociology emerged, saw the rise of science and the triumph of reason over God, superstition and nature, a dichotomous split which was implicitly gendered since sociology took for granted the dichotomy of men to culture, women to nature.

The sometimes metaphoric identification of women with nature was a source of celebration for some philosophers who saw beauty in nature. Women were seen to be important to men: the association of women with

the natural world supposedly gave men an insight into the divine plan. This train of thought runs through the work of the Romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau (1972) saw the separation of men and women into public and private spheres as an essential aspect of social order. His ideas about the differences in the sexes are laid out clearly in *Émile*. In her analysis, Gatens (1991) discusses in detail Rousseau's characterization of the sexes in this text. He argues that the separation of men and women into different spheres is a 'natural' one: men and women are fundamentally, i.e. 'naturally', different creatures. Man is associated with the mind, he has a capacity for *reason* which makes him suited to the public sphere; whilst a woman is identified with her body, and her role in the reproductive process gives her an insight into the passions and makes her fit to perform in the private, domestic realm. Rousseau believed that man is born twice, once into existence, and a second time as a man. Woman, however, is only born once: she never rises from the natural state of existence. Thus whilst a man can transcend his sex, a woman is confined to hers. According to Rousseau, 'the male is only a male now and again, the female is always a female' (1972: 324). As Moira Gatens (1991) notes, in Rousseau's philosophy women are expected to provide a 'natural' foundation necessary for the security of the social contract. The private sphere provides the emotional and mental stability necessary to public and civic life, and marriage is the means by which men have access to the private sphere and therefore to 'nature'. Marriage also ensures men a domestic republic and female submissiveness. Women's confinement in the private sphere is therefore part of a 'natural hierarchy' which is necessary for social order. To stray too far from this natural organization would destroy social life. For Rousseau, the consequences of women entering the public sphere would be either that they become men and upset the balance between nature and culture, or that they stay female and corrupt the public sphere.

However there was also a more negative positioning of women as a force of nature. For many the female body, in particular the uterus, was a source of irrationality, and this fear of irrationality in the age of reason was just one justification for the exclusion of women from the public sphere. Thus as Sydie argues, 'whatever the interpretation, women were men's opposites, and the opposition was a necessary but potentially negative one' (1987: 5).

Sydie (1987) gives a detailed discussion of how this dichotomous split has operated within sociology to the detriment of women. At its inception, sociology made claim to be a science concerned with the social and not the natural world. Furthermore, since the nature/culture dichotomy was one of asymmetry rather than equality, the world of the social was seen to have a 'natural' right to control and dominate the world of nature. This characterization of the world in terms of nature/culture, whilst ostensibly gender-neutral, at closer inspection turns out to be biased towards men since, as we have seen, only men were placed on the side of culture. She argues that Durkheim, for example, whilst considering marriage and family structures

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as socially and not biologically organized, falls into biological arguments when discussing the different roles men and women adopt in society. The division of labour results in women's increasing confinement to the home but this division has organic and physiological dimensions: both sexes have different capacities which make them suited to their roles. Thus Durkheim saw the division between men and women as necessary and functional to society.

### FEMINISTS TAKE ON THE ACADEMY

This acceptance of the nature/culture dichotomy on the part of sociology had tangible implications for sociological research. If the private sphere of women is treated as 'natural' then it was largely outside the realm of a sociology which concentrates its attention on social phenomena found in the public realm. In focusing on the public realm, the realm of society and culture, sociology effectively dealt largely with men's experiences and rendered invisible the experiences of women in the home. Thus, for a long time, housework and childrearing were conceived of as 'non-work', as 'natural' or 'animal' functions. As feminists such as Oakley (1977), Sydie (1987) and Barrett (1988) have shown, far from being gender-neutral, the early sociologists suffered from gender blindness: the generic 'man' of early sociology was shown to stand for 'men'. Breaking the association of women with nature is seen by many feminists to be an important strategy. In recent years feminists such as Oakley (1977) have challenged the view that women's work is natural, pointing instead to how housework and childcare are socially organized labour, as much a part of the social world as the paid work and activities of men outside the home.

Given the way in which the Western philosophical and sociological tradition has perpetuated the idea of women's 'natural' inferiority to men, feminists have been eager to challenge in various ways the dichotomies of nature/culture, mind/body, reason/passion, public/private. Whilst all feminists share a desire to change women's status of subordination, there has been no consensus amongst feminists about what theoretical and political strategies might best achieve this. There are various ways of categorizing feminists, however, and amongst the main categories are liberal, radical, Marxist, psychoanalytic and postmodernist and poststructuralist. These different schools of feminism have disagreed on what emphasis to place on biology as an explanatory factor in accounting for difference between men and women. Broadly speaking, the response to this issue has resulted in two major lines of argument that cut *across* the various schools of feminism. The first theme is that of transcendence of the body. Many feminists have argued that women's emancipation can only be achieved when they can move outside the confines of their bodies and



reproductive functions. This theme can be found in liberal and Marxist feminist accounts and can be traced through to the work of contemporary postmodernist and poststructuralist feminists. It is, however, also found in some but not all radical feminist writings. In general, this line of thought is one which aims to see the eradication of difference and the emergence of an androgenous society where sexual difference has no meaning. Exactly how women can move beyond the body is a point of disagreement amongst these very different schools of feminism, with each proposing different theoretical and political strategies for the movement of women out of the confines of their sex. The second theme which has emerged in response to women's association with nature and the body has been the celebration of the female body and its properties. This celebration of the female body can be found in some contemporary radical feminism where there is a tendency to collapse sex and gender: the female sexual characteristics are seen to be a source of 'feminine' characteristics such as nurturing or passivism. Essentialism is also associated with the so-called 'French' feminism that adopts psychoanalysis to theorize the 'feminine' as a textual and political strategy for the understanding of woman as 'other' to man.

Not all schools of feminism have therefore challenged the pairing of women with nature and men with culture. Gatens (1991) argues that a number of different schools of feminism, in particular liberal, existential and radical feminism, take for granted the assumption that the female body positions women closer to nature. She suggests that it is only in recent years that the assumption of a 'natural' basis for the division of labour between the sexes has been challenged. However, whilst liberals, existentialists and radicals often begin by leaving the nature/female, culture/male distinctions in place, they differ on the *value* they give to nature and culture and also what can be done about altering the situation.

### **LIBERAL FEMINISM**

Mary Wollstonecraft's now classic *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, first published in 1792, is a good example of the arguments put forward by liberal feminists and how they maintain the body/mind, nature/culture, private/public distinctions, albeit with some modifications. Wollstonecraft addresses herself to Rousseau's philosophical position, particularly the ideas he laid down in *Émile*. What Wollstonecraft takes issue with in Rousseau is his positioning of women and men on opposite sides of each of these dichotomies. Her aim, according to Gatens, is to 'desexualise reason and passion, nature and culture; to lessen the importance of sexual difference in the structuring of subjectivity and social role; and to *humanise* (or sexually neutralise) both the private and the public spheres' (1991: 21).

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Rather than seeing men and women as fundamentally (or naturally) different, as Rousseau does, Wollstonecraft argues that there is an essential similarity between all men and women. In this way, Wollstonecraft asserts the idea of an *a priori* genderless subject. Men and women are not different creatures with different characteristics but are fundamentally the same in that both sexes are capable of passion and reason. However, unlike Rousseau who saw the necessity of both reason and passion, Wollstonecraft places greater value on reason and argues that it must be brought to bear in order to control passion. The development of reason is not just possible and desirable in men, as Rousseau argues, but for Wollstonecraft can and must be cultivated in both sexes. To desexualize reason and make it a trait of men *and* women means giving women the same rights to education as men and allowing them to enter into public life. Wollstonecraft's feminism therefore assumes that the root of women's oppression lies in their confinement to reproduction and thus the private sphere, the life of the body and passions. In celebrating the life of the public realm Wollstonecraft proposes that reason and the mind must rule the body. Female emancipation therefore depends upon women *transcending* the confines of the female body which position them in the home/private realm. If women can achieve this transcendence (and it must be noted that she did not see all women able to do so) then an androgenous society would emerge where no distinctions are made between men and women on the basis of their sex.

The main problem with Wollstonecraft's argument is that it leaves intact the distinction between nature/culture, mind/body and public/private as taken-for-granted facts of life. She takes for granted women's confinement to the body and, as a corollary to this, the fact that women's private work in the home is 'natural'. Her argument with Rousseau is simply about the way in which he organizes these two domains in terms of the sexes. The liberal feminist celebration of reason and the public sphere as the root of female emancipation may ostensibly be gender-neutral, but the result is that it implicitly supports the view that the things men do are superior to the things women do. In terms of sociological research, it means devaluing of things which women do in the home and not recognizing that what women do in the home is also of *social* value.

## EXISTENTIAL FEMINISM

The theme of women's transcendence of the body is one that links other feminists, for example existential feminists like Simone de Beauvoir (1972) and the radical feminist Shulamith Firestone (1970). One tenet of existentialism is a profound disgust of the body and the desire to transcend it. The body is seen as a problem to existentialists because it limits freedom in life and carries us to our death. This theme can be found in de Beauvoir's

classic account of women's oppression in *The Second Sex*. For de Beauvoir, reproduction is one of the 'natural' facts of a woman's life which serve to limit her. She places no positive value on these facts; instead, pregnancy and childbirth are ugly and distasteful and the role of a mother is ultimately limiting and alienating to women, a source of unfreedom. The aim for de Beauvoir is for women to transcend their bodies. Fundamentally a *social constructivist*, de Beauvoir does not say that biology is the sole cause of women's oppression. However, as Gatens (1991) points out, her adoption of the existential framework is a problem for feminism. The existential framework is not gender-neutral, as de Beauvoir assumes it is, but is inflected with a masculinist bias which assumes that nature and the 'mere existence' of the body are negative aspects of life. Jean Bethke Elshtain (1981) is also critical of de Beauvoir's general attitude to the body because it ultimately results in a *greater* mistrust of the female body. De Beauvoir's feminism requires that a woman rejects her body and its reproductive abilities in order to become a free self, but this rejection of the body is more costly to women. Men can remain men during and after sexual intercourse, whilst a woman who becomes pregnant, according to de Beauvoir, loses her freedom and sense of self. Thus in de Beauvoir's account, a woman's reproductive capacity makes her more confined to her body than a man – a point that echoes philosophers like Rousseau.

How much significance should feminists give to the fact of reproduction? Barrett (1988) argues that undoubtedly the biological facts of reproduction do exert some restrictions on women: childbirth is painful and dangerous. However she suggests that it is necessary to look at the social meanings given to these 'facts' since there are culturally variable ways of dealing with reproduction. She suggests that the biological liabilities of reproduction for women need to be examined in the light of other biological limitations which affect men to a greater extent. Barrett asks, 'is a planned pregnancy for a thirty five year old more or less disruptive to her work life than an unplanned heart attack of a man of the same age?' (1988: 75). There is also no necessarily biological reason why women's childbearing role should mean that women are the primary carers of children, yet in most cultures they are. Gatens (1991) argues that it is not the fact of a woman's body *per se* that is the root of her oppression, but how it is constructed socially. In reproducing these values, Gatens argues that de Beauvoir's account does not provide a solution to the problem.

## **RADICAL FEMINISM**

Whilst by no means a unified approach, one thing linking radical feminism has been the tendency to focus on the body and in particular on women's reproductive capacity in their accounts of oppression. Radical feminists

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have therefore emphasized the power men have over women's bodies: some like Firestone look at men's power over reproduction, whilst others like Susan Brownmiller (1975) and Andrea Dworkin (1981) look at rape and pornography. Firestone's (1970) account borrows from Marx's historical materialism but imposes sex not class as the motor of history. Men and women each make up a sex class and this biological division is the most fundamental one in history and the source of men's systematic subordination of women. Like de Beauvoir, Firestone is repelled by pregnancy which she argues is 'barbaric', but unlike de Beauvoir she goes as far as to see women's subjection rooted entirely in their biological role and thus presents a biological determinist account. Unlike liberal feminists, she does not see entry to education or the public sphere as effecting a transformation in women's low social status. Instead, women's emancipation can only take place through a biological revolution which would free them from the constraints of their bodies. The transcendence of the female body is made possible through the use of new reproductive technologies: contraception, sterilization and abortion, as well as technologies of artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilization and so on which were in their infancy when Firestone was writing. Echoing Marx's call for the proletariat to cease the means of production, she argues that women must cease the means of reproduction. In this 'brave new world' women would not have to give birth to babies and, once the shackles of pregnancy and labour are removed, so too will be the 'common-sense' claim that women's 'natural' duty is to care for children.

This position has been challenged by other radical feminists. A number of radical feminists, amongst them Mary Daly (1978) and Adrienne Rich (1976), have pointed out the problems of placing such faith in science and technology. Given the history of science, it is more likely that reproductive technologies would fall into the hands of men than women, giving them another means to control women's bodies. Furthermore, the rendering of pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing as negative aspects of a woman's life has been challenged. Many radical feminists have argued that the problem is not that women give birth, but that giving birth is treated as a problem by a male-dominated society. Since Firestone, many radical feminists have chosen to see female biology and reproduction positively, as a source of strength for women. Rich (1976), for example, argues that it is men's jealousy of women's reproductive capacity that makes them control it. Male gynaecology and obstetrics now control women's reproduction where once female midwives did. In this way, men have also come to control how women feel about reproduction and alienated women from their own experience. For Rich, giving back to women control over pregnancy and childbirth would result in these things attaining a positive value. Radical feminists have therefore sought not to challenge the association of women with nature and men with culture, but to change the *values* given to these, inverting the hierarchy which places culture as superior to nature: the

associations of women with nature, passion, carnality are posed as traits to be valued above those associated with men. Radical feminists produce an essentialist account since they argue that the traits women exhibit in the world are rooted in their biology. By mapping femininity directly onto 'female', and likewise 'masculinity' onto 'male', radical feminists do not divide sex from gender but collapse the dichotomy (Haraway 1990; 1991).

Are women closer to nature than men? Gatens (1991), Ortner (1974) and others would argue that they are not, but that the symbols a culture produces make it appear so. To assume that women are closer to nature is to conflate biological functions with social characteristics, which, as has been argued here by Oakley and Barrett, is highly problematic. These three approaches – liberal, existential, radical – in different ways leave in place the nature/women, culture/men dichotomies. Wollstonecraft, de Beauvoir and Firestone take for granted women's connection to nature and do not see this association as socially constructed. Likewise the radical strategy to change the values associated with nature and culture also simply leaves the structure in place. This is problematic to those feminists like Gatens who argue that the association of women with nature and men with culture is not 'natural' but socially constructed.

### **THE PROBLEMS OF THE SEX/GENDER DICHOTOMY**

In recent years, a number of challenges have been made to the sex/gender distinction. Barrett (1988), in her later preface to *Women's Oppression Today*, points out some of the problems of separating sex and gender. Social constructivist feminists (like herself) have tended to overemphasize social forces and neglect biology and the real limitations that reproduction has placed on women in times of limited contraception. Moreover, although social constructivists tried to ignore, neutralize or transcend the body, the fact remains that the female body is the ontological ground of feminism since, as a political project, feminism depends on the idea of a biological woman. A further problem with the sex/gender distinction is that it assumes that a clear line can be made between biology and the social world: it is assumed that sex is an unadorned 'fact' of nature, a pre-social state onto which a social meaning is pinned. However, a point made strongly by poststructuralism is that biology and nature do not stand outside culture as 'raw facts' which then acquire a social meaning: biology and nature are themselves socially constituted. In the light of poststructuralism and in particular the work of Michel Foucault, the body has now ceased to be something taken for granted as 'natural' matter outside the social and thus unchanging, and has become the topic of historical and cultural analysis. Foucault's (1977; 1979a) analysis recognizes the concrete material existence of bodies in history but he does not acknowledge the

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body as having any essential qualities. Foucault's *anti-essentialist* position means that he considers how bodies acquire different meanings and are subject to historical forces of power at different times. Although Foucault does not address the question of sexual difference in his work, many feminists have turned to his analysis because it enables them to analyse the body as a concrete entity, shaped by social forces, but without having to acknowledge any essential or universal meanings of male and female bodies. It enables feminists to ask how particular meanings get attached to the female body at any one time and how these *come to be seen* as 'natural'.

### CONCLUSION

The division between social constructivists and essentialists is, if anything, greater today than ever before. Feminists disagree on what significance to attach to the body, and the two trends – one towards transcendence of the body and nature, the other towards celebration of the body and women's connection to nature – can be mapped today onto the division between social constructivist and essentialist feminists. The former approach is currently campaigned by new postmodern feminists such as Sadie Plant and Donna Haraway, who in different ways celebrate technology: Plant looks to the disembodied space of the Internet as a potential source for transcendence of the body; Haraway looks to the unnatural cyborg as the means for women to rise above the female body and its oppressive connection to nature. The essentialist celebration of the feminine is now lodged within radical feminism and the 'French' feminism associated in particular with Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. The problem of how to interpret biology, what status to accord the body in social life, remains a matter of intense feminist debate. The sex/gender dichotomy, whilst useful, has not solved the problem of how to consider the relationship of biology to culture.

### KEY CONCEPTS

**SEX** This term is used in sociology not to describe the procreative act between people but rather to understand the natural disposition and physical configuration of the individual. By and large people are men or women, this is their sex.

**GENDER** Gender is sociology's concept for distinguishing between our sexual identity and the social identity that has become historically and culturally

## SEX/GENDER

attached to it. It does not follow from being sexually a woman that you are either good at or motivated to do housework. It is the case that only women can give birth, this is a natural and sexual difference, it is not the case that only women can engage in child care, this is a gender difference.