

# Dismantling Gender Polarization and Compulsory Heterosexuality: Should We Turn the Volume Down or Up?

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*At the center of all my previous work on gender and sexuality has been the goal of shrinking both the relevance and the reach of the male/female dichotomy by trying, insofar as possible, to make it as minimal a presence in human social and psychological life as, say, eye color or foot size. Here, however, I argue that a more effective way to undo the privileged status of the two-and-only-two categories of sex/gender/desire that are currently treated in Western culture as normal and natural may be to explode or proliferate such categories (i.e., to turn the volume up) rather than try to eliminate them (i.e., to turn the volume down). In making this argument, I discuss the work of three scholars whose ideas are central: philosopher Judith Butler, anthropologist Mary Douglas, and developmental geneticist Anne Fausto-Sterling.*

In the final five pages of *The Lenses of Gender*, I argued that to interrupt the social reproduction of male power, we need to dismantle not only androcentrism and biological essentialism but also gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality. In other words, we need to sever all the culturally-constructed connections that currently exist in our society between what sex a person is and virtually every other aspect of human experience, including modes of dress, social roles, and even ways of expressing emotion and experiencing sexual desire. Put somewhat differently, we need to cut back the male-female distinction to a narrow—if critically important—relevance having primarily to do with the biology of reproduction.

With complete gender depolarization, the biology of sex would become a minimal presence in human social life. This does not mean that males and females would merely be freer to be masculine, feminine, or androgynous, heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual than they are now. What it means is that the distinction between male and female would no longer be the dimension around which the culture is organized. Hence, the very concepts of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny, heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality would be

as absent from the cultural consciousness as the concepts of a “hetero-eye-colored” eroticism, a “homo-eye-colored” eroticism, and a “bi-eye-colored” eroticism are now.

Consistent with this argument, I ended *Lenses* by calling not just for a social revolution but also for a psychological revolution:

Simply put, this psychological revolution would have us all begin to view the biological fact of being male or female in much the same way that we now view the biological fact of being human. Rather than seeing our sex as so authentically who we are that it needs to be elaborated, or so tenuous that it needs to be bolstered, or so limiting that it needs to be traded in for another model, we would instead view our sex as so completely given by nature, so capable of exerting its influence automatically, and so limited in its sphere of influence to those domains where it really does matter biologically that it could be safely tucked away in the backs of our minds and left to its own devices. In other words, biological sex would no longer be at the core of individual identity and sexuality. (Bem, 1993, p. 196)

Shrinking the relevance—or the reach—of sex in both our social and our psychological life is what I here mean by turning its volume *way* down.

Anyone familiar with the history of my work on gender and sexuality

already knows that the goal of shrinking sex's reach has been at its center for as long as I have been a feminist psychologist, which has now been for some 25 years. I here give only a few examples. In my early work on androgyny, I set forth a genderless model of mental health. In my later work on gender schematicity, I raised the possibility that we humans might not need to look through gender-polarizing lenses to the extent that most of us currently do. In *The Lenses of Gender*, I argued that the allegedly natural links that have long been thought to exist among sex, psyche,

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and sexuality have been constructed, in part, by more than 100 years of gender-polarizing theorizing in psychology, psychiatry, and sexology. Not only that, I further argued that psychology's 100-year struggle to figure out once and for all what biological sex differences there really are is misguided, in part, because it too much (and too reductionistically) emphasizes sexual difference per se and doesn't enough emphasize sexual difference in context. In other words, it is a distraction from the more urgent question of how our male-centered social world transforms whatever differences currently exist between the sexes (whether biological or not biological) into female disadvantage. Finally, there is even the mantra I recited to my children from the time they were old enough to open their ears: "A boy is someone with a penis and testicles; a girl is someone with a clitoris, vagina, and uterus; and whether you're a girl or a boy, a man or a woman, doesn't need to matter—or shouldn't anyway—until and unless you want to make a baby." [Given Anne Fausto-Sterling's (1993) analysis of intersexuals, which is discussed later in this article, I would clearly have to modify this mantra if I were teaching my children the categories of sexual difference today rather than 20 years ago.]

In my heart of hearts, I am still deeply attached to the principle of dismantling both gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality by trying to make the male-female distinction as minimal a presence in human social life as, say, eye color or foot size. At the same time, however, I have also come to think that this goal is an unreachable utopian fantasy. After all, not only does the sex of the body (by which I mean the biology of reproduction) matter more than eye color or foot size, from which it follows that there is probably more of a biological limit on how minimal a presence sex could come to have. In addition, history probably imposes a limit as

well—unless, of course, we can all manage to come down with amnesia for the many cultural and historical associations between male/female, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual.

In an early paper on androgyny, I suggested that "when androgyny becomes a reality, the *concept* of androgyny will have been transcended" (Bem, 1976, p. 60). I meant by this that when the androgynous message had finally been absorbed by the culture, the concepts of masculinity and femininity would cease to have content, and the distinctions to which they refer would blur into invisibility. But today I suggest that the content of these male/female associations will be remembered for a very long time; no matter how much we might like to, we thus cannot simply wish them away.

Much as I would still like to wish them away, given what I now see as the realities of biology and history, I have begun to worry that there may be no possible path for getting us from where we are now to where I would like us to be. So I here propose another utopian fantasy, this one based on the reverse strategy of turning the volume up. More specifically, I propose that rather than trying to dismantle the two-and-only-twoness of gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality by *eliminating* gender categories, we instead dismantle that two-and-only-twoness by *exploding* or *proliferating* gender categories. In other words, I propose that we let a thousand categories of sex/gender/desire begin to bloom in any and all fluid and permeable configurations and, through that very proliferation, that we thereby undo (or, if you prefer, that we de-privilege or de-center or de-stabilize) the privileged status of the two-and-only-two that are currently treated as normal and natural. If a thousand categories seems too many, then let's begin with at least 18. Why 18? The math is simple: two sexes (male/female) X three genders (masculine/feminine/androgynous) X three desires (heterosex-

ual/homosexual/bisexual). As radical—and outrageous—as this proposal will surely seem to many, it is fully consistent with the ideas of numerous contemporary scholars. I now discuss three of these.

### Judith Butler

Judith Butler is a philosopher, and the book of hers that I know best is entitled *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, published in 1990. The question Butler set out to answer in this book was how best to make gender trouble, i.e., how best to "trouble the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (p. viii). Her answer was to challenge the conceptual foundations of the sex/gender/desire system. In her words, this means a "genealogical" critique, which is not a search for "origins" or "inner truth" but an investigation of "the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (pp. viii-ix). More simply, her answer was to "trace the way in which gender fables establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts" (p. xi).

Even in this one-paragraph introduction to Butler's work, we can already see one of its distinguishing hallmarks. Butler is a master of nifty little reversals, three of which I am now going to show you.

The traditional view in both Western culture and Western science is that there are two and only two sexes that are naturally both different from another and attracted to one another. This division of all human beings into two bipolar categories of sex/gender/desire (the one category being male/masculine/attracted to women and the other category being female/feminine/attracted to men) may be differently elaborated in different cultures but, proponents of the traditional system say, it is also the biological foundation upon which culture is built.

Butler's first reversal is as follows. Rather than these two bipolar groups being the cause of exclusive and compulsory heterosexuality, they are instead the effect of exclusive and compulsory heterosexuality. In other words, for there to be a system of exclusive and compulsory heterosexuality, two such bipolar groups had to come into existence and so, voilà, the system produces them. That very cultural and historical production is then hidden, according to Butler, by an extraordinarily clever sleight of hand that casts the historical and cultural construction of the two-and-only-two into the realm of the pre-social, the pre-cultural, the pre-discursive. Thus it comes to pass that the two-and-only-two are accepted as a taken-for-granted and natural given of existence.

Another traditional view in Western culture, especially in certain branches of psychoanalysis, is that homosexuality is a pathetic imitation of heterosexuality, which is itself the natural or original form of sexuality. The same assumption holds for both drag and butch/femme roles, at least as enacted by gay men and lesbians.

Butler's second reversal goes like this. First, she argued, *all gender is drag*. In other words, all gender is an imitation of some phantasmagorical vision of what a man or a woman is supposed to be like. Hence there is nothing more natural, original, or unconstructed about a female dressing up like a woman than a male dressing up like a woman. That, of course, was the subtext of the movie *The Crying Game*. That, of course, is also why all the many dressed-up, made-up, and coiffed-up women walking along New York's Madison Avenue always look, to my eyes at least, not like women, but like people of whatever sex trying to look the way they think women are supposed to look.

Not only, according to Butler, is all gender drag, including that performed by the most conventional of masculine men and feminine women. In addition, heterosexuality can be

said to require homosexuality as a foundation at least as much as homosexuality has been said to require heterosexuality. Put somewhat differently, heterosexuality can be seen as having needed to construct an allegedly perverse, unnatural, and imitative homosexuality as the counterpoint against which to define itself as normal, natural, and original.

The same point can be expressed in another way. It is the traditional Western view that people who do not have the so-called normal clustering of sex/gender/desire have something wrong with them. They are anomalies, pathologies, developmental failures; hence they need, in some way, to be corrected, cured, healed, or fixed.

Butler's third reversal is that these so-called anomalies are defined as anomalous not because they really are anomalous but because the system of compulsory heterosexuality requires that they be defined this way. In other words, compulsory heterosexuality requires that there exists only a very narrow range of all possible sex/gender/desire configurations. Hence it excludes all other configurations from the "matrix of intelligibility" (p. 17) and then uses these so-called perverse others as the counterpoint to establish the two-and-only-two that are allowed to exist within the framework of the system. The two-and-only-two is thus created by a historical process in which everything else is either excluded or demonized, and the border between the normal and the perverse is carefully patrolled.

Another way to say all this is that the demonized are as necessary to the system of compulsory heterosexuality as the privileged. This is so because the contrast with the so-called abnormal or perverse is what defines—and thereby brings into conceptual and empirical existence—the so-called normal.

#### Mary Douglas

Mary Douglas is an anthropologist who wrote a book in 1966 enti-

tled *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. At first glance, this book seems irrelevant to the current discussion because it was not about gender or sexuality but about comparative religion cross-culturally and especially about why various religions define particular things as polluted, dangerous, impure, or taboo. Nevertheless, Douglas's book has a very important idea to add to this discussion.

Her book begins with a fascinating—and highly contextual—analysis of "dirt" as "disorder" (p. 2) or "matter out of place" (p. 35). So shoes aren't "dirt," but shoes on the table are. Food isn't "dirt" either, but food in the bedroom might be, and so might be food on your sweater.

Douglas analyzed the double edge of these elements out of place. The reason they bother us so much, she suggested, is because they violate and thereby challenge, or threaten, our most cherished classifications. After all, if shoes spend enough time on the table and food spends enough time in the bedroom, pretty soon there won't even be a special place for eating any longer. So we collectively say: "Yuk, this doesn't belong here. It is dirt, pollution, dangerous, disgusting, unholy, taboo." Yet, as much as we may be bothered by these elements out of place, we need them, Douglas argued, because through their very definition as dirt, our category of non-dirt is defined and clarified. Douglas's analysis of dirt obviously shares much in common with Butler's analysis of perversion or abnormality. For both theorists, the very elements defined by a system as anomalies uphold the systematicity—and hence the existence—of the system itself.

But then Douglas added another twist. These elements out of place, she argued, are not only critical to the system; they are also a danger to the system. They must thus be carefully managed, lest their power ends up destroying the very system they are supposed to be upholding. In

Douglas's words, "No culture can ignore the anomalies which its scheme produces, except at risk of forfeiting confidence" (p. 39).

Douglas gave many examples of how these dangerous elements are culturally managed. One technique is to incorporate them into public rituals, as a symbol of evil versus good. Another technique is to segregate them—as, for example, when all the Jews are put into a ghetto, and clear-cut rules are established about what kinds of interactions are and are not allowed with them. Still another technique is to eradicate the dangerous elements altogether. Douglas wrote of a culture, for example, that literally wrings the necks of all the night-crowing cocks so their presence cannot contradict the cherished cultural definition of a cock as a bird that crows at dawn.

The applicability of Douglas's analysis to sex, gender, and sexual desire is probably obvious, but I will make the three most important connections explicit. First, all the people who might currently be embraced by the label *queer* in our society are themselves the "dirt" that both define and threaten the culture's cherished classifications of sex/gender/desire. Second, the culture reduces the threat of all that dirt through a variety of management strategies, including, among others, requiring that lesbians and gay men stay closeted. Finally, there is power in the refusal of queer people to be managed or disciplined, power in their insistence on being unruly bodies.

### Anne Fausto-Sterling

The last author I will discuss is Anne Fausto-Sterling, a developmental geneticist who is perhaps best known to psychologists for her 1985 book entitled *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Women and Men*. What I want to discuss here, however, is her 1993 article entitled "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough."

According to Fausto-Sterling, sex is a continuum that ought to be

divided not into just two sexes but into at least five sexes—which she labels women, men, herms, ferms, and merms. According to Fausto-Sterling's definitions, *herms* are the so-called true hermaphrodites who possess one testis and one ovary; *ferms* are female pseudohermaphrodites who possess ovaries and some aspect of male genitalia but no testes; and *merms* are male pseudohermaphrodites who possess testes and some aspects of female genitalia but no ovaries.

Herms, ferms, and merms are estimated to be at least 4% of all births. So, says Fausto-Sterling, there ought to be as many as 240 such undergraduates on Brown University's 6,000-student campus, where she teaches. But they're not there, she goes on to say, because of our culture's unexamined assumption that they are anomalies in need of surgical and hormonal correction. These absent intersexuals, I suggest, are our culture's counterpart to the night-crowing cocks, discussed by Douglas, whose necks have been wrung. Hence, they are not in existence, either.

Partly for fun, I quote Fausto-Sterling's description of someone named Emma, who was originally described by urologist Hugh Young in a 1937 book entitled *Genital Abnormalities, Hermaphroditism, and Related Adrenal Diseases*. Emma was a hermaphrodite who had grown up as a female. According to Fausto-Sterling (1993, p. 23),

Emma had both a penis-size clitoris and a vagina, which made it possible for him/her to have "normal" heterosexual sex with both men and women. As a teenager Emma had had sex with a number of girls to whom s/he was deeply attracted; but at the age of nineteen s/he had married a man. Unfortunately, he had given Emma little sexual pleasure (though he had no complaints), and so throughout that marriage and subsequent ones Emma had kept girlfriends on the side. With some frequency s/he had pleasurable sex with them. Young describes his

subject as appearing "to be quite content and even happy." In conversation Emma occasionally told him of his/her wish to be a man, a circumstance Young said would be relatively easy to bring about. But Emma's reply strikes a heroic blow for self-interest: "Would you have to remove that vagina? I don't know about that because that's my meal ticket. If you did that, I would have to quit my husband and go to work, so I think I'll keep it and stay as I am. My husband supports me well, and even though I don't have any sexual pleasure with him, I do have lots with my girlfriends."

Conventional medical wisdom says that, unless surgically and hormonally "corrected," intersexuals are doomed to a life of misery. But that was obviously not the case for Emma, which led Fausto-Sterling to argue for raising all the little Emmas now living in the world as "unabashed intersexuals" (p. 24). Her argument is so provocative that I quote it at some length, according to Fausto-Sterling (p. 24),

The treatment of intersexuality in this century provides a clear example of what the French historian Michel Foucault has called biopower. The knowledge developed in biochemistry, embryology, endocrinology, psychology and surgery has enabled physicians to control the very sex of the human body. The multiple contradictions in that kind of power call for some scrutiny. On the one hand, the medical "management" of intersexuality certainly developed as part of an attempt to free people from perceived psychological pain (though whether the pain was the patient's, the parents' or the physician's is unclear). And if one accepts the assumption that in a sex-divided culture people can realize their greatest potential for happiness and productivity only if they are sure they belong to one of only two acknowledged sexes, modern medicine has been extremely successful.

On the other hand, the same medical accomplishments can be read not as progress but as a mode of discipline. Hermaphrodites have unruly bodies. They do not fall naturally into a binary classification; only a surgical shoehorn can

put them there. But why should we care if a "woman," defined as one who has breasts, a vagina, a uterus and ovaries and who menstruates, also has a clitoris large enough to penetrate the vagina of another woman? Why should we care if there are people whose biological equipment enables them to have sex "naturally" with both men and women? The answers seem to lie in a cultural need to maintain clear distinctions between the sexes. Society mandates the control of intersexual bodies because they blur and bridge the great divide. Inasmuch as hermaphrodites literally embody both sexes, they possess the irritating ability to live sometimes as one sex and sometimes the other, and they raise the specter of homosexuality.

But what if things were altogether different? Imagine a world in which the same knowledge that has enabled medicine to intervene in the management of intersexual patients has been placed at the service of multiple sexualities. Imagine that the sexes have multiplied beyond currently imaginable limits. It would have to be a world of shared powers. Patient and physician, parent and child, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual—all these oppositions and others would have to be dissolved as sources of division. A new ethic of medical treatment would arise, one that would permit ambiguity in a culture that had overcome sexual division. The central mission of medical treatment would be to preserve life. Thus hermaphrodites would be concerned primarily not about whether they can conform to society but about whether they might develop potentially life-threatening conditions—hernias, gonadal tumors, salt imbalance caused by adrenal malfunction—that sometimes accompany hermaphroditic development. In my ideal world medical intervention for intersexuals would take place only rarely before the age of reason; subsequent treatments would be a cooperative venture between physician, patient and other advisers trained in issues of gender multiplicity.

I do not pretend that the transition to my utopia would be smooth. Sex, even the supposedly "normal," heterosexual kind, con-

tinues to cause untold anxiety in Western society. And certainly a culture that has yet to come to grips—religiously and, in some states, legally—with the ancient and relatively uncomplicated reality of homosexual love will not readily embrace intersexuality. No doubt the most troublesome arena by far would be the rearing of children. Parents, at least since the Victorian era, have fretted, sometimes to the point of outright denial, over the fact that their children are sexual beings.

All that and more amply explains why intersexual children are generally squeezed into one of the two prevailing sexual categories. But what would be the psychological consequences of taking the alternative road—raising children as unabashed intersexuals? On the surface that tack seems fraught with peril. What, for example, would happen to the intersexual child amid the unrelenting cruelty of the school yard? When the time came to shower in gym class, what horrors and humiliations would await the intersexual as his/her anatomy was displayed in all its nontraditional glory? In whose gym class would s/he register to begin with? What bathroom would s/he use? And how on earth would Mom and Dad help shepherd him/her through the mine field of puberty?

In the past thirty years those questions have been ignored, as the scientific community has, with remarkable unanimity, avoided contemplating the alternative route of unimpeded intersexuality. But modern investigators tend to overlook a substantial body of case histories, most of them compiled between 1930 and 1960, before surgical intervention became rampant. Almost without exception, those reports describe children who grew up knowing they were intersexual (although they did not advertise it) and adjusted to their unusual status. Some of the studies are richly detailed—described at the level of gym-class showering (which most intersexuals avoided without incident); in any event, there is not a psychotic or a suicide in the lot.

Still, the nuances of socialization among intersexuals cry out for more sophisticated analysis. Clearly, before my vision of sexual

multiplicity can be realized, the first openly intersexual children and their parents will have to be brave pioneers who will bear the brunt of society's growing pains. But in the long view—though it could take generations to achieve—the prize might be a society in which sexuality is something to be celebrated for its subtleties and not something to be feared or ridiculed.

### Toward a Kaleidoscope of Color

Fausto-Sterling's exuberant call for us to raise little Emmas as unabashed intersexuals brings me all the way back to the proposal I made at the outset of this article, which was that we might more realistically dismantle both gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality by turning the volume up rather than turning the volume down. In other words, it might be more effective in the long run if all of us sex/gender/desire "anomalies" were henceforth to refuse to be managed, regulated, invisibilized, disciplined, and/or in any other way homogenized into the residual category of *dirt* that stands in such stark opposition to the two-and-only-two privileged and cherished categories of male/masculine/attracted to women and female/feminine/attracted to men—and that we instead begin madly and exuberantly to proliferate ourselves into as many categories of sex/gender/desire as we seem to need.

Would the creation of these many new categories merely give us 1,000 straightjackets where before we had two and only two? Not necessarily. At least not if the categories were presumed to be fluid, not if mobility were presumed to be possible from one category to another, and not if the categories acknowledged the 2-, 3-, 4-, 5- (and so on) sidedness in each of us. Who knows? Perhaps these many fluid categories would create such a huge new space of possibility that more and more people who now manage to squeeze themselves, however uncomfortably, into the two-and-only-two would begin, for the first time, to be able to see the shoehorn that is squeezing

them, and they would then be motivated to look around for something that fit them better. What interesting gender trouble we would then have made.

For many years, Cornell anthropologist Kathryn March has begun her guest lecture in my undergraduate course on the Social Construction of Gender with the following analogy: Sex is to Gender as Light is to Color. Her idea here is a simple one. Both sex and light are natural physical continua, whereas gender and color are historically and culturally constructed categories that arbitrarily divide sex and light into named clusters invested with cultural meaning. Thus, in neither domain is there anything sacred—or biologically special—about the particular categories constructed by any given culture.

I have always loved this analogy because it allows me to make yet another ironic twist. With respect to color categories, anthropologists have found that some cultures have only two categories and others only three, whereas we in the U.S. have the full 256 of the big Crayola coloring box. Wow, I always say to my class, isn't it wonderful to be so richly blessed with so many possibilities rather than to be so impoverished as

to have only light and dark or light and dark and red? But isn't it also ironic, I then say, that in the domain of sex/gender/desire, it's the other cultures who have that Crayola color box of multitudinous possibilities, and we who are impoverished, with two-and-only-two (plus the dirt, of course) from birth to death?

I suggested earlier that I could no longer envision any possible way to dismantle either gender polarization or compulsory heterosexuality by eliminating gender categories, but I could envision a way to do this by proliferating gender categories. Not only can I envision a way to do this; I can already see it happening in the world around me. You can see it, too, if you look under the heading of either identity politics or multiculturalism. Because what is happening there—and in many more domains than just sex/gender/desire—is not the silence of turning the volume down on difference and diversity but the cacophony of sound (and also of conflict) that comes from having finally turned the volume up on the many multidimensional voices that have been silenced far too long—including not just lesbians, gay men, and now bisexuals, but the much more color-full Crayola kaleidoscope of, for example, f-to-m and m-to-f

transgendered people, lipstick lesbians, butches, baby butches, stone butches, femmes, butchy femmes, bulldaggers, leather dykes, softball dykes, rugby dykes, dykes on bikes, klesbians, hasbians, dominatrices, fag hags, drag queens, opera queens, size queens, rice queens, bears, bottoms, tops, masters, slaves, leather men, vanilla boys, clones, daddies, friends of Dorothy, and so on and so forth ad (perhaps) infinitum.

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