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The Question of Gender

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Introduction

JUDITH BUTLER AND ELIZABETH WEED

In a 2008 essay, Joan W. Scott relays a telling story about the academic discomfort that posing questions can produce.¹ When she first submitted her essay, “Is Gender a Useful Category of Historical Analysis?” to the *American Historical Review* (*AHR*), the editors asked her to remove the question mark, explaining that question marks were not allowed in the titles of articles. They could not simply drop the question mark without losing the sense of the title. If the question mark were simply missing, the question would still be there, but deflated, deprived of the punctuation mark without which it does not make sense. Of course, the title that was accepted, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” is an assertion and a declaration, however modest. The insertion of the colon makes us think, “Gender, what is gender? What comes after the colon will tell us what it is.” What follows is then a kind of understatement: useful. If it is useful, it is not useless, but that makes us wonder who thought it was useless to begin with? If it were to have been declarative and more bold, it could have read “In Praise of Gender as a Useful Category of Analysis.” “Useful” is most emphatically not “destructive” or “revolutionary” and not even “critical.” One wonders whether “useful” was meant to compensate in an academic forum for all the more raucous ways that gender could be discussed. Indeed, the essay could have been called, “In Praise of Non-Raucous Considerations of Gender in a Presumptively Hostile Academic Context.”

More seriously, it turns out that the question mark as well as the reference to “usefulness” proved central to the definition of gender itself. The original question form that Scott wanted to preserve carried a kind of challenge. “Is

gender useful or not?” implies a context that one might consult in order to track the effects of gender. So, to ask the question is to presume that there are parameters and contexts that must first be known and analyzed in order to answer the question. When the question mark is dropped, then gender appears simply as “useful” in the abstract, then so too does gender become separated from its specific historical operations and effects as well as its changing contexts. If one declares in a vacuum that gender is “useful,” then is one implicitly declaring it always useful, or useful on all occasions? It is a nearly pugnacious claim: “Gender is always useful in all contexts, so don’t doubt it!” Scott was precisely *not* trying to advance that polemic—although it seems as if the *AHR* somehow preferred the formulation that implied that she did. If *AHR* did not allow questions in titles, was that because questions are not the same as knowledge—indeed, may be signs of not knowing, or of not yet knowing? How does one, then, write and publish an essay that queries how fields of knowledge are formed, calling into question prevailing paradigms, within such a journal? If the question form is forbidden because of its critical potential, then it seems that only certain kinds of academic inquiries are permissible, and they do not include those that question the paradigms that establish the contours of existing domains of knowledge.

So what is the big deal? It is, after all, a simple punctuation mark that goes missing in favor of another that transforms an interrogative into an assertoric claim. “Gender” is introduced and it is “a” useful category, presumably one among others. We are solicited to imagine a full pantry of useful categories of analysis and to discover gender there, nestled between other such categories, such as class and power. It would be one category among many, useful in the same way as they are. A modest claim, a bid for inclusion in the class of useful things: an understated pluralism of useful categories of historical analysis.

But if we return the title to its question form, then something else happens. First, whoever asks the question (and whoever reads it) *does not know* in advance whether or not it is useful, and this not-knowing proves to be important. The one who poses the question has not settled on the answer in advance only to proceed to explain why it is patently and obviously true that gender is a useful category. In its question form, the title starts with the confession of a certain epistemic uncertainty. One does not know whether gender, as a category, is useful, and one does not even know how one is supposed to go about deciding that question. Some other set of terms has to intervene to help us move the question forward. From the start, however, gender is in an uncertain and unknown quantity in relation to the matter of usefulness. It may or may not be useful, but in order to know, we have to consider how gender works, and to do that, we have to look at specific historical contexts and the

dynamics of gender to start to formulate an answer. We also have to know what kinds of uses we are looking for, and so to understand how usefulness will be gauged. Useful for what? We do not yet have grounds for knowing, and we do not yet have a measure for understanding what usefulness might be. But as we read, matters become more clear.

Twenty-four years after the publication of this extraordinarily important essay, Scott now argues, “I want to insist that the term *gender* is useful only as a question.”² Indeed, she has now reversed the editorial decision of the *AHR* in 1986, showing just how much their decision to change the title rested on a misapprehension of her project. She was trying in the essay not only to ask a question about gender, but also to develop a conception of gender that required asking questions: “It is not a programmatic or methodological treatise.”³ Of course, Joan Scott is credited with having developed *a theory* of gender, but if we mean by “theory” a timeless set of precepts or principles, then we have missed the point of Scott’s theoretical explorations. For Scott, theory always proceeds by way of questions, and questions are the means through which taken-for-granted presuppositions are contested and new ways of thinking and analyzing become possible (a point that brings us close to understanding in what “usefulness” consists). This became very clear at the moment within women’s history when Scott, along with some other scholars, proposed that it was not enough to look at images of women in certain historical scenes or even how women are treated differentially within certain contexts. Whereas both of these kinds of inquiry have their place and even their urgency, they only make sense once we start to ask how gendered meanings are produced. In other words, we cannot take gender, or gendered meanings, for granted, since gender is precisely that which is being produced and organized over time, differently and differentially, and this ongoing production and mode of differentiation has to be understood as part of the very operation of power or, in Scott’s words, “a primary way of signifying power.”

This leads to two extremely important conclusions. The first has to do with contextualizing gender; the second, with seeing how gender operates in the production of apparently unrelated domains, such as class, power, politics, and history itself. To understand gender, we cannot pose the question of its ontology. It is not possible to know what gender “is” apart from the way that it is produced and mobilized; and further, it is not possible to know whether gender is a useful category of analysis unless we can first understand the purposes for which it is deployed, the broader politics it supports and helps to produce, and the geopolitical repercussions of its circulation. To say that gender does not have a single meaning or, even, that there is no such

thing as “women,” is simply to say that we make a mistake if we expect that gender, or the categories of women and men, are either culturally established in fixed form or timeless kinds of beings. If they “are” anything, they are historical. This means that to consider gender or to try and gauge the usefulness of the category is to ask first and foremost, how have such categories been formed, through what means, and with what meanings? Perhaps most importantly, what do they themselves produce? This brings us to the second part of the formulation. Gender is put to use in various historical situations in order to define and promote the public sphere, the principle of universality, or reason, or the body, or citizenship and enfranchisement. In this way, gender cannot be counted as one useful category of historical analysis among others (according to a model of tepid pluralism), since gender is operating to help in the very definition and historical production of major dimensions of social and political life, including labor, class, politics, and rights. It is thus a serious and critical reversal within feminist scholarship to focus not only on when women achieved rights, and through what struggles (important as that is), but how the very notion of rights was gendered from the start, and how women’s struggles intervened to reshape the very meaning and range of rights. The first perspective is more or less identitarian, but the second is an example of critique, since it focuses on how gender actively produces and circumscribes a domain of knowledge or a central category of social and political life. Such an approach unleashed a wide range of questions: how is gender to be understood in relation to other prevalent concepts such as universality, equality, freedom, but also rights, civil society, private and public spheres, labor?

In this way, gender as a category never works alone. It will not do to consider it as one pantry item among others, since gender is formed in relation to other social and political modes of social organization and is itself actively producing and reproducing such modes, including the family, labor, class, slavery, imperialism, immigration politics, and the state, to name a few. Thus, to ask about gender and its uses means accepting as a point of departure a historically dynamic and complex field of analysis. Since gender is not an isolated factor or element on such a map, but is itself mobilized in a constitutive and productive relation to those other modes of organizing political life, the only way to gauge its usefulness is by tracking those effects. Gender will be useful, it seems, only under those conditions in which we can see how it works, as a mode of signifying power, to produce and sustain certain ways of organizing social and political life. If this is the task, then gender cannot be known in advance (it “is” nothing in advance), but can only be illuminated as a result of a set of specifically *historical questions that seek to know how it is at once formed in history and formative of history*. In other words, we have to suspend our

compulsion to stipulate in advance what gender is in order to begin the task of analyzing gender as a useful category of historical analysis.

That said, the question remains whether this very approach to gender is still possible. Scott's approach operates at a critical distance from those modes of gender mainstreaming and other NGO deployments of "gender" as variable factors in a social analysis. Those projects tend to know in advance what gender is, and even formulate transposable methodologies to secure their object (and their funding). Scott's version of gender is distinguished from these by its critical impetus and effect. The ability to rethink analytic categories, as Wendy Brown makes clear in the epilogue to this volume, is part of the "permanent revolution" in thought that Scott's work performs. Moreover, over and against a sociological definition of gender that would presume the social making of the body without psychic remainder, Scott turns our attention to the question of sexual difference, where that difference seems to persist, even as the various ways of giving that difference meaning seem to vary. This persistent and irresolvable dilemma gives rise to phantasmatic efforts to settle the question of what a man or woman may be, and these take numerous historical forms with powerful effects within social and political life.⁴

The essays in this volume provide no resounding answer as to whether or not the category of gender remains useful.⁵ They aim neither to pin down gender nor fix Scott's contribution to critical thinking, but instead address in some way the critical efficacy of "gender" more than two decades after the publication of "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." A number of the essays address gender directly; some move quickly through gender to other critical terrain. Some of the essays offer sustained readings of Scott's own work; others take on topics ranging from the historical to the art historical, from film theory to theories of sexuality. The essays are united by a common engagement with Scott's work: throughout them, we can read the question form in action, that form of questioning that has long been the signature of Scott's work.

Judith Butler's opening essay on Joan Scott poses a question that is at once quite personal and illuminating for the volume as a whole—how to think *about* Joan Scott when she is so used to thinking *with* her as a friend and close interlocutor. Butler observes that the hesitation she feels in writing about Scott's work has a good deal to do with the way Scott herself mobilizes the scene of interlocation, how she actively engages with the critical presumptions of her interlocutors in such a way as to excite and also to consternate. This mode of critical engagement troubles the distinction between the *about* and the *with*. And it is this practice of Scott's of "speaking up and talking back" that is a force that runs through all of her

work, uniting her brilliant theoretical and scholarly contributions with her political beliefs and principles. Tracing the major turns in Scott's work—women, gender, sexual difference, through paradox and critique—Butler takes a close look at the ways notions of *difference* and *change* are continuous players in Scott's critical feminism.

"The Case of History" brings together the essays of four historians and a sociologist that explore questions in the neighborhood of Scott's disciplinary home of history. There is no one history, of course, and in that sense no one *case*, as the title might suggest. The case is constituted rather by the very particular connection between historical inquiry and *change*, and by the considerable challenges Scott has brought to the ways historians think about notions of sameness and difference that underpin theories of change. The Spanish historian Miguel Cabrera looks at the ways that Scott questions the very premises of social history in her theorization of the categories of language, experience, and identity. Cabrera argues that Scott's rethinking and reanimation of these "cornerstone notions" of historical research make her one of the most important architects of the new historiography that emerged in the past two decades. Engaging with this new historiography, Mary Louise Roberts looks at the ways Sarah Bernhardt and Rosa Bonheur used eccentricity to produce and manage their celebrity. Roberts argues that since both eccentricity and celebrity were emerging notions in nineteenth-century France, the two were able to challenge restrictive norms of womanhood by creatively exploiting the "hyper-individualism" of the eccentric.

Demonstrating that the category of gender can be useful outside of its Western provenance, Mrinalini Sinha uses it to examine the collective politics of Indian women in colonial India and finds there a surprising genealogy for liberalism. What she reveals is not a footnote to the narrative of Western liberalism, but a particular logic of gender that recasts both the supposed universality of European liberalism and the history of the citizen-subject in colonial India. Elora Shehabuddin turns to a more contemporary imperialist project in her analysis of the ways gender has recently been used to shore up the U.S. "war on terror." At a time when a critical feminism is most urgently needed, a monolithic feminism has helped construct a monolithic Islam in order to once again "save" Muslim women. At the same time, Muslim feminist efforts are effaced. In a discussion of the vicissitudes of "gender" in contemporary France, sociologist Éric Fassin shows the way emancipatory movements for "sexual democracy"—such as for gay marriage—have become racialized in a troubling way, reacting against Muslims and other "others" in the name of sexual modernity. For Fassin, such a turn demonstrates the way sexual democracy, like gender, can be a double-edged sword.

The essays in “Seeing the Question” address in different ways the elusiveness of the category of gender in visual texts, questioning whether or not to see is in any simple way to know. Surveying the state of her discipline, art historian Mary Sheriff is critical of early feminist readings that replaced canonical interpretations of art with, to her mind, similarly inflexible gendered interpretations and proposes instead strategies for rereading texts that preserve the instability of gender. Analyzing an image that joined a female dancer and a printing press, art historian Janis Bergman-Carton reveals how the very instability of gender offered late nineteenth-century artists, printers, and dealers ways to negotiate symbolically the shifting relationships between high artistic creation and commercial reproduction. She argues that far from being a mechanical couple, the image serves to suggest a new and self-generating art form. For film theorist Mary Ann Doane, the problem with “gender” is that however unstable it might be, it always inevitably has a “contract with the notion of identity,” and this through the stabilizing process of *recognition*. She examines the ways the device of the female-face-as-screen serves, in both avant-garde and mainstream cinema, to stage and manage the anxieties about knowability and intelligibility that attend the spread of representational technologies in the twentieth century.

The next three essays, grouped under the title “Body and Sexuality in Question,” question corporality and sexuality in different ways. Gayle Salamon turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* for a generative mode of theorizing trans embodiment. Taking up Merleau-Ponty’s notions of bodily potentiality, his understanding of the ambiguity of the sexual schema, and his thoughts on the flesh, Salamon offers a dynamic way of thinking about trans embodiment that displaces all too familiar theoretical impasses. Intervening in the division between queer theory and feminism—a division that figures “queer” as liberatory and feminism as moralizing and limiting—Lynne Huffer engages with Michel Foucault’s little-read 1961 book, *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*, translated in 2006 as *History of Madness*. She argues that this book challenges the foundational assumptions of queer theory and, in doing so, offers possibilities for a postmoral ethics of lived experience that values a generative convergence of feminist and queer approaches to sexuality. Elizabeth Weed looks at the different kinds of rhetorical work done by the category of gender and by the psychoanalytic notion of sexual difference. She argues that in the writing of Joan Scott, the “useful” category of gender figures a plenitude of meaning, while sexual difference figures its impossibility.

In the epilogue, Wendy Brown is struck by two strains that run through a number of the essays: a decided turn to the ethical as distinct from the political,

and a frustration with the co-optability of gender and sexual equity projects by nonprogressive groups. In order to sustain the work of the political—in concert with the ethical and against co-optation—she urges us to look at Joan Scott’s example, to Scott’s “incisive appreciation of paradoxical political discourse” and to her “deep commitment to critique, to ‘thinking in time.’”

In asking whether gender is a useful category of analysis, this volume also alerts us to *the ways in which gender is used* as a category of analysis. We see, through these diverse essays, that gender is, by definition, neither emancipatory nor nefarious. Its meaning can only be determined by its usage; hence, it is always bound up with operations of power that demand complex analyses in which we cannot claim to know in advance what we will find. A testimony to the complexity of gender, the volume is also a testament to Joan Scott, whose work continues to offer us a model of how to pay attention to complexity, how to find the questions to ask, and how to persist in asking—especially when the terrain is unknown, and in spite of those who wish the questions were already settled—when, clearly, they are not.

NOTES

1. Joan W. Scott, “AHR Forum: Unanswered Questions,” *American Historical Review*, 113 (December 2008): 1422–1430.

2. *Ibid.*, 1422.

3. *Ibid.*, 1423.

4. See Joan W. Scott, “Fantasy Echo: History and the Construct of Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 27 (Winter 2001): 284–304.

5. Most of the essays were written initially for a conference held at the Center for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee in May 2007, “In Terms of Gender: Crosscultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives.” The one piece not written for the conference is the essay by Miguel Cabrera.