

Feminism as Political Practice

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Starting with a discussion of three related but distinct ideas – sex, gender and sexuality – Elsa Dorlin summarizes forty years of feminist theories. She also traces these three categories back to practices that are inseparable from a context of domination.

About: Elsa Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités: Introduction à la théorie féministe* [Sex, Gender and Sexuality: An Introduction to Feminist Theory], Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, “*Philosophies*” series, 2008, 160 pp., 12€.

By making the connection between sex, gender and sexuality a central issue of feminism, the aim of Elsa Dorlin’s book is to produce a critical assessment and above all a diagnosis of current power relations. Three questions run through her book: what is special about a feminist analysis of power relations? What can feminism rely on as political practice? And how are power relations reproduced and expressed?

Heterosexual domination: naturalizing and excluding

Dorlin suggests that we should see the development of feminist theories as a succession of conceptual shifts: from sex to gender, from gender to sexuality, and then from sexuality to queer practice. At first sight, feminist thinking appeared to be a claim for the equality of the sexes, and for the arrival of women on the political scene. Much of Dorlin’s analysis questions the idea that “woman” (*femina*) is the proper point of departure for feminism, by showing that in feminist concepts and struggles, claims based on a feminine point of view very often turn out to be problematic assertions of a difference between the sexes. The construction of a feminist philosophy requires the rejection of any differentialist feminism that would claim that there are essential differences between what is masculine and what is feminine. Against that differentialist view, Dorlin deploys two main strategies. First she deconstructs the category of sex, and criticizes treating feminine identities as natural. Analysis of medical discourse and practices, especially in the treatment of intersex individuals whose sex at birth is ambiguous, shows that anatomical evidence is a result of interventions that create a masculine-feminine binarism that is presented as insurmountable (i.e. it is “naturalized”). Secondly, criticism of the oppression of women tends to rely on the existence of specifically feminine features, so it risks essentializing an identity that should actually be understood as the effect of oppression. Like Christine Delphy¹, Dorlin thus argues that gender precedes sex, and defines gender as “a power relation that provides for its reproduction partly by mutations of the categorical system that it produces and on which it leans” (p. 54): the sexes are categories produced by a power system that subordinates the feminine to the masculine, and modifications of these categories are possible because it is not a matter of following nature but of affirming difference and inequality. So that is the first shift in feminist theory in this book: from the recognition of the equality of the sexes to analysis of ways in which gender arises.

¹ Cf. Christine Delphy, *L’ennemi principal, II. Penser le genre*, Paris, Syllepse, 2001.

As gender precedes sex, Dorlin argues that sexuality precedes gender. Here again the development of feminist struggles, by bringing to light new subjects and issues, necessitates a critical interpretation of the uses of the idea of gender. Although the concept of gender helps to deconstruct the naturalness of the sexes, it is not immune to the assertion of the primacy of one sexuality over another. Debates about gay parenting and homosexuality more generally have clearly shown that the issue is not just the inequality of men and women, it is the inequality of sexualities. Here it is not so much a matter of mistakenly treating the sexes as natural than it is of seeing differences between the sexes as the foundation of culture. Exclusion is applied to homosexualities and more widely to marital and sexual ways that depart from heterosexuality, and it falls to feminist philosophy to take into account not only the relationship between women and men but also between homosexuality and heterosexuality. So the second shift, in line with Gayle Rubin², consists of moving from the ways in which gender arises to a critique of the system of compulsory heterosexuality.

The third shift rests on taking on board queer theories and practices. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler³, Dorlin brings her enquiry to bear on the production of the body and of sexualities as a decision about what is and what is not intelligible. Heterosexuality is not just the way of organizing gender and sexualities, it is also the kind of sexuality that is considered to be the true and authentic one. However, minority sexualities are not really excluded from this question of authenticity (for example, we can say that someone is not “truly” gay). By bringing transsexuals and drag queens onto the theoretical scene, queer theory produces a critique of the homosexuality that bases its legitimacy on its implicit or explicit claim that it is the “real” homosexuality. Here we see the substance of this third and final shift in this book: from the critique of the system of compulsory heterosexuality to practices that subvert “authentic” sexualities.

Where are these successive shifts taking us? There seems to be perpetual motion, since setting out one identity always entails excluding a different one, and it is impossible to include all the minorities. However, Dorlin’s analysis focuses not on the gradual integration of minoritized subjects, but on the growing pressure of domination. Going along with the book’s shifts, the reader comes to see heterosexual domination more clearly, and to notice the various forms of this domination (economic, sexual, and racial). Up to now feminist theory has worked to identify masculine domination; instead, Dorlin identifies heterosexuality as the principle of the power relations that affect gender and sexuality. Essentially, heterosexuality is neither a practice nor even a sexual identity. It is a political and economic system defined by a binarism of the sexes that establishes a hierarchy of the feminine and the masculine – a hierarchy of sexualities that rests on the primacy of reproductive penetration, the invisibility of minority practices, the appropriation of women by men, and the exclusion of identities that do not correspond to the ideals of masculinity and femininity.

LGBTQ and beyond: feminism’s subjects and objects

After identifying heterosexuality as the regime that divides up power and distributes dominant meanings of gender and sexualities, Dorlin’s work deploys a second line of reasoning: while heterosexuality is clearly the dominant regime, it is also a zone of contention

² Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex", in Rayna Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975; reprinted in Linda Nicholson (ed.), *Second Wave: A Feminist Reader*, New York and London, Routledge, 1997.

³ Cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London, Routledge, 1990.

in which the dominated subjects enter into conflict. For heterosexual domination is flawed, and appears to contain within itself its own undoing. This can be seen with homosexuality, but also with intersexuality: power relations clearly do assign different statuses to individuals, and do put practices into a hierarchy, but these relations prevent neither the existence of conflicts nor the expression of minority life styles. Following Michel Foucault's arguments,⁴ Dorlin regards feminist knowledge – the knowledge of minorities in the heterosexual regime – as a practice of power. She regards the production of concepts as a theoretical and practical challenge that can end up supporting more or less discerning policies. Feminist theory can construct a view of reality that runs counter to the dominant view. It can articulate the view of the vanquished – of women, homosexuals, and transsexuals – and criticize the dominant categories by producing other, less excluding categories.

What, then, are the subjects of feminism? What are the topics on which can be constructed feminist theory and feminist politics? We have seen that the development of feminist theory has been advanced by a series of shifts that have brought about a critical reconsideration of what is included in the subjects of feminism, moving from women to homosexuals and then to transsexuals. This is reflected in the gradual expansion of the acronym LGB to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer). Dorlin takes this development very seriously, and thinks of the subject of feminism “as a fluctuating, volatile and intrinsically erratic category, which cannot be defined *a priori*, and cannot be at the foundation of feminism's development and struggles without running the risk of reproducing and reiterating exclusions” (p. 97). The proliferation of feminism's subjects is not the unfortunate result of a lack of a theoretical foundation, it is the effect of a theory that takes seriously the power relations that always determine assignments of identity. The idea of founding feminist theory on the basis of a definition of its subjects (women, lesbians, etc.) is rejected in favour of thinking in terms of a strategy aimed at reducing the establishment of exclusions as much as possible. What might appear to be an epistemological necessity – namely, having a subject about which to speak and to act – is replaced by a political demand: the refusal to exclude the dominated.

We can draw two conclusions from this political demand: first, that feminism is a work of raising awareness about power relations, especially the relations of domination that are implicit in some feminist claims. By emphasizing particularly the relations between sex and race, Dorlin clearly shows that the assertion of a subject for feminism rests on a norm of femininity that can be implicitly racist. She draws attention to the fact that in the debates about voting rights in the United States in the nineteenth century some feminists opposed voting rights for blacks, because as white women they should be considered as more legitimate citizens. They argued that defending the voting rights of women required excluding blacks from the category “woman”. But the idea is not to go beyond each successive feminist subject by treating it as obsolete (as if homosexuals had become a more relevant topic than women, transsexuals more relevant than homosexuals, and so on), it is rather to multiply and to accumulate points of view, in order to open up different strategic fronts against heterosexual domination and to prevent even feminist theory itself from engendering mechanisms that exclude.

The second conclusion is that although power relations are omnipresent, the division into dominant and dominated is not established in advance: nothing determines in advance what are the proper and improper subjects and objects of feminism. On this point, Dorlin's

⁴ Especially his first series of lectures at the Collège de France: “Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976”, translated into English by David Macey, New York, Picador, 2003.

discussion of dildos is interesting. In lesbian feminism there is a well-known question about the use of dildos. Taking the dildo to be a substitute for the penis, it seems to follow either that, from the lesbian point of view, using it is not an authentically lesbian practice; or that, from the heterosexual point of view, a genuine sexual relation requires a penis. We can see that the assumption in both cases is that there is an authentic sexuality, and true sex; this assumption conceals the historicity and the naturalizing of sexualities. But nothing dictates that the dildo be a substitute of the penis; the dildo's meaning varies with the context, and in fact it points to a "potential proliferation of supplemental penetrants" (p. 137) which can subvert the heterosexual order, if only because as an artifice it implicitly questions the "natural" function of the penis in the sexual act. And even if we were to suppose that the use of dildos is not widespread – even among feminists - that does not mean that these issues concern only a few people. Are the subjects of feminism found in minorities, among the more dominated? If the domination comes from processes of naturalizing and excluding, and if the heterosexual regime defines the subjects, whether these be dominated or dominant, the heterosexual imperative concerns everyone. There are no natural dominants, there are only subjectifying processes that give to each person a variable place in power relations and in a defined system of categories.

Sex crises

The reflection on the subjects and objects of feminism lets us look at one last viewpoint in this book: that the faults in the heterosexual regime indicate not only that it is an arena for conflicts, but also that there is a systemic crisis in which feminist theory plays an integral part. Picking up on Gaston Bachelard's thinking about epistemological obstacles, Dorlin makes the idea of a crisis a core conceptual starting point for constructing a feminist theory. What constitutes a crisis? Crisis is understood here not as a rupture between knowledge and shared opinion, nor as a passage from one scientific concept to another; instead, it is seen as a permanent condition of the connection between sexual knowledge and practices. Thus, while studies of intersexuality show that the binary categorization on which they rest ultimately breaks down, that does not stop doctors from actually performing operations that reassign the sex of children who are considered to be sexually ambiguous. The epistemological crisis does not lead to a reconfiguration of sex categories; it works rather as a reaffirmation of gender relations. Let us go back to and complete Dorlin's definition of gender: "Gender can be defined as a power relation that provides for its reproduction partly by mutations in the categorical system that it produces and on which it rests. But in doing that in the full knowledge and view of everyone, as in the case of treatment protocols for intersex individuals, it openly displays its thorough historicity. For gender's history is one of multiple crises and multiple mutations that these crises have brought to the treatment of bodies; gender bows to the relations of force that shake and threaten it" (p. 54). Thinking about sex in terms of crises avoids two pitfalls: presenting a theory of domination as an ahistorical fact, i.e. an unshakeable given; and emphasizing contestations and subversions without wondering about what makes them possible. And by thinking about crises as conditions that make possible the reproduction of gender relations, we can understand both how domination functions through multiple and conflicting efforts that try to set the distribution of power and categories; and how feminist theory abides nowhere but in these relations of power, with its opposing efforts to subvert domination and to reveal crises by criticism.

By looking at the case of pornography, we can see how feminist theory thus conceived can use its criticism in that way. While the production of heterosexual pornography has often been condemned as sexist by feminist theories, Dorlin, thinking of pornographic representations as presenting some truth about sex, rejects this strategy; for her, it's not a

matter of denouncing the sexism of these representations, but of asking how they fit into the process of establishing a “true” sex, which excludes other representations of sexuality. Along with Linda Williams⁵, Dorlin identifies three techniques in pornography that indicate its position in the regime of heterosexual domination: framing that imposes a clinical gaze at bodies; the voyeuristic recording of orgasm in a sexually differentiated manner, to represent the “true” female orgasm; and the male orgasm as the end of the scene. She does not think pornography as such should be denounced; instead she calls for “shifting the accepted rules and techniques of mass pornography” (p. 146) and coming up with different uses of pornography.

At this point one could ask how much Dorlin’s own analysis relies on a simplistic concept of “mass pornography”, rather like that of the feminist critiques of pornography. Indeed, although there is clearly pornography that claims to be alternative, it is not easy to describe heterosexual pornography as homogeneous; and even more difficult to grasp the “masses” to which it is supposed to correspond. On the contrary, while there are indeed dominant “rules” in the pornography industry, during the last thirty years we have seen the development of categories that are more and more precise. For example, consider the use of dildos in non-alternative pornography: while the dildo is used in “lesbian” films made for heterosexual audiences, clearly functioning in this case as a reaffirmation of the heterosexual order, the strap-on dildo is also used by women to penetrate men (the category is “pegging”). That does not decide whether or not this practice has a sexist character, but it does show that the issue is not so much to distinguish between mass pornography and minority uses of pornography, but to see how excluding and including take up some space within a production that is generally conceived simply as a representation of masculine and heterosexual domination.

Fluctuations in the topics of feminism, multiplication of the strategies of criticism, and the reconfiguration of relations of domination: while Elsa Dorlin’s book may not found a new feminist theory, it does put feminist theory at the heart of the sex crises that affect all of us.

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⁵ Cf. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999.