

Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity Study Guide

Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity by Judith Butler

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Plot Summary

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* begins with a seemingly simple question. In recent years, many feminists have defended the idea of a concrete feminine identity because they believe it is crucial for advancing the interests of women. Without a focal point conception of women, feminist identity politics would not be possible. However, as Butler points out, there are various postmodern and post-structuralist reasons to worry about the very idea of concrete identities much less the idea of well-defined, non-social conceptual boundaries. So, this leads to Butler's focal question: Can feminist identity politics survive without a feminist identity?

To answer the question, Butler focuses almost exclusively on questions surrounding the construction of feminine identity, rather than equally weighting this deconstruction with an analysis of feminist organizational tactics, political doctrines and so on. Thus, the book's three chapters focus on a gradual critique of the feminine identity as having a concrete form.

Chapter 1, "The Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," begins with a review of the argument that 'women' as a strictly defined category are not the proper subject of feminism. Rather, feminism does not have a concrete subject. This leads her into a discussion of the relationship between sex and gender. Many individuals are born 'sexed' in that they have a biological form, but what relationship does this bear to gender, if any? She then worries about the very idea of gender, what its origin is, to what extent it is connected to sex (it partly is and partly isn't on Butler's view). She is concerned about a strict binary distinction between sex and gender and a similar distinction between gender types. She points out that gender identity is complex in its relation to sex and that to appreciate these complexities, feminists must move further away from the traditional Western 'metaphysics of substance' which then leads her to focus on the linguistic structures that represent this metaphysics, something she also wants to critique.

In Chapter 2, "Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix," Butler inquires into the nature and origins of the concept of gender. She discusses structuralist perspectives on the idea and how the concreteness of gender can be exposed as absurd by Masquerade. She is interested in a genealogy of gender identification and discusses the theories of Lacan, Riviere and Freud in this regard. She rejects the idea that all power structures and cultural restrictions must be done away with to have a less repressive mode of gender identification (a view common amongst feminists) and argues that gender identification requires a social structure in order for it to be an achievement.

Chapter 3, "Subversive Bodily Acts," is the longest but focuses largely on a critique of Julia Kristeva, a discussion of Foucault's publication of the journals of Herculine Barbin, a 19th century hermaphrodite, her sympathetic critique of Monique Wittig and her view that traditional views of gender identity can be 'subverted' through masquerade and drag. In the conclusion, "From Parody to Politics" she argues that feminist politics really can do without a concrete feminine identity, and that doing without it will make solidarity

and organization easier. She then argues that feminists with her view should pursue the deconstruction of feminine identity through parody.



Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section I,

Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section I, Summary and Analysis

Butler opens with the claim that feminist theories have presumed that there is an already existing feminine identity known as 'women' that grounds feminine interests and aims inside of a dialogue and also grounds the representation of women politically. Many feminists have believed that developing a feminine identity is essential to making women and women's political issues visible.

But many feminists have challenged this idea, as they deny that the idea of 'woman' is a stable, well-defined category. Much can be said on behalf of deconstructing the concept. Butler relies on Foucault here, following him in arguing that society constructs subjects and then individuals come to represent them. Requirements precede identity, not the other way around.

The feminine identity may well be consistently produced by societal mechanisms that define women in an exclusionary way. The very idea of 'woman' may serve to make women alienated from their own society. There may be some deeper identity that stands prior to the category of 'woman'. These entrapping assumptions about identity are often attributable to a form of foundationalism run rampant. For politics, however, there is no need for a universal idea of woman or an idea that remains stable across cultures. Such a universal basis will inevitably obscure the varied ways in which women are oppressed.

Butler's thesis is that to the extent feminism understands its subject as a concrete, well-defined category of woman that is universal and unified, it undermines its ability to represent women. In short, well-defined concepts have counterexamples that obscure reality and marginalize some people; but Butler does not want to deny that representational politics are important, she just wants a post-feminist politics.

A deep problem may exist as well. The idea of woman may not just obscure the truth but it may only have its proper function within oppressive social concepts. So the feminist must engage in a 'genealogy' of the concept of 'woman,' a deconstruction to understand the roots of the idea in centers of power. The feminist subject cannot ground feminist politics.



Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section II, The Compulsory Order of Sex/Gender/Desire

Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section II, The Compulsory Order of Sex/Gender/Desire Summary and Analysis

Feminism often splits the unity of women when it splits the ideas of sex and gender. The distinction was first used to undermine the idea of 'biology-as-destiny.' However, if this distinction is pushed too far, then the idea of gender becomes disconnected from the body. The distinction also runs the risk of ignoring the question of how we can refer to a 'given' sex or a 'given' gender without understanding the processes through which sex and genders are socially assigned. Sex might be a gendered category and vice versa. We may not be able to separate the ideas.



Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section III, Gender: The Circular Ruins of Contemporary Debate

Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section III, Gender: The Circular Ruins of Contemporary Debate Summary and Analysis

Do individuals have one gender? Do they possess genders or are they identical with a gender? Some feminists believe that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex but they should inquire into how the construction comes about. Could gender be constructed differently? If we do not understand where gender originates and whether it could be different the monster 'biology-as-destiny' could be replaced by another monster, 'culture-as-destiny.'

Butler also worries that gender is not really chosen just because it is constructed. The process of construction is more complex than that. Choice does not occur in an unconstructed vacuum and so choice cannot be the whole story. Constructions seem to be caught between the opposition between free will and determinism. It appears to be a mixture. The concepts are not intractable but they are also not wholly under our control. Constraint is always part of the language of gender.

Gender is an idea that differentiates some bodies from others. Gender for some feminists, however, is only a relation between those represented and those representing. Luce Irigaray has complicated matters by suggesting that within a patriarchal culture, women cannot be properly represented by language because women are understood as the negation of men. Women are simply the Other. This will lead to the question of the metaphysics of substance, of what makes a woman a positive being. Perhaps, as Irigaray suggests, the idea of a feminine 'sex' is just the idea of linguistic absence.

It is hard to get clear on these distinctions because there are so many interpretive possibilities. Sometimes this lack of clarity makes feminist discourse circular. Beauvoir thinks that masculinist discourse is by its nature bigoted by attributing positive being only to the male, and so feminist discourse falters as a result. Is the male-female distinction merely a substitute for the master-slave distinction? For Beauvoir, women must make their bodies a departure point for their freedom, not as a limitation. The idea of the body cannot be untied from human freedom.



Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section IV, Theorizing the Binary, The Unitary, and Beyond

Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section IV, Theorizing the Binary, The Unitary, and Beyond Summary and Analysis

Beauvoir and Irigaray disagree about how gender asymmetry is generated. Beauvoir believes it lies in a failure of reciprocity in an asymmetrical dialogue, whereas Irigaray argues that the dialogue itself is a manifestation of masculinism. Butler leans more towards Irigaray, holding that feminists ought to critique in a more totalizing way, including criticism of themselves.

It turns out that present-day feminist debates about the essentialism of sex and gender raises the question of how universal feminine identity is in a variety of ways, but some attempts to form political coalitions of women without assuming what a 'woman' is have been made. One cannot insist that the unity of a coalition requires a totalizing set of identity definitions because this will in fact undermine solidarity and representation. Unity is not necessary for political action to be effective. Instead, women must take an 'antifoundationalist' approach, where they don't use 'identity' as a premise to produce the meaning of a particular coalition prior to the generation of the coalition.

Butler believes that the definition of gender should be 'permanently deferred' and left open to redefinition at any time. This, she believes, will produce better, more open coalitions and more effectively promote solidarity and representation.



Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section V, Identity, Sex and the Metaphysics of Substance

Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section V, Identity, Sex and the Metaphysics of Substance Summary and Analysis

A worry arises that the idea of 'identity' has no meaning. Maybe we cannot even claim that objects are self-identical. And the idea of 'gender identity' is even more complex. Butler claims that 'intelligible' genders are those that produce and sustain coherence and continuity between sex, gender, sexual practice and sexual desires. The only valid notion of 'truth' of gender identity is rooted in the regularly practices that produce coherent gender identities which are themselves embedded in a pre-existing set of norms.

The idea of a 'matrix of intelligibility' must be further analyzed before gender identity can be understood, as a result. French feminist and post-structuralist theories produce different ideas of the social mechanisms of power that produce gender identity. And the conceptions of identity generate differ according to the explanatory model for gender identity given.

But all of these views hold that sex under hegemony is a kind of 'substance' or a metaphysically self-identical being. Linguistic trickery is responsible for this illusion. Wittig argues that the binary 'restriction' on sex, for instance, is constructed to serve the interests of those who prefer a system of 'compulsory heretosexuality.' Women have also often been identified with 'sex' which makes their identity tied to their satisfaction of male sexual desire.

Wittig wants the idea of 'sex' destroyed to liberate women to be universal subjects. The metaphysics of substance is a major obstacle to female liberation in the same way. Language is so wedded to the metaphysics of substance that individuals can't be represented effectively in language with a gender demarcation. Gender can sometimes represent a unified experience between individuals but one must be careful here, because gender can be constructed for political reasons to oppress.

Those who want to do away with the binary relation between the sexes and the metaphysics of substance often hastily presuppose that the ideas of woman and man already exist within a binary frame, but this might not be. Foucault's discussion of hermaphrodites is relevant here. We may be able to speak of 'men' with or without masculine attributions if we come to understand gender identity on a deeper level.

Gender will probably end up being best understood as a bundle of contingently associated attributes rather than as a substance or noun.



Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section VI, Language, Power and the Strategies of Displacement

Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, Section VI, Language, Power and the Strategies of Displacement Summary and Analysis

Feminist theory often looks for a bad person who is wreaking havoc behind the scenes. It cannot explain how oppression occurs without a hidden agent. Oppression is institutionalized by those who had an interest in maintaining it and language is constructed by those intending to obliterate conceptual categories that hurt their positions. However, matters are more complex than this.

Butler discusses various thinkers like Wittig, Freud, Lacan, and Irigaray on these matters, arguing that sexual differences themselves are not mere constructions rooted in the metaphysics of substance proffered by a masculinist society. Feminists can appropriate the idea of sexual difference for themselves. Butler then covers the debate between materialist and Lacanian positions on sexual difference, whether the idea of sexuality exists 'before' or 'after' the laws of social construction. Butler worries about the quarrel because it relies on the idea that sexuality only flourishes prior to oppression or following its overthrow. Some sexuality, however, is enhanced by law—and sometimes in good ways.

As a result, the feminist idea of postgenital sexuality comes in for criticism because it goes 'postgenital' to get away from social laws regulated gender identity, but it does so with a cost. Pro-sexuality movements within feminism have argued that no matter where one finds sexuality, it will be constructed within a power discourse, and so this cannot be avoided. There is nothing outside of a power discourse. Power structures aren't all bad or patriarchal. Butler then gives some cases, arguing that without recourse to some ideas of power, liberation could not be achieved. She denies that an ontology of gender is needed for this point to hold.



Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, Introduction and Section I, Structuralism's Critical Exchange

Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, Introduction and Section I, Structuralism's Critical Exchange Summary and Analysis

Many feminists try to think of a point of origin for oppression, perhaps from pre-patriarchal cultures, so as to see masculine dominance as merely contingent, but rectifying the pre-patriarchal scheme is problematic as well because it suggests a clear definition of what a post-patriarchal culture might look like. Feminists often hope for a Utopian revolution against patriarchy, partly through socialist feminism and structuralist anthropology, such as Levi-Strauss's. The very idea of conceiving sex in this kind of concrete way supports domination.

The nature-culture separation obscures the difficulties fighting against oppressive culture and suggests that nature and originary power structures are always bad. To support these points, Butler discusses the work of anthropologists Marilyn Strathern and Carol MacCormack. Looking for a sexed nature prior to culture has good intentions because it aims to show that patriarchy is not inevitable and universal, but figuring out how patriarchy came to be does not show that it can be removed and whether it can be removed does not depend on its having a clear origin.

In the next section, Butler dives into a discussion of an exchange between structuralists, who concern themselves with cultural laws and their role in oppression. She discusses Levi-Strauss's work on the subject. He worries about the 'totality' and 'closure' of language as a tool of oppression and he sees masculine culture as produced through an intentional act to differentiate between men and women. The dominance of men also expresses homoeroticism, the sexual preference of men for men. This produces non-reciprocity between men and women. This is related to cultural laws forbidding incest, which represents a distinction between affection between men and women in the family, say between mothers and sons. According to Levi-Strauss, forbidding incest is the beginning of the divide between men and women and the creation of kinship.



Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, Section II, Lacan, Riviere, and the Strategies of Masquerade and Section III, Freud and the Melancholia of Gender

Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, Section II, Lacan, Riviere, and the Strategies of Masquerade and Section III, Freud and the Melancholia of Gender Summary and Analysis

Lacan's theory of language forbids looking for the 'being' of gender or sex because his theory of language disputes the idea that there is a concrete ontology for these ideas and that language is often misleading because it reflects a Western metaphysical view that thinks asking "What is X?" is sensible. There is no direct access to being. Ontology requires that appearance matches reality and is not mediated by representations. The symbolic is the only known universal and it is always affected by power structures, language, social relationships, and so on. Masculine subjects do not originate meanings, but only reflect them.

Women are also given original meanings, which Lacan believes to be The Phallus. Women represent the sexuality of men and the representation is enforced on women through linguistic and cultural laws. Men 'have' the Phallus but women are 'identical' with the Phallus, although she is not really the Phallus. She only appears to be the Phallus through what Lacan calls 'masquerade.'

Masquerade is when an individual without identity pretends to have a concrete identity. It gives the appearance of reality when in fact there is no reality to the mask worn within social relationships. Masquerade then becomes a kind of 'heterosexual comedy' because heterosexism is sustained by mere illusion. Masquerade both produces a fake sexual ontology and as a denial of feminine desire. These two ideas are not mutually exclusive.

Masks allow individuals to refuse to offer love to others and they often force women into heterosexual bonds with men, subordinating them. Female homosexuality is obscured. Joan Riviere has a similar idea because femininity is a masquerade in aggression and conflict resolution. Women wear the mask of subordination to placate aggressive men; this even happens in sexual positions. Homosexual men also exaggerate



heterosexuality in terms of dominance. The homosexual man and the masked woman both promote the superiority of heterosexual male dominance by contrasting themselves with it and accepting rejection. Butler disagrees with Riviere though because if one understands female homosexuality, then she can understand that male homosexuality isn't all bad. However, masks do serve the social function of helping men believe that they are men and resolve challenges to their masculinity.

Some wonder whether femininity is nothing more than a mask, as it may have been created solely to affirm masculinity. However, this question dissolves into a question of the origins of the feminine mask. Butler suggests that the very ideas of masculinity and femininity are constructed to avoid acknowledging homosexual desires. But these constructs are destined to fail because they mask reality. Butler ends the section by describing Lacan's view as identifying feminine masquerade as a form of 'slave morality'.

Butler next turns her attention to Freud and the melancholy of gender. Freud held that melancholy was essential to ego formation and character formation. Melancholy may be the only way to develop a new identity on Freud's view. Butler continues with Freud exegesis for some time, given an analysis of the Oedipal complex. Then Butler turns to criticize the idea of bisexuality as a combination of masculine and feminine dispositions when in fact it may be the originary, non-binary sexuality. However, constructing an identity may require ignoring bisexuality and internalization a gender identity so as to differentiate from others. Egos form, then, from reacting to sanctions and taboos.

Yet all gender identification cannot derive from implementing the taboo against homosexuality. Dispositions of sexuality often hide themselves in order to hide their true origins, but these origins can be numerous.



Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, Section IV, Gender Complexity and the Limits of Identification

Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, Section IV, Gender Complexity and the Limits of Identification Summary and Analysis

Lacan, Riviere and Freud offer different accounts about how gender identifications work, but feminist critics often focus on maternal identification. Sometimes there is recourse to the unconscious, and in any event there is no identity-fixing in advance. In fact, one might hold that multiple and simultaneous identifications occur and they produce various conflicts and convergences that produce a complex process of shifting identity. This can be left open and leads to adopting 'incorporation' as the mechanisms of gender identification, the process of slowly incorporating various attributes. Incest and homosexuality taboos can't tell the whole story. Melancholia explanations have more plausibility. Desires lead to incorporation which leads to identification; but it is hard to quantify this effect.



Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, Section V, Reformulating Prohibition as Power

Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, Section V, Reformulating Prohibition as Power Summary and Analysis

Butler is guided partly by Foucault's critique of foundationalism and to psychoanalysis. She then draws similarities between them and Marcuse's discussion of the effects of sublimation on the psyche. She argues that we cannot understand sexuality as prior to moral and cultural law. Rubin mistakenly holds a separation between sex and gender which presumes a sharp ontological understanding of these ideas, despite claiming a broad range of sexual possibilities. Rubin wants to overthrow the law as well and be replaced by a lack of gender disparity. Foucault has some worries about this idea however because it suggests a story that relies too much on repression. Laws are not mere causes of repression; they are the results of broader social forces that must be analyzed.

Butler doesn't want to show that there are cultures where the incest taboo doesn't operate but instead to show where and how it operates, rather than giving a mere conceptual analysis. Psychoanalytic theory, she argues, has recognized how the incest taboo works.

Butler goes on to discuss the idea of bisexuality as lying outside of language and the symbolic. Its repression is indeed a locus of subversion, but perhaps the sexual desire is instituted by the prohibition of incest rather than the other way around.



Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, Section I, The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva

Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, Section I, The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva Summary and Analysis

Kristeva has a theory of the 'semiotic' aspect of language. At first, it appears to be a sympathetic critique of Lacan. But she challenges Lacan's view that cultural meaning needs the relationship of the woman to the maternal body to be repressed. Butler, however, is skeptical over her strategy of subversion. She takes issue with various steps in Kristeva's argument for the 'semiotic' as a source of 'effective subversion.' Her theory appears to be self-defeating and supposing her theory of primary drives is correct, it's not clear how they can serve subversive purposes.

Kristeva argues that there is a valid idea of free energy that shows itself in language through poetry. She understands the semiotic in psychoanalytic terms. Primary drives are repressed by the symbolic and societal. The relation of dependence between child and the maternal body is one of the repressed primary drives and this destroys something valuable. Poetry helps to express the dependence on the Mother. Poetry unravels the person as produced by the semiotic.

The maternal body is important because it signals a fluidity in identity between mother and child, deessentializing identity and she sees female homosexuality as a form of psychosis, an idea with which Butler strongly disagrees. She then proceeds to critique Kristeva's whole theory of primary drives, their relationship to the semiotic and maternal body and the idea of female homosexuality as a psychosis. The lesbian is not 'the Other.' Additionally, the maternal does not merely express a loss of identity but of the Western idea of biological teleology, the original idea of oppression. She also sees the law as primarily prohibitive and oppressive.

Foucault rejects the use of the class of sex acts to unify sexuality and make it a cause. The body is not essentially sexed for Foucault. His ideas provide a useful antidote to Kristeva. Maternal libidinal economy must be re-understood in his terms.



Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, Section II, Foucault, Herculine, and the Politics of Sexual Discontinuity

Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, Section II, Foucault, Herculine, and the Politics of Sexual Discontinuity Summary and Analysis

Foucault's genealogy of gender helps to criticize Lacanian and neo-Lacanian theories that see unusual sexual practices and identities as unintelligible. Many of his best insights concern his publication of the journals of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite. He argues that the univocal idea of sex serves social regulation and control and only artificially binds different sexual functions together which makes sex as such look causal. Sex is an effect not a cause. Liberation views of sex are problematic as well, for Foucault. The intersexed body refutes sexual categorization.

Butler transitions to discuss the development of Foucault's views between his works and she describes Herculine's journal entries and analyze them. Not only does the hermaphrodite help tear down the walls of oppression but homosexuality itself undermines the trappings of traditional sexual morality. Sexual nonidentity can be achieved through homosexual sex.

Butler argues that the distinction between Same and Other is a 'false binary' that should be undermined, in part through the example of Herculine, whose journals continue to be analyzed.

What Butler finds valuable in Foucault is the deconstruction of the univocity of sex and fracturing it into more individuated forms. She discusses a biological challenge to the idea from DNA research and attempts to refute it. XY females pose a problem for traditional gender categories. There is more convention in human biological research than is supposed.



Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, Section III, Monique Wittig, Bodily Disintegration and Fictive Sex

Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, Section III, Monique Wittig, Bodily Disintegration and Fictive Sex Summary and Analysis

Butler asks whether there can be humans that are pre-gendered. She wants to affirm that gender is always acquired and is an achievement, but whether the pre-gendered individual? Wittig emphasized, however, that individuals aren't born as men or women. The linguistic distinction between the sexes just imposes cultural heterosexuality and invents the ideas of men and women in relation to the repression of homosexuality.

Wittig sees the idea of sex as oppressive to women, gays and lesbians and sees the idea of sex as an abstraction imposed on society. Physical features are not determinative of sex; it is language that creates social reality. Women must become authoritative, speaking subjects and attain the pursuit of presence, meaning existing in a radical and uninterrupted way. And she believes that one can talk her way out of her gender, but it is not clear how this works, save through literature.

Butler continues to expand on Wittig's critique of compulsory heterosexuality and language's role in promoting it. She believes that Wittig is mistaken in radically opposing heterosexuality and homosexuality. And the distinctions between sexes and genders do not always have to be violent, but can be quite subtle. Her idea of fictive sex is important but she applies it in crude ways. Wittig also sees power as extended deliberately but the use of power is not always conscious or the result of an individual's action. Further, lesbianism is not the rejection of heterosexuality because it engages heterosexuality through opposition.



Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, Section IV, Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions

Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, Section IV, Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions Summary and Analysis

A lot of feminist theory relies on concrete categories to establish a point of reference. Theory emerges from them, as do politics. We cannot, however, generalize about the body and its sexed significance, but neither can we wholly separate sex and gender. We must resist identifying the body as a thing prior to culture assigning it significance. Butler then goes on to draw insights on these points from various contemporaries of hers. The point is the stable bodily contours require constructing falsehood. The boundary of the body is socially constructed.

Foucault has a useful discussion of 'surface body' politics where we conceive of our bodies from their outsides without attending to our physical interiors and psychical features. The outside needn't define us. Identification is socially constructed and so we need not follow an external, surface definition of ourselves. The inner truth of gender is a fabrication; there is no original gender identity and this is parodied in drag. The point of drag is to mock gender identity and can be used subversively.

Bodies aren't beings but instead are 'variable boundaries' which are socially and politically regulated. Solidified gender norms make certain social forms possible and others impossible. Yet nonetheless, gender can be volitionally controlled. It is a kind of act although the act does not occur without a context. It is constructed through repetition over time. Genders are neither true nor false and can be undermined.



Conclusion, From Parody to Politics

Conclusion, From Parody to Politics Summary and Analysis

Butler's main question is whether feminist politics can dispense with the idea of a 'subject' or concrete category of 'woman' and survive. She thinks it can and wants to resist a 'foundationalist' basis for identity politics. There is no need for this. We do not have to locate agency in the category of woman. Subjects are situated and identity is asserted and developed through social relationships.

Social discourse constructs the opposition between I and Thou. Political identity discussions supports these oppositions. These oppositions can be embedded in language and are often used oppressively. We can, however, make use of subversive acts like parody in order to explode these categories and oppositions. Theoretical inquiry can place the political in the context of destroying identity.

Butler has tried to argue for her thesis by describing a genealogy of the 'naturalization of sex and of bodies.' She wants to know whether the concepts came from in order to show whether and that they can be dispensed with. Whatever the origins, if we deconstruction identity we need not deconstruct feminist politics.



Characters

Judith Butler

Gender Trouble does not really have characters, so to speak, as it is a work of feminist philosophy and anthropology rather than a story. However, it does have subjects of discussion, and one of these subjects is the author herself, Judith Butler. The book is full of her arguments and her critiques of others, and so her arguments and critiques represent her character in the book as much as any other character of archetype.

Butler is an American post-structuralist philosopher whose contributions to many fields of thought have been widely renowned within the humanities. She is a professor of rhetoric and comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley. In Gender Trouble (her 1990 book that sold over 100,000 copies) she argues that the categories of sex and gender are incoherent, despite their seeming coherence within the culture. Their seeming coherence is only made apparent because of masculine genders and the heterosexual wants of those who are male sexed. These categories are all socially constructed and are 'performative' in nature because they are constructed through action, which gives them all the reality they have.

Butler not only believes that gender identity is socially constructed - a view common among feminists - but she thinks that idea of sex is as well. Many feminists acknowledge that the body is born sexed male or female, but Butler sees even this as a cultural imposition.

Woman

The idea of 'woman' is central to Gender Trouble. While 'woman' is not a character in the book per se, she is the main object of discussion. Even when Butler discusses other matters, it is all in the service of deepening the reader's conception of the core and the boundaries of the idea of woman.

Her first discussion of the idea of woman is woman as the subject of feminism. For some time, before Butler's writing Gender Trouble, the feminist movement assumed that the idea of woman was concrete, that being feminine has some kind of positive essence. They assumed this, Butler argues, because they believed they needed a concrete feminine identity in order to have feminist politics, for without a concrete identity for the woman, feminist politics would have no focal point and so no coherent mode of organization.

However, 'woman' does not need to be a concrete category in order for this to be. Thus, the whole idea of 'woman' as having discrete boundaries is challenged throughout the book. The second discussion of the idea of 'woman' arises in Butler's discussion of the distinction between gender and sex. Many feminists have wanted to separate gender from sex entirely but Butler worries that this will detach feminism from a focus on the



feminine body and on something more ethereal. Other discussions of 'woman' abound in the book, but these are perhaps two of the best examples of how 'woman' is a main character of sorts.

Man

Man is the opposite of Woman in traditional sex and gender ideology and many have argued that the very idea of Woman is simply the idea of the negation of Man.

The Heterosexual

Heterosexual desire is thought to be the source of the genesis of gender identity.

The Homosexual

Some see male homosexuality as a taboo that heterosexual desire sets up in order to repress homosexual desire.

Michel Foucault

The mid-20th century philosopher who is perhaps Butler's main influence. His genealogy of gender is particularly important to Butler.

Jacques Lacan

A mid-20th century French psychiatrist who made important contributions to linguistics. Butler relies heavily on his ideas.

Monique Wittig

A French author and feminist theorist who wanted to overcome gender, Butler has mixed feelings about her ideas.

Herculine Barbin

A French intersexed person; Michel Foucault found her memories and had them published. Butler relies on the journals in *Gender Trouble*.



Julia Kristeva

A Bulgarian-French philosophy, literary critic and feminist, Kristeva comes in for scrutiny in *Gender Trouble*.

Sigmund Freud

The great psychologist and founder of psychoanalysis, Butler thinks a lot of his genealogy of gender and its association with melancholy.

Simone de Beauvoir

A mid-20th century French writer and philosopher, Beauvoir was an extremely important 20th century feminist. Butler relies heavily on her work as well.



Objects/Places

Masquerade

This occurs when one wears a gender mask in accord with the demands of one's society or in order to acquire gender attributes.

The Incest Taboo

The taboo against incest, which is thought to be the beginning of gender identification by some theorists.

The Homosexuality Taboo

The taboo against homosexuality is also thought to help generate gender identification.

The Body

Butler often discusses the relationship of social constructs to the body and emphasizes not advancing theory that alienates individuals from their bodies.

Drag

Dressing in drag is a way of parodying concrete gender identities.

The Phallus

Men have the phallus on Butler's view but women are made into the Phallus - they are identified with sex itself.

The Heterosexual Matrix

The matrix of heterosexual language, social norms and sexual desire that marginalizes women and homosexuals.

Compulsory Heterosexuality

Compulsory heterosexuality occurs in cultures where homosexuality is forbidden and intersexed persons are ignored.



Feminist Identity Politics

The politics women can use to advance their interests, Butler believes it can function without a concrete idea of woman.

The Idea of Concrete Feminine Identity

Butler wants to reject the notion that feminine identity is concrete.

The Metaphysics of Substance

An old, destructive Western idea that things have concrete definitions.

Gender and Sex

The relationship between gender and sex is analyzed at length by Butler.

The Hermaphrodite

An intersexed person, the hermaphrodite helps to render the idea of a concrete gender absurd.

Freudian Melancholia

Freud believes that melancholy accompanies gender identification; Butler thinks there is something to this idea.



Themes

Feminist Identity Politics without Feminine Identity

Judith Butler states that the main point of *Gender Trouble* is to aid feminist identity politics. She argues that feminist identity politics has been invaluable to promoting the interests of women over the past several decades that it exists. However, the feminist movement has become unduly wedded to a concrete conception of feminine identity. Feminists have claimed that they need a concrete feminine identity in order to have a focal point or departure point from which to organize a clearly defined women's movement and a clearly defined political program for advancing women's interests.

However, Butler argues that women can dispense with feminine identity as a concrete idea and that in fact they should. The problem with employing a concrete conception of feminine identity is that it marginalizes those who do not clearly fit the socially constructed ideal of feminine identity that the feminist movement has constructed. There are many, butch lesbians and the intersexed who are often not well represented.

Butler argues that solidarity can be achieved in a less direct, top-down fashion by forming an ecumenical but less well-defined coalition built around the advancement of values that others for their own reasons can endorse. This is not an impractical mode of coalition-building either, and in fact, it is important anyway that the feminist movement figure out how to build such coalitions because otherwise they cannot remain true to their deep principles of liberation and equality.

The Fluidity of the Feminine Identity

The main thesis of *Gender Trouble* is that feminist politics can dispense with feminist identity, but the reader will not find much discussion of political tactics, political programs, the history of social movements involving women and so on. Butler's book is not primarily about analyzing the feminist political movement. Instead, she aims to argue that the very idea of a concrete feminine identity has flaws in order to convince the women's movement to move off of a concrete feminine identity. The argument is primarily conceptual, not pragmatic (although many postmodernist, post-structuralist philosophers like Butler will reject this distinction).

Butler claims that feminine identity is fluid for several reasons. First, the idea of gender identity is quite complex and while it is not wholly consciously structured it is created through masquerade and the repeated, stylized behavioral choices of individuals constrained by social rules that enable certain forms of identity creation. Further, gender and sex bear a complex relation towards one another. Gender is not wholly divorced from sex, as this would make gender too ethereal, yet neither is it wholly determined by sex because individuals of the same sex can have different genders.



In addition, sex itself is a culturally constructed category subject to its own fluidities and is not wholly biologically determined - perhaps Butler's most original and controversial position. Thus, feminist identity politics should move away from a concrete feminist identity because the concept itself is confused and has the potential for oppressive use.

Subversion and Masquerade

Much of *Gender Trouble* is devoted to a genealogy of gender. A 'genealogy' is an attempt to trace the roots of a particular concept not in the development of ideas but through the idea's development due to more materialistic factors, such as economic and social pressures or attempts by some to dominate others; the idea of the genealogy develops partly from Marx and Nietzsche and is wielded with some force by Butler.

In Chapter 2, Butler covers numerous theories of the genealogy of gender identification. Some hold that the very idea of gender is defined by the incest taboo. It originates in the need to avoid sexual connection between mother and son. Others hold that the idea of gender is formed in reaction to the homosexual taboo because heterosexual men wish to repress their homosexual desires, they need a heterosexual construct gender in order to convince themselves that their homosexual desires are not part of who they are.

While Butler reviews these theories she appears to hold that the genealogy of gender identification is not as important as the inaccuracies in the idea themselves. She argues that gender is a social achievement both enabled and frustration by different combinations of social rules and that as such, the focus of the feminist and queer theorist should be on how the nexus between social rules and individual choice shape and constrain gender choice and development.

One way that feminists can fight back against gender identification being constrained and defined by a masculinist culture and a masculinist elite is through acts of 'subversion' where individuals expose the absurdity of the idea of concrete genders. This can be accomplished through the prominent display of intersexed persons, such as the journals of Herculine Barbin, a 19th century hermaphrodite which Foucault republished. Subversion can also be accomplished through drag shows to show that gender identity can be reoriented and undermined through free choice.

The point of subversion is to undermine the coerced practice of social masquerade. Many individuals are forced to pretend their way into a gender identity, a false socially constructed association of attributes that an individual may not wholly share with other members of the category. As a result, masquerade can be an oppressive process. Drag masquerade can help to subvert the normally oppressive uses of masquerade.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is that of its author, Judith Butler, a late-20th century feminist. Butler is an American post-structuralist philosopher whose contributions to many fields of thought have been widely renowned within the humanities. She is a professor of rhetoric and comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley. In *Gender Trouble* (her 1990 book that sold over 100,000 copies) she argues that the categories of sex and gender are incoherent, despite their seeming coherence within the culture. Their seeming coherence is only made apparent because of masculine genders and the heterosexual wants of those who are male sexed. These categories are all socially constructed and are 'performative' in nature because they are constructed through action, which gives them all the reality they have.

Butler not only believes that gender identity is socially constructed - a view common among feminists - but she thinks that idea of sex is as well. Many feminists acknowledge that the body is born sexed male or female, but Butler sees even this as a cultural imposition. Thus her perspective is a fairly radical one, at least vis-à-vis a commonsense conception of gender and sex. Butler's emphasis on social and cultural constructions, the oppressive potential of language and concepts themselves, along with her sharp rejection of any popular 'bourgeois' values will seem shocking to many readers, particularly her tolerance and seeming embrace of intersexed sexual acts and the destruction of incest taboos.

Tone

The tone of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is strongly ideological, densely academic, sexually radical and highly anti-metaphysical. The tone is ideological because it has explicit normative commitments characteristic of a late-20th century feminist intellectual. Butler is hostile to traditional moral views about sex and gender because she sees them as essentialist - they trap inherently fluid individuals into conceptual prisons that force these individuals to serve the interests of cultural, biological, sexual, social and economic elites. She is interested in the liberation of women from a 'masculinist' culture and of the homosexual and intersexual from social marginalization. This comes across in her strident defense of the way in which the very idea of deviance is meant as a tool of social oppression.

The tone is densely academic because it contains the dense, hard to decipher jargon of a postmodernist writer, with phrases like 'The heterosexual matrix,' and 'the metaphysics of substance' and words like 'alterity,' 'semiotic,' 'deconstruction' and so on the reader unfamiliar with the terms of art within the feminist, postmodernist, post-structuralist, and social philosophical communities will be lost. The tone is also sexually



radical because Butler wants to deny not only that gender has any particular nature or essence but that human bodies are even born sexed in any objective sense of the world. All is culturally and socially constructed. Finally, the tone is anti-metaphysical because it attacks the very idea of a metaphysics of substance as imprisoning marginal individuals that do not fit the mold society creates for them.

Structure

Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity is a short but dense book with three chapters and a conclusion. Each chapter has at least four subsections. Gender Trouble is a work of postmodernist philosophy so it can be rather dense. As a result, despite the fact that the subsections are short they can be quite tough reading. The book as a whole is structured so as to argue that feminist politics can do without a concrete feminine identity but towards this end, Butler mainly argues that feminine identity is more fluid than concrete and it is this idea that is defended in the book's three chapters.

Chapter 1, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," sets up the problem. In Section I, 'Women' as the Subject of Feminism, Butler argues that there was some reason to think that the idea of 'women' is a concrete 'departure point' for feminism but she believes this will be misleading. In Section II, The Compulsory Order of Sex/Gender/Desire shows how traditional understandings of sex, gender, and sexual desire can be imprisoning and in Section III, Gender: The Circular Ruins of Contemporary Debate, Butler tries to show that the concept of gender and debates about its nature have been complex and point to important issues. Throughout the chapter, Butler emphasizes her main themes about the fluidity of gender identity and the social forces that make it appear concrete.

In Chapter 2, "Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix," Butler reviews various genealogies of the concept of gender and gender identification, critique aspects of views she doesn't like and defending others that she does like. In Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, Butler focuses primarily on showing how the idea of concrete gender identity can be subverted by analyzing the theories of Kristeva, Foucault, and Wittig. The conclusion sums up her main line of argument and outlines how a feminist politics should proceed.



Quotes

"One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." (Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, 1)

"Strictly speaking, 'women' cannot be said to exist." (Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, 1)

"Woman does not have a sex." (Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, 1)

"The deployment of sexuality ... established this notion of sex." (Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, 1)

"The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual." (Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, 1)

"Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time." (Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, 16)

"The straight mind continues to affirm that incest, and not homosexuality represents its major interdiction. Thus, when thought by the straight mind, homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality." (Chapter 1, Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire, 35)

"But how does a woman 'appear' to be the Phallus, the lack that embodies and affirms the Phallus? According to Lacan, this is done through masquerade, the effect of a melancholy that is essential to the feminine position as such." (Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, 46)

"As a result, this narrative strategy, revolving upon the distinction between an irrecoverable origin and a perpetually displaced present, makes all effort at recovering that origin in the name of subversion inevitably belated." (Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, 78)

"The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its 'natural' past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities." (Chapter 2, Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, 93)

"The category of sex belongs to a system of compulsory heterosexuality that clearly operates through a system of compulsory sexual reproduction. In Wittig's view, to which we now turn, 'masculine' and 'feminine,' 'male' and 'female' exist only within the heterosexual matrix; indeed, they are the naturalized terms that keep that matrix concealed and, hence, protected from a radical critique." (Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, 111)

"Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body." (Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, 111)



"The more insidious and effective strategy it seems is a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest 'sex,' but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of 'identity' in order to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic." (Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, 128)

"Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts." (Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, 140)

"Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible." (Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, 141)

"The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics." (Chapter 3, Subversive Bodily Acts, 148)



Topics for Discussion

What is the main concern of Gender Trouble?

What is the main argument of Gender Trouble?

What is Butler's position on the category of 'woman'?

What does Butler think is the proper genealogy of the feminine identity? What are some accounts she rejects?

Explain Butler's critique of Julia Kristeva.

What are Butler's criticisms of Wittig? What does she find valuable in Wittig?

How do Foucault and Freud contribute to Butler's argument?

What is Masquerade? Why is it important?

Explain the ideas of The Heterosexual Matrix and Compulsory Heterosexuality, then explain their role in the book.