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Gender and Its Discontents¹

Keywords

gender, transgender, gender unease, gender theory, gender practice, gender studies

Abstract

Gender produces multiple discontents (unease, discomfort, embarrassment, irritation, annoyance) in society. With this straightforward thesis the author addresses the problem of gender—Butlerian “gender trouble”—as a form of cultural discontent or unease. During the ground-breaking and path-paving women’s, feminist, gay and lesbian movements, gender, then female gender, caused cultural irritation for the patriarchy of the then societies and continues to do so to this very day. However, with the recent transgender movement, this cultural unease about gender has taken on entirely new dimensions, including turning gender into an alarming issue, a threatening global specter and annoyingly omnipresent conflict not only in wider society but also in academia. These uneasy issues are here tackled in two ways, through the theory and practice of gender. The way subversive gender theory can trigger collective unease, even if it is falsely imposed, artificially induced, and manipulatively orchestrated, is shown using the example of the abuse of Judith Butler’s gender theory by polemicists in culture war debates surrounding gender and proponents and supporters of the anti-gender movement, clearly betraying their intention of harming communities of gender non-conforming people and those communities’ efforts towards social, political, and legal emancipation. The way transgressive gender practice can trigger relational discomfort in everyday interactions is illustrated through the author’s own “gender story” in the form of a short autoethnography of gender unease, to illustrate the problem of deep sex/gender binarism, essentialism, primordial-

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¹ This paper is a translation of the unpublished Slovenian version entitled “Spol in nelagodje,” literally “Gender and Unease,” “Gender and Discontent,” or “Gender and Discomfort,” and appears here as a paraphrase of the English translation of Freud’s book *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

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ism, perennialism, and naturalism permeating, completely spontaneously and unreflexively, all our thoughts, words, actions, relationships, institutions, and collectives.

Spol in nelagodje

Ključne besede

spol, transspolnost, nelagodje spola, teorija spola, praksa spola, študiji spolov

Povzetek

Spol povzroča številna nelagodja (v obliki neugodja, neprijetnosti, zadrege, nerodnosti, vznemirjenja) v družbi. S to preprosto tezo avtorica naslavlja problem spola—butterjevsko “težavo s spolom”—kot obliko kulturnega nelagodja. Že v času prelomnih in pot utirajočih si ženskih, feminističnih, gejevskih in lezbičnih gibanj je spol, takrat prvenstveno ženski spol, povzročil kulturno vznemirjenost patriarhata tedanjih družb in jo povzroča še danes. Toda z nedavnim transspolnim gibanjem je to nelagodje v zvezi s spolom dobilo popolnoma nove razsežnosti, vključno s pretvorbo spola v nekakšno alarmantno družbeno vprašanje, strah vzbujajočo globalno fantazmo in nadležno vseprisoten konflikt ne le v širši družbi, ampak tudi v akademskem svetu. Tovrstnega kulturnega nelagodja spola se tu lotevamo z dveh zornih kotov, skozi teorijo spola in prakso spola. Način, na katerega lahko subverzivna teorija spola sproži kolektivno nelagodje, tudi če je slednje lažno proizvedeno, umetno vsiljeno in manipulativno orkestrirano, je prikazan na primeru zlorabe teorije spola Judith Butler s strani antigenderistov, kar zgovorno izdaja njihov namen, tj. škodovati transspolni, interpolni in spolno nebinarni skupnosti ter zavreti njena prizadevanja za družbeno, politično in pravno priznanje ter temeljno emancipacijo na ravni človekovih pravic. Način, na katerega lahko transgresivna praksa spola sproži odnosno nelagodje v vsakdanjih medčloveških stikih, je ponazorjen z avtoričino lastno življenjsko »zgodbo spola« v obliki kratke avtoetnografije nelagodja spola, ki nakazuje na problem globokega spolnega binarizma, esencializma, primordializma, perenializma in naturalizma, ki povsem spontano in nerefleksivno prežema vse naše misli, besede, dejanja, odnose, institucije in kolektive.

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Gender as Unease

While information, understanding, and knowledge certainly can give rise to discontent or unease, their lack (in its various forms as non-/mis-/dis-/mal-/anti-/

post-information/understanding/knowledge) has the potential to make the discontent or unease even more socially intolerable. This may be a fairly epistemic claim, yet without the sort of epistemological aspirations and investments present in the monograph *Trans(spol)nost* (Trans(gender)ness);² here, the question of gender is addressed as a form of cultural discontent or unease (Freud's *Unbehagen*) generated in a number of ways by the theory and practice of gender.³ The claim may be too strong and too ambitious, considering that it was initially put forth in a low-risk, academic setting.⁴ Still, while the occasion suddenly prompting these preliminary thoughts on gender and unease may have been a small one, some of the ideas expressed here are ones the author has been privately mulling over for at least two decades. What follows, then, is neither a complete theoretical analysis of gender unease in all its social, relational and epistemic manifestations nor the final outcome of a program of empirical research, but rather develops a starting point from which to approach the topic, which the author might decide to explore with more academic rigor at some later point.

Discussions of gender seem alarmingly ever-present in our time, a feverish topic triggering a wider unease in society. Whether considered: an unavoidable destiny; a natural given; a fact of biology; an essential entity; a visible body; a sexual difference; an interior identity; a fixed box; a fluid state; an intimate feeling; an imagined community; a relational reality; a categorical apparatus; a scientific episteme; an academic issue; a part of a political agenda; an historical regime; a public matter; a social construct; a legal status; an ideological dogma; a bureaucratic norm; a statistical datum; a piece of viral information; a cultural practice; an everyday attribute; or, a system of oppression, over the recent decades gender—this bio-psycho-social complex, this layered multi-constitution, this deep socialization—has attracted enormous attention by academics and activists as well as by the broader public.⁵ The responsibility for gender becoming

² See Vlado Kotnik, *Trans(spol)nost: Arheologija trans/vednosti* [Trans(gender)ness: The archaeology of trans/knowledge] (Ljubljana: Krtina, 2022), 69–129, 449–55.

³ Kotnik, 66, 452.

⁴ A fifteen-minute talk at the Roza_simpozij on June 19, 2024, part of the series of events Roza_ZRC+ organized by ZRC SAZU (Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts) as the foremost scientific institution in Slovenia to raise awareness about LGBTQIA+ persons' lives, rights, scientific and artistic achievements, culture and social visibility both in the Slovenian academic community and in the broader society.

⁵ The list of relevant literature dealing with different representations of gender is long, so here is only a short selection of works for further reading: Simone de Beauvoir, *The*

a pre-eminent “trouble” of our society, according to the detractors of a reflexive and subversive understanding of gender, lies with one single person: the philosopher, gender theorist, and nonbinary activist Judith Butler. Moreover,

Second Sex, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011); Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994); R. A. Briggs and B. R. George, *What Even Is Gender?* (New York: Routledge, 2023); Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge 1990), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Tina Chanter, *Gender: Key Concepts in Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2007); Heath Fogg Davis, *Beyond Trans: Does Gender Matter?* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Micaela Di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Muriel Dimen and Virginia Goldner, eds., *Gender in Psychoanalytic Space: Between Clinic and Culture* (New York: Other Press, 2010); Anne Fausto-Sterling’s *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Men and Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) and *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (New York: World View Forum, 1992); Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler, eds., *Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Sexualities: From Feminism to Trans** (New York: Routledge, 2022); Kit Heyam, *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender* (New York: Seal Press, 2022); Sally Hines’ *TransForming Gender: Transgender Practices of Identity, Intimacy and Care* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2007) and *Is Gender Fluid? A Primer for the 21st Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2020); Mary Holmes, *What Is Gender? Sociological Approaches* (London: Sage, 2007); Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds., *Gender: A Sociological Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002); Judith Lorber and Susan Farrell, eds., *The Social Construction of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Rosalind Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Ann Oakley, *The Ann Oakley Reader: Gender, Women & Social Science* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2005); Nina Perger, *Razpiranje horizontov možnega: O nebinarnih spolnih in seksualnih identitetah v Sloveniji* [Expanding the horizons of the possible: On non-binary gender and sexual identities in Slovenia] (Ljubljana: Založba FDV, 2020); Sabrina Ramet, ed., *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Raka Ray, Jennifer Carlson, and Abigail Andrews, *The Social Life of Gender* (Berkeley: Sage, 2018); Peggy Reeves Sanday and Ruth Gallagher Goodenough, eds., *Beyond the Second Sex: New Directions in the Anthropology of Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Charlotte Chucky Tate, Ella Ben Hagai, and Faye J. Crosby, *Undoing the Gender Binary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Valerija Vendramin and Renata Šribar, *Spoli, seksualnost in nasilje skozi nove medije* [Genders, sexuality, and violence through new media] (Ljubljana: Pedagoški inštitut, 2010).

the trouble can be traced to one single book of theirs: *Gender Trouble*.⁶ Herein, Butler offers a true, erudite theory of gender as opposed to the disingenuous “theories” that queerphobes and transphobes evoke and weaponize in their polemics, campaigns, and mobilizations against communities of gender non-conforming people.

Gender Theory as Collective Unease

Gender Trouble struck at the very foundations of how gender had been understood until then, bringing Butler both global fame and grave accusations. A watershed book for a reflexive theory of gender, over the three decades since its publication it has been credited with and blamed for a wide range of ideas. Among the general public, two mistaken readings or else intentional false allegations have recently stood out as particularly incendiary: first, the notion that Butler denies the existence of biological sex, claiming that the biology of sex has nothing to do with reality, hence is something inexistent, made up; and second, that Butler insists that gender is merely and simply a choice, claiming that all people experience and choose gender in the manner of arbitrarily shopping for it in a “supermarket of gender.” These types of simplistic, deceitful and misleading claims, had they actually been made by Butler, would obviously be expected not just to provoke unease in society, but to draw sharp criticism from serious academia. Butler’s theory of gender as performative did attract some justified commentary from academics and activists, yet none was such as to warrant their name triggering cultural unease, moral panic, collective ire, and orchestrated hate and violence in society. So, what were Butler’s theoretical claims that have earned them such aversion and deathly hatred in some social circles, particularly among certain rabble-rousing political factions and their adherents and followers, recently manifested in such worrying incidents as labelling Butler’s work as “diabolical” or Butler as the “witch” of gender theory or even as the burning of Butler in effigy by extreme rightists and anti-gender protesters?⁷

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⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁷ Alexandre Aragão, “Please Watch This Insane Footage of Judith Butler Being Called a Witch in Brazil,” BuzzFeed News, November 8, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alexandrearagao/judith-butler-brazil>; Scott Jaschik, “Judith Butler on Being Attacked in Brazil,” Inside Higher Ed, November 12, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/13/judith-butler-discusses-being-burned-effigy-and-protested-brazil>;

Regarding the first colossal lie, Butler has never claimed that sex does not exist. What they have claimed was that sex—just like gender—is not the sort of biological reality that is given *a priori* but something that is brought about in the manner of representing sex through repetitive acts. Sex, then, is fundamentally a performative reality, not a primordial, biological one, since the biological reality of sex itself is only realized through a developmental reality of sex, hence through a processual performative reality of gender. In other words, the biological/natural and social/cultural determinations of sex/gender are always already performative, since human beings, as carriers and creators of sex/gender information, are in fact sexed/gendered multi-constitutionally and multi-processually. Both sex and gender are something that is imagined, perceived, declared, practiced, polished, drilled, and disciplined, meaning that they are not permanently given but subject to change and *un/doing*. This claim of Butler's called into question the established belief that "true" gender is based in nature and in bodies that are necessarily heteronormative. The self-evident, quasi-natural foundation of biological sex was thereby revealed as something naturalized, reified, always already socially determined as a complex of regulatory, institutional, and collective fictions supporting a hierarchical binary of sex/gender, phallogocentrism, and enforced heterosexism, and as effects disguised as causes. Biological sex, then, cannot be considered as some "pre-discursive"⁸ (chromosomal, hormonal, anatomical) fact, given that sex is, by definition, already socially imagined through-and-through. Gender, in turn, does not causally follow from sex, hence it cannot be reduced to a multiple or diverse interpretation of a unified, monolithic, uniform, mono-constituted biological sex. According to Butler, then, both sex and gender are, to various extents, constructs of patriarchy and apparatuses for cultural production of sex/gender. Gender is not a cultural interpretation of sex but rather "a kind of persistent impersonation that pass-

Ingrid Cyfer, "A bruxa está solta: Os protestos contra a visita de Judith Butler ao Brasil à luz de sua reflexão sobre ética, política e vulnerabilidade" [The witch is loose: Protest against Judith Butler's visit to Brazil in light of her reflections on ethics, politics and vulnerability], *Cadernos Pagu* 53 (2018): e185303, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/18094449201800530003>; Judith Butler, "Why Is the Idea of 'Gender' Provoking Backlash the World Over?" *Guardian*, October 23, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/23/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash>; Finn Mackay, "Who's Afraid of Gender? by Judith Butler Review—the Gender Theorist Goes Mainstream," *Guardian*, March 13, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/mar/13/whos-afraid-of-gender-by-judith-butler-review-the-gender-theorist-goes-mainstream>.

⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 7.

es as the real,”⁹ that is, a form of perpetual emulation, imitation, simulation, which comes to be considered as the reality of gender. The predominant “gender feels,” to borrow from Briggs and George¹⁰—that is, male and female, whether these “feels” refer to materiality (associated to the body and its biological sexual characteristics), to expression (associated to gender roles and gendered behaviour), or classification (associated to membership in a gender category, whether legally recognized or not, majority or minority)—are both similarly produced through a stylized repetition of “special effects” of their bio-psycho-social phenomenality, which is always already collectively constructed, wrought, assembled on the basis of thousands of repeated/repeatable gestures, conceived/conceivable attitudes, distributed/distributable positions, performed/performable images, imagined/imaginable scripts. Rather than somehow biologically destined, genders are a matter of cultural matrices and classifications within which gender identities would not even be thinkable nor could they be, in Benedict Anderson’s terminology, *imagined*.¹¹ Just like identities in general, gender identities, rather than possessing an innate core, are a matter of constant doing¹² and re-doing of *bricolage*: “In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. [. . .] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”¹³ According to Butler, the body, understood by gender primordialists, naturalists, essentialists, perennialists, and anti-genderists as a petrified manifestation of sex, is not a prepared surface waiting to be given a meaning, but is first and foremost—to put it in Pierre Bourdieu’s praxeological terms—a set of structured/structuring individual and collective practices that are characterized, designated or marked on multiple levels: physical, psychical, material, spiritual, mental, emotional, economic, cultural, political, symbolical. Sex, then, is no more a body’s “interior truth” than the fact that each sexed body is a “performatively enacted signification,” so that “sex [is], by definition, [. . .] gender all along”;¹⁴ i.e. the fact

⁹ Butler, viii.

¹⁰ Briggs and George, *What Even Is Gender?*, particularly chap. 2 “All the Feels: Against ‘Gender Identity.’”

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6–7.

¹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22–25, 32–34.

¹³ Butler, 25.

¹⁴ Butler, 8.

that sex is nothing but gender, or something that is always-already given [*toujours-déjà-donné*] as gender, to put it in impeccably Althusserian terms. As for gender, it is in fact a deeply socialized/socializing set of performative acts people learn and recreate by (re)imagining and (re)presenting them.

Regarding the second colossal lie: Butler never claimed that gender is chosen in the manner of arbitrarily shopping for gender as for a commodity on offer in a “supermarket of gender.” They did claim that our gender happens as its constant performance. We are never naturally in our gender; we are only gendered and un-gendered performatively. The theory of *gender performativity* is regularly misrepresented and misinterpreted as *gender performance*, facilitating accusations that Butler dismisses sex, claiming that sex is in essence gender and gender simply a costume that can be put on, taken off and exchanged for another on a whim, several times per day—a view that actually fits perfectly with the utterly trivialized commodification of gender under turbo-capitalist neoliberalism, but certainly has nothing to do with a truly Butlerian reflexive and subversive theory of gender.¹⁵ What Butler does claim is that gender is *performative* in that it involves the stylized repetition of gestures from whose routine enactment gender comes to emerge. Furthermore, that mechanical enacting of gender, far from being voluntary, far from unconstrained or frivolous, and even further from perfectly free, is collectively, socially expected, desired, prescribed, demanded, controlled, regulated, and sanctioned. The theory of gender performativity argues that the enactment of sex, gender, and sexuality is linked to power in society. From this rather Foucauldian premise, Butler draws the obvious inference that the reason cisgenderness/cisnormativity and heterosexuality/heteronormativity (as we would call them today) are socially constructed as natural is that the opposition of male and female sex is perceived, in the social imaginary, as natural, rather than a result of *doing* and/or *undoing gender*. Their key claim, however, is that sex/gender is always already an imitation, that is, that sex/gender is always enacted in the manner of performing it without a genuine original to base it on. Even more, Butler argues that there never was a “prior,” “primordial,” “initial,” “original,” “ultimate,” or even “perennial” sex in

¹⁵ For gender as fashion-stylized performative, see Vlado Kotnik and Tadej Praprotnik, *Več kot moda: Onkraj oblačilnih, telesnih, spolnih, odnosnih in komunikacijskih ortodoksij* [More than fashion: Beyond orthodoxies of clothing, body, gender, relationships, and communication] (Koper: Založba Univerze na Primorskem, 2023).

the sense of pre-given and enduring *natural* or *essential sex*¹⁶ later to be socially and culturally shaped, perfected, or reworked, but rather that—as new evidence from gender history suggests—at least since the thirteenth century, sex has been explicitly naturalized. This is followed by its intense essentialization since the late eighteenth century. Both of these claims in themselves were provocative enough, but certainly the case for them required neither the denial of biological sex nor the theorization of a gender supermarket. Both continue to be relevant today and belong to the standard repertory of key findings of gender studies, despite critiques of certain failings in Butler’s interpretation of gender as performative in the emergent academic field of transgender studies.¹⁷

At the time *Gender Trouble* was first published, the claim that performing gender is always already an imitation, a fabrication, a frivolous game, a makeup, or a masquerade, was no doubt beneficial in putting up a mirror to the naturalized cisgender and heterosexual identities. At the time, these naturalized and essentialized cisgender and heterosexual identities were, and continue to be, well protected through the socially-situated and legally recognized categories of sex and sexuality. Thus, Butler’s theorization certainly continues to challenge the processes thus far identified. However, such a challenge necessarily beneficial to minority sexual and gender identities, such as transgender, intersex, and non-binary, whose attempts to establish for themselves a place and category in society hinge on convincing the hetero- and cisnormativized majority that transgender, intersex, and gender non-binary identities are just as real and therefore in need of social classification and legal recognition of their specific situations, conditions, and feelings of gender; and finally, that non-dominant gender situations, conditions, and feelings are no gender masquerade, let alone supermarket, but on the contrary, legitimate, genuine experiences of gender identity and integrity. Transgender studies, critical in this aspect of Butler’s notion of performing gender performative, tried to overcome the problem in the sense of *deperformancing* (NB: not deperformativizing) gender, in order to draw attention to the fact that it is not just people who perform gender (and if they do so, they can also subvert or non-perform it) but also gender that performs people (in the

¹⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6–7, 94–106.

¹⁷ See Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Kotnik, *Trans(spol)nost*.

sense that gender, as a category possessed with performative force, produces effects on people's genderedness, on how they are gendered and how they gender themselves). In short, transgender studies' criticism of Butler stemmed from the perception that Butler considered gender more in the sense of *performance* rather than of *performativity*.

Butler would later acknowledge and additionally explain that there is a difference between *gender performance* and *gender performativity*. In a 2011 interview, they explain:

It's one thing to say that gender is performed and that is a little different from saying gender is performative. When we say gender is performed we usually mean that we've taken on a role or we're acting in some way and that our acting or our role playing is crucial to the gender that we are and the gender that we present to the world. To say that gender is performative is a little different because for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman. [. . .] We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start. I know it's controversial, but that's my claim.¹⁸

The high-minded or well-informed *Homo academicus* and *Homo ordinarius* of the western world did not have to wait for Butler's *Gender Trouble*; since the late 1960s, they have been able to reimagine gender, drawing on important key insights gradually organized in the inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary scholarly corpus of gender studies.¹⁹ Lest we forget however, this complex and diverse

¹⁸ Judith Butler, "Your Behavior Creates Your Gender," YouTube video, uploaded by Big Think, June 6, 2011, 3:01, <https://youtu.be/Bo7o2LYATDc>.

¹⁹ See Robert Jesse Stoller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (New York: Science House, 1968); John Money and Anke Ehrhardt, *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl: The Differentiation and Dimorphism of Gender Identity from Conception to Maturity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society: Towards a New Society* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972); Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (New York: Wiley, 1978); Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West, eds., *Doing Gender, Doing Difference Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change* (London: Routledge, 2002); Anne Cranny-Francis et al.,

erudite contribution to the theory and practice of gender—to put it in somewhat Bourdieusian terms—does not encompass all of the reality of recent academic, activist, and general social interest in gender. Parallel to relevant scientific findings, pertinent theoretical contributions, and credible activist investments, the recent decades have seen the rise of conservative, populist, retraditionalizing, and anti-gender movements and campaigns basing the legitimacy of their social interest in gender and their public addressing of gender on conspiracist, moralistic, paternalist, essentialist, naturalist, anti-feminist, sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, queerphobic, and transphobic speech on gender—or rather, against gender. The entire heritage of progressive imagining of sex/gender as a manifestation of the long development of enlightening cultural, intellectual, and scientific insights into sex/gender, when exploited by these movements for instant media appeal, is debased to the level of a “gender lobby,” “gender agenda,” “gender theory,” “gender ideology,” or even “gender revolution.” According to some authors, these pejorative and negative anti-gender labels are empty signifiers distilling a mix of denial of the sex/gender distinction, advocacy of the traditional patriarchal family, opposition to same-sex marriage, incitement of moral panic, promotion of conspiracy theories predicting the impending downfall of the “old world,” demands for a new order and similar non-egalitarian, unjust, and non-inclusive mobilizations.²⁰ The advocacy of gender equality, equity, diversity, and inclusivity is painted by such hostile movements as some sort of “gender conspiracy” or “dangers of gender” directly threatening the existence of the “natural order” of sex/gender system tasked with imagining sex/gender within the confines of traditional patriarchal values, obviously considered as “natural.”

More than thirty years after *Gender Trouble* was published, Butler is still having to field its misreadings and the manufacturing of collective unease around

Gender Studies: Terms and Debates (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London: Sage, 2004).

²⁰ See Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa, eds., *Anti-Genderismus: Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen* [Anti-genderism: Sexuality and gender as arenas of current political conflicts] (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015); Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, eds., *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

it. Most recently, their tellingly entitled book *Who's Afraid of Gender?*²¹ is an attempt to explain how over the last decade, shameful gender conservatism, populism, and fierce “culture wars” and “gender wars,” particularly in the US and the UK, have turned gender into an “alarming matter,” a fear-inducing global specter that has become a convergence point of all fears and worries around sexuality, bodies, intimacy, sex, and even the future survival of humanity itself. Such worries about an apocalyptic and cataclysmic “collapse” of gender “as we knew it” in the west, *ergo* of Western civilization as such, has been systematically whipped up by populist and conservative political factions as an effective tool against gender and sexual minorities and their social, political, and legal emancipation. All this trouble, supposedly, is entirely Butler’s doing by paving the way for the transgender movement to kick off in the 1990s with the memorable trans-liberating message that “there are more than two sexes/genders.” Suggesting that the book could just as easily be called “Who’s Afraid of Judith Butler?” is not entirely facetious. The fact is that the fears and worries fixated on the anti-genderist notion of “gender” as a weapon against the transgender movement and transgender community, as explored by Butler in this new book, are similarly fixated on its author, viewed among such hateful detractors as an almost diabolical figure.

Having said this much about the unease caused by the Butlerian theory of gender, whether fundamentally misunderstood or subject to nefarious lies about its intentions and contributions, let us now move on to the unease provoked by gender practice.

Gender Practice as Relational Unease

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While it might seem that discussion of unease is easier and less fraught when it centers on others’ unease rather than the author’s own, I will make an exception here and start with myself as the person I know best. The author, then, has often—in fact regularly—had unknown/unknowing people approach her as a woman and address her as such without reservations, in short, and in Althusserian terms, interpellate her into the subject position of a woman. Seeing her for the first time, or (still) seeing her without “knowing,” she is a woman in their

²¹ Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (London: Allen Lane, 2024). The title is presumably punning on Edward Albee’s theater piece *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962).

eyes. Just a woman, no more and no less than a woman. A woman entirely untroubling, unsuspicious, unquestionable, and harmless, in short, a *real woman*, a *natural woman* so to say; nothing to subtract there, nothing to add, nothing to prove. A woman who, to put it in Lévi-Straussian terms, has nature and culture on her side. That, at least, is how she appears in the eyes of the unknown/unknowing—at *first glance*.

But that first glance at the harmonious correspondence between nature and culture in this woman is a short-lived one. The perceived “naturalness,” “normality,” and “regularity” are gone the moment the unknown/unknowing person, on meeting the woman, hears her name, which does not sound like a woman’s; or, even more commonly, the moment another, supposedly “in the know,” whispers to the unknown/unknowing person that who they see is not “really” a woman; or when they find out, one way or another, that she is a special kind of woman, a different woman, a transwoman. This specific circumstance triggers a cascade of dramatic twists whereby that first glance is immediately suspended, repressed, and transformed into a *last look*, which is nothing more than a repeatedly corrected, refused, subverted, and abolished first glance. The last look—one of the *longue durée*—is in fact a perpetual negation of the first glance. More precisely, a negation of its “natural order.” This, then, is a situation where a new piece of information intervenes into the unknown/unknowing person’s first glance as their “natural look”—a cognitive or pseudo-cognitive watershed moment redefining everything past and defining everything to come, reordering things afresh; this moment is the point of emergence of unease in the relationship. The unease unfolds from nothingness, like Michel Chion’s acousmatic sound/voice, permeating the invisible ether of the relationship; sometimes so powerfully unspeakable as to become almost palpable.²² In other cases, awkward or half-spoken (with backpedaling and apologizing: “I didn’t know you weren’t a woman,” “my bad, you do look like a woman,” “I apologize for mistaking your gender,” “forgive me for misgendering you,” “I’m sorry I didn’t notice before” etc.), almost never spoken appropriately, in such a way as not to produce relational unease, sometimes more in the other person than in herself, sometimes in herself too as the result of the other person’s unease. Most notably, it almost never occurs to these uninformed contacts who supposedly made a

²² Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 32, 71–73, 221.

“slip,” a “mistake,” a “misjudgment,” that perhaps there was no mistake at all, that their first glance was, in fact, perfectly correct, while the last look, the one they think is finally correct, absolutely missed the mark.

For many years, others’ unease, which might offer material for an illuminating (auto)ethnographic inquiry into gender unease, was her own. She was uneasy because they were: unease with unease. Recently, she has been systematically working on reducing the frequency and the force of this uneasy transference, telling herself that others’ unease is not hers. It is their unease, and it should stay with them, since it is themselves who produce it in contact with her or rather about her not face to face. Her supposed gender “non-normativity,” “nonconformity,” “incongruity,” “otherness” is, in fact, relationally independent. Even more, in contact with unknown/unknowing people—those not initiated into the “deep truth” about her—she passes perfectly until the moment they “learn” about her. It is only when/if they “learn” that her gender becomes an issue for them, something to be corrected, doubted, undermined, refuted.

It is extremely telling that all the distortions, misrepresentations, censorship, and corrections of her authentic gender (dis)positions by others have led her to prefer to entrust her “deep truth” to clothes rather than people. In her mind, clothes, unlike people, have never betrayed her. They have allowed her to achieve social visibility, legitimacy, credibility, and integrity for what other people had consistently overlooked in her, whether intentionally or not, but certainly systematically blind to it: the fact that she is a woman. Clothes have been an unspoken and relatively conflict-free means of her transformation into a manifest woman. They did for her what others’ gender blindness undid. More precisely: clothes did not make her a woman; they simply confirmed her being a woman. While in some intellectual discourses, fashion is still considered as something banal, trivial, surface-level, non-formative, unintelligible, that is, a more or less anti-intellectual and non-transformative practice, it was the only thing she could turn to unconditionally in her quest for social legitimacy and prosperity:

No one in the outside world—the world outside of my family—truly got used to my appearance, my looks, my being presumably “evidently different.” The early warnings received in the school system would be followed up on in a number of ways. No milieu was exempt: neither the peers, nor the country’s healthcare, nor

Slovenian academia, nor any other formative system. Possibly the only sphere of activity to specifically assist me in my trans difference in society, without reservations, was the sphere of fashion. After twenty years of secondary socializational, institutional, and pseudo-institutional indoctrinating attempts at putting me into “the correct box,” clothes were what effected my unspoken coming out. Without ado. Without words. My clothing served as my silent, yet persistent manifesto of my trans difference.²³

Fashion, then, is what this woman has been using as a makeshift means of patching up others’ gender unease as she encounters it.

A special chapter in this autoethnography of gender unease is reserved for people who have “known” (about) her for years, who similarly deceive themselves into historicizing their frequent mistakes in addressing her, justifying themselves by appealing to the time they supposedly got to know her as a non-woman. She might tell such (un)knowledgeable acquaintances—as specifically domesticated holders of petrified gender (non-)knowledge—that in truth there never was such an original, supposedly male, for them to really (get to) know, despite their tendency to consider it as some fossilized primordial thing, indisputably anterior to the reality of the woman they see and know now that her “woman-ness” has been made explicitly apparent. Let us leave cracking this unpleasantly tough essentialist nut for another time.

Finally, another special chapter in this autoethnography of gender unease might be dedicated to those “abusive knowledgeable acquaintances” who, informed of this woman’s self-identification, express their ignorance, disrespect, and spite bluntly: violence and abuse, through misaddressing her, which of course is never just a matter of misaddressing but also one of misgendering. Misaddressing produces misgendering and *vice versa*. These are situations that not only give rise to relational unease but transform relational unease into relational violence. As already foreseen by the unfortunate philosopher Althusser, successful interpellation of the subject is not possible without self-interpellation: if the interpellation is to take effect, a subject interpellated into a certain subject position must recognize themselves in the interpellation. Misaddressing and misgendering, then, are rather a matter of forceful, violent interpellation

²³ Kotnik and Praprotnik, *Več kot moda*, 194.

as a form of power mechanism increasing, rather than diminishing unease, violence, and conflict.

What is the source of all this relational unease? Why does gender cause so much burden of unease not only in the general society but also in academia? Why is it that a privileged subject such as a *Homo academicus*,²⁴ as a Lacanian subject who is supposed to know (*le sujet-supposé-savoir*)—to know better and more—, can be just as spontaneously, radically, and systematically unerringly mistaken as a *homo ordinarius*, who is not usually expected to be initiated into scholarly truths, scientific findings, and reflexive skills and is generally not interpellated into a holder of knowledge, at least not an erudite one, certainly not a Lacanian subject supposed to know? These are questions the author has been asking for decades, given that the story of her life is one of permanent preoccupation with her (trans-/inter-/non-)sex/gender and reactions to it; it is a story of an abundant (lack of) thinking of her distinctive sexedness/genderedness, her gendering by others and her self-gendering. When it comes to *Homo academicus*, the story of his not-thinking of gender is particularly striking. On this subject, this particular woman has thirty years of experience with the specifically constituted and socialized academic agent, the *Homo academicus à la slovène*, whose virtually endemic provincialism, obscurantism, and anti-intellectualism reveal him not only in his Lacanian position of a subject supposed to know, but also that of a subject supposing himself to know. To put it in Lacanian, Foucauldian, and Althusserian terms combined, this particular *Homo academicus*' "gender knowledge" functioned and still functions not only as knowledge of a *subject who is supposed to know*, therefore as knowledge of a *subject whose power is supposed to know* (*un pouvoir supposé savoir*), but as knowledge of a subject who *always-already* (*toujours-déjà*) knows. When it comes to gender, this type of all-knowing, bumbling subject, unprepared for gender reflexivity and unequipped for gender reflection, behaves as if knowing all about gender on the basis that everyone has one anyway, and even more, that it is given to everyone in an unambiguous, i.e. "natural" way as the only possible, thinkable way there is. But let us leave the Slovenian *Homo academicus*' gender trouble aside.

²⁴ See Vlado Kotnik, *Homo academicus in mediji: Bourdieuevske meditacije* [Homo academicus and the media: Bourdieusian meditations] (Koper: Univerzitetna založba Annales, 2016), 159–95.

Gender Unease as *Unbehagen*

While unease seems to lack both a clear definition and unanimous scholarly conceptualization, as at best an indefinably and impalpably unfavorable, unfortunate, unpleasant “mood,” “sensation,” “feeling,” it is rather unmissable that unease functions not only as a(n) (unseen, hidden) psychical formation but also as a (visible, manifest) social structure determining cultural practices. Gender unease, particularly related to the notion of more than two sexes/genders, is neither something necessarily psychological nor biological, nor yet a combination of the two; neither is it something natural, but rather a matter of culture and society. The first to come to mind when attempting to explain such gender unease (*Unbehagen*) is Freud’s 1930 *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*).²⁵ In this book, our ingenious Viennese psychoanalyst’s approach to the *Unbehagen* in culture is surprisingly non-psychoanalytical, almost sociological, emphasizing the social dimension of unease, which, at first glance, had appeared—including in his clinical and psychoanalytical practice—as a matter of individual psychology. Whether Freud’s “sociologisation”²⁶ of unease is taken

²⁵ It was first published in German in 1930 as *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (literally “Unease in Culture,” “Uneasiness in Culture,” or “Discontent in Culture”) and translated into English as *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Crucial insights into Freud’s *Unbehagen* are here based on the Slovenian translation *Nelagodje v kulturi* (trans. Samo Krušič [Ljubljana: Gyrus, 2001]) and with the help of Mladen Dolar’s afterword to the Slovenian translation. In the following note I quote from the English translation by James Strachey in vol. 21 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*.

²⁶ Recognizable in Freud’s understanding of culture as a regulatory mechanism that produces the fundamental problem of society, that is, that culture demands the renunciation or deprivation of individuals’ instincts (90, 97, 127–29), especially those that cause (excessive) pleasure, aggression, hostility, or self-destruction, and solves its fundamental problem, that is, that culture protects individuals as social agents against their instinctual nature and thus enables coexistence, community (86, 89–90), hence society. The task of culture is therefore to withdraw instinctual satisfactions or gratifications (127) and set limits or restrictions (112) to individuals’ inclination to pleasures and aggressions as their original, self-subsisting instinctual dispositions (95–97, 104–5, 112, 122). According to Freud, culture indeed suppresses pleasures and aggressions, but in doing so it produces a sense of guilt and anxiety (or rather a feeling of possibilities of guilt and anxiety), whereby such senses and/or feelings are no longer a direct reaction to external authority or externally threatening uneasiness, but the result of permanent internal uneasiness (61, 123–25, 127–28). For Freud, such uneasy senses and/or feelings remain largely unconscious or appear as *Unbehagen*, a sort of free-floating dissatisfaction or oceanic irritation without a clearly detectable source, motive, reason, symptom, content, form, or location. Today gen-

as an attempt at including the social dimension of unease in the field of research of individual psychology or as a psychoanalytical contribution to the deciphering of the psychical formation in the form of the society's collective unconscious and hence of the sociability of culture itself, there is no getting around the insight that behind any and all in-gendering, gendering, and self-gendering there is a social structure. In other words, our gender, or better, our genders are social practices and as such entwined in many social relationships. In fact, there is no gender without the social infrastructure of gender enabling and demanding the perception, recognition, linguistic expression, categorization, and value judgments of gender. There is, in short, nothing self-evidently natural about gender as a social practice. All our practices of in-gendering, gendering, and self-gendering, whether inscribed/inscribing, ascribed/ascribing, or self-ascribed/self-ascribing, are products of the ways gender is socially constituted, determined, organized, and socialized, that is, of the sociality of gender as its fundamental formative, informative, performative, and transformative nature.

In various intellectual traditions within scholarly disciplines, unease was long inscribed mostly or predominantly within the psychological. It was considered as an external expression of the internal, a manifestation of the psyche. This psychologization of unease largely prevented a view of unease as a social phenomenon, a social structure, a social fact, rather than just a psychical phenomenon, structure, or fact. Clearly, Freud must have been aware of this, with regard to sexuality in general as well as to his own sexuality and his attitude to sexuality. The subsequent tradition of psychological and psychoanalytical approaches to unease continued to strongly psychologize the phenomenon.

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Less clear is Freud's awareness that sex(/gender), as well as sexuality, is such a social structure engendering a culture of unease and triggering cultural unease. Freud seems to have understood that our attitudes to sexuality result from how sexuality is viewed by our society and culture. Why did he not think to include sex(/gender), unlike for instance his Berlin colleague Magnus Hirschfeld? Is it perhaps that for Freud, in his theoretical and therapeutic practice, the possibility of his own non-heterosexual or not-entirely-heterosexual status was much

der functions as Freudian *Unbehagen*, a sort of free-floating empty signifier of planetary anxiety and irritation triggered by anything that appears to threaten its binary sex/gender system.

more readily imagined than that of his non-cisgender or not-entirely-cisgender status? There is no doubt that in his psychoanalytical theory and therapy, Freud was a strict gender binarist and essentialist, with the distinction between males(/men) and females(/women) inscribed in the very origins of his psychoanalysis, which is based on sex(/gender) difference, faithfully taken into account when he proposed the mechanisms of denial and splitting of self (to the conscious and unconscious) as a consequence of “bodily” differences between men and women. However, his understanding of sex(/gender) difference was narrowly tied to the anatomical difference from which he inferred a sexual difference, rather than to a historically-produced difference. What, then, is that anatomical difference which then becomes a sexual difference (the Oedipus vs. Electra complexes)? Certainly, Freud did not explore the anatomical difference as something bodily multi-constituted, but in a reductionist way, from the angle of external genital morphology. Freud’s insistence on sex(/gender) difference, going so far as introducing little boys and girls (child sexuality) into his account of human sexuality, stemmed entirely from late nineteenth century views of sexual dimorphism, which Freud was obviously unable to conceive of in ways other than binary, essentialist, and therefore cisnormative. Interestingly, when it came to sexuality, he was able to think it in more flexible, dynamic, processual, and plural ways.²⁷

In any case, it seems there are two Freudian messages about unease in culture: first, there is no culture without unease; secondly, no one can always feel at ease in culture, since culture will always produce unease. In other words, there are always reasons why people as social agents feel uneasy in culture. For our purposes, this Freudian starting point can be illuminating, even comforting; however, it can also be harmfully misleading. For instance, trans people are often accused of being “too sensitive” to being misgendered by others. Conversely, trans persons themselves are often too quick to attribute unease about their own gender non-normativity or nonconformity to their own internal states or the states of their own bodies. It is therefore not at all surprising that the predominant view of gender dysphoria (a type of distress in persons whose gender assigned at birth does not match their gender as they experience and express it themselves) is based on a psychological rather than sociological understanding of dysphoria. Gender dysphoria tends to be considered as a problem of the

²⁷ See editorial note on hermaphroditism in Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” 105n3.

mental state of the transgender person. Certainly, there are trans persons who do not feel at ease in culture because of their inner state which appears to be unrelated to external factors. There are also trans persons whose unease in culture does not stem from inside them but from outside, not from the psyche but from society. The reasons for gender dysphoria, then, may sometimes be social rather than psychical, stemming from social relationships rather than from somewhere deep in the soul:

In other words, transgender people are not born with gender dysphoria but acquire it in the course of their socialization. Some transgender persons explicitly report to have no inner gender dysphoria, being perfectly happy with how mother nature made them, but can still be ascribed with dysphoria because society keeps telling them they don't "fit the mold." The distress or unease they feel does not, therefore, stem from them, from their psyche, but is externally generated, generated by others through objecting, in various ways, to their gender incongruity, pushing them to conform etc. In this sense, gender dysphoria is an eminently social phenomenon.²⁸

Our limited and incomplete understanding of gender dysphoria is a consequence of our limited and incomplete understanding of sex/gender itself; of our inability to think it as plural, non-binary, and multi-constituted, rather than unrelentingly dual, binary, and mono-constituted.²⁹ Gender can be neither thought nor practiced separate from its social constitution, organization, classification, regulation, administration etc. But that precisely which socially establishes gender—its social constitution, organization, classification, regulation, administration etc.—is also the point where gender turns into trouble, but a social trouble, a trouble for society. That is because the very point where gender is constituted is also the starting point for its normativization, narrativization, differentiation, and distinction, while the points of deviation from gender norms and sexual difference are also the points of emergence of devaluing, discrediting, marginalization, stigmatization, pathologization, and discrimination.

Thus we have circled back to the case of this particular woman, the author, and to the question of how she can get those who "know/have learnt" to understand

²⁸ Kotnik, *Trans(spol)nost*, 111.

²⁹ For more on the multi-constitution of sex/gender, see Kotnik, 22–26, 457–60.

that their first-glance impression of her was not wrong; that in fact, it was not their first glance that was mistaken, but their last look; that what they should be apologizing for is the “correct” gendering that is not, rather than the “misgendering” that actually never was. Unease with transgender, intersex, and gender nonbinary is revelatory not only of individual and collective unconscious of gender, of the fact that people remain unreconciled with gender, unable to truly think the plurality of sex(es)/gender(s), but also, and even more so, of something else: the fact that such (re)producers of unease are truly deep gender binarists, essentialists, primordialists, perennialists, and naturalists. Their gender-binary, essentialist, primordialist, perennialist, or naturalist unconscious is perhaps most obvious precisely in their unease, which is to be understood as a manifest form of distortion, displacement, suppression of their deeply socialized gender unconscious. Thus, the unease people feel and express on coming into contact with (information on) transgender, intersex, or gender nonbinary persons reveals neither those persons’ gender nor their unconscious, but rather the unconscious of the binarists, essentialists, primordialists, perennialists, and naturalists themselves. What sort of knowledge is that, genuinely revealing its holders’ unthinking gender binarism, essentialism, primordialism, perennialism, and naturalism? This question can be understood as an eminently epistemological one, but answers should be looked for not only in gender theory but in (one’s own) gender practice. All the more so because transgender persons deserve a practice of gendering where cis-(re-)producers of unease will finally feel uneasy at manifesting their unthinking gender binarism, essentialism, primordialism, perennialism, and naturalism rather than at coming into contact with someone who does not fit with their gender binarism, essentialism, primordialism, perennialism, and naturalism. Even more: trans people finally deserve to see others becoming capable of acknowledging (to themselves) their own problematic inability to let go of their own binarism, essentialism, primordialism, perennialism, and naturalism. An open acknowledgement that when it comes to gender, almost all of us, whether transgender or not, are in fact deep binarists, essentialists, primordialists, perennialists, and naturalists, since we are all, more or less successfully, socialized into a world of gender binarism, essentialism, primordialism, perennialism, and naturalism, may well be the only way for us to finally, at some point in the future, stop becoming just that.

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