gender ideals in feminist and anthropological thought. But that part of my account aims only to show how some gender conceptions are worth taking seriously; it certainly does not prove that gender really makes perfect sense after all, or that it is ultimately benign.

Is it too dangerous even hypothetically to treat gender as meaningful? Is there no way of conceiving gender in all the power it can exert that does not subject us to that power? Is no position available between a rigid acceptance of determinate gender norms and an unrealistically detached "analytic" of gender? Must we either remain in the grip of a despotic gender ethos that has forfeited our trust or take as our ideals of emancipation beings without any emotional or ethical grasp of sex difference—angels of some sort—with only a wispy claim to human trust? Must we confound gender, that is, represent it as lacking any meaningful "function," if we are not to be confounded by incoherently conservative "functionalism"?

I sharpen these dilemmas as a way of advertising for a more reasonable (but not simple) middle way, combining noncomplacent performances of gender with nonpresumptuous performances of its negation.

References

Comment on Hawkesworth's "Confounding Gender"

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What is the point of Mary Hawkesworth's article (in this issue)? Of this kind of finger-wagging "correction" of the work of people who are presumably her political allies? Let's leave aside for the moment the misrepresentations and distortions she produces to advance her "critique," although these are relevant too. Why go through such contortions as she does, risking the exposure of her own analytic limitations in order to attack—in the name of feminism—some of the most original feminist scholarship we have? If Mary Hawkesworth's article were an isolated piece, it would not be worth asking these questions or, indeed, bothering to address at all. But since it is an example of a genre of academic writing that
is increasingly evident in feminist circles, I think its significance needs to be pondered. Why is there now a proliferation of work that tries to patrol the borders of feminist inquiry in the name of "emancipation"? Why these efforts to circumscribe definitions, to prescribe (and proscribe) conclusions in the name of "liberation"? Why this eagerness to impose an ill-conceived form of discipline in a field that takes pride in the rigor of its interdisciplinarity?

Optimistically, one could say that struggle over terminology, strategy, and theory is but a sign of the growing pains of a maturing field. And that canonical texts become so in part because they are vigorously contested. Pessimistically, one could say that violent polemics are the correlate of political impotence, the last gasps of a movement whose least radical elements are about to be subsumed into the mainstream, while the most radical are lashed back into oblivion. Skeptically, or perhaps materialistically (depending on one's perspective), one could say that these "critiques" are nothing more than the signs of an intense careerism. Competition for scarce positions and resources has turned political allies into professional enemies in the area of feminist studies, as elsewhere. In the race for prominence, young scholars seek to display their intelligence not by demonstrating originality of thought but by finding fault in the work of those whom they want to emulate and displace.

But I do not think any of these possibilities can fully account for the phenomenon of which Hawkesworth's article is only a recent example. Rather, I think these efforts to impose conceptual cleanliness, scrub away ambiguity, and purge contradiction are symptoms of feminism's incurable paradoxical condition (something I have written about at length elsewhere). The incurable condition is the effect of contradictions in liberal democratic theory that offer universal guarantees of inclusion but hold out a singular standard for inclusion. Difference and multiplicity fit uneasily in this scheme, if at all. That is the source of the dilemma women have repeatedly confronted since the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century: They have needed to prove sameness in order to qualify for equality if they are to meet the singular standard (of masculine individuality) held out for inclusion, but they have had to argue for equality as women, thus raising the issue of their difference. The equality versus difference dilemma does not admit of resolution. It is built into feminism, which at once embodies and protests against the contradictions of liberal political theory.

Feminism is not the source of its constitutive problems, and yet many of its adherents act as if that were the case. They make the mistake of blaming

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1 See Scott 1996.
feminism for liberalism's contradictions and, like the aspirant saints of the
Middle Ages, make self-purification a rationale for existence. They think
that by expunging contradiction, complexity, ambiguity, and even dis-
agreement from within the feminist movement, they will also end inequal-
ity, hierarchy, injustice, and discrimination in the world. But, since contra-
diction, complexity, and ambiguity are exactly what need to be addressed,
they succeed only in undermining their own cause. They perpetuate the
symptoms (and the discursive system that produced them) that they ought
to be analyzing.

This is the case with Hawkesworth's article. She rushes from text to text,
sweeping away complexity (as so much dirt in the feminist household),
and replacing it with seemingly tidier either/or formulations when none
have been proposed. Thus she turns Judith Butler's careful attempt to ana-
lyze the relationships between the social and subjective aspects of gender
into an either/or proposition. "Butler's account makes gender too much
a matter of the self," she asserts. It "privatizes gender," disregarding "the
economic and political forces that circumscribe women's lives" (668). For
Hawkesworth there is a necessary opposition between the symbolic and
the material, the abstract and the concrete, the individual and the social,
the psychic and the institutional, the subjective and the political. She can-
not grasp the fact that Butler refuses these binary divisions. Gender Trouble
(1990), after all, is meant precisely to confound all these seemingly clear
distinctions that are actually not at all clear, but whose false clarity is re-
quired to shore up the "natural attitude" that Hawkesworth so passionately
wants to refute. Unfortunately, the "natural attitude" cannot be refuted by
force of logic or by repudiation. It has to be denaturalized, and that re-
quires understanding how it operates, not only as an abstract logical sys-
tem, but as the ideology that constitutes subjective experiences of gender.
For Hawkesworth, this kind of understanding (because it requires a certain
intimate knowledge of "the enemy") is tantamount to betrayal.

Hawkesworth rewrites Steven Smith's (1992) analysis of the operations
of the sex/gender distinction as a base/superstructure model when that is
not the case. She is so eager to expunge biology as a determinant of gender
that she reads his descriptions of how gender ideology works as an en-
donsement of its assumptions. She makes him an advocate of heterosexual
complementarity and reproductive drives, when he is an analyst of these
desires. While he understands them to be the effect of a certain gender ide-
ology, she takes them to be causes of (or explanations for) gender.

It is Hawkesworth who imputes causality, not Smith (or Connell or
Butler or Kessler and McKenna). She does this, I think, because she cannot
accept the idea that ideologies may have real, material ("palpable" in her
terms) effects. ("Is gender after all, a matter of belief more than a structure of social forces?" she asks [674], separating two realms that the authors she reviews insist cannot be separated.) The paradox of language, so eloquently captured by Roland Barthes's discussion of historical discourse ("fact never has any but a linguistic existence . . . , yet everything happens as if this linguistic existence were merely a pure and simple 'copy' of another existence, situated in an extra-structural field, the 'real'" [1986, 138]), is intolerable for her. So Hawkesworth replaces paradox (which holds opposites in unresolvable tension) with a set of binary oppositions. Since, in her philosophy, effects must have causes and since "reality" cannot be an effect, she deems it a cause. From this follows her misreading of these five authors as committed to base/superstructure models and to "functionalism." While the authors treat subjective desires, reproductive impulses, heterosexual norms of complementarity, and the like as effects of gender ideologies, Hawkesworth reads them the other way around. Since she will not even entertain the idea that ideologies produce biological and psychic realities by claiming to reflect those realities, she not only misses the point of the books she reviews but also fails to grasp their authors' analyses of how gender operates.

Hawkesworth's rationalist posture creates the illusion that she has carefully dissected the logic of these books and found their flaws. In fact, she imposes a false logic on them. The distinctions she makes between gender as an analytic category and gender as an explanans do not hold up when applied to these authors. Their work is preeminently analytic; they dissect the problem into its parts and try to understand their interrelationships. It is Hawkesworth who reifies gender, not the five authors, and Hawkesworth who introduces an external measure of adequacy for the work they do. That measure is fundamentally anti-intellectual: the work must serve the liberation of women in the terms she understands it (as a political process that refutes or beats down the "natural attitude") or it is denounced. So if Butler (1990) seeks to understand how gender ideologies produce "women" and enforce normative subjectivities, she is accused of perpetuating "women's invisibility" and "miring them in victimization." And if Kessler and McKenna (1978) want to explore the psychological workings of gender in order to identify its social and political as well as personal effects, they are accused of giving up on the political entirely. "There are dire implications in the displacement of gender from external world to internal, mental terrain," she writes, as if gender could not exist in both realms at once (679). If Smith (1992) shows that gender produces subjectively felt experiences of sexuality that are attributed to biology, he is reviled as a biological determinist since any recognition of biology is, says Hawkesworth, "an
impossible ground for feminist accounts of gender” (663). But to recognize the power of biological thinking is not to attribute gender to biology, just as to recognize the power of capitalist ideology is neither to accept the idea that the market is a natural force nor to deny the need for socialism. Poor Robert Connell (1987) is accused of harboring “heterosexist presumptions” because he analyzes the powerful ways in which the impetus to reproduce is made the basis for a gender system that takes heterosexuality and its pleasures as its norm. Somehow, in Hawkesworth’s reckoning, even mentioning these things means acceptance of them and this mentioning, therefore, is bad for feminism.

Hawkesworth assumes the stance of the logical reasoner in order to advance propositions that are both outdated and counterproductive. They are outdated because feminists of whatever theoretical persuasion are beyond the point of refusing to take seriously ideas, ideologies, and practices they do not like. It will not work anymore to denounce the false consciousness of antifeminist or nonfeminist women; we need to know how they think as they do, how and in what terms and with what conflicts they experience their femininity. Hawkesworth’s propositions are counterproductive because they dismiss as antifeminist theories that might have some use, but that she does not like. Instead of engaging in a serious debate about the very different analyses of gender ideology contained in the four books she reviews, she lumps them all together and refuses their terms in the name of feminism. But who is she to take up that name?

If feminism is to maintain its critical force, if it is to challenge and disrupt the workings of powerful hierarchies designed to keep women “in their place,” then it must be allowed to contemplate its paradoxes and the ambiguities of its existence. Such contemplation involves analyzing not only the conditions of existence (psychic as well as social) that produce inequalities of power but also the discursive conditions that produce feminism. The two are obviously interrelated, but not as stimulus and response. Feminism is not an inevitable response to discrimination against women. It is made possible by theories of equality and justice that are also sometimes the source of inequality and injustice. Feminism exists because of these contradictions and as a contradiction in societies that represent themselves as democratic. There is no way to purge contradiction from feminism, nor is it possible to get rid of contradiction in the theorizing of feminists.

We ought to be debating issues, not conducting purity campaigns. And I hope future issues of Signs will encourage wide-ranging and serious debate of diverse theoretical points of view: not in the interest of promoting the idea that “anything goes” in feminist theory, but in the interest of
impurity, nonconformity, and unruliness—the traits that have made possible feminism's most original contributions and its most important breakthroughs.

**References**


**Comment on Hawkesworth's "Confounding Gender": Re-Structuring Gender**

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Mary Hawkesworth's clear and interesting article (in this issue) centers on the connection between gender politics and gender theory. I share her concern with this connection, and applaud the attempt to grapple with general theories of gender on this terrain. I am pleased to see attention being given to Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's pioneering, and still highly relevant, work.

Hawkesworth argues, on the basis of a detailed reading of the four texts, that despite their marked differences they share a common problem, a tendency to reductionism and functionalism. This surprising conclusion, if true, is an important critique of gender theory. It is a particularly worrying criticism of *Gender and Power* (Connell 1987), which vigorously rejects functionalism and reductionism and tries to spell out an alternative. Reductionist or functionalist theory, Hawkesworth rightly observes, would lead feminism into pessimism, or into a universalizing stance that would exclude rather than include.