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GENDER



GENDER is a system of categorizing ourselves and each other (including bodies, desires, and behaviors) running through every aspect of culture and society, and intertwining with other categories and hierarchies (race, class, sexuality, age, ability, and so much more). Various aspects of biology (for example, genitals, chromosomes, and body shape) are interpreted to mean that human beings naturally belong in one of two categories: male and female. But if we look more closely, we might question the nature of gender. Biology, human and otherwise, is wonderfully diverse.

Nature doesn't give us these two options. We interpret and categorize, and then come to believe that those interpretations, those categories, are the truth. Gender doesn't just happen. People define it, invent it. Even genital surgery on intersex bodies is described as corrective, as though nature had made a mistake by not conforming to our binary thinking. Because we invent gender, we can do it differently. This becomes clear when we look at the many ways that throughout history and across cultures, different aspects of social life and personality have been part of defining gender. What counts as a "real" man or a "good" woman, as masculine or feminine, varies from place to place and time to time. In some (sub)cultures, gender hasn't been limited to two options but instead includes recognition of three, four, or many genders.

The usual story in countries like the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, however, is that there are only two options. And while these states may offer formal, legal equality, in practice they still largely value those characteristics associated with men and masculinity (for instance, independence, control, and strength) over those associated with women and femininity (say, interdependence, love, and gentleness). This hierarchy can be subtle or blatant, woven together with other hierarchies through institutions and systems, socialization and culture, in ways that produce many complex effects. In dominant cultures, mind and reason are imagined as both separate from and superior to body and emotion; so too is whiteness privileged over color, action over rest, hetero over homo, and firmness over tenderness.

Gender can be more or less rigid. Supposedly abnormal, unnatural, or improper gender behavior can be met with social censure ranging from teasing to bullying, discrimination, imprisonment, forced medical “treatment,” sexual violence, emotional abuse, and even murder. This violence is most obvious when it comes to transgender people, or those who otherwise transgress the social assumption of two fixed and natural genders. Why does gender transgression trigger such strong emotions, even to the point of violence? Perhaps it is because none of us are perfect examples of a real man or real woman. No one can live up to these abstract ideals, with all the contradictory messages about what they even mean. Most people twist themselves into knots trying to conform to what they think they should be, rather than simply being aware of who they actually are. Self-policing one’s gender can feel so familiar, so habitual and subtle, that the effort put into conforming may seem natural and effortless. Yet there is something profoundly liberating in growing self-aware of the habits we hold on to out of fear or shame, and when it feels right, learning to let them go.

Gender isn’t just an individual experience, though. It’s intertwined with all of our relationships and social institutions— many of which presently, if sometimes inadvertently, serve to constrain, hurt, or control most people. Perhaps the most obvious structure that does this today is the family, where people generally first learn to notice the anxieties and expectations that come with gender. Even the very idea of what a family is and how it works (or what it should be and how it should work) is inextricably linked with gender. The idealized nuclear family, for example, is defined as consisting of a monogamous, married, and reproductive heterosexual couple led by the male “head of household.” If the woman works outside the home, as is often economically necessary at this stage of capitalism, she is still likely to do far more of the housekeeping, emotional labor, and child care—with little or no recognition of such tasks as work. Children are given gender labels from birth and may be expected to conform to them. And while being the head of household has its privileges, masculinity is frequently tied to one’s ability or not to provide financially for the family, which in turn leads to a great deal of anxiety, frustration, and shame in class-based societies.

The wider political economy is also gendered in oppressive and exploitative ways. Just as women’s labor inside the home is typically taken for granted, all sorts of feminized labor is taken for granted in capitalism too. When people talk about “the economy,” they usually are referring to a narrow and official definition that only includes paid work, the production of materials or knowledge, and the sales and distribution of those products. The economy, in this understanding, doesn’t include the bearing and (unpaid) caring of children nor the (unpaid) housework on which any economy depends. Nor does capitalism and related colonialist projects truly recognize the traditional knowledge of noncapitalist cultures, whose extensive histories of, say, working with plants are exploited by pharmaceutical and agricultural corporations. Feminists of color have long noted the linkages between colonialism’s unacknowledged dependence on the skills, wisdom, and labor of people of color and women of all races. Many celebrated historical figures in colonial nations are both white and male. There is nothing wrong with white men per se, but neither is there anything as special about them as cultures of white supremacy and gender hierarchy would encourage us to believe. Besides, no one does anything on their own. We all depend on the efforts of others. While understated in capitalist thought, such efforts have inherent worth and point the way to alternative economies.

Indeed, when work associated with women and femininity (such as teaching, nursing, cleaning, and listening) is paid, it’s paid much less than work associated with men and masculinity (such as sports, finance, leadership, and talking). This gender hierarchy is further tied up with race and class inequalities when, for example, higher-status women move into work traditionally associated with men, thereby leaving feminized labor to lower-status women.

The nation-state, too, is gendered. Like the traditional head of household, the head of state offers protection in exchange for obedience. Its other characteristics (including rigid borders, competitiveness, aggression, and independence) are also those linked to certain versions of men and masculinity. Some nations invade others in order to demonstrate their dominance, which once again involves hierarchies of race and wealth. Like individuals or households competing for economic success, nation-states are inherently insecure. By simultaneously creating fear and promising security, they endlessly justify their existence.

The ways we categorize humanity into races, ethnicities, classes, and countries are all gendered. Consider common stereotypes: the passive East Asian woman, the hypersexual black man, the exotic other from across the border (whether of nations or neighborhoods). Colonial invasions have long been justified by white men (and women) drawn to both wealth and playing the hero, allegedly protecting brown women from brown men. Ongoing inequalities are reinforced by continuing to cast brown women and men, especially those in the so-called developing world, in the role of a victim in need of charity. Gender divisions are rife with contradictions. Class hierarchies, for instance, can be based on a division between manual labor (using the body, which is associated with femininity) and so-called skilled labor (using the mind, and linked to authority and control, which are all associated with masculinity). Working-class masculine frustration often merely reverses this hierarchy, suggesting that the strength of using one's body is a more authentic form of masculinity, while upper-class men with their clean clothes and soft skin are effeminate.

Holding on to such resentment, to fantasies of superiority and a fear of different cultures, is itself part of a gendered culture uncomfortable with emotion. Instead of simply allowing emotions to exist and pass through us, or finding other healthy ways to deal with our feelings, most of us are taught to either cling to or reject them (which is really just another way of holding on). Learning to be comfortable with our desires as well as our fears is part of creating a world where we can live with and love ourselves along with each other in all our differences and similarities. Even our relationship with the rest of the natural world ("Mother Nature") is connected to gender. Inciting fear and shame in people, about either their own gender or gendered others (such as queers or foreigners), induces a self-centered state of mind. When individuals feel threatened, they of course prepare to defend themselves. They may do this by supporting war, which has a profound ecological impact, or even through shopping. Making people insecure about their bodies, and then offering products and services to address the supposed imperfections, is fuel to the fire of a growth economy, unsustainable on a finite planet. Self-centeredness (associated, for example, with certain success-oriented versions of masculinity) can also lead to seeing the bodies of other people, other species, and the earth itself as merely "resources" available for one's own benefit rather than beings in their own right.

Gender is a living, evolving system. It has no fixed truth. It changes as we change our relationships with ourselves, each other, and the world. Gender diversity is about the incredible beauty of life's capacity to overflow, undermine, subvert, and refuse all the categories we put on it, ourselves, and each other. Compassion can motivate people to seek each other out, to support and nourish each other, to do gender differently. Men who want to let themselves be gentle become friends. Women who know they can be strong organize together and share skills. Drag queens and kings, bi people and transfolk, lesbian women and gay men, and queers of all sexualities make spaces for themselves and each other to connect, share, and play. Friendships, networks, and movements can also include, cross, or transcend all these identities and more.

Sometimes people cling to gender identities to feel safe. At other times, they might hold them lightly. Different spaces, different practices, can help people feel safe enough to drop some of their own borders and self-policing in order to experience gender lightly, playfully. Families can, of course, also embody alternatives to normative gender. Single mothers or fathers, joint mothers or joint fathers, and transgender parents all show that children do not need two parents of

supposedly opposite genders. Gender diversity in children can be respected and honored. People can become conscious of how work is divided within the home. We can be less fixed and more experimental with our roles as well as identities. Sometimes people create their own families, defined less by blood kinship and more by affinity, friendship, and intimacy. People in social groups, movements, and even neighborhoods can become family, developing their own rituals and relationships. Housing cooperatives, queer networks of friends and lovers, or extended families of other sorts all highlight that the heavily gendered ideal of the nuclear family is only one possibility among many.

Economics and politics can be done differently, too. The dominant systems of capitalism and the nation-state are not the only options. They do not even represent the majority of ways that people engage in economics or politics but instead simply demand the most attention. Feminist geographers and economists, for example, highlight the diverse economies that exist around the world—all the various forms of producing, consuming, sharing, and working—that don't fit into the narrow (and macho) definition of the economy. We can acknowledge, celebrate, and develop diverse, cooperative, caring economies, emphasizing their viability as real alternatives. Indigenous activist-scholars and anarchist anthropologists note that many cultures, and even some nations, do not have the same impulse to define clear borders or police their own people—forms of social control that are taken for granted as politics. Let's notice in our own lives the difference between the official stories of who is in control and how life actually works. How might we nurture the elements of our society that work cooperatively with other people as well as ecosystems to create freedom, equality, and abundance?

Like power, gender is everywhere, running through our relationships with ourselves, each other, and the earth, and the relations between nations, classes, and cultures. And like power, it is not a problem in itself but instead a question of how we do it. Gender can be a pattern of control, violence, and domination. Or it can be just another way of talking about the beautiful diversity of human existence.

The Lexicon series aims to convert words into politically helpful tools—for those already engaged in a politics from below as well as the newly approaching—by offering definitional understandings of commonly used keywords.