

Exposé

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This thesis will explore the possibilities and boundaries of the rather new and highly debated category transgender. It is the task of my work to show that transgender might be employed as a basis on which a subject-position becomes imaginable, enabling the subject to understand himself¹ neither as completely dependent on the dominant bipolar gender-discourse(s) nor as a free-floating entity waiting to be signified as will. As I will show, transgender is rather a non-identity than an identity if identity means to be identical with oneself once a certain status is achieved or assumed to be achieved. Consequently, transgender as a theoretical concept of thinking the subject differently provides possibilities for an empowering self-understanding of the “deviant” subject, for developing more inclusive political strategies that take into account differences as well as similarities and equality, and for coalitional politics that acknowledge and use their necessarily provisional character. The focus of my work will be on the theoretical grounds that make these changes possible.

The term transgender is widely used in different discourses bearing various and contradictory meanings. Some theorists regard transgender as a promising concept for thinking the subject less fixed and unchanging. This openness is thought to involve different yet entangled sides of the subject like the body, gender, and sexuality/desire. The rigid dichotomous structure of the sex/gender/sexuality system is critiqued for being exclusive and oppressing all persons who do not fit into the demanded coherences. The proposed effects of transgender theory and politics differ; on the one hand, theorists strive to thoroughly destabilize the whole sex/gender/sexuality system by theoretically undermining its requirements. On the other hand, transgender is introduced as signifying a third category and hence, making room for “deviances”.² Other

¹ Leslie Feinberg introduces these terms in order to avoid the heteronormative use of gendered language.

² Kate Bornstein: *Gender Outlaw. On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*.

theorists critique transgender for not being grounded on a reliable basis of identity. Following from this, it is assumed that identity(-politics) are rendered impossible or at least impotent. Hence, the subject stays excluded from any position of power enabling hir to fight for more freedom of expression and life.

In this work I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of transgender theory in further detail to come to the conclusion that only paradoxical strategies working on different levels might lead to a promising concept of thinking the subject less fixed. In this regard it is my suggestion to look for strategies to rock the pillars the restrictive sex/gender/sexuality system rests on. In order to appear stable and unshaking the sex/gender/sexuality system requires coherence between one and only one unambiguously sexed body (male or female) and one and only one unambiguous gender identity (feminine or masculine), which is assigned to every individual and simultaneously has to be picked and lived. From these two seemingly reconciled characteristics of the subject follows a harsh reinforcement of congruent sexuality (preferred heterosexuality or sometimes tolerated homosexuality), required to be as one-dimensional, unambiguous, and unchanging as the other aspects of the subject.³ This very brief framing of the sex/gender/sexuality system is necessarily simplified, for the system is highly adaptable and constantly re-constructed by all its participants, yet to a varying degree and impact.

Because of the inconsistencies of the use of the category transgender, I consider it useful to approach a necessarily temporary definition to work with in order to clarify my thoughts and argument. Aiming to find a clearer, yet necessarily tentative, definition of the term transgender, it is useful to look at the history of the term. Therefore in the first chapter of my thesis I will elaborate on the medical-psychiatric discourse in which lie the parts of roots of transgender. I will briefly discuss the main theorists who developed concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality in the medical-psychological field as there are Magnus Hirschfeld, Havelock Ellis, Harry Benjamin, and John Money.

In a second step I will show the discussions concerning transgender in feminist theory and queer theory. Debates concerning the position of transsexuals in feminist circles are being continued since the 1970s. I will compare the positions of lesbian feminists like Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys, who strongly argue against a participation of male-to-female transsexuals in the feminist movement, with transgender theorists like Patrick Califia and others who critique

³ I this exposé as well as in my thesis I will mainly focus on the body, gender, and sexuality, although I am highly aware of other structuring dimensions of the subject such as “race”/ethnicity, class, age, dis/ability, and many more that might not even be considered important yet.

lesbian feminism for rendering trans-people the enemy and excluding them from any feminist movement. I will show that these arguments are resting on essentialist, hence oppressive identity-categories.

In the third chapter I will focus on the broad field of transgender theory, which proves to be highly differentiated in itself. As every emerging movement, transgenderism digs for roots to position itself in relation to other discourses. One step on this path is re-writing transgender history as feminists did re-writing “herstory”. Therefore, I will give a brief account of the strategies trans-people employ to make themselves visible throughout history. Furthermore, I will present the main ways in which transgender theory and practice approach dominant discourses in order to establish themselves as possible ways of living and thinking. In this chapter I will mainly draw on writings by trans-people, for making their own voices heard and acknowledged is one of the major issues for trans-theorists. I will discuss the notion of transgender as a third category as proposed by Kate Bornstein, Michael Gilbert, and Sandy Stone⁴ as well as the idea of viewing the sex/gender/sexuality system as a continuum as debated by Judith Halberstam and Leslie Feinberg. I will focus on the significance of the body for transgender theorists concerning the individual’s right to alter one’s body as discussed by Leslie Feinberg, Pippa Brush, and Pat Califia. Finally, I will juxtapose the arguments for and against the notion of passing which sometimes separate transgender theory and practice from transsexual theory and practice.

In the last section I will present my supposed working-hypothesis. The tentative character of this hypothesis is inevitable, bearing the risk of drifting into meaninglessness which will be discussed in this final part. I will argue for a concept of transgender that is highly differentiated in itself yet inclusive towards an always changing “outside”. Transgender is a self-evaluative notion that may be interpreted as broadly as meaning “some degree of discomfort, all or some of the time with one’s birth-assigned gender designation.”⁵ Roughly speaking, everybody who ‘admits’ it is transgendered, to various degrees. Inherent in this character of inclusiveness lies not only the risk of becoming senselessly empty, but also the possible prospect of triggering an ongoing debate concerning the content of sex, (trans)gender, and sexuality. This debate will be characterized by a self-critical attitude towards one’s own and the expectations and demands of others. I suggest to bear this self-critical openness in mind while building new coalitions everybody who wants to alter the oppressive sex/gender/sexuality system is in need of. On the

⁴ None of these listings of authors is exhaustive, it just names few major theorists who will be discussed.

⁵ Gilbert, Michael: „The Transgender Philosopher“, p. 2.

level of political strategies I propose to employ differing, seemingly contradictory tactics, for the outcome of a certain deed or political action is never securely predictable. Hence, I think it necessary to approach tactics such as theoretical analyses of the aspects of the sex/gender/sexuality system as well as other important aspects of human life as there are “race”/ethnicity, age, dis/ability, class and many others. Although theoretical and practical approaches are often seen as irreconcilable, I strongly argue for employing strategies of both realms in order to fight for more freedom and acceptance amongst human beings. Hence, civil rights for transgender people as well as theoretical examinations of the persistency of the dichotomous sex/gender/sexuality system are necessary for moving towards a less rigid and oppressive way of thinking and living.

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