Using gender to undo gender

A feminist degendering movement

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Abstract Women's status in the Western world has improved enormously, but the revolution that would make women and men truly equal has not yet occurred. I argue that the reason is that gender divisions still deeply bifurcate the structure of modern society. Feminists want women and men to be equal, but few talk about doing away with gender divisions altogether. From a social constructionist structural gender perspective, it is the ubiquitous division of people into two unequally valued categories that undergirds the continually reappearing instances of gender inequality. I argue that it is this gendering that needs to be challenged by feminists, with the long-term goal of doing away with binary gender divisions altogether. To this end, I call for a feminist degendering movement.

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Plus ça change. . .

I keep a file of newspaper clippings and articles that I entitle 'plus ça change'. In this file are pieces 25 years apart that say the same thing: women are absent from the boards of large corporations and unequally represented in political governing bodies; occupations resegregate when dominant men leave because of worsening work conditions; married women with children at all levels of the work force have prime responsibility for their family; prostitution pays better than other work for poor women and girls in many countries; abortion may be legalized, but access is often blocked or ringed with restrictions. I also have a file of 'progress' – descriptions of women prime ministers of several large countries, the new women CEOs of major corporations, women astronauts, women winners of the science Nobel Prizes, women's sports achievements. The latter, though, are still anomalies, not the norm, or they would not be such big news. Then there are the yes-and-no cases – more women with children in the labor force and subsidized parental leave, but not more sharing of child care and housework between women and men household members. Some desegregation of occupations, but a continued glass ceiling for

women in occupations normatively identified as men's work and a glass escalator for men in occupations gender-typed as women's work, as well as continued devaluation in pay and prestige for work done mostly by women.

In the past 150 years, women's status in the Western world has improved enormously (Jackson, 1998), but the revolution (or evolution) that would make women and men truly equal has not yet occurred. The question that puzzles me is why, with regard to gender inequality, the more things change, the more they stay the same. The answer, I suggest, is that gender divisions still deeply bifurcate the structure of modern society. From a social constructionist structural gender perspective, it is the ubiquitous division of people into two unequally valued categories that undergirds the continually reappearing instances of gender inequality. I argue that it is this gendering that needs to be challenged by feminists, with the long-term goal of not just minimizing, but of doing away with binary gender divisions completely. To this end, I call for a feminist degendering movement.

Such a movement needs to start by attending to the way gender divisions structure our daily lives, our sense of ourselves and our interactions with other people, our families, work organizations, political entities, legal and medical systems, religions, and high and popular culture. Gender divisions are so common in our daily life and, for most people, so 'natural', that it is only the rare gender rebel that challenges them. Most of those who cross gender boundaries by passing as a member of the opposite gender, or by sex-change surgery, want to be taken as 'normal' men or women (Gagné and Tewksbury, 1998).

While racial, ethnic, class and sexual divisions have been significantly challenged, the belief that gender divisions are normal and natural is still an underlying frame for modern social life.[1] The assumption that biology produces two categories of different people, 'females' and 'males', and that it is inevitable that societies will be divided along the lines of these two categories was a 20th-century *doxa* – that which '*goes without saying because it comes without saying*' (Bourdieu, 1977: 167; original emphasis). Then feminists claimed that the content and meaning of the divisions and the social structure built on them were not natural but man-made. Biological ideology is now orthodoxy, in Bourdieu's definition, seeking 'conscious systematization and express rationalization' (1977: 169). The search for legitimacy fuels the glut of scientific studies on genetic, hormonal or other physiological origin for all sorts of gendered behavior (Van Den Wijngaard, 1997). Most feminists who seek change in the structure and value system of gendered social orders rarely challenge the binary divisions, perhaps because they too believe in their ultimate biological underpinnings (Hawkesworth, 1997). As Christine Delphy says, 'Feminists seem to want to abolish hierarchy and even sex roles, but not difference itself' (1993: 6). 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 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' (1993: 192).

Eradicating the social divide between females and males 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 *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally' (1971: 11). In 1980, Monique Wittig challenged lesbians and gay men to deny the divisive power of hetero-sexuality by refusing to think of themselves as women and men. More recently, postmodernists and queer theorists have questioned the two-fold divisions of gender, sexuality and even sex, undermining the solidity of a world built on men/women, heterosexuals/homosexuals and male/female (Butler, 1990; Garber, 1992, 1995; Sedgwick, 1990).

But feminism as a movement has lost sight of Firestone's revolutionary goal in the fight for equal treatment within the present gender structure. The feminist drive for equality has settled for minimizing gender divisions, yet these divisions continue to reproduce inequality. The distinctions between women and men may be deceptive, as Cynthia Fuchs Epstein (1988) argues, but they are unlikely to wither away by themselves. Women and men more and more do similar work, but the work world continues to replicate occupational gender segregation even as women move into jobs formerly considered men's work (Jacobs, 1989). During the 1970s and 1980s, women who went into occupations where the employees were pre-dominantly men soon found that their co-workers became predominantly women because the men left (Reskin and Roos, 1990). In fact, it was because the men were leaving increasingly unattractive work sectors that positions opened for women. The underlying gender structure of the work world remained intact.

As feminists, we need a gender perspective to make this structure visible. But we also need to think beyond gender to the possibilities of a non-gendered social order.[2] In *Paradoxes of Gender*, I suggested two thought experiments that render gender irrelevant (Lorber, 1994: 292–302; also see Lorber, 1986). 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, alternating men and women 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 sub-ordination of women by men. As Delphy says:

> If we define men within a gender framework, they are first and foremost domi-nants 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. (1993: 8)

Without denying the importance of continuing to fight for gender equality, for an end to sexual exploitation and violence, and for women's freedom from men's domination, I will argue in this article that feminism needs a long-term strategy to undermine the overall gendered structure of the societies most of us live in. Feminism has long battled against the content and rationale of women's devaluation and subordinate status. We now need a feminist degendering movement that would rebel against the division of the social world into two basic categories – the very structure of women's inequality.

Gender as structure

From a structural perspective, gender is the division of people into contrasting and complementary social categories, 'boys' and 'girls', 'men' and 'women'. In this structural conceptualization, gendering is the process and the gendered social order the product of social construction (Lorber, 1994). Through interaction with caretakers, socialization in childhood, peer pressure in adolescence, and gendered work and family roles, people are divided into two groups and made to be different in behavior, attitudes and emotions. The content of the differences depends on the society's culture, values, economic and family structure, and past history. The resultant gendered social order is based on and maintains these differences. Thus, there is a continuous loop-back effect between gendered social institutions and the social construction of gender in individuals (West and Zimmerman, 1987). In societies with other major social divisions, such as race, ethnicity, religion and social class, gender is intricately intertwined with these other statuses (West and Fenstermaker, 1995).

Despite these cross-cutting statuses, the contemporary Western world is a very gendered world, consisting of only two legal categories – 'male' and 'female'. For individuals, gender is a major social status that is cross-cut by other major social statuses (racial ethnic, social class, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) and so gender is actually not a binary status, even though it is treated as such legally, socially and in most social science research (Lorber, 1996). On an individual basis, gender fragments; from a societal perspective, gender overrides these multiplicities and simply divides people into two categories.

The binary divisions of gender are deeply rooted in every aspect of social life and social organization in most societies.[3] Although the binary principle of gender remains the same, its content and thrust change as other major aspects of the social order change. The gendered division of work has shifted with changing means of producing food and other goods, which in turn modifies patterns of child care and family structures. Gendered power imbalances, which are usually based on the ability to amass and distribute material resources, change with rules about property ownership and inheritance. Men's domination of women has not been the same throughout time and place, but varies with political, economic and family structures. In the sense of an underlying principle of how people are

categorized and valued, gender is differently constructed throughout the world and throughout history (Oyĕwùmí, 1997; Riley, 1988; Scott, 1988).

As pervasive as gender is, because it is constructed and maintained through daily interaction, it can be resisted and reshaped by gender trouble-makers (Butler, 1990). The social construction perspective argues that people create their social realities and identities, including their gender, through their actions with others – their families, friends, colleagues. Gender is a constant performance, but its enactment is hemmed in by the general rules of social life, cultural expectations, workplace norms and laws. These social restraints are also amenable to change, but not easily, because the social order is structured for stability (Giddens, 1984). Many aspects of gender have been changed through individual agency, group pressure and social movements.[4] But the underlying structure has not.

Gender is built into the Western world's overall social system, interpenetrating the organization of the production of goods and services, kinship and family, sexuality, emotional relationships and the minutiae of daily life. Gendered practices have been questioned, but the overall legitimacy of the gendered social order is deeply ingrained and currently bolstered by scientific studies on supposed inborn differences between females and males. The ultimate touchstone is pregnancy and childbirth. Yet procreative and other biological differences are part of the gendered social order, which is so pervasive that the behavior and attitudes it produces are perceived as natural, including women's greater predisposition to nurturance and bonding. This belief in natural – and thus, necessary – differences legitimates many gender inequalities and exploitations of women.

Feminist movements have focused on the inequalities and exploitations, especially in the gendered work world and domestic division of labor, but have found that as one set of gendered practices is eliminated, others rise to take their place. To keep women down, differences from men must be maintained and used as a rationale for women's inferior status (Reskin, 1988). Feminists have either minimized these differences, to little effect, or maximized and valorized them, also to little effect. The problem is that the focus has been on differences between women and men as individuals or as social actors. These differences are a means to an end – legitimation and justification of gendered social orders.

As the concept of gender has developed in the social sciences, it has moved from an attribute of individuals that produces effects in the phenomenon under study (e.g., men's and women's crime rates, voting patterns, labor force participation) to a major building block in the social order and an integral element in every aspect of social life (e.g., how crime is conceptualized and categorized is gendered, political power is gendered, the economy and the labor force are gender-segregated and gender-stratified) (Ferree et al., 1999). Feminist social scientists have mapped out the effects of gendering on daily lives and on social institutions and have produced reams of data on how these processes maintain inequality between women and men (see Lorber, 1994). I suggest that it is now time to find ways to undercut the first principle of the gendered social order, the division into 'men' and 'women'.

Before I proceed with a discussion of degendering strategies, let me locate the social constructionist structural perspective on gender in recent feminist debates on gender theory.

Gender, women and difference

In the debate over gender as a concept and gender theory as epistemology and politics, sex-difference proponents have become the opposing faction (Foster, 1999). '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 (Bem, 1993; Connell, 1987; Lorber, 1994). '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 (MacKinnon, 1989; Rhode, 1990). '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 possessors of the Phallus and the Others (Cixous and Clément, 1986; Gallop, 1982; Irigaray, 1985).

These perspectives are not as far apart as they may seem. A gender perspective locates the source of women's oppression in the organization of the social world, so that biology and sexuality are socially constructed *as* gendered (Lorber, 1994). Therefore, biological and sexual sources of oppression are symptoms of the underlying pathology – the gendered social order. Menstruation, menopause, hormonal fluctuations, pregnancy, eating disorders and propensities to different illnesses are biological phenomena that are mediated and experienced socially (Lorber, 1997). Feminists who would not be considered gender feminists have described childbirth and motherhood as experience and social institution (Rich, 1977) and laid out the politics of the social formation and control of sexual practices (Rubin, 1984). Bodies do matter, but the way they matter is a social phenomenon (Butler, 1993). Gender theory adds another layer, claiming that the social is always gendered, therefore female and male bodies are gendered for femininity and masculinity, for instance, through sports (Hargreaves, 1986; Messner and Sabo, 1994).

The expression and behavioral manifestations of emotions are gendered as well, including sexual violence, since they are molded by norms of situational appropriateness and permissiveness (Hochschild, 1983; Sanday, 1990; Scheff, 1990). Sexuality is so gendered that women and men bisexuals prefer women partners for emotional intimacy and men partners for physical assertiveness (Weinberg et al., 1994: 49–58). Certainly, the gender differences between heterosexual men and heterosexual women and between homosexual men and lesbians is a canon of feminist thought (Kitzinger, 1987; Richardson, 1996). As social phenomena, bodies, sexualities and emotions, like gender, vary over time and place. As Linda Nicholson says in 'Interpreting *Gender*',

Thus I am advocating that we think about the meaning of *woman* as illustrating a map of intersecting similarities and differences. Within such a map the body does not disappear but rather becomes a historically specific variable whose meaning and import are recognized as potentially different in different historical contexts. (1994: 101)

Two powerful feminist theories have linked gendered social structures with gendered personalities and consciousness. One is Nancy Chodorow's (1978) linkage of the division of parenting in the heterogendered Western nuclear family to the objectification and emotional repression in men's psyches and the emotional openness and nurturance of women's psyches. Both emerge from the primacy of women in parenting. Boys' separation from their mothers and identification with their fathers leads to their entrance into the dominant world but also necessitates continuous repression of their emotional longings and fear of castration. Girls' continued identification with their mothers makes them available for intimacy; their heterosexual coupling with emotionally dissatisfying men produces their desires to become mothers and reproduces the gendered family structure from which gendered psyches emerge.

Standpoint feminism links the gendered division of labor in the work world and in the home to gendered consciousness (Hartsock, 1987). Standpoint feminism argues that as physical and social reproducers of children – out of bodies, emotions, thought and physical labor – women 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 they are closely connected to their bodies and their emotions, women's unconscious as well as conscious view of the world is unitary and concrete. If women produced knowledge and culture, they would be much more in touch with the everyday material world, with their bodies, with procreative rhythms and with the connectedness among people, because that is what women experience in the structurally gendered social world (O'Brien, 1981).

As for the sources of women's oppression, multicultural and postcolonial feminists claim that there are complex systems of dominance and subordination, in which some men are subordinate to other men, and to some women as well (Collins, 1990; Trinh, 1989). 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 (Connell, 1995). A gender analysis sees gender hierarchies as inextricable from other hierarchies, but conversely argues that hierarchies of class, race and achievement must be seen as substantively gendered (Acker, 1999; Glenn, 1999). 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, these differences arising from similar and different social locations (Braidotti, 1994; Felski, 1997; Frye, 1996).

The paradox is that against these multiplicities, the Western social world is divided into only two genders, and the members of each of these

categories are made similar enough to be easily identifiable and different enough from the members of the other to be allocated separate work and family responsibilities, and to be economically rewarded and culturally valued in significantly non-equivalent ways (Lorber, 1994). Feminists have attacked the falsity of within-group homogeneity, pointing out the diversity of men and of women, and have also challenged the unequal rewards and cultural devaluation of women. The binary gender divisions of the social world, however, have been taken as given. That is, although the level of analysis in both gender theory and difference feminism has ultimately been the social order, the level of politics has been the individual, collections of similarly situated individuals or targeted organizations such as medicine or the criminal justice system.

A powerful feminist theory for change could be based on structural analyses of the social and psychic processes and practices that maintain the gender order, combined with analyses of where individual agency can undo gender. Social constructionist structural feminist theory argues that the gendered social order is constantly restabilized even when disrupted by individual and collective action, while postmodern feminism has shown how individuals can consciously and purposefully create disorder and categorical instability, opening the way to change (Flax, 1987). The social order is an intersectional structure, with socially constructed individuals and groups ranged in a pyramidal hierarchy of power and powerlessness, privilege and disadvantage, normality and otherness. Because these social statuses and the rationales that legitimate their inequality are constructed in the interaction of everyday life and in cultural representations and solidified in institutional practices and laws, they can all be subverted by resistance, rebellion and concerted political action. Empirical research on such contradictions of modern gender relations as the gendered imbalance in child care and the domestic division of labor in seemingly egalitarian households has made visible the fault lines where political pressure can be used for long-lasting restructuring (Calasanti and Bailey, 1991). What we need now is a feminist degendering movement that can use these theories and data for a feminist politics targeting the legitimacy of the structure of the gendered social order.

Feminist change

Feminists want a social order where gender does not privilege men as a category nor give them power over women as a category. As with feminists of the past, we are faced with the dilemma of gender-neutral equality versus gender-marked equity. Arguing for gender equality, we claim that women and men are virtually interchangeable. Taking the stance of gender equity, we recognize the physiological and procreative sex differences between females and males, and look for ways to make them socially equivalent. The dilemma, or what Joan Wallach Scott calls the inevitable feminist paradox, is that the fight to erase the effects of sex differences invokes them:

To the extent that it acted for 'women,' feminism produced the 'sexual difference' it sought to eliminate. This paradox – the need both to accept and to refuse 'sexual difference' – was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its history. (1996: 3–4)

The gendered social orders of modern Western societies themselves reflect this ambiguity, shifting like pendulums between values and practices that emphasize sex differences and those that emphasize gender equality. Today, housework and childrearing are considered work and given due value in divorce settlements. At the same time, no one demands that a married woman spend her whole life cooking, cleaning and taking care of children. But most men living in households with adult women do not share equally in domestic work, so women now routinely have a double work shift (Hochschild and Machung, 1989), or they hire to do 'their' work another woman from the supply of those disadvantaged by poor education or immigrant status (Glenn, 1992). Not much has changed in the work–family structure for women, except that married mothers with good educations now have social approval for the life-long, full-time pursuit of prestigious careers as well as the freedom to quit 'for the sake of their family'.

For most women in post-industrial societies whose households are not totally economically dependent on them, the work–family combination remains what it has been since the industrial revolution took the production of goods and services out of the home and into factories and offices – their paid work is fitted around the care of children and the maintenance of households. Most European countries and Israel have policies of maternal leave and subsidized child care that encourage women with small children to stay in the paid work force, but because they have the organizational and emotional responsibility for their families, they are discouraged from competing with men for high-level, better-paid, full-time positions (Izraeli, 1992). Since there has been little restructuring of either the workplace or family life, many women in European countries are having one child or none at all (Specter, 1998). In the USA, the 'brave new families' sharing resources, children and domestic labor seem to be as much the fallout from divorce and step-parenting as the outcome of deliberate attempts to live and love as equals (Stacey, 1991).

A gender perspective can account for these paradoxical inequalities buried in what have seemed like successes in the fight for women's equality – full-time jobs, subsidized child care, opening up of the professions and politics. Women's seeming always to 'come home' is the outcome of a gendered division of labor that consistently discourages and does not reward their total immersion in public life (Rantalaiho and Heiskanen, 1997). A sex-differences perspective, as important as it is for dealing directly with the issues of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, elides too easily into arguments that women choose families over careers because of their biologically based nurturant and relational characteristics.

An unequally structured gender order needs to be addressed directly, through a feminist degendering movement, rather than through a women's

movement. We need to undermine the current structure of gender politically and institutionally, develop strategies for dismantling the gendered division of labor in the family and workplaces and, wherever possible, degender everyday interaction.

A feminist degendering movement

The legitimacy of the gendered social order can be subverted at the level of its underlying discourse – its biological assumptions, its binarism and its socially constructed gender differences. It can be openly challenged by non-gendered practices in ordinary interaction, in families, child-rearing, language and organization of space. And to the extent that feminists have control over organizations, they can be organized in non-gendered ways.

On the level of discourse, we need to frame research questions and political issues so that they are not based on the standardized categories of 'men' vs 'women', and 'boys' vs 'girls' and on the taken-for-granted assumptions that their characteristics are uniform and universal, and thus somehow related to procreation and parenting. At the very least, we can start with the work already done by multicultural feminists on the intersections of gender, social class and racial ethnic categories; by researchers of multiple masculinities; and by the on-going studies of sexualities and transgenders (Lorber, 1996).

These multi-viewed perspectives can be translated into praxis by seeking solutions to problems in ways that question conventional categories and conventional assumptions. When we ask 'What is the problem?' we need to challenge 'deeply held cultural assumptions, given specific historical, economic and cultural locations' (Bacchi, 1999: 205). When faced with a political solution to a social problem, we can ask if this gender categorization and separation is necessary and what the latent consequences are likely to be. To this end, we must dissect the layers of power embedded in the gendered 'relations of ruling' (Smith, 1990).

We can try to blur gender boundaries in our everyday lives and undermine the built-in gender divisions in our work worlds. Whenever we can, we should encourage the degendering of instrumental tasks, physical labor, athletic prowess, emotional sustenance and physical spaces. Every time a man changes a baby's diapers, it's a small rebellion; if he can do it in a gender-neutral public baby station, it's a social transformation.[5] As Christine Delphy says,

> We do not know what the values, individual personality traits, and culture of a nonhierarchical society would be like, and we have great difficulty in imagining it. But to imagine it we must think that it is possible. Practices produce values; other practices produce other values. (1993: 8)

As examples of some attempts to undermine one aspect of the gendered social order, child care, consider the following efforts at degendering parenting.

In many European countries, child care help and subsidized parental

leave for either parent has changed mothering from a full-time occupation to something that can be combined with paid work out of the home and so can be participated in by both parents. To encourage the active involvement of fathers, Sweden has allocated leave time in the first year of a newborn's life that the father must take or it is forfeited – 'daddy days'. But without programs geared to new fathers and social encouragement of their fuller participation in infant care, most men use only the minimum post-birth two weeks (Swedin, 1995). Changed values and attitudes – the importance of hands-on infant care by fathers and their capacity for nurturant behavior – have yet to be institutionalized by changes in the gendered structure of work and family.

Some people have structured their families to be gender-equal on every level – domestic work, child care and financial contribution to the household (Bem, 1998; Deutsch, 1999; Risman, 1998; Schwartz, 1994). However, as long as work is structured for a married-man-with-wife career pattern, and men's work is paid better than women's work, gender-equal families will be very hard to attain by the majority of people. Other heterosexual couples have reversed roles – the woman is the breadwinner and the man the child-carer and housekeeper (Wheelock, 1990). One study reported that the domestic world is so gendered that male househusbands suffered from ostracism and isolation, and also from a suspicion of homosexuality (Smith, 1998). Oddly, lesbian and gay couples who have reared children in a variety of family arrangements have blended more easily into hetero-coupled social worlds, at least in some communities (Weston, 1991). Corporate and government policies that offer health insurance and other benefits to any couple in a long-term household arrangement have helped to restructure family life in ways that do not assume heterogendered partnering; allocating benefits universally to individuals rather than to couples through the 'head of household' would undermine the idea of gendered families even more (Robson, 1994).

At the other end of the spectrum 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 sweat-shop-like conditions, while reserving better-paid jobs and support for entrepreneurship to middle-class men (Mies et al., 1988; Moghadam, 1996). 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 that would allow them to break into men's occupations (Sparr, 1994; Ward, 1990). In many of these countries, violence and sexual exploitation, as well as the spread of AIDS heterosexually, seriously undermine efforts to upgrade the lives of women and girls (World Health Organization, 1995). Feminist work here has all it can do to prevent women's lives from worsening. A gender perspective is needed to influence the programs of development agencies to be attentive to possible deleterious effects on women and girls of seemingly gender-neutral policies. Degendering would be counter-productive.

So I am not suggesting that a movement to eradicate gender divisions is

universally useful. It would be most effective where women have achieved a high measure of equality. Tracing the rise in women's status in the USA in the past 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. However, 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 (Jackson, 1998: 8). A feminist degendering movement that pushed for gender neutrality at the informal levels of interaction in the work world and in the family would enhance the social forces of rationality and objectivity that have given women in the Western world their formal equality with men in laws, jobs and voting power. It would not do much good in directly combating sexual harassment, rape and physical violence, but it might undercut the legitimation of these harmful manifestations of masculinity. A degendering movement whose goal is greater equality would also have to include pressure for erasure of other invidious divisions, especially race and ethnicity, and for open access to economic resources, educational opportunities and political power.

What could be lost are the valued qualities of women's lives that difference feminists have valorized – nurturance, relationality, emotionality – if the outcome of degendering is what we have come to see as a masculine world – objective, instrumental and bureaucratic. But, in actuality, the modern world is both formal in organization and informal in practice, rule-based and relational, rational and emotional at one and the same time, and so are the people in it, women and men. Diminishment of gender as an organizing principle of institutions and everyday life would not turn women into men any more than it would turn men into women. It would rather degenderize the best – and the worst – qualities of people.

Towards the end of gender

In sum, to change modern Western gendered social orders to be less gendered will mean changing everyday gendered behavior, modification of gender-organized attitudes and values, especially about families and children, but, most of all, a restructuring of the gendered division of work and redressing the gendered power imbalances in the governments of dominant nations. A movement to change the embedded gendered social order needs individual agency, informal social action and formal political organizations (none of which is separate from the others). Because gender so imbues our lives, a feminist degendering movement will be everywhere and ongoing. If this sounds like the 'good old days' of pervasive personal politics, it is – but rather than just fighting sexism or the oppression of women by male-dominated institutions, it includes men and attends as well to other subordinating social statuses. Most of all, it directly targets the processes

and practices of gendering and their outcome – gendered people, practices, and power.

Notes

1. For a description of frames in face-to-face interaction, see Goffman (1974) and in politics, Gamson (1992).
2. In Bourdieu's progression (doxa, orthodoxy, heterodoxy), this is thinking heterodoxically: 'Orthodoxy, straight, or rather *straightened,* opinion, which aims, without ever entirely succeeding, at restoring the primal state of innocence of doxa, exists only in the objective relationship which opposes it to heterodoxy, that is, by reference to the choice – *hairesis,* heresy – made possible by the existence of *competing possibilities* and to the explicit critique of the sum total of the alternatives not chosen that the established order implies' (1977: 169; entire discussion appears on pp. 159–71; original emphases).
3. There are societies that have third genders – in some Native American tribes, biological males whose gender status is that of a woman (Williams, 1986); in some African societies, females with the gender status of sons or husbands (Amadiume, 1987).
4. For recent research on gender and social movements, see Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1998, 1999).
5. For me, the success of the degendering movement will be marked by unisex bathrooms. This is not a trivial goal – gender-divided bathrooms replicate the supposed biological base of the gendered social order and the symbolic separation of men's and women's social worlds. They also are constant evidence of gender inequity, since there are never enough ladies' rooms in public spaces (Molotch, 1988).

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