

The Gender That Is None: Some Daring Reflections on the Concept of Gender in Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler¹

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Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler are now regarded as classics of philosophical gender studies. They each stand for a very specific approach: Beauvoir purports equality theory, Irigaray is considered the main representative of difference theory, and Butler is assigned to construction theory. The three gender conceptions could not be more different. The protagonists of these approaches have contributed significantly to positioning their theories as fundamentally divergent and incompatible theoretical conceptions, and feminist reception has done its part to reinforce and ultimately cement this impression of incompatibility.² It is possible to continue in this way – and there are perfectly good reasons to do so. But there are also reasons to step off the well-trodden paths of mainstream reception, if only to briefly give another idea a chance and revive all the more strongly the rich thinking that these three great theorists have presented to us.

I would like to draw attention to one passage from each of the three theorists' major works that I find interesting enough to relate to each other. These are passages that are significant to their philosophical concept of gender, but – with a few exceptions – do not always receive sufficient attention in feminist circles; at best they are mentioned, often half-heartedly. The following considerations are undoubtedly experimental in character and I am fully aware that they are a bit of a gamble. For they do not fit into the “mainstream” interpretation of the three classicists and even, to a certain extent, go against the grain of their theoretical designs. But how to stop thinking once one has started? Doesn't philosophical thinking live up to its name precisely when it embarks on detours not yet undertaken? Even at the risk of going astray and ultimately failing to withstand possible counter-arguments, such an idea demands to be presented.

Let us begin with Simone de Beauvoir. In her study, *The Second Sex*, the “grande dame” of modern gender studies not only provides us with a

phenomenological-existentialist description of female existence and analyzes – in great detail – gender relations in patriarchal society. She also presents very concrete ideas about what the relationship between the sexes must look like if one is to escape gender asymmetry and establish an ethical relationship between the sexes, free from oppression and characterized by reciprocity. Beauvoir sketches an alternative gender order that, at the time it was drafted, was still a long way from being realized, as the author notes in the concluding remarks of her study. Here is the passage that I would like to focus on. It reads: “The fact of being a human being is infinitely more important than all the singularities that distinguish human beings” (Beauvoir 2010, 732). Now, these “singularities” include gender identity, and people differ in terms of gender, among other things. That these “singularities” are less important than the fact of being a “human being” relativizes the importance of being a particular gender; it is lost in the face of the paramount importance of being a “human being.” In philosophical terms: For Beauvoir, the universality of being a human being ultimately overrides the particularity of being gendered. This corresponds entirely to Beauvoir’s humanistic conception and finally results in the plea for equality and its paradoxical formulation in the call for “brotherhood” (766).

Let us now turn to Luce Irigaray and what is probably her best-known book, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. In her attempt to conceptualize a female imaginary, she describes “woman” as follows: “*She is neither one nor two*. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one sex, or as two. She resists all adequate definition” (Irigaray 1985, 26). While the first part of this quote is common knowledge, the second part is often omitted. Yet already the first part is intriguing, since Irigaray is considered a defender of sexual difference. According to Irigaray, woman is not “one” because the One is reserved for men in patriarchal societies, where there is no neuter and certainly no radically other feminine. In order to distinguish herself from this one sex, Irigaray envisions the woman who is already differentiated in herself and, for this reason alone, resists a clear and distinct assignment to the classical dualism of woman and man. That is why she speaks of woman as the sex “which is not one.” But she is also not simply something different in herself, just “two”; according to this passage, she is “*neither one nor two*” (my emphasis). She is, so to speak, more than that. Which brings us to the second part of the quotation; that the woman now resists “all adequate definition” is astonishing. Thus, nothing can be said

about her sex. The question is, which sex is it about which nothing can be said? If nothing can be said about sex, what happens to sex? Does every reference to sex/gender – and therefore also to the “woman” – then become obsolete? Must we then surmise that woman is not a sex/gender at all? Or at least a sex/gender that has lost its sharp contours? Even if one concedes that there is something like a minimal definition in Irigaray, that is, that the determination of woman consists precisely in the fact that she cannot be determined, that she eludes any determination, the fact remains that the determination does not reach much further than the realization that she remains incomplete. Perhaps, however, the determination is an impossible task; woman is and remains indeterminate. Therefore, the theorist who, more than any other, tirelessly holds to the primacy of sexual difference, indeed who claims the difference between woman and man as a universal, ontological difference and is interested in conceptualizing a female subject, says at the same time that there is no “adequate definition” of woman. Even if the matter is somewhat more complicated than can be presented here, we must concede that, at least here, we are dealing with a paradox requiring elucidation.

Now, let us look at Judith Butler. Her specific contribution to gender studies, among other things, is the critique of the essentialization of the female gender (“women”) and the ensuing demand for recognition of gender plurality. But this demand is not all-encompassing. Butler delves deep in her critique of essentialism, saying, not only, that gender identity is plural. She also states that such an identity cannot be conceptualized at all, at least not subjected to a complete determination. It is ontologically impossible, she tells us, to provide a complete picture of identity. Interestingly, she expresses skepticism even toward those very feminist theorists who, for the purpose of providing as complete a descriptive account of identity as possible, deliberately insist on the inclusion of a wide variety of identity categories. She quite rightly points out that those who strive for such a complete determination usually add an “etc.” to the end of their list of categories of “race, class, gender, etc.” – thus implicitly expressing something that, for Butler, is an inescapable fact: namely, that a complete list of identity categories is futile. The “etc.” placed at the end of the list is a sign of this. Butler concludes that a determination of identity is doomed to “failure.” She writes, “This failure, however, is instructive: what political impetus is to be derived from the exasperated “etc.” that so often occurs at the end of such lines?” (Butler 1990, 143). That, for Butler, this

failure is not a cause for resignation but an occasion for alternative gender politics is remarkable. But what should also be of interest in our context is that she denies the possibility of determining gender identity, because what one applies to the “list” of categories also applies to the category “gender.” Gender eludes complete determination. Consequently, according to Butler, feminist gender politics would have to be about keeping the determination of gender open. This is fundamentally desirable, since it holds out the prospect of alternative or complementary determinations. At the same time, however, it is not much more than an envisioning, and “gender” remains in its indeterminacy.

What conclusions can be drawn from these three quotes? In all three cases, we note a certain disappearance of gender. Simone de Beauvoir believes that a true ethical relationship between human beings ultimately transcends all gender differences in their particularity. If one proceeds in her humanistic understanding of gender justice, then gender disappears just as humanity is realized. Luce Irigaray asserts that woman is a sex characterized by indeterminacy; sex vanishes the moment its indeterminacy is asserted. Judith Butler sees the determination of identity as doomed to failure and assumes that the determination of gender is essentially incomplete. In this case, gender dissolves precisely at the point at which the possibility of a complete determination is denied.

As we familiarize ourselves with these thoughts, an interesting paradox becomes apparent. Those gender researchers and feminist theorists who are ultimately concerned with an alternative feminist gender order also have a concept of indifference in their theoretical program. Or, to put it another way, all three gender theories are developed in the name of gender – and even in the name of the female gender. Beauvoir begins with the thesis of the oppression of women and sets herself the goal of liberating women from patriarchal oppression. Irigaray claims that the female gender (woman) does not yet exist in the patriarchal culture and that it must, therefore, first be invented. And even when Butler shakes the foundations of feminism itself and makes the category “woman” or “women” the subject of criticism, she does so in the name of efficient gender politics.

All three theorists, then, strive for an appropriate gender theory that focuses on the issue of gender. Nevertheless, there are considerations in the works of Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler that throw thought-provoking light on their theories of “gender.” In all three, namely, we find approaches to a disappearance of gender – a gender that does not actually exist in this way. They

are part of a thinking of indeterminacy, which Gerhard Gamm once identified as a characteristic of modernity in his study *Flucht aus der Kategorie* (1994).

Postscript

I am aware that the accounts of the three theorists are abbreviated and that the passages I have singled out require further analysis and discussion. It is also clear to me that my interpretation of the “disappearance of the subject” can easily be critically questioned. For example, one objection could be that the impossibility of a (complete) determination of gender does not actually make gender disappear but only expresses the difficulty of wanting to achieve a completeness of description (of gender!). Another concern could be that the thesis of the fundamental indeterminacy of gender itself represents an attempt to determine gender, even if only in its indeterminacy. Indeed, when Irigaray says that the sex is not “one” but more than that – that is, up to the point where it cannot be enumerated – then, of course, she too provides a kind of determination of sex. Likewise, in a humanist-universalist conception of gender, as in Beauvoir, gender does not actually “disappear.” Indeed, when Beauvoir claims that the universal human qualities of being human are more important than the gendered particularities, she does not mean that the singular genders “disappear”; but only that they are less vital than the universalities.

However, there are, in my view, unmistakable *tendencies* in all these conceptions of Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler that make the following questions legitimate: How much gender do we still have when its naming and determination turns out to be impossible, as in Butler and Irigaray? And how much is left of gender if, as with Beauvoir, we are supposed to place the universally “being human” above the “being human” in particular? Why are several generations of gender theorists, with such different approaches, so keen to draw attention to the impossibility of a complete determination of sex and gender (Irigaray, Butler)? Why is it that the very gender scholars who wanted to make (female) gender visible in the 20th century claim that the difference between the sexes is less important than what is generally human (Beauvoir)? Finally, which brings me to the present: How do we approach these gender theories at a time when assertions to be recognized as a particular gender are becoming increasingly unmistakable, complex, and occasionally competitive in terms of gender politics?

Notes

- 1 This text originally appeared in German language as “Das Geschlecht, das keines ist. Einige wagemutige Überlegungen zum Geschlechterbegriff bei Beauvoir, Irigaray und Butler.” *Was Wir. Beiträge für Ursula Kubes-Hofmann*, edited by Hanna Hacker and Susanne Hochreiter, Vienna: Praesens Verlag 2013, 142-148. It was supplemented by a final page (“Postscript”) for the Festschrift for Prof. Dr. Veronica Vasterling and translated into English by Ida Černe.
- 2 In my Dutch PhD, supervised by Veronica Vasterling, and in my habilitation thesis, I questioned this specific history of reception in its self-evidence. But, above all, I questioned the impression of a progressive, quasi-evolutionist development of theory (see Stoller 2006, 2010).

References

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