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## Sex, Gender, and the Origin of the Culture Wars: An Intellectual History

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### Abstract

*Many Americans today have accepted what seemed inconceivable just a generation ago: that gender is artificial, is socially constructed, and can be chosen freely by all individuals. This notion—that biological sex can be willfully separated from gender—originated in the arguments of influential radical feminists writing from the 1950s through the 1970s. The premises of their theories, in turn, have ushered in the new world of transgenderism. Yesterday's shocking theory has become today's accepted norm, with more changes to come. Yet whether this new world will prove to be fit for human flourishing remains to be seen.*

Many intractable controversies in today's culture wars relate to issues of sex and gender. Americans disagree, for instance, about whether marriage is limited to a man and a woman, who can use which bathrooms, and whether we should hope that mothers should take care of children—at least in their formative years. These controversies are emblematic of the inability to say what a man is, what a woman is, or even whether stable sexual identities are linked to our bodies.

This confusion has origins in the revolution that the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir initiated after the Second World War. Before the publication of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949, science and

philosophy assumed that society's prevailing opinions about men and women were grounded in sex so that gender corresponded to sex. Beauvoir demurred. She drew a distinction between gender (society's prevailing opinions about what man and woman should be) and sex or biology (the seemingly immutable characteristics of the body and closely linked psychological traits). There is no reason, feminists from Beauvoir onward would argue, for sex to be destiny: A woman's biology had seemed to direct her toward family life and make her dependent on a husband.

Such feminists promised to bring forth a new, independent woman who would overcome her gender. This new woman would no longer take her bearings from what her body or society suggested about her destiny. In this mode of thinking, gender is merely an idea constructed to keep women in a subordinate position. This critique claimed to show how biological realities and social mores contributing to womanly identity were neither necessary nor healthy, and it posited a future where women would be free to define their identities without any

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reference to their bodies. A world of complete freedom would be a world “beyond gender”—a world in which no members of society would make assumptions about an individual based on biology.

The feminist aspiration to create a world without gender, first articulated by Beauvoir in the 1940s and later by American disciples such as Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, and others in the 1960s, prepared the ground for a more radical vision in the 1990s by scholars like Judith Butler, who extended the idea to include advocacy for transgender rights.

The idea of a supposedly socially constructed gender foisted on all individuals is bound to cause intense debate and hence ever more radical calls to “deconstruct” gender in the name of greater autonomy and creativity in human identity. The new liberating philosophy would deconstruct or expose norms as arbitrary obstacles to healthy human identity. Taking things a step further, “queer theory,” derived from the post-structural thought of Michel Foucault, questioned the naturalness and necessity of everyday practices of self-control of sexual passions, the prominence of heterosexual norms, and the binary conception of gender.

The result has been a spiraling revolution in which what had seemed natural and possibly also crucial to human identity is alleged to be extraneous, accidental, and repressive. From this revolution proceeds another level of confusion about extending marriage to same-sex couples, gendered pronouns, transgender issues about the use of public restrooms and locker rooms, the importance of fidelity to marriage, and any number of additional permutations of such issues.

This revolution has required ongoing readjustment on the part of government, as well as in public mores and even in the conception of language. It gives rise to new opinions and sentiments, suggests new concepts, and modifies every aspect of life within the

sphere of personal relations. Many facets of family life have been roiled by the feminist effort to separate sex from gender and subsequent efforts to create a world beyond gender and without preconceived roles.

In addition, the supposedly objective application of liberationist science identifies even more socially constructed distinctions. Since society manufactures gender difference, the theory goes, gender can be unmade and remade by properly reconstructing society. This is the foundation of a world built on the liberation of the individual and the freedom to create an identity without social or biological constraints.

### **Feminism Before the Separation of Sex from Gender**

Feminist thinkers of all stripes today define themselves against biological essentialism and its concomitant political and cultural patriarchy. Biological essentialism alleges that the differing characters and roles of men and women have a permanent basis in sexual biology and innate psychological proclivities originating in sex. Thus, according to this theory, biological sex goes a long way in determining how societies conceive of gender, with perceptions of women as more passive and caring and less aggressive and violent than men,<sup>1</sup> more sexually modest or less promiscuous than men,<sup>2</sup> less physically powerful than men,<sup>3</sup> and more interested in and affectionate with children than more daring, rough-and-tumble men,<sup>4</sup> among a myriad of other differences.

The most influential defender of patriarchy on such grounds during the 19th century was Charles Darwin, who defended the sexual basis for gender on apparently authoritative, scientific grounds.<sup>5</sup> Especially in *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871,<sup>6</sup> Darwin argues that males and females have different characters because they have different genetic makeups derived from the successful procreative and survival strategies of genetic forbears.<sup>7</sup>

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1. David P. Barash, *Out of Eden: The Surprising Consequences of Polygamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 27-33 and 42-45; Steven E. Rhoads, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004), pp. 134-158.
  2. Barash, *Out of Eden*, pp. 60-72; Rhoads, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*, pp. 48-54.
  3. Rhoads, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*, pp. 168-173; Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano, *Playing with the Boys: Why Separate Is Not Equal in Sports* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 52-58.
  4. Barash, *Out of Eden*, pp. 113-126; Rhoads, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*, pp. 190-204.
  5. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 6 and 23.
  6. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), pp. 617-622.
  7. Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 139-140.
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- Strong men capable of surviving gained sexual access to women capable of attracting men and nurturing children—according to Darwin, the natural basis for the idea that men are aggressive and women passive;
- Men had to be sure of their progeny in order to provide protection, so women at least affected to be more modest and passive sexually—the natural basis for the sexual double standard; and
- Men provided for the family, while women specialized in caring for the children—the natural basis for the division of labor between the sexes.

Similar ideas are also found in the thinking of Sigmund Freud, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, August Comte, and others. Each thought that women are less inclined to run for political office, put career before family, pursue wealth aggressively, or be sexually promiscuous.<sup>8</sup> Otto Weininger even argues that the emancipation of women is a contradiction in terms, and many feminists influenced by Beauvoir cite his *Sex and Character* as representative of this patriarchal scientific tradition.<sup>9</sup>

### The First Wave of Feminist Reformers

While these biological essentialists were writing, the first wave of feminist reformers (1850–1920) arose to critique the subordinate condition of women. These thinkers, finding their source in the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), operated within a classically liberal intellectual framework and hoped, as the title of Wollstonecraft’s 1792 book suggests, for the “vindication of the rights of women.” In America, such a vindication was conceived as

extending rights to women within America’s traditional dedication to individual rights and limited government.<sup>10</sup>

The crowning achievements for first-wave feminists lay in establishing a legal right for women to own property, legal acceptance for divorce, and ultimately the right to vote. If women had not previously appeared interested in exercising such rights, argued first-wave feminists, this apolitical appearance was traceable to society’s failure to protect such rights. They were concerned that, as John Stuart Mill argues in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), no society could yet know what woman actually is because “the whole force of education...enslaves [women’s] minds” to motherly and wifely sacrificial duties.<sup>11</sup> The old system of coverture in which women lost their legal identity within marriage had underestimated the capacity of women for citizenship. Women and men could choose differently from one another under this regime of greater freedom and independence.<sup>12</sup>

The legal framework for which first-wave feminists fervently wished was established, more or less throughout the Western world, during the first third of the 20th century.

### The Second Wave: Simone de Beauvoir and the Distinction Between Sex and Gender

Beginning with Simone de Beauvoir, the mother of second-wave feminism, feminists expressed disappointment in the actual choices women made with the rights and protections that first-wave feminists had won. Many women still prioritized motherhood over a career and valued loving relationships within marriage more than market relations outside

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8. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nibet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), para. 166A.

9. “Emancipation, as I mean to discuss it, is not the wish for an outward equality with man, but what is of real importance in the woman question, the deep-seated craving to acquire a man’s character, to attain his mental and moral freedom, to reach his real interests and his creative power. I maintain that the real female element has neither the desire nor the capacity for emancipation in this sense. All those who are striving for this real emancipation, all women who are truly famous and are of conspicuous mental ability, to the first glance of an expert reveal some of the anatomical characters of the male, some external bodily resemblance to a man. Those so-called ‘women’ who have been held up to admiration in the past and present, by advocates of woman’s rights, as examples of what women can do, have almost invariably been what I have described as sexually intermediate forms.” Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1906), p. 65.

10. Christina Villegas, “The Modern Feminist Rejection of Constitutional Government,” Heritage Foundation *First Principles Report* No. 60, August 8, 2016, pp. 2–4, <http://report.heritage.org/fp60>.

11. John Stuart Mill, “The Subjection of Women,” in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–1991), Vol. 21, p. 271.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 297–298.

the home and sexual liberation. When they chose a career, they tended to enter the caring professions instead of aspiring to be chief executive officers, bohemian poets, or academics. Generally, despite a century of struggle, women lived more passively and dependently than second-wave feminists thought healthy or appropriate.

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### **Simone de Beauvoir and her American disciples recommended freeing women from accumulated patriarchal culture and spent a great deal of intellectual energy finding ways to identify the assumptions that enslaved women to their old character.**

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Second-wave feminists argued that this perceived lack of progress was traceable to the entrenched cultural patriarchy, because of which men and women continued to indulge beliefs consistent with biological essentialism. Legal freedom was not enough to provide substantive equality for women. Getting women to choose differently would require a more fundamental cultural reformation centered on encouraging women to shed their maternal, wifely personalities and become independent. Beauvoir and her American disciples recommended freeing women from accumulated patriarchal culture and spent a great deal of intellectual energy finding ways to identify the assumptions that enslaved women to their old character.<sup>13</sup>

Beauvoir's thought is the first to provide intellectual justification for divorcing sex from gender and for holding that culture alone has determined the meaning of sex and the body. Her opus, *The Second Sex* (1949 French; 1953 English translation), frames the argument for contemporary feminism and for all subsequent thinkers who criticize and deconstruct seemingly natural human distinctions.<sup>14</sup> This deconstruction is evident in the most famous expression of Beauvoir's thought, the question that begins *The Second Sex*: "what is a woman?" She answers:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.<sup>15</sup>

Women, the argument runs, were passively defined by their biological, cultural, and civilizational situation. They grew into the artificial roles of dependent wife and sacrificing mother according to the cultural influence of gender roles, and these gender roles had been built on a seemingly obvious interpretation of the female body. Individuals who allowed themselves to be thus defined, perhaps falsely thinking that culture is a reflection of nature, manifest what Beauvoir called an almost subhuman "immanence."

For Beauvoir, the common traits of "immanent" women result from pervasive social indoctrination or socialization. Beauvoir identifies how immanence is taught and reinforced in a thousand different ways.

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13. Testifying to the kinship between herself and American radicals, Beauvoir names Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, and Shulamith Firestone as her worthy successors in the effort to establish a genuinely liberated society. See Alice Schwarzer, *After the Second Sex: Conversations with Simone de Beauvoir*, trans. Marianne Howarth (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 39 and 46. Firestone, for instance, the most radical and thoroughgoing of these subsequent thinkers, dedicates *The Dialectic of Sex* to "Simone de Beauvoir, Who Endured" and praises and cites Beauvoir throughout her analysis. In it, she describes Beauvoir as "the most comprehensive and far-reaching" feminist theorist, one who related feminism "to the best ideas of our culture." See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 8. Firestone herself was, in the words of one of her admirers, "the American Simone de Beauvoir." See Susan Faludi, "Death of a Revolutionary," *The New Yorker*, April 15, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/15/death-of-a-revolutionary> (accessed April 26, 2017).

14. "We must only note that the varieties of behavior reports are not dictated to woman by her hormones nor predetermined in the structure of the female brain: they are shaped as in a mold by her situation." Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 597. "The peculiarities that identify her as specifically a woman get their importance from the significance placed upon them. They can be surmounted, in the future, when they are regarded in new perspectives." *Ibid.*, p. 727. "The fact is that her resignation comes not from any predetermined inferiority: on the contrary, it is that which gives rise to all her insufficiencies; that resignation has its source in the adolescent girl's past, in the society around her, and particularly in the future assigned her." *Ibid.*, p. 329.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. ix and 267.

Society, for instance, prepares women to be passive and tender and men to take the initiative in sexual relations. Male initiative in sex is “an essential element” in patriarchy’s “general frame.”

Everything helps to confirm this hierarchy in the eyes of the little girl. The historical and literary culture to which she belongs, the songs and legends with which she is lulled to sleep, are one long exaltation of man.... Children’s books, mythology, stories, tales, all reflect the myths born of the pride and the desires of men; thus it is that through the eyes of men the little girl discovers the world and reads therein her destiny.<sup>16</sup>

And Beauvoir means *everything*. Indoctrination starts early. Men, for instance, are made to be faster, stronger, more competitive, and more aggressive than girls in sports through our belief that sports are “good for boys,” and girls are encouraged to be meek, timid, feminine, and maternal instead of risking injury.<sup>17</sup> Society creates and baptizes male promiscuity and sexual desire, while women are seen as objects of sexual desire. Men are to take women; women are taught to dream of being taken. Girls are taught sexual shame and modesty, while boys are taught confidence and eroticism.<sup>18</sup> Thus, according to Beauvoir, there is the universal acceptance of the sexual double standard whereby men are given a pass for promiscuity and adultery while women are punished.<sup>19</sup>

Trained to be passive, women, for Beauvoir, accept their seemingly subordinate roles as mothers and housewives. Against such education toward immanence, Beauvoir encourages what she calls “transcendence,” the idea that human beings must struggle to free themselves from the social or natural influence in a “continual reaching out toward other liberties” and in an effort “to engage in freely chosen

projects.”<sup>20</sup> Human beings will either be made passively by their situation (immanence) or define and make themselves (transcendence). “Man is defined as a being who is not fixed, who makes himself what he is,” Beauvoir writes. “Man is not a natural species: he is a historical idea.”<sup>21</sup>

As historical beings without fixed boundaries, women are not bound to be governed by any of the customs, assigned psychological traits, economic considerations, moral virtues, respective bodies, cultural attributes, or other limits that have long made them the “second sex.” Men have been transcendent; women have been relegated to a world of immanence. If women would transcend their current fate as the second sex, they would enjoy an “indefinitely open future” as they strive for more freedom and independence.<sup>22</sup>

As Beauvoir sees it, sexual passivity and the nexus of motherhood and marriage have combined to trap women in immanence and stagnation. Those traps can be sprung with sexual revolution and independent careers in a genuinely liberated workplace, which are steps on the road toward reaching other liberties. Sexual revolutionaries must shun sexual modesty and domesticity, adopt independent careers, and develop the qualities of character needed to pursue them.

Contraception and abortion also play an important part in Beauvoir’s project for reform. Birth control helps women to be more sexually adventurous and promiscuous and less dependent on one man for sex. Untroubled about the consequences of sex, women might take the initiative in sexual matters, perhaps even becoming the controlling partner and escaping the aforementioned posture of defeat.<sup>23</sup> To help this along, Beauvoir follows Freud, arguing that passive women are sexually “frigid,” repressed, narcissistic, and nervous.<sup>24</sup>

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16. *Ibid.*, pp. 280 and 288.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 330–335; Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 28–29.

18. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, pp. 307–315 and 321.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 188ff. and 548–553.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. xxxiv–xxxv.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34. See also p. 716: “Humanity is something more than a mere species: it is a historical development; it is to be defined by the manner in which it deals with its natural, fixed characteristics.”

22. *Ibid.*, pp. xxxv and 714.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 387–390.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 322–327, 352, 359, and 391.

In Beauvoir's view, to be a "passive" woman is to be an uninteresting lover, relying ineffectually on looks and makeup to keep the interest of a man. However, the availability of birth control and abortion is "only a point of departure for the liberation of women,"<sup>25</sup> because women must also believe that using birth control methods is honorable, necessary, a key contribution to the good life, and perhaps even an exercise in social responsibility. Their sex lives must express their independence; they must never be dependent on any particular person for satisfaction.

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Beauvoir goes beyond appeals that we make contraception and abortion legal and provide public provision for both. Since unprotected sex could lead to motherhood, the best way to encourage the use of birth control is through a forceful critique of motherhood and family life that calls into question not only their naturalness, but also their nobility and our need for them. As she says in reflecting on *The Second Sex* (and with the assistance of Shulamith Firestone's powerful elaboration of her thought), "I think that the family must be abolished."<sup>26</sup>

For Beauvoir, the false elevation of motherhood captures the gendered sexual division of labor of the past, with men pursuing interesting careers while women mind the home. By limiting women to performing Sisyphean, "tiresome, empty, monotonous" household tasks, marriage "mutilates" and

"annihilates" the wife. In marriage, "her life is virtually finished forever."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, according to Beauvoir, no man doing creative work outside the home could respect a woman who is just a housewife. Marriage therefore provides scant protection and satisfaction for women. No wonder it marks a boring, "slow assassination" of life for both husbands and wives.<sup>28</sup>

As a practical matter, Beauvoir imagines a future in which women use contraception to avoid this slow death in life as mothers and wives. The combination of readily available contraception and the fundamental critique of motherhood opens the door, for Beauvoir's feminist followers, to new practices such as state-funded day care and new technologies such as cloning that may very well continue the process of gender deconstruction and liberation.

In leveling this critique, Beauvoir suggests that all or most aspects of what had been regarded as rooted in sex (e.g., motherhood) are really socially constructed and hence changeable.<sup>29</sup> For those who would argue that the differences between the bodies of men and women place limits on how much social experimentation can be undertaken, Beauvoir answers emphatically: "The situation does not depend on the body; the reverse is true."<sup>30</sup> It is how we conceive of the body that matters, not the body itself.

If biological essentialists collapsed gender into sex, Beauvoir does the opposite: There is no sex, no natural woman or man, no stable meaningful biology underlying an "[a]bsolute" man or woman; women and men are social construction or "gender" all the way down. Sex, too is only "gender" if human beings would but interpret it creatively. Human ingenuity, responding creatively to changes in our situation and manipulating the situation itself with technology (e.g., contraception and later genetic engineering), can manufacture a new woman and a new man. Transcendent individuals create themselves, freed from society's gender roles, nature, and sex.

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25. Schwarzer, *After the Second Sex*, p. 48.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

27. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, pp. 451-459 and 477-478.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 471 and 476.

29. Regarding the ambiguity as to whether all or only most aspects of sexuality are socially constructed, see Scott Yenor, *Family Politics: The Idea of Marriage in Modern Political Thought* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), p. 192. Some subtle indications in Beauvoir's work point to the possibility of awareness that her project is not fully possible. Sex requires the body, and the question of how sex can be free or immanent probably involves a mystery and a compromise. She says, for instance, that "every human existence involves transcendence and immanence at the same time." Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. X. In other words, she perhaps believes that there are limits to the revolution that she announces.

30. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 697.

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Beauvoir does not detail what awaits human beings once legal changes, new stories, myths and clichés, and advances in technology come about. Women will be “autonomous individuals,” she writes. Each woman will finally be “a full human being” able to “live in and for herself.”<sup>31</sup> Subsequent thinkers follow where Beauvoir points and provide a more vivid picture of what a world of transcendent human beings would look like.

### **Beauvoir Comes to America: Betty Friedan and the Construction of a Healthy Human Identity**

Moving beyond traditional ideas of man or woman raises the question of what now constitutes human identity. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) accepts Beauvoir’s intellectual framework and conclusions regarding the psychology of human identity. Friedan, however, rearticulates these in a manner more congenial to American politics and modern life—that is, in terms of the emerging science of human liberation characteristic of American Progressivism.

Friedan claims to have been just a simple suburban girl when she ran across Beauvoir’s thought:

It was *The Second Sex* that introduced me to an existentialist approach to reality and political responsibility—that in effect freed me from the rubrics of authoritative ideology and led me to whatever original analysis of women’s existence that I have been able to contribute to the Women’s Movement and its unique politics.... When I first read *The Second Sex* in the early Fifties, I was writing “housewife” on the census blanks, still in the unanalyzed embrace of the feminine mystique.<sup>32</sup>

Friedan uses the term “feminine mystique” to describe the complex of laws, opinions, and pressures that turn women into the sexually passive housewives that Beauvoir called the “second sex.” Friedan brought Beauvoir’s abstract endorsement of

“transcendence,” suggestive of making human beings into gods, down from the heavens and packaged it in terms more consistent with America’s dedication to individual rights. The prevailing Progressive ideology, captured in America’s universities, put the new science in the service of cultural reconstruction to support healthy, chosen human identities.

For Friedan, the old patriarchal science had long reinforced the “feminine mystique,” counseling women to find fulfillment in their distinctive wifely and motherly tasks. According to that science, women of Friedan’s day should have been satisfied, fulfilling their destinies as wives and mothers during the baby boom.

Friedan, however, diagnosed a discontentment traceable to a disjunction between society’s expectations and women’s real dreams. In her estimation, women of the 1950s and early 1960s yearned to escape their immanent fates and suffered from boredom, feeling trapped and sensing that they had nothing important to do. They suffered from the “problem that has no name.”<sup>33</sup> This problem, she says, is a problem that no one—not scientists, doctors, counselors, psychiatrists, or the popular press—has yet identified.

A woman who allows society to define her life for her has what Friedan calls a “forfeited self” with “no goal, no purpose, no ambition patterning her days into the future, making her stretch and grow beyond the small score of years in which her body can fill its biological function.” Such a woman commits “a kind of suicide.”<sup>34</sup>

Stirring next to the old patriarchal science was a new liberating science that would show how old ideas actually disabled women. It would establish the importance of human liberation to a healthy identity. “The core of the problem for women today,” Friedan contends, “is a problem of identity—a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique.”<sup>35</sup> Friedan writes:

I think the experts in a great many fields have been holding pieces of that truth under their

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31. Ibid., p. 263.

32. Betty Friedan, *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women’s Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 387–388.

33. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1997), pp. 22, 31, and 27.

34. Ibid., p. 336.

35. Ibid., pp. 71 and 77.

microscopes for a long time without realizing it. I found pieces of it in certain new research and theoretical developments in psychology, social and biological science whose implications for women seem never to have been examined. I became aware of a growing body of evidence, much of which has not been reported publicly because it does not fit the current modes of thought about women—evidence which throws into question the standards of feminine normality, feminine adjustment, feminine fulfillment, and feminine maturity.<sup>36</sup>

Instead of living according to the feminine mystique, each woman must solve her own “identity crisis” by finding “the work, or the cause, or the purpose that evokes...creativity.”<sup>37</sup> Creative work fosters genuine struggle, and such struggle fosters personal growth. Through such creativity, women can become their true selves and achieve “self-actualization,” a phrase Friedan borrows from mid-century psychologist Abraham Maslow.

Maslow, a leading light of the new liberating science, argues that achieving the highest levels of happiness requires “giving up a simpler and easier and less effortful life” as a mother and wife “in exchange for a more demanding, more difficult life” pursuing a larger mission “concerned with the good of mankind.”<sup>38</sup> Self-actualized people possess “the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities. Such people seem to be fulfilling themselves and to be doing the best that they are capable of doing” and to be conscious of it.<sup>39</sup> They have “good self-confidence, self-assurance, high evaluation of the self, feelings of general capability or superiority,

and lack of shyness, timidity, self-consciousness or embarrassment.”<sup>40</sup>

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**A woman who allows society to define her life for her has what Betty Friedan calls a “forfeited self” with “no goal, no purpose, no ambition...making her stretch and grow beyond the small score of years in which her body can fill its biological function.” Such a woman commits “a kind of suicide.”**

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A fully developed woman will strive “beyond femaleness to the full humanness she shares with males,” Maslow writes.<sup>41</sup> At the pinnacle of human motivation is the desire for self-actualization, which Maslow defines as “growth...the striving toward health, the quest for identity and autonomy, the yearning for excellence.”<sup>42</sup>

Following Maslow, Friedan sees such people moving “beyond privatism” toward “some mission in life...outside themselves,” enjoying sexual pleasures more than others because they have a stronger sense of their own individuality, and loving out of gifted love and “spontaneous admiration” instead of a needy love informed by personal dependence.<sup>43</sup> Friedan applies Maslow’s theory and concludes that old gender roles immiserate women and that self-actualized women would be happy.<sup>44</sup> A self-actualized person is “psychologically free—more autonomous.”<sup>45</sup>

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36. Ibid., p. 31.

37. Ibid., p. 334.

38. Ibid., pp. 316–317 and 322, quoting Abraham Maslow’s published and unpublished works.

39. Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper, 1970), p. 150.

40. A. H. Maslow, “Dominance, Personality, and Social Behavior in Women,” *Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 16, Issue 2, 1942, p. 3.

41. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, p. xvii.

42. Ibid., p. xii. See also p. 46: “What a man *can* be, he *must* be.... This need we may call self-actualization.... It refers to man’s desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.” Emphasis in original.

43. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, pp. 322–326.

44. Some recent scientific evidence cited by Friedan seems to support such conclusions: Some studies purport to show that autonomous or emancipated women (as opposed to those who are bewitched by the feminine mystique) are happier and experience more and more profound orgasms, while others purport to show that there are fewer unhappy marriages among college-educated women. See Ibid., pp. 319ff., (Maslow’s study of 130 women); 327–329 (Kinsey’s sex study); 329ff.

45. Ibid., p. 320.

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Friedan marks a second wave of progressive political thought in which New Deal Progressivism's focus on reconstructing the economy changed to the 1960s sexual revolution's focus on reconstructing major cultural institutions and bringing forth a new kind of self-actualized human being/woman. She frames issues of healthy identity clinically, in terms of promoting psychological health, and links the realization of liberation or autonomy to what promotes mental health, personal fulfillment, and self-actualization, all framed in a largely value-neutral way: It is possible to be fulfilled so long as one constructs his or her own destiny, regardless of the destiny chosen.

This contains an implicit critique of women living traditional roles unless they can independently and self-consciously understand and embrace all that such roles entail. The task for psychiatrists, parents, government generally, and educators is to ensure that no individual is forced to conform to society's preconceived notions of proper living and that all individuals are free to choose their own identities. It is a task involving continual diagnosis and an ongoing search for a remedy.

After the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, exposing the influence of patriarchy and realizing the promise of a new future for individual growth became linchpins for the scientific enterprise. Science had uncovered the hidden power of gender and hence could point to the gap between what women have been and what women on a path to self-actualization could become. In this stream of thought, healthy human identity for women lay beyond society's prevailing notions of gender.

### **Kate Millett and the Fully Realized Sexual Revolution**

Kate Millett, whose *Sexual Politics* (1970) is the first major feminist book to embrace the distinction between the words *sex* and *gender*, marks perhaps the culmination of feminist thinking. Millett points to the need to reconstruct academic disciplines, especially the social sciences and humanities, with a new focus on structures of gender oppression that have subjugated women. Universities become doubly central to social transformation, on Millett's

view: They identify the sources of social indoctrination and oppression from which women and others must be liberated, and they recommend methods for constructing a world without gender.

Millett's theory of sexual politics includes a research agenda for the new science of liberation in which biology, sociology, economics, anthropology, psychology, history, and other disciplines should be directed toward demonstrating how gender has been socially constructed in the past. The clear implication is that such constructions can be dismantled and a new society constructed with the assistance of these and other disciplines.<sup>46</sup>

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This liberating science can identify and condemn the sources of oppression, but by itself, it can only give a glimpse of what a future world without gender would be like. Producing a revolution of ideas regarding sex and gender would require a work of imagination promoted through all public institutions: Universities (especially the new humanities) and popular culture would all play a part in undertaking such an exercise of imagination to produce this revolution. Millett imagines that "a fully realized sexual revolution" would have three main facets.

*First*, a sexual revolution would abolish "the ideology of male supremacy and the traditional socialization by which it is upheld in matters of status, role, and temperament," leading to the "integration of the separate sexual subcultures, an assimilation of both sides of previously segregated human experience."<sup>47</sup> Roles in child-rearing, for instance, would likely fade and eventually disappear as parental roles became less gender-defined and more androgynous.

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46. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, pp. 26 and 33-58.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Another alleged element of male ideology is the tradition of romantic love as central to relations between men and women. Love, “perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women’s oppression,” Shulamith Firestone writes.<sup>48</sup> Women, for Firestone, seem dreamy about love, emotions, and relationships. This preoccupation detains them while men pursue creative work on their own. Women thus seem “more monogamous, better at loving, possessive, ‘clinging,’ more interested in (highly involved) relationships than in sex per se.”

Because men and women are not equally vulnerable in love (men can get out of a love relationship with fewer economic or emotional consequences), love is not possible without a complete social revolution in which men and women can be equally vulnerable (or equally invulnerable) and mutually supportive of (or equally indifferent to) one another. “It is not the process of love itself that is at fault, but its *political*, i.e., unequal *power* context: the who, why, when, and where of it is what makes it now such a holocaust.”<sup>49</sup>

*Second*, a drastic change in the “patriarchal proprietary family” is necessary for women to secure “complete economic independence.” Women must obviously secure fulfilling employment outside of the home. An “important corollary” to this goal, writes Millett, is “the end of the present chattel status and denial of right to minors.”<sup>50</sup>

The dependence of children is an invention of patriarchy, in this view, designed to make women feel as if they are needed to raise them. A charter of rights for minors would foster their independence from the family, freeing mothers from it as well. With fewer marital duties, women would be freer to pursue economic independence outside marriage. According to this theory, childhood appears to be a gender too—a phase of life invented by society that creates expectations for how needy “children” should act. Thus, the abolition of gender requires movement toward the abolition of childhood.

Beauvoir nodded in this direction after learning from Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* that, in Beauvoir’s words, “women will not be liberated until they have been liberated from their children and by the same token, until children have also been liberated from their parents.”<sup>51</sup> Such liberation may also require artificial reproduction (i.e., cloning) and the professionalization of child care or a willingness to leave children free to develop on their own as in the case of “ghetto” children, as Firestone notes.<sup>52</sup> In fact, both Beauvoir and Firestone envision children freely experimenting sexually,<sup>53</sup> becoming economically viable and major contributors to a future society on par with adults. Because of this, curtailing parental rights falls under the rubric of securing independence for women.

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*Third*, sexual revolution also requires “an end to traditional sexual inhibitions and taboos, particularly those that most threaten patriarchal monogamous marriage: homosexuality, ‘illegitimacy,’ adolescent, and pre- and extra-marital sexuality.” Restrictions on sexual activity reinforce ideas of monogamous romantic love, parental responsibility, economic dependence, and other cultural attributes that define traditional family life. Emancipating sexuality from such restrictions would help to divorce marriage from sexuality and allow individuals to express primal human drives without inhibition.

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48. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, p. 142.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 119. Emphasis in original.

50. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 62.

51. Schwarzer, *After the Second Sex*, p. 39.

52. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, pp. 204, 114–115.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 87–93 and 187. Beauvoir endorses Firestone’s entire analysis, presumably including her new understanding of child sexuality. See also Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), pp. 27–30 and 104–112. Foucault sees prohibitions on childhood sexuality as social constructs designed to serve an old family system and to heighten artificially the importance of sexuality to a person’s identity. There seems to be a liberating future in which such taboos would be less carefully taught.

Sex has supposedly been repressed and channeled toward responsible reproduction, but under conditions of sexual freedom, all sexual outlets would receive equal public approval.<sup>54</sup>

In Millett's view, cultivating an individual identity instead of dully accepting the identity proposed by society fosters a healthier, happier individual. The mismatch between society's artificial demands and the requirements of individual fulfillment, identified by Friedan as "the problem that has no name," is central to the scientific project. The way to a world of fulfillment and liberation passes through a three-pronged sexual revolution: It requires the destruction of patriarchal sources of socialization, the cultivation of an ethic of individuality, and the removal of sexual inhibitions.

Millett's sexual revolution, while it represents the fully built-out feminist project, also has profound implications for the acceptance of homosexuality, transgenderism, and other issues of gender identity. Realization of feminist ambitions demands transcending women's issues narrowly defined. It implicates changing our ideas about children, love, manhood, and even the existence of these categories as such. The theoretical mission initiated in Beauvoir's thought has many direct applications for political practice and daily life as it deconstructs what people take for granted as a matter of course.

### **The Third Wave: The Rolling Revolution and Transgenderism**

Friedan's emphasis on identity led reformers to apply the identity-crisis concept beyond women, first to homosexuality, then to natural sexual aberrations, and most recently to transgender individuals. This initiated a third wave of feminism that seeks to move beyond the binary character of Beauvoir's feminism toward her hopes for an "indefinitely open future" of sexual identities.<sup>55</sup>

**Transsexual Ambiguities.** Advances beyond second-wave feminism include the changing evaluation of transsexuals (people who undergo sex-change operations) and those born with sexual aberrations

such as hermaphrodites. Second-wave feminists recognized the importance to their theories of those who are born with anatomical aberrations. Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, and Millett allude to sexual aberrations to show that the concept of nature with which sex is associated is "not always unambiguous."<sup>56</sup> Nature, they note, does not reliably produce human beings who are identifiably male or female.

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Second-wave feminists embraced Robert Stoller's scientific work on the grip that gender apparently has on human identity. Stoller established the Gender Identity Center at the University of California–Los Angeles in 1965 and wrote *Sex and Gender* (1968), a very influential book.

For Stoller, sex has "connotations of anatomy and physiology," while gender relates to the "tremendous areas of behavior, feelings, thoughts, and fantasies that...do not have primarily biological connotations." While "sex and gender seem to common sense inextricably bound together...[the] two realms...are not inevitably bound in anything like a one-to-one relationship" and "may go in quite independent ways."<sup>57</sup> Gender may in fact exist contrary to anatomy and physiology, as in the case of those who are born with anatomical features of both men and women:

Although the external genitalia (penis, testes, scrotum) contribute to the sense of maleness, no one of them is essential for it, not even all of them together. In the absence of complete evidence, I

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54. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 62. See also Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, pp. 236–237.

55. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. xxxv.

56. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971), pp. 18–19; see also Millett, *Sexual Politics*, pp. 30–31, and Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, pp. 10–11 and 404.

57. Robert J. Stoller, *Sex and Gender: The Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (New York: Science House, 1968), pp. viii–ix.

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agree with Money and the Hampsons who show in their large series of intersexed [those with features of both sexes] patients that gender role is determined by postnatal forces, regardless of the anatomy and physiology of the external genitalia.<sup>58</sup>

Stoller views gender identity as shaped by important social and sexual experiences in the first 18 months of life. So stubborn is gender identity that it would be easier, he argues, to surgically change the sex of an adolescent male assigned as a female at birth and raised as a girl than it would be to change his gendered sense of self.

Therewith, Stoller points to the trailblazer in transsexual activism, John Money, cofounder of the Johns Hopkins Gender Identity Clinic in 1965. Money was involved in winning approval for sexual reassignment surgery in 1966 and in creating the transsexual category for those with mixed sexual identities.

Money won fame for the case of David Reimer, catalogued by Money and coauthor Patricia Tucker in *Sexual Signatures* (1976). A botched circumcision at eight months left the boy without a penis. Johns Hopkins staff convinced David's parents to castrate the boy and raise him as a girl renamed Brenda according to conventional standards. No vagina was added to make Brenda a girl physically. Annual follow-up visits "proved how well all [parties] succeeded in adjusting to that decision."<sup>59</sup>

Money thought this case proved that "the gender identity gate is open at birth for a normal child no less than for one born with unfinished sex organs...

and that it stays open at least for something over a year after birth."<sup>60</sup> Both David and his brother Brian would die before reaching 40, each by his own hand after a history of mental illness.<sup>61</sup>

After relating David Reimer's story, Money relates several others about well-adjusted patients who physically transitioned from one sex to the other at the ages of 11 and 12, suggesting that the "gender identity gate" may remain open much longer than 18 months.<sup>62</sup> The door to ever-later sex reassignment surgery seems open. More important from the perspective of second-wave feminism, the door is open to a greater role for human choice concerning the creation of identity or self-conception and to the idea of gender fluidity independent of the body.<sup>63</sup>

Some second-wave feminists endorsed Money's approach because its ideas about femininity and masculinity seemed malleable and because it suggested that the body does not imply a fixed destiny. This philosophical alliance between feminists and Money and his scientific acolytes had a political hue as well: Few things erode "the ideology of male supremacy and the traditional socialization" as much as problematizing the biological basis of identity.<sup>64</sup>

### Judith Butler: Queer Theory, Homosexual Advocacy, and Transgender Rights

In this rolling revolution, the supposed insights of one generation can become an obstacle in the next. Chief among the third-wave critics of such second-wave alliances is Judith Butler.

Those who were performing the gender reassignment surgeries thought of themselves as breaking

58. Ibid., p. 48. Stoller refers to John Money, "Psychosexual Differentiation," in *Sex Research, New Developments*, ed. John Money (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), p. 12: "The condition existing at birth and for several months thereafter is one of psychosexual undifferentiation. Just as in the embryo, morphologic sexual differentiation passes from a plastic stage to one of fixed immutability, so also does psychosexual differentiation become fixed and immutable—so much so, that mankind has traditionally assumed that so strong and fixed a feeling as personal sexual identity must stem from something innate, instinctive, and not subject to postnatal experience and learning. The error of this traditional assumption is that the power and permanence of something learned has been underestimated."

59. John Money and Patricia Tucker, *Sexual Signatures: On Being a Man or a Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 95.

60. Ibid., p. 98.

61. John Colapinto, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy That Was Raised as a Girl* (New York: Harper, 2006).

62. Money and Tucker, *Sexual Signatures*, pp. 101ff.

63. Money and Tucker understood his pioneering work as connected to gaining acceptance for other sexual "pioneers of change" including groups of liberationists who break down previous gender stereotypes. Most prominent among these liberationists are women's liberationists, who fight against pay discrimination and escape from the passive dependence typical of old-style femininity; transsexuals, who fight to win acceptance as people with the gender identities of men but have been trapped in a woman's body (or vice versa); married pioneers, who would practice open marriage and other swinging practices "beyond monogamy"; and youths, who will engage in sexual experimentation outside of tradition without shame. Ibid., pp. 186–229.

64. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 62.

new ground, but to Butler, they were merely reinforcing society's tendency to view people as either women or men. Butler thinks that these surgeries call for "a serious and increasingly popular critique of idealized gender dimorphism within the transsexual movement itself"—one that will lead to a world in which "mixed genital attributes might be accepted and loved without having to transform them into a more socially coherent or normative notion of gender."<sup>65</sup>

Butler links third-wave feminism to developments in queer theory, homosexual advocacy, and transgender rights.<sup>66</sup> Queer theory holds that all expressions of gender and sexuality are socially constructed and hence changeable, with the hope that celebrating the supposedly queer lifestyles will undermine or "problematize" fixed notions of personal identity and rigid distinctions.<sup>67</sup> Society's way of pigeonholing individuals into binary male and female categories is especially prominent. Queer theory finds liberation beyond the binary and beyond the normal. Among those liberated through a wide acceptance of queer theory would be transgendered people, whose self-conception transcends supposedly normal conceptions of gender but who do not necessarily reconfigure their bodies to accommodate this self-conception.

Feminists may once have opposed the inclusion of homosexual ("queer"), drag (men dressed as women), butch (masculine lesbians), femme (feminine lesbians), and transgender persons in their movement because such individuals undermined the idea of sisterhood that bound the movement together.<sup>68</sup> Early homosexual activists similarly seemed to accept the idea of homosexual or heterosexual orientation as embedded in a person's genetic makeup or as somehow natural.

Butler and others among this third wave accept the feminist divorce of sex from gender and its aspiration to move "beyond gender" or to "undo" gender.

According to third-wave theorists, their feminist predecessors were insufficiently radical because they did not reject the binary character of gender and instead just encouraged supposedly "immanent" women to perform more like "transcendent" men.

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For Butler, gender itself is an imposition, an act of pseudoviolence integrated into our language and expectations. There is no real, natural gender for Butler, nor is there a natural or proper expression of sexuality. Gender and sexuality are "performances" arising from and constituting common life. For her understanding of social norms, Butler relies especially on French post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault, who seeks to expose political power as it manifests itself in our ideas of truth, reality, and language, all of which reinforce the dominant group's vision of political power and make its way of life implicitly normal. Society exerts this power subtly by constructing "truth" and "reality" and thereby constructs a theory of which categories count as human. Many subtle things in society, for instance, from religious teaching to popular culture, encourage people to expect love relations between men and women. These expectations must be exposed as artificial so that a more open and "queer" future can arise. Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, to use Butler's more technical

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65. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 64–65. See also Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugating Knowledge: An Introduction to Transgender Studies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 1.

66. Susan Stryker sees the "wave of transgender scholarship" as "part of a broader queer intellectual movement." Stryker, "(De)Subjugating Knowledge," p. 1 (and, more broadly, pp. 3–7).

67. David M. Halperin argues that "Queer is...whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence." See David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 62. Emphasis in original.

68. Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), Chapters 2 and 3.

language, exposes the “mechanism of coercion” behind the modern preference for heterosexual sex in the hope of liberating a more polymorphous expression of sexual desire and, ultimately, new engenderings.<sup>69</sup>

Leslie Feinberg, whose pamphlet “Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come” (1992) likely offers the first full treatment of the transgender phenomenon, echoes Friedan’s account of the discrimination suffered by the transgendered as “an oppression without a name” because it is so engrained in culture as to appear natural.<sup>70</sup> Engendering has been an unseen “violence” that in Butler’s words “emerges from a profound desire to keep the order of binary gender to appear natural or necessary, to make of it a structure, either natural or cultural or both, which no human being can oppose, and still remain human.”<sup>71</sup>

Undoing gender requires empowerment of those who fantasize about and also perform different gender spectacles, revealing fluid and transgressive possibilities of new realities. Butler’s *Gender Trouble* emphasizes the transgressive nature of drag and cross-dressing,<sup>72</sup> while her *Undoing Gender* adds transgender as the latest new gender performance. “When something [seemingly] unreal,” Butler writes, “lays claim to reality...something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification.”<sup>73</sup>

Accordingly, a more developed feminism would integrate queer theory because “queers” “struggle to rework the norms” and posit “a different future for the norm itself.” They “make us not only question what is real and what ‘must’ be, but they also show us how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can become instituted,” just as feminists

hope.<sup>74</sup> With new transgressive possibilities, “a new legitimating lexicon for...gender complexity” can develop within “law, psychiatry, social and literary theory.”<sup>75</sup>

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**Freedom from society’s impositions or constructions is not enough. In a future of transgender liberation, say third-wave theorists, a thousand genders will bloom because the public will recognize the legitimacy, even the beauty, of all gender performances.**

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Thus, a recognition of transgenderism is consistent with the philosophical premises of second-wave feminism (i.e., divorcing one’s body from one’s identity) and also furthers the three political goals of sexual revolution that Millett articulates. It moves beyond second-wave feminists because the ground won by those activists has been won, and new fields of conquest appear open.

Freedom from society’s impositions or constructions is not enough, however. In a future of transgender liberation, say third-wave theorists, a thousand genders will bloom because the public will recognize the legitimacy, even the beauty, of all gender performances. “We are not carving out a place for autonomy,” Butler writes, “if by autonomy we mean a state of individuation, taken as self-persisting prior to and apart from any relations of dependency on the world of others.” Persons “cannot persist without norms of recognition” that support their persistence and build their mental health. One’s identity is never fully real or fully one’s own until it is endorsed in and through the public authorities and recognized as such by one’s fellow citizens. The “very sense

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69. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, pp. 36-49.

70. Leslie Feinberg, “Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come” (New York: World View Forum, 1992), p. 6.

71. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 35. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), argues that dichotomies in the sexual world such as natural/artificial, gay/straight, closeted/out, and masculine/feminine are recent arbitrary products of our bourgeois sexual regime.

72. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

73. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, pp. 27-28.

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 26 and 28-29.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

of personhood is linked to the desire for recognition, and that desire places us outside ourselves, in a realm of social norms that we do not fully choose.”<sup>76</sup>

It is difficult to imagine how the work of undoing gender could be completed: It seems to demand continual social transformation not only in the name of liberation from past impositions, but also as a way to secure recognition for tomorrow’s desires. Butler doubts whether we need norms to live, but all individuals need public recognition and affirmation for their identity to continue.

Butler’s argument leads to a transgressive defense of same-sex marriage. Far from welcoming “virtually normal” couples into a traditional marriage culture, Butler embraces same-sex marriage because it creates gender trouble for marriage. It combats essentialism and upsets expected gender norms about heterosexuality within marriage. It introduces new realities such as open marriage, thereby creating new performances that perhaps may point toward dethroning marriage as an important public value and ending the legal recognition of marriage. In the long term, same-sex marriage may affirm transgressive performances by disrupting the old norm. Shaking the public recognition of marriage in this way is a step toward creating a more open future.<sup>77</sup>

Butler expects that witnessing transgender incidents would produce a disruptive effect much like that produced by observing two men or two women in wedlock. Following this logic, public restrooms and showering facilities are based on a binary conception of gender, serving as instruments of oppression for those who do not conform to society’s norms. Support for women’s sports also seems to be based on such essentialism, so finding a place for transgender athletes likewise becomes a moral imperative. After all, women’s sports are based on the seemingly benighted assumption that there are women. Transgendered persons create “gender trouble” for

contemporary notions of reality and call for affirmation and recognition so that those who formerly were considered “unreal” can be welcomed into the human race.

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**Transgender activism begins with the help of a science that deconstructs, claims that individuals’ health is compromised by society’s repressions, and names a psychological syndrome from which such individuals suffer: “gender dysphoria.”**

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According to Butler, the body is neither a given nor a limit: The limit in our identity is our ability to entertain “fantasy,” which is “an internal film that we project inside the interior theater of the mind.”<sup>78</sup> A new politics must “create a world in which those who understand their gender and their desire to be nonnormative can live and thrive not only without the threat of violence from the outside but without the pervasive sense of their own unreality, which can lead to suicide or a suicidal life.”<sup>79</sup>

Few transgendered activists are self-consciously post-structuralist queer theorists, just as few feminists of the 1960s and 1970s were Beauvoir-inspired existentialists. Their activism, however, bends in the direction of these theories.

Transgender activism begins with the help of a science that deconstructs, claims that individuals’ health is compromised by society’s repressions, and names a psychological syndrome from which such individuals suffer. The scientific keystone to this new establishment is the disorder known as “gender dysphoria,”<sup>80</sup> which seems to cause a persistent and consistent unease about one’s gender identity or an

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76. *Ibid.*, pp. 32 (emphasis in original) and 33. See also *ibid.*, p. 8, for her contention that “a livable life does require various degrees of stability” and that a “life for which no categories of recognition exist is not a livable life.”

77. For such arguments, see, among others, Martha Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency* (New York: The New Press, 2004), pp. 105–108 and 134–136; Richard D. Mohr, *The Long Arc of Justice: Lesbian and Gay Marriage, Equality and Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 69ff.; and Ann Ferguson, “Gay Marriage: An American and Feminist Dilemma,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2007), esp. p. 51.

78. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 217.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

80. “Gender Dysphoria,” in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, ed. American Psychiatric Association (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), p. 452.

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incongruity between one's biological sex and internal sense of life as either a man or a woman. In this case, a scientific name is assigned to an issue that on other occasions had gone unnamed.

From the perspective of queer theory, these reactions are almost charming in their adherence to the traditional relation between sex and gender.<sup>81</sup> For queer theorists, those who are experiencing gender confusion should not be cured; rather, their identities should be affirmed and celebrated. When a child suffering from "gender dysphoria" arrives at school, it is not simply a question of demanding transitioning measures and hormone treatments. For queer theorists, such a child arrives with a demand that the school and its community recognize and affirm the child's questionable gender status as a permanent fact.

The 2015 experience of Minnesota's Nova Classical Academy illustrates this point. A parent enrolled his five-year-old in the charter school. The child, according to the parent, thought of himself as a boy who likes "girl things." The parent demanded that the school support the non-gender-conforming student with changes in curriculum and policies (among other things), and the school complied under legal and public pressure.<sup>82</sup> There are multiple stories of how professionals in some states are prevented from treating "gender dysphoria" as a pathological syndrome requiring counseling and preventive parenting. The ultimate goal is public recognition of queer theory's view of the human landscape.

## Conclusion

The queer theory that leads to demands that the transgendered be publicly recognized shares much with Beauvoir's initial insight about women being made, not born. Transgender theorists, in Butler's words, "are carrying on the legacy of Simone de Beauvoir: if one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one, then becoming is the vehicle for gender itself."<sup>83</sup> Beauvoir and her successors drained all significance from the term *sex* and said that it could be filled through human construction with a new idea of woman.

Queer theorists agreed and went further, filling gender more freely based on individual imagination and choice instead of artificial dichotomies and other remnants of tradition. Becoming human would now have to proceed from individual imagination, unaffected by socially imposed ideas of gender. Queer theorists pushed against a door that second-wave feminists had already opened. With queer theory, human beings come closer to being, as Beauvoir contended, historical beings instead of fixed species.

The importance of identity formation, begun in Friedan's reiteration of Beauvoir's thought, also fosters the importance of transgender rights. Human identity is not determined by one's biology, genes, or upbringing; it is a product of how people conceive of themselves. Human beings are, on this view, unsexed persons caught in a body of one sex or another without any need to follow previous gender scripts. "No more vivid example exists," writes the philosopher Roger Scruton, "of the human determination to triumph over biological destiny, in the interests of a moral idea."<sup>84</sup> Elevating the morality of human imagination and escaping the iron grip of gender construction—in effect, two sides of the same coin—transgender activists make common cause with feminists in the defense of autonomy, freedom from biological necessity, and human liberation.

There exists no better way of extending the sexual revolution that second-wave feminists imagined than by shaking confidence in the very idea of man and woman. Transgender theories are thus a late iteration of the feminist goal of a sexual revolution that includes abolition of male supremacy and traditional socialization toward gender scripts, cultivation of androgyny, elimination of the proprietary family and the dependence of women and children on that family, and celebration of non-monogamous, non-marital sexual experiences. Being one gender or another is a matter of human imagination, and new types of genders can be imagined: These experiences are in keeping with the rolling sexual revolution.

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81. Butler counsels people to submit to a diagnosis for gender dysphoria "ironically or facetiously" to get the health care if it is desired but to reject the implication that this is a pathology to be corrected; "autonomy," not pathology, is the standard by which to judge the proper choice. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, pp. 82ff. and 87.

82. Katherine Kersten, "Transgender Conformity," *First Things*, December 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2016/12/transgender-conformity> (accessed April 27, 2017).

83. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 65.

84. Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 274.



Transgender rights therefore extend the philosophical premises of second-wave feminism and foster its political project while pointing to a world that is not exactly what those feminists thought was needed in their time. Whether this new world will prove to be fit for human flourishing remains to be seen.

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