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A WORLD WITHOUT GENDER

Making the Revolution

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Lorber argue that there is "ambivalence" about contemporary gender divisions?
2. Do you agree with Lorber that we need to work toward a "gender-free" society? What do you find most appealing about this idea? What do you find most uncomfortable? What can you do in your own life to begin working toward abolishing gender?
3. Would a "degendering" of society lead to the erasure of differences among men and women?
4. How would degendering society change our conceptions of sexual identity?

But what is it that is impossible to think, and what kind of impossibility are we faced with here?

—Michel Foucault

With all the diversity and divisions of gender identities and gender practices, the ultimate paradox is that gender systems are still binary. Societies in developed and developing countries with vastly different cultures, complex economies, and a variety of family groupings organize their members into categories of people who have different statuses, roles, access to economic resources and skills training, and opportunities for leadership and political power. Gender is only one of those sorting mechanisms, but it is virtually universal. The ubiquity of gender as an organizing principle of social life leads to the belief that the man-woman division is a male-female division. It is not. Societies are not divided into "penises" and "vaginas" or "wombs" and "nonwombs" or "ovaries" and "testes." Nor are most modern societies divided into child bearers and

non-child bearers. When gender as a social institution organizes a society, the divisions are "women" and "men"—social identities whose breaches are possible but often punishable. The comparative social categories for "woman" and "man" are not body types but social divisions like "slave" and "free man," "peasant" and "aristocrat," "Black" and "White." In societies that do not have third genders, you pass at great peril as a person of the gender category opposite the one you are legally assigned, but it is done easily, especially when all it takes is a clothing change.

The insidiousness of such deeply embedded social categories is that they control our lives. They create differences between one group and its supposed opposite and designate the first group as primary, the norm, and the second as subordinate, the other. The differences are established through the contrast of socially created opposites. As Joan Wallach Scott notes, "Any unitary concept in fact contains repressed or negated material; it is established in explicit opposition to another term." Because the categorical

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opposites contain elements of the other, similarities must be suppressed; if, the similarities were allowed to emerge, they would blur the boundaries between the two groups and undermine the distinction of one as dominant.

The distinctions between women and men and the dominance of men are hard to justify in modern Western societies, but they persist. Tracing the rise in women's status in the United States in the last 150 years, Robert Max Jackson argues that thanks to increasing bureaucratization and rationalization of many areas of modern life, women have substantial equality with men in jobs, legal rights, education, and voting power. Despite these marks of formal equality, what he calls residual inequalities are still to be tackled—the rarity of women in high political office and at the top levels of prestigious and lucrative professions, the widespread imbalance in domestic labor, greater costs to women in divorce and staying unpartnered, sexual harassment, rape, physical violence, and the persistent belief that women and men are inherently different.

Modern Western societies are comparatively less gender-divided and more gender-egalitarian than feudal, aristocratic, or eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bourgeois societies were. But the areas of inequality are stubbornly resistant to change. Most men living in households with adult women do not share equally in domestic work and child care, so most women have a double work shift, or they hire to do “their” work another woman from the supply of those disadvantaged by poor education or immigrant status. This unequal domestic division of labor diminishes women's worth in the paid workplace and cuts into opportunities to wield political power. Yet with modern technology, women and men can do much of the same work in home maintenance, child care, and the paid marketplace, and the presence of women at the top echelons of governments is becoming routine.

Nonetheless, the gender schema of male-female differences and men's dominance bubbles away beneath the public rhetoric of respect for individual differences and legal equality. The continued social endorsement of men's dominance over women spills out in sexual entitlement—harassment of subordinates for sexual favors, sly and overt groping, date rape, gang rape, rape as an instrument of war, prostitution. It is also manifest

in population and abortion policies that give women little choice in when and whether to procreate. The continued belief in the biological origin of differences between women and men continues to justify the gender divisions of family and paid work and the resulting inequality of economic resources and political power.

The ambivalence over gender divisions and allocation of responsibilities for child care, household maintenance, and paid work characterizes a social order in transition. In many respects, women and men are so equal that the gender divisions seem unnecessary, and then, when they are ignored, major aspects of inequality thwart women's ambitions. The infamous glass ceiling that allows women to see the road to the top and then bump their heads on invisible barriers is a case of perennial gender inequality. Gender segregation in the workplace is another. Women and men more and more do similar work, but dominant men continue to monopolize the better jobs, and the work world continues to replicate occupational gender segregation even as women move into jobs formerly considered men's work. During the 1970s and 1980s, women who went into occupations where the employees were predominantly men soon found that their co-workers became predominantly women because the men left. The entry of women did not drive the men out; it was because the men were leaving increasingly unattractive work sectors that positions for women opened. Similarly, women's and men's wages have become more equal because men's wages have declined, not because women's wages have increased; men still get the highest-paying jobs.

At the other end of the spectrum from the increase in formal equality in the Western world is the deepening of the gendered divisions of work in the global economy. Financed by capital from developed countries, work organizations around the world exploit the labor of poor, young, unmarried women under sweatshop-like conditions while reserving better-paid jobs and support for entrepreneurship for middle-class men. The policies of the International Monetary Fund and other financial restructuring agencies do not include gender desegregation or encouraging women's education and access to health resources, which would allow women to break into men's occupations. In many of these countries, violence and sexual exploitation, as well as the spread of AIDS heterosexual mine efforts to upgrade the lives

Population policies are embedded in gendered stratification systems. Feminist work here has all it can do to prevent women's lives from worsening and to influence the programs of development agencies to be attentive to the needs of women and girls.

The persistence of gender inequality makes it necessary to have a gendered perspective on how work and family are organized, how resources are awarded, and how power is distributed. However, I think that we also have to include in this perspective the other major social statuses intertwined with gender—at a minimum, social class, racial ethnic group, and sexual orientation. For many purposes, age, parental and relational status, physical ability, education, and religion have to be included as well. This multiple perspective fragments gender and breaks the hold of binary categorization. I think that for feminists in modern Western civilizations, going beyond gender is a needed step toward gender equality, with the immediate target for change the legal rigidity of gender statuses, their constant use in the allocation of family work and paid jobs, and the embedded notion of men's entitlement to women's services and sexuality.

FEMINISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Feminists have described the history and changing content of gender categories—the fluidity of “masculinity” and “femininity,” the switches of tasks and jobs, the turnabouts of beliefs about what is “natural.” Many feminists have intensively documented the practices that sustain the gendered social order in an effort to change the processes, expectations, and value systems that blight women's lives. But few feminists are now challenging the binary divisions themselves, perhaps because they, too, believe in their ultimate biological underpinnings. As Christine Delphy says, “Feminists seem to want to abolish hierarchy and even sex roles, but not difference itself.” That is, while feminists want women and men to be equal, few talk now about doing away with gender divisions altogether. One who does is Sandra Lipsitz Bem, who advocates “a vision of utopia in which gender polarization . . . has been so completely dismantled that—except in narrowly biological contexts like reproduction—the distinction between male and female no longer organizes the culture and the psyche.”

Eradicating the social division of women and men is hardly a new idea for feminists. In 1971, Shulamith Firestone said that “the end goal of feminist revolution must be . . . not just the elimination of male *privi lege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital difference between human beings would no longer matter culturally.” In 1972, Lois Gould's classic tale of childhood degendering, “X: A Fabulous Child's Story,” was published in *Ms.* magazine. In 1980, Monique Wittig challenged lesbians and gay men to deny the divisive power of heterosexuality by refusing to think of themselves as women and men. In 1986, I said we needed to dismantle “Noah's ark”—lockstep binary thinking. Since 1990, postmodernists and queer theorists, following Judith Butler's lead in *Gender Trouble*, have questioned the twofold divisions of gender, sexuality, and even sex, undermining the solidity of a world built on men/women, heterosexuals/homosexuals, and male/female. Currently, in *Undoing Gender*, Butler argues that gender is a fluid, psychological, and sexual category but that collective social norms sustain gender divisions and the power intrinsic in gender hierarchies.

Yet feminism as a movement, in the fight for equal treatment within the present gender structure, has lost sight of the revolutionary goal of dismantling gender divisions. The present drive toward gender balance or mainstreaming gender continues the attempts to undo the effects of gender divisions, but it is these divisions that perpetuate gender inequality. The distinctions between women and men may be deceptive, as Cynthia Fuchs Epstein argues, but they are unlikely to wither away by themselves.

Part of the reason the dismantling of gender divisions was abandoned was that some feminists began to focus on women's bodily, sexual, and emotional differences from men and to valorize those differences, taking joy and pride in being a woman. Moving away from the goal of liberal feminists—to gain equality in the public world of work and politics—difference feminists insisted that what women gave men and children, and each other, in nurturance and emotional sustenance should not be relegated to secondary labor but should be rewarded as a primary contribution to society. In the debate over gender theory and politics, difference feminists and gender feminists became opposing factions.

GENDER, WOMEN, AND DIFFERENCE

Gender feminists argue for the value of the generality of the concept, contending that gender encompasses the social construction of masculinities as well as femininities, the interrelations of women and men, the division of labor in the economy and in the family, and the structural power imbalances of modern Western societies. Difference feminists argue that the concept of gender minimizes the body and sexuality, the significance of women's procreative and nurturing capacities, and the violent potentialities of men's control of women's bodies, sexuality, and emotions. Difference feminists, using psychoanalytic and linguistic analyses of bodies, sexualities, psyches, and cultural representations, have eschewed a concept of gender for a deconstruction of the symbolic social order as deeply divided between the dominant possessors of the phallus and oppressed others.

Standpoint feminism, a theoretical perspective that links the gendered division of labor in the work world and in the home to gendered consciousness, incorporates marxist and psychoanalytic theories of difference. Standpoint feminism locates the source of differences between women and men in the gendered structure of family work and paid work, as well as in bodies and sexualities. As physical and social reproducers of children, women use their bodies, emotions, thoughts, and physical labor, and so they are grounded in material reality in ways that men are not. Women are responsible for most of the everyday work, even if they are highly educated, while highly educated men concentrate on the abstract and the intellectual. Because women's lives connect them to their bodies and emotions, their unconscious, as well as their conscious, the view of the world is unitary and concrete. If women produced knowledge, what we know would be much more in touch with the everyday material world, with bodies, procreative rhythms, and the connectedness among people, because that is what women experience in the gendered social world.

Standpoint feminism privileges women's viewpoint; multicultural feminism asks, Which women? Multicultural and postcolonial feminists, addressing the national and international sources of women's oppression, claim that they are enmeshed in complex systems of class and racial ethnic dominance and subordination,

in which some men are subordinate to other men and to some women as well. Feminist studies of men show that all men may have a "patriarchal dividend" of privilege and entitlement to women's labor, sexuality, and emotions, but some men additionally have the privileges of whiteness, education, prosperity, and prestige. These analyses see gender hierarchies as inextricable from the hierarchies of class and racial ethnic statuses.

In this sense, *difference* is expanded from men versus women to the multiplicities of sameness and difference among women and among men and within individuals as well. All these differences arise from different social locations or standpoints, and it is hard to justify privileging one over others. Joan Wallach Scott points out that within-gender differences are especially compatible with "an equality that rests on differences—differences that confound, disrupt, and render ambiguous the meaning of any fixed binary opposition." Working with these differences, feminist philosophers and political scientists have developed gendered theories of justice and have located gender in the matrix of complex inequality.

Feminist theories of justice contend that gender is a different form of inequality from social class or racial ethnic disadvantage because of women's responsibility for family work. Gendering family work produces inequality in the home because of the imbalance of the division of domestic labor. It also produces inequality in the workforce because women workers carry the extra baggage of care for husband, home, and children. Where they don't, there are other forms of inequality similar to those for men—in social class, racial ethnic categorization, sexual orientation, education, occupation, immigration. Thus, women as a group suffer from both public and private forms of injustice. As Leslie McCall says, "The discussion of inequality must therefore be expanded from one revolving around a unitary term—the new inequality—to one involving an open question about the overlapping and conflicting manifestations of gender, race, and class inequality."

DEGENERATING AND FEMINIST THEORIES

Many feminists have implicitly called for a gender-free society by urging the minimization of the effects of

gender, to the point of gender's practical disappearance. I am arguing here for a gender-free society to be an *explicit and primary goal*. This goal is not incompatible with feminist theories of difference, standpoint feminism, psychoanalytic theories, or feminist theories of justice. In fact, in many ways it is the logical outcome of these theories.

Difference feminists argue that gender feminists neglect the valued qualities of women's lives that come from their bodies, sexualities, and intimate parenting—nurturance, interrelatedness, emotionality. The basis of standpoint feminism is that women live in a world in touch with bodies, children, and hands-on physical labor. Difference and standpoint feminists may argue that degendering will create a masculine world—objective, instrumental, and bureaucratic. However, men also do physical labor, for pay or as volunteers and do-it-yourselfers, so they are not all detached from the material world.

Men also do far more caring for others, including elderly parents and infants, than is recognized by gendered norms for masculine behavior. These norms expect men to look out for their buddies in times of war and danger, but men also care for elderly parents and sick spouses and partners. Degendering policies would encourage men to routinely care for children, the elderly, and each other and not leave emotional sustenance for family and friends to women. Thus, men as well as women would develop the valued qualities of nurturance, relatedness, and emotional expression.

Work relations in the modern world are both formal in organization and informal in practice, rule-based and relational, rational and emotional at the same time, and so are women and men workers. Organizational bureaucracies necessitate objectivity, rationality, and adherence to rules. The parallel informal organization of work creates circles of colleagues built on trust and loyalty and networks of sponsors, mentors, and novices, the "families" that make work life so attractive to men and women. Diminution of gender divisions as an organizing principle of workplaces would not turn warmhearted women into coldhearted men any more than it would turn warmhearted men into coldhearted women. It would, rather, degender the best—and the worst—qualities of people so that good and bad characteristics are no longer seen as "the way women are" or "the way men are."

Gender feminism has been accused of superficiality in that it does not attend to unconscious desires and

deeply embedded personality patterns. In psychoanalytic theories of parenting, those are the outcome of women's primary parenting. These theories argue that women's openness to others and child-care capabilities are produced by continued identification of daughters with their mothers to the point of blurred ego boundaries. Men's repression of emotionality emerges from their need to separate from their mothers and from their hostility toward women, which in turn emerges from their fears that they, too, will lose their penises, just as their mothers must have. Sons develop the ego boundaries encouraged by identification with an emotionally distant father and demanded by the competitiveness of the world of men they enter as his heir. Castration fears are sublimated into control of emotions and dominating relationships with women.

Degendering parenting is a way of cutting into this loop of the reproduction of gendered children by gendered parents. Boys close to fathers who "mother" would not have to repress emotions to be masculine, and girls could identify with fathers and mothers. Misogynist views of women as castrated inferiors and potential castrators would also be diminished by boys' not having to reject everything womanly to be masculine. Degendering parenting would undercut distinct personality structures—objective and rational men, relational and emotional women—allowing boys and girls to develop the characteristics to compete and be authoritative, as well as to cooperate and befriend.

Feminist multicultural, social-class, and racial ethnic studies, as well as feminist studies of men, have long called for a perspective that locates gender in stratification systems of multiple domination or intersectionality. Degendering places gender within the matrix of complex inequality and calls for erasure of all invidious divisions and open access to economic resources, educational opportunities, and political power. These multi-viewed perspectives have to be translated into praxis by seeking solutions to problems in ways that do not rely on conventional categories and conventional assumptions. As Carol Lee Bacchi warns, when we ask, what is the problem? we need to challenge "deeply held cultural assumptions, given specific historical, economic and cultural locations."

Gender balance—putting women's as well as men's needs and perspectives into public policies—perpetuates gender divisions and women's subordinate position,

since women as a group are matched against dominant men. Since separate is never equal, we need gender "mainstreaming" policies built on the assumption that all groups are equally entitled to public resources but not in exactly the same way. The groups that are compensated in the fight for equality need to be carefully constructed to reflect multiple sources of disadvantage. Advantages only to women, just like a single-minded focus on the needs of disadvantaged racial ethnic or social-class groups, can too easily be undercut by protesters who invoke the needs of the other groups.

Iris Marion Young says that a just heterogeneous society would attend to the needs of different groups, not erase differences: "Justice in a group-differentiated society demands social equality of groups, and mutual recognition and affirmation of group differences." A policy of degendering would recognize people of different social classes, racial ethnic categories, ages, sexual orientations, parental and relational statuses, and so on, as shifting groups, cooperating and conflicting, depending on the situation and the policy question.

There is a testable equation in degendering. I am arguing that it is only by undercutting the gender system of legal statuses, bureaucratic categories, and official and private allocation of tasks and roles that gender equality can be permanently achieved. In the countries that are the most degendered in the sense of treating women and men the same, legally and bureaucratically, women and men have more equal statuses. They are more likely to be comparably educated, work in comparable occupations and professions, have comparable political power and economic resources, and have shared responsibility for the care of children.

Degendering is already common in many gender-equal societies, such as Sweden and Norway. The extent of degendering in those countries is in sharp contrast to the forcefulness of gendering in such countries as Saudi Arabia, where every aspect of women's and men's lives is controlled by gender, to women's marked disadvantage. The feminist task of gaining citizenship rights and economic equality for most of the world's women is undeniably of first priority, but a second task can be done where women are not so terribly unequal—challenging the binary structures just a little bit more by asking why they are necessary at all.

Degendering will not do away with wars and hunger and economic disparities. But I do think that

degendering will undercut the patriarchal and oppressive structure of Western societies and social institutions and give all of us the space to use our energies to demilitarize, work for peaceable solutions to conflicts, grow and distribute food, and level the gaps between social classes.

A WORLD WITHOUT GENDER

In an essay about why war is futile, Jonathan Schell, recalling Marx's "all that was solid melted into air," begins:

There are moments in history when a crack in time seems to open and swallow the known world: solid-seeming institutions, rotted from within, collapse or are discarded, settled beliefs are unsettled; old truths are discovered to be provisional; acts that were forbidden are permitted or even required; boundaries thought impassable are passed without comment; and outrageous and unreal events...flood in profusion from some portal of future that no one was guarding or even watching.

I think that in the not-too-far future, we will see this crumbling of gender divisions and statuses.

Throughout this book, I have suggested ways to think about families, work, political regimes, and political action from the perspective of multiple gendering. I have said that these multiplicities challenge the solidity of the binary gender order and provide examples of degendering practices. Now I would like to think beyond gender to the possibilities of a totally nongendered social order.

In *Paradoxes of Gender*, I described two thought experiments that render gender irrelevant. In the first, an imaginary society divided into two genders treats them strictly equally, with half of all jobs held by men and half by women, family work done half by women and half by men, men and women serving alternately as heads of governments, equal numbers of women and men in the officer corps and ranks of armed forces, on sports teams, in cultural productions, and so on throughout society. In the second imaginary society, all work is equally valued and recompensed, regardless of who does it, and families and

work groups are structured for equality of control of resources and decisions. Either path would render gender irrelevant—strict parity by the interchangeability of women and men and strict equality by making no category of people more valuable than any other. Strict parity would make it pointless to construct and maintain gender differences; strict equality would contradict the purpose of gender divisions by undercutting the subordination of women by men. As Christine Delphy says:

If we define men within a gender framework, they are first and foremost dominants with characteristics which enable them to remain dominants. To be like them would be also to be dominants, but this is a contradiction in terms.... To be dominant one must have someone to dominate.

At the end of *Paradoxes of Gender*, I asked the reader to envisage a scrupulously gender-equal world. Here I am going further and trying to imagine a world without genders at all. Can we think the impossible and envisage societies where people come in all colors, shapes, and sizes and where body characteristics are not markers for status identification or for predetermined allocation to any kind of activity? Here is my vision of such a world:

Love and sexuality, friendships and intimacies revolve around people with a mutual attraction to each other's bodies, intellects, interests, and personalities. Males inseminate willing females through copulation or provide sperm for insemination. Females who want to, give birth to infants. These infants become part of families of different kinds of kinship groups and households composed of a variety of responsible adults. They are breast-fed by lactating females and cared for by competent child minders. They receive love and affection from the older children and adults in their circles of relationships. Their favorites and role models vary over time, but there is at least one legally responsible adult for every child.

Children are not sexed at birth—their genitalia are irrelevant in the choice of names, blankets, and clothing. "A child is born to . . .," the announcements read. In play groups and schools, children are organized by age, size, talents, skills, reading ability, math competence—whatever the needs of the group. Children's

talents, skills, and interests shape their choices of further education and job training.

If we can assume nonassortment by other invidious categories, such as racial ethnic group, people are hired on the basis of their credentials, experience, interviewing skills, and connections. The salary scales and prestige value of occupations and professions depend on various kinds of social assessments, just as they do now, but the positions that pay best and are valued most are not monopolized by any one type of person. Science is done by scientists, teaching by teachers, cultural productions by writers, artists, musicians, dancers, singers, actors, and media producers. The beliefs and values and technologies of the time and place govern the content.

Positions of public authority in corporations, bureaucracies, and governments are attained by competition, sponsorship and patronage, networking, and other familiar forms of mobility. Charity, honesty, and competence are as evident as corruption, double-dealing, and shoddy work—people are people.

So there are still murders, wars, and other forms of violence although perhaps through an ethical evolution, societies might develop in which people are taught how to handle anger and conflict in positive ways. But rules are made to be broken, so there is still a need for police and soldiers, judges and prison guards.

Games and sports are played for fitness and fun. New games are devised that put less emphasis on body shapes and more on skill. In competitions, people of different levels of body functioning and abilities compete against one another in a variety of "Olympics."

In the major and minor religions, new liturgies and rituals are in use, but old ones are turned to for their historical cultural value, as are the old novels, plays, songs, and operas. Those who have the calling and the talent lead congregations and prayer services and speak for the god(s).

New language forms develop that do not mark or categorize the speaker or the spoken about. The old forms of language and literature are studied for their archaic beauty and what they tell us about the way people used to live and behave and think.

People group and identify themselves on the basis of all sorts of similarities and disdain others on the basis of all sorts of differences. Sometimes those who identify with each other wear similar clothing or hair styles or jewelry or cosmetics. Sometimes these