

October 2010

Toril Moi

Duke University

**When It Makes Sense (or Not) to Claim that Sex, Gender and the Body  
Are Socially Constructed**

***Introduction***

Moi, Toril. *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Moi, Toril. *Sex, Gender and the Body: The Student Edition of What Is a Woman?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

***Why All This Talk about Construction?***

From W. K. Brooks, *The Law of Heredity* (1883):

“[T]he ovum is conservative, the male cell progressive” (84).

“The positions which women already occupy in society and the duties which they perform are, in the main, what they should be if our view is correct; and any attempt to improve the condition of women by ignoring or obliterating the intellectual differences between them and men must result in disaster to the race” (263).

Feminist fear: nature = biology = essence = no change = a commitment to the unjust status quo.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945):

“Man is a historical idea and not a natural species” (E170/F199).

“Everything is both manufactured and natural in man” (E189/F221).

Any classic humanism postulates that in scratching the history of men a little [...] one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature. Progressive humanism, on the contrary, must always remember to reverse the terms of this very old imposture, constantly to scour nature its “laws” and its “limits” in order to discover History there, and at last to establish Nature itself as historical. (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*).

***Where Sex Was, Gender Shall Be: Ordinary Meanings of Sex and Gender***

Virginia Woolf: “It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex.” (1929)

US law: to discriminate against someone “on the basis of sex.”

tick the box for gender

***Feminist Theories of Sex and Gender***

Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna R. Reiter, 157-210. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975.

the sex/gender system  
sex as the body  
sex as "chromosomal" sex  
"sex or the body"  
scientism: the body as a thing, an object

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)

"myths of femininity"  
the body  
lived experience  
subjectivity  
the body as a situation, the body as background

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990)

"perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (GT, p. 7 old/p. 11 new).

"But 'the body' is itself a construction, as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender." (GT, 8 old/13 new).

Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (1993): Matter is an effect of power.

1. Essentialists claim that sex determines gender. Butler opposes them by claiming that 'regulatory discourses' determine biological facts. Sex is the performative effect of gender.

2. In order to explain how this can be, a general theory of "materiality" is required. Butler's project is to produce a "poststructuralist rewriting of discursive performativity as it operates in the materialization of sex" (12).

3. Butler proposes that matter is an effect of power: "What I would propose . . . is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter. That matter is always materialized has, I think, to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed materializing effects of regulatory power in the Foucaultian sense." (9-10).

4. Therefore the body is material and constructed.

***The Social Construction of Sex, Gender and the Body***

Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (1999)

“The Hacking Test”:

- (0) In the present state of affairs, x is taken for granted; x appears to be inevitable
- (1) x is not inevitable, x could have been otherwise, x is contingent
- (2) x is a bad thing
- (3) the world would be a better place without x.

*Degrees of commitment to constructionist claims:*

- a. historicists
- b1. reformists and b2. unmaskers
- c. revolutionaries

**a. gender (in the sense of oppressive social relations, or normative femininity, etc.)**

- (0) In the present state of affairs, gender is taken for granted; gender appears to be inevitable
- (1) gender is not inevitable, gender could have been otherwise, gender is contingent
- (2) gender is a bad thing
- (3) the world would be a better place without gender

**b. gender (in the sense of lived experience, the way we live our sexual embodiment)**

- (0) In the present state of affairs, gender is taken for granted; gender appears to be inevitable
- (1) gender is not inevitable, gender could have been otherwise, gender is contingent
- (2) gender is a bad thing
- (3) the world would be a better place without gender

**c. “chromosomal” sex**

- (0) In the present state of affairs, chromosomal sex is taken for granted; chromosomal sex appears to be inevitable
- (1) chromosomal sex is not inevitable, chromosomal sex could have been otherwise, chromosomal sex is contingent
- (2) chromosomal sex is a bad thing
- (3) the world would be a better place without chromosomal sex

**d. The body**

- (0) In the present state of affairs, the body is taken for granted; the body appears to be inevitable

- (1) the body is not inevitable, the body could have been otherwise, the body is contingent
- (2) the body is a bad thing
- (3) the world would be a better place without the body

*Conclusions:*

- forget about "sex" in the sense of hormones, chromosomes etc.
- historicist about the body
- reformist about gender in the sense of lived experience
- revolutionary about gender in the sense of ideology and oppressive social norms

***It All Depends on What You Want to Know***

"What you need to learn will depend on what specifically it is you want to know; and how you can find out will depend specifically on what you already command. How we answer the question 'What is X' will depend, therefore, on the specific case of ignorance and of knowledge." (Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* p. 20)

"The body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world. But that body is not enough to define her," Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

P. M. S. Hacker:

"I'm only interested in her body"

"I'm only interested in her."