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I

Introduction

We inhabit a culture which seems to revolve around fixed categories, opposites, and which seems much less comfortable with ambiguity, change, blurs ... on the issue of gender and sexual binaries, a great deal of cultural, political, and emotional effort and energy has been vested in constructing, reproducing, and sustaining certain opposing categories.

Dunphy 2000: 3

Is it possible to move beyond the male–female gender binary system? What happens to gender theory when we consider sex and gender identities as more than just ‘male’ or ‘female’? In what ways are the sexual orientation categories that we take for granted in the West – heterosexual, lesbian, and gay – destabilised by sexual and gender fluidity? And, crucially, what are the implications of gender and sexual fluidity and multiplicity for social policy, citizenship, new social movements, and democracy?

This book explores the territory that is opened up when gender, and sexual orientation, binaries are disrupted or displaced. The gender binary system is continually problematised, by women and men who transgress gender stereotypes, by sissy boys and tomboys, by butch dykes and camp men, and by many others. Sexual orientation binaries are destabilised when people move between or beyond gay and straight identities. Gender and sexual dimorphism are also continually reinscribed, and people who move beyond – or exist outside of – the binary system are systematically socially excluded via the operation of social institutions and discourses that privilege non-trans¹ and non-intersex² people, and heterosexuals, in a wide range of ways.

This book reads from the margins, taking the standpoints of gender and sexual minorities who are socially excluded³ as its starting point. It reverses the privileging of non-trans men and women, foregrounding issues of relevance to transsexuals, intersex people,

2 Gender Politics

cross-dressers, androgynes and people with multiple gender identities, whilst recognising that their interests are shared by anyone who is concerned with creating a society that is more equal and tolerant of difference. It marginalises heterosexuals and addresses the interests of lesbians, gay men, and, in particular, bisexuals and other people with fluid or multiple sexualities. In doing this, it broadens understandings of gender and sexuality, provoking a more complex and finely grained way of looking at gender and sexual politics, and contributing to the cultural enrichment envisaged by authors such as Parekh (1994). The book paints a temporary picture of a complex, ongoing set of processes. My objective is to provide some tools for analysing this messiness. The book has a limited remit. Whilst emphasising the diversity of gender and sexual minority people's experiences and views, I cannot hope to fully represent them/us in a text of this nature, or to provide any kind of 'expert' view. In addition, I have focussed on the Western, specifically UK, situation, whilst providing some acknowledgement of the situation in other parts of the world, and I have – as noted above – foregrounded trans people, whilst including sexual minorities (especially bisexuals), and, also, non-trans women, in some parts of the book.

I have drawn on empirical material whilst writing this book, enabling me to inform arguments and provide illustrative case studies. My data has been drawn from four main studies (see the methodological note for more details about these projects and the identities of the contributors). First, I draw on an in-depth exploration of trans politics, which I conducted during the 1990s, and which included transsexuals, intersex people, cross-dressers, drag kings and queens and others. Second, I have used material from a large study of lesbian and gay equalities work in local government (this included bisexuals and trans people to an extent) which took place in 2001–03. Third, I have included data from a small study of gender and sexual diversity in India, which I conducted in 2003. Lastly, I conducted interviews with a number of bisexual, lesbian and gay, and trans people during 2003, as a way of updating the earlier study on transgender, and gaining more material on bisexuality. In keeping with the usual norms (see Kirsch 2000), I shall identify myself at this stage as a female-bodied bisexual, who does not identify as trans in any substantial way at present, but who has explored some trans identities in the past. I have identified the people who took part in the research projects as research contributors, and their contributions can be distinguished from the literature by the absence of dates in the text.

They are quoted by name unless a preference for anonymity was expressed. The projects that contributors took part in are identified in some cases by the following: (a) Transgender Politics; (b) Lesbian and Gay Equality in Local Government; (c) Gender and Sexual Diversity in India; and (d) LGBT research.

KEY THEMES

This book is underpinned by a number of key debates, which are reflected in varying ways in the literature on gender theory, sexuality, and political economy. The fundamental issue for work in the field of gender and sexual diversity concerns the tensions between fluid, liminal (existing outside of duality) identities, and concrete identities that fit into fixed binary categories. Discrete forms of categorisation form the basis for social identification, identity politics, and social policy initiatives, yet this rigidly binaried categorisation stifles diversity. Post-structuralism reveals the gender and sexual binary system as socially constructed, and lacking an inherent reality. However, post-structuralist approaches are also problematic in a number of ways. I therefore argue for the combination of post-structuralist and other forms of analysis, and I begin to map out different conceptual approaches to gender and sexual diversity.

Another theme, which runs through the book, concerns the tensions between universalism and particularist forms of politics and policy initiatives. Should we aim for 'one size fits all', or universalist, forms of equalities politics, or do we need particularist, diversity oriented approaches, that address the varied needs and interests of the different groups? Universalist approaches are better suited to those types of identity that are fluid or not categorised, as particularist politics requires people to identify with certain categories and identities. Universalism is inclusive, not only of marginalised minorities but also of dominant majorities. However, although it has a number of advantages, it risks glossing over differences and reinforcing the dominant order, because the loudest voices tend to get heard if particular attention is not paid to the quieter ones. Particularism, on the other hand, is useful in foregrounding the interests of minority groups, but is problematic where it 'freezes' identities in a restrictive way, and can also lend itself to factionalism between groups. I argue, following the work of feminist theorists and others, that a combination of universalist and particularist approaches is necessary for gender politics.

A further issue concerns the implications of complex, fluid identities for identity politics. What is the basis for alliances when identities are deconstructed or multiple? The issue is not only that people with deconstructed identities are difficult to organise into movements. The groups that I am concerned with in the book sometimes straddle different, oppositional identity categories – for example some bisexuals have alliances both with heterosexuals and with lesbians and gays, who may build their identities in opposition to heterosexuality. In addition, there are huge tensions between assimilationist politics, where marginalised groups aim to fit into (and become part of) the heterosexual, gender binaried mainstream, and radical, oppositional politics, where people seek to challenge this. These different aspects of the sexual and gender minority communities can lead to a considerable amount of conflict, both within communities, and between them – conflict that is fuelled by the effects of forces such as patriarchy and homophobia. Alliances can, however, be formed, based on notions of respect, self-determination, equality⁴ and care. The notion of ‘rainbow alliances’ is perhaps particularly helpful, as it is inclusive, and covers both universalism (the rainbow) and particularism (the different colours). However, issues will remain concerning differences of interest, and the operation of processes of stigmatisation, problems with achieving representation of all members of communities, and the way in which movements get defused when members access mainstream culture and the associated privilege.

Another key theme for this book is the way in which mainstream citizenship, social policy, and democracy, can – or cannot – be changed to reflect the needs of marginalised groups. These institutions are currently dominated by the interests of white, male, heterosexual, middle-class people, although these interests are hidden because they are generally embedded in these institutions, via hidden assumptions and normalised procedures. For example, mainstream models of citizenship and democracy embody the idea that politics takes place in the public sphere, which disadvantages women, who tend to have less access to the public sphere than men, as well as sexual minorities, because sexuality is framed as a private matter and heterosexuality is privileged by default. Arguably, the recognition of the rights of gender and sexual minorities broadens ideas of equal rights, and the related social institutions, but there are also related dangers in that, by engaging with the mainstream, minorities lose their identities and power base. The debate concerning whether it is

possible to extend mainstream institutions is reflected more widely in gender and sexual politics, with ongoing tensions between the creation of separate social spaces and communities, and attempts to integrate and alter the mainstream to make it more equitable. Some forms of politics, for example queer politics and lesbian separatism, are formed in opposition to the mainstream, but this is problematic for people whose identities shift between mainstream and marginalised social spaces.

A further issue is intersectionality, or the relationship between different social structuring factors, such as 'race', class, nationality, disability, gender, and sexuality. This book focuses on gender, and to a lesser extent, sexuality, but I have attempted to locate my discussions of these in the context of the other structuring forces where possible, as gender and sexuality are constructed in relation to them. These forces operate in complex, contextualised ways, and are hierarchical, so that some groups gain power and control over others because people with certain characteristics (such as being white) are privileged over others, and processes of normalisation mask discrimination. Obviously, the way in which these power dynamics operate differs depending on geographical and social location. From a post-structuralist perspective, the power relations are internalised by individuals so that they become seen as natural, although there are sites of resistance to this.

THE ORGANISATION OF THIS BOOK

This book begins by providing the theoretical and empirical foundations for later discussions, before moving on to address the areas of social policy, social movements and activism. Lastly, I explore gender and sexual diversity in relation to the fields of citizenship and democracy.

The second chapter, 'Gender Theory', explores different ways of theorising gender and sexuality beyond the gender binary system. I start by demonstrating the ways in which gender and sexual orientation binaries are exploded by some types of trans and intersex. The destabilisation of the gender binary system also involves the problematisation of the sexual orientation binaries that rely on discrete male–female genders for their meaning. How can this diversity and complexity be theorised? First, gender and sexuality must be understood in relation to other social factors, so I begin by contextualising them via a discussion of intersectionality. I then outline a

range of theories concerning gender and critically evaluate these in relation to gender pluralism. Although aspects of second-wave feminisms and masculinity studies are conceptually useful, they are flawed because they rely ontologically on discrete male–female categorisation. Post-structuralist approaches provide crucial tools for conceptualising gender diversity, as does queer theory, but these bodies of theory have some limitations, such as a tendency to overlook bodily realities and to valorise transgression. I therefore explore a number of alternatives that draw on post-structuralism but combine this with recognition of its limitations. These alternatives can be separated into three ideal types: the broadening of the gender binary system, degendering, and gender pluralism. I argue that degendering is useful but limited because it erodes the basis for gender politics, and that broadening the gender binary system, whilst important, fails to include people of all genders. Gender pluralism, whilst problematic in some ways, is the most fully inclusive approach.

In the third chapter, 'Gender, Sexuality, and Social Exclusion', I describe the social exclusion of gender diverse people (transsexuals, cross-dressers, intersex people, gender fluid people, and gender plural people), framing it in relation to theories of social exclusion. Trans and intersex people have varied experiences of social inclusion and exclusion. However, there are some general trends, concerning not only areas traditional to discourses of social exclusion (poverty and employment), but also social institutions such as language, bureaucracy, healthcare, and the family. Trans and intersex people provoke a broadening out of concepts of social exclusion to include cultural and identity factors more fully. This is because the sources of their exclusion are deeply embedded, taking place, in many cases, at earlier stages than those identified by social exclusion theorists. The processes of erasure take place at discursive as well as institutional levels. The discourses that contribute to the social exclusion of gender minorities include ethnocentrism, patriarchy, and homophobia. The stigmatisation of gender diversity reinforces, and is reinforced by, the social exclusion of other groups, especially women and sexual minorities.

The fourth chapter, 'Social Policy Implications', provides a critique of mainstream and some other approaches to social policy, documenting the processes by which gender and sexual minorities are overlooked. I begin by evaluating some of the traditional models of social policy in relation to gender and sexual diversity, concluding that they are usefully pragmatic, but limited in scope. I then explore

the work of post-structuralist Carol Bacchi (1999) and apply some of Bacchi's concepts to gender and sexual diversity. I argue that whilst post-structuralist approaches are valuable in foregrounding the processes by which gender and sexual minorities are excluded from policy processes, they need to be combined with the implementation oriented mainstream approaches in order to impact on the social policy arena. I then move on to explore ways of implementing equalities initiatives via equal opportunities policies, arguing that liberal and radical approaches both have positive aspects, but that a strong liberal approach may be most useful for the inclusion of gender and sexual minorities, because it is incrementalist and pragmatic. Lastly, I outline some of the social policy implications of the three theoretical models of gender diversity that I developed in the theory chapter. The broadening gender binaries, and degendering, approaches support measures that are held within strong liberal frameworks. The gender pluralism model is mostly compatible with the former approaches, but goes beyond them, providing greater support for gender diversity. All of these approaches entail support for gender and sexual minorities to engage in policy-making and political processes.

The fifth chapter, 'Activism: Tensions and Alliances', provides an overview and analysis of some of the tensions between, and within, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (LGBT) and feminist communities.⁵ I begin by demonstrating the close historical identity overlaps between these different groups, and then describe the ways in which the early gay and lesbian liberation movement became fragmented along gender lines. I outline the ways in which trans and bisexual people are ostracised and excluded by the lesbian, gay, and feminist communities, arguing that although the recognition of difference is necessary, prejudice against trans people and bisexuals – and the resulting exclusion of these groups from lesbian, feminist, and gay organisations – is unjustifiable for a range of reasons. The chapter then moves on to explore the possibility of 'rainbow alliances' – alliances that recognise and support diversity across the range of gender identities and sexual orientations. Alliances across the LGBT communities have developed considerably over the last few years, and are seen by many contributors as being crucial to the development of a progressive and effective movement, but there are ongoing challenges concerning the formation of these alliances.

The sixth chapter, 'Gender, Sexuality, and the New Social Movements', provides an overview of the development of a number

of key movements concerning gender and sexuality – the women’s liberation movement, the men’s movements, the gay and lesbian movement, the bisexual movement, and the trans and intersex movements – analysing them in relation to new social movement (NSM) theory. I argue that NSMs concerning gender and sexuality share many characteristics. They tend overall to move from a period of collective insurgency through to more stable, institutionalised forms – although some have not attained the latter stage. The movements associated with trans, and intersex people are less well developed than some of the others, for various reasons, including the small numbers⁶ of people, diversity within the communities, and tensions concerning aims. The bisexual movement is similarly underdeveloped. Its membership is diverse, and the identity fluidity associated with bisexuality means that bisexuals easily become politically assimilated into either heterosexual or lesbian/gay cultures. All of the movements can be analysed using NSM theories to some degree, although some of them highlighted points for further exploration, such as the importance of cyberspace in providing political opportunities, the influence and role of non-political sub-cultures in the formation of NSMs, and the complex nature of the relationships between NSMs and mainstream organisations.

The seventh chapter, ‘Citizenship’, outlines some aspects of mainstream models of citizenship and analyses them in relation to feminist, sexual minority, and trans citizenships. Feminist and sexual models of citizenship have developed in response to the inadequacies of mainstream models of citizenship, however, feminist models of citizenship are themselves limited, in that they serve to erase subjects with identities that do not fit into male or female, or gay and straight, categories. Although there is a wide range of approaches to sexual citizenship, there has been little analysis of bisexual citizenship, and existing work on trans, fetish and Sadomasochism (SM) citizenships is limited. Bisexual citizenship focuses on concerns such as increasing bisexual visibility, creating support for same-sex relationships in a way that does not produce rigid categories, and polyamory. SM and fetish citizenships are concerned with equal rights for adults to participate in consensual fetish and SM activities, including group activities in semi-public places. Central concerns for trans citizenship are with rights claims and managing the destabilisation of gender and sexual orientation binaries that trans and intersex involve. I demonstrate the way in which mainstream as well as alternative notions of citizenship can

be used in developing notions of citizenship in these areas, and the way in which the citizenship of gender and sexual minorities highlights some of the flaws of the different approaches.

In the eighth and final chapter, 'Gender and Democracy', I expand on earlier discussions and integrate them with existing scholarship concerning democracy. I begin by outlining some of the key aspects of liberal and representative, and participative models of democracy, and I also discuss queer and anarchist trans political stances. These different approaches have a number of advantages and disadvantages for trans politics. Liberal democracy provides central concepts, such as autonomy, justice, and self-determination – concepts that are widely evident in transgender politics – and representative democracy goes some way to including gender minorities. However, these approaches are limited, and prone to the difficulties associated with universalism. Participatory, and strong, models of democracy usefully emphasise citizen engagement in politics, but there is a lack of capacity to support this amongst the gender and sexual minority communities. Queer and anarchist positions helpfully assert the independence of gender minorities, but are arguably lacking in political clout unless combined with other approaches. After evaluating these different types of democracy in relation to trans, I explore a number of relevant debates in the feminist literature concerning democracy. Feminist discussions about universalism and diversity provide a basis for theorising trans and democracy. I argue that a fusion of approaches, in which particularism and universalism are balanced, seems to be the best approach, and that radical pluralism also provides interesting possibilities.

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