

The Unbearable Lightness of 'Gender and Diversity'

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What is at stake, here and now, in the study of gender and diversity? My contribution to this round table, at the happy occasion of the launch of the *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, interrogates the central terms of the journal's title, which have become key in research about social difference and inequality, and social justice at large. The genealogy of the concept of gender is by now a familiar one: our current usage of the term emerged in the 1960s within North American feminist thought as a way of conceptualizing the social character of distinctions based on sex. Rejecting the biological determinism of sex, gender came to signify the cultural interpretation of bodies, i.e. a field of cultural possibilities with respect to sexual difference, and the interpretation, appropriation, and materialisation of these possibilities (Butler, 1990). Gender relations point to the multilayered set of power relations that animate different notions of femininity and masculinity. The rise of gender as a category of analysis occurred in a particular moment in (institutional) time characterized by the need to systematise feminist knowledge within the U.S. academy (Scott, 1986). This knowledge production began its long march through the institutions under the sign of Women's Studies, thereby emphasising the omission of women both as objects of (critical) knowledge, and as subjects, as scholars (Braidotti, 1991; 1994). The earliest institutionalisation of Women's Studies in North America dates from the end of the 1960s, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s the interdisciplinary field continued to establish itself and to break new scholarly ground. By the 1980s, a more systematic elaboration of key concepts ensued, and critical engagements with the ways in which gender operated within Women's Studies led to a new kind of interrogation of gender, which furthered inquiry into heteronormativity and its role within the construction of gendered identities (Butler, 1990).

Gender as a category of analysis emerged at the heart of the Women's Studies project, and also pushed the boundaries of this interdisciplinary field, as it critically

engaged with some of the key questions and concerns that came up within Women's Studies. This includes a concern with 'woman' as a category of analysis and the assumption of women as an already constituted group with particular interests (Mohanty, 1984), as well as a tension between mechanisms of 'disciplining' the field of Women's Studies on the one hand, and feminist critique on institutionalising mechanisms on the other – a tension that relates to how power constitutes the subject (Brown, 1997). If Women's Studies was often understood as having a too narrow focus on women, without sufficiently considering the relational context in which 'woman' as a category came into being, gender as a category stressed the relational aspects of normative femininity. If the study of women, moreover, was understood as simply adding a theme to the established disciplines, an emphasis on the relational character of gender advanced a bolder claim and concerned the fundamental transformation of disciplinary paradigms (Scott, 1986, p. 1054). Moreover, gender was perceived as a more neutral and objective term than 'women', and seemed more appropriate in an academic environment than feminism. "Gender includes but does not name women and so seems to pose no critical threat", as Scott put it (1986, p. 1056). Thus gender effectively operates as a way of granting academic legitimacy for feminist critique and scholarship that initially convened under the sign of Women's Studies. By the end of the 1980s, and all throughout the 1990s, there were lively debates about the appropriate name for the recently institutionalized centres of feminist knowledge, and these debates were increasingly settled in favour of Gender Studies.

After more than four decades of the use of gender as an analytical category, as well as two decades after the shift from Women's Studies to Gender Studies, it is appropriate to ask what the study of gender has become. One might expect that the key-concept of a scholarly field that establishes itself becomes more settled and clear over time, yet gender has in fact become more elusive as a category, Scott (2013) argues. To explore this conundrum, I return to the time and space of our conversation at this round table, Belgium in the 21st century. Situating the discussion in this way implies thinking a local situation in relation to the well-known and globalized North American narrative of the interdisciplinary fields of Women's Studies / Gender Studies, and considering the gaps and tensions that emerge within this relation.

Local Women's Studies / Gender Studies Stories

A first prominent set of tensions in this respect pertains to the realm of language: 'gender' as an English term does not necessarily translate into local terms in languages other than English. Gender is non-native to Belgium's two main languages, Dutch and French, and in the French-speaking context there is an estab-

lished feminist tradition of thinking about *les rapports sociaux de sexe*. Much has been written on the language issue, and scholars of gender working outside of the North American context emphasise the importance of tracing local terminologies and frames that culturally mediate and represent questions of sexual difference (Griffin & Braidotti, 2002). Good scholarship requires that we understand the differences, slippages and gaps between 'gender' and local terminologies to refer to sexual difference and its social/cultural aspects. Yet in the current proliferation of discourses on gender, it is also worth paying attention to other kinds of critiques or resistances that might congeal in the argument of the absence of a local equivalent. The recent dramatic denunciation of *l'idéologie du gender* in France is a case in point (Tevanian, 2014): here the deliberate use of the English term 'gender', emphasizing that the term is not indigenous, functions as a way of dismissing the insights of gender theory.

A second terrain of tensions relates to the question of time, and notably institutional time. The narrative of the emergence of gender as a field of study commonly invokes a linear understanding of time: first there was Women's Studies which then 'matured' into Gender Studies, thus the relation between Women's Studies and Gender Studies is cast in terms of the supplementation of the former by the latter. This quasi evolutionary narrative is problematic in many ways, and all too often denies the genealogical affinity among different feminist research projects and agendas (each of them multiple in itself), which each foreground particular questions and concerns that are shaped both by internal dynamics and interrogations within the field, as well as glosses over the specificity of different processes of institutionalisation.¹ I would like to raise the question what such a linear account does for the local Belgian context, where in fact Women's Studies was hardly institutionalised in the first place. To a great extent, Women's Studies in Belgium emerged and developed outside of the academy.² Its first moment of academic institutionalisation was relatively limited and brief: twelve years of one interuniversity degree-awarding post-graduate programme on the Flemish side of the country. The discontinuation of the programme, in 2006, was all too readily cast in terms of failure – an idiom that can be considered as symptomatic for the narrative of the institutionalisation of Women's Studies, as Wiegman argues. 'Failure' here points to a larger progress narrative that includes dependence, incorporation and disavowal (Wiegman, 2012). In sum, the Belgian situation is characterized by a marked institutional break of the connection between Women's Studies and Gender Studies (on the Flemish side), with a disavowal of the Women's Studies experience (without a structural analysis of why the programme was discontinued).

This raises many questions, especially in the current effort towards the institutionalisation of Gender Studies in Belgium, which at present is on the academic agenda in Flanders. What does it mean to institutionalise Gender Studies without the

full support of an organic and genealogical connection to Women's Studies? The question of institutionalisation is a complex one, encompassing different dimensions (Griffin, 2005). If we apply Griffin's analysis of the different phases of the institutionalisation of Women's Studies/Gender Studies in a European context, the Belgian struggle is still to a large extent to be situated in the first two (the activist and the establishment phase) of six phases. It goes without saying that the study of women, gender and feminism is present within the Belgian academy through the engagement of individual professors, post-docs and doctoral students, and their collaborative efforts that might result in public lectures, seminars and sometimes 'centres'. Yet most of these efforts are not structurally embedded and funded, and therefore remain volatile, as they tend to depend solely on individuals who most often struggle against the grain to do their feminist work. Anchoring Women's Studies/Gender Studies within the academy requires a more robust form of institutionalisation, with a focus on official accreditation of degree-awarding programmes in Women's Studies/Gender Studies, multiple full-time professorial positions and chairs with an explicit Women's Studies/Gender Studies profile in each university, and funded centres for fundamental research. Such an understanding of institutionalisation, moreover, allows for comparing the situation in Belgium to that of other European countries, and reveals that Belgium significantly lags behind, with no degree-awarding programme before 2014, less than a handful of recent full-time professorial appointments with Women's Studies/Gender Studies profiles, and no fully funded centre that serves the theoretical and methodological development of the field. Particularly worrisome in the Belgian context is the way in which a low degree of institutionalisation coincides with the institutional break between Women's Studies and Gender Studies, although one can seriously doubt whether 'coincidence' is the most appropriate term in this context. An urgent question arises here about (the vulnerability of) the ground on which Gender Studies in Belgium is currently developed.

This brings us to a third field of contention, which concerns the meaning of gender. Increasingly gender is used in ways that are disconnected from the feminist political and intellectual horizon in which the concept was shaped (Scott, 1986). I have already mentioned the *idéologie du gender* discourse that delegitimizes the analytical category of gender while affirming a 'biology-is-destiny' ontology of sexual difference. While less massive and visible than on the Parisian streets, the *idéologie du gender's* spectre roams through Belgian (Catholic) institutions, often in insidious ways. At the same time, there is a marked rise of gender as a statistical category. What are the consequences of such usages of gender? When gender is disconnected from feminism, what suffers first is a critical analysis of power. After all, gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power (Scott, 1986, p. 1067). Yet it is not uncommon to encounter usages of gender that suggest symmetry, or at least

'balance', at the expense of thinking and analysing power. Some novel scholarly usages of gender (in Belgium) in fact fail to differ substantially from the essentialising m/f assignments of the popular culture meme 'men are from Mars, women are from Venus', and flatly reinstate the stereotypical gender binary unpacked by more than four decades of critical scholarship. Such a representation of gender, furthermore, relies on omitting the question of sexuality, and more precisely heteronormativity as gender's constitutive power matrix. Understandings of femininity and masculinity cannot be adequately studied, in other words, without considering norms of (hetero)sexuality.

From Sex to Gender and Back Again: The Rise of 'Gender Lite'

As the result of undertheorising the concept of gender, the notion is all too often collapsed into sex and functions as a binary sociological parameter without any meaningful investigation into its cultural construction. The use of gender in policy papers and legal texts is "hilariously underdefined", to borrow Waaldijk's expression (Waaldijk, 2013, p. 61). The so-called gender statistics are another case in point: gender statistics most often simply refer to statistics differentiated according to sex, usually in a binary m/f mode. By all means useful and necessary, such statistics measure sex, and do not give us any direct insight into gender. Here the meanings of sex and gender keep sliding into one another, blurring the boundaries that were established to keep them apart. The ease of this conflation, Scott (2013) suggests, might be due precisely to the fact that sex has no prior meaning to gender, as Butler (1990) has argued.

Through these novel usages of gender, the contours emerge of something that we might call 'gender lite': gender without feminism, gender without power, but also gender without sexuality, nor 'race' and ethnicity. The result of these new usages of gender is a critical loss of gender's analytical value: gender effectively ceases to do the analytical work it was conceived to do, and that significantly differs from the work of the category of sex. Thus 'gender lite' runs the risk of re-inscribing the biological grounds of sex, in a binary and heteronormative way. Gender as a term might have granted some academic legitimacy to feminist knowledge production, yet its institutionalisation in neoliberal times occurs at the expense of the feminist drive at the very heart of Women's Studies/Gender Studies, i.e. a rigorous analysis of power relations.

It is crucial to take stock of this loss of analytical value, precisely at a time of new efforts to institutionalize Gender Studies in Belgium. The critical line of my intervention by no means denies that interesting work on gender is taking place within the Belgian academy. Indeed, the very launch of this journal, as well recent initiatives in

terms of (doctoral) research seminars, and last but not least the project of an interdisciplinary master programme in Gender and Diversity, testify to the resilience of the feminist impulses which have been formative to Women's Studies and Gender Studies and which continue to animate and drive these interdisciplinary fields. Yet comparing the Belgian situation with international contexts inevitably invokes the sentiment of 'too little, too slow'. One could speculate endlessly why this is the case, and point to fine ironies such as the fact that the city in which relatively advanced European Gender and Science policies were developed is situated in a country which scores exceptionally bad with respect both to women and gender in the academy. But some things are clear: this predicament is characterized both by a great amount of ignorance about, as well as resistance against, gender as a category of analysis and the established interdisciplinary fields of Women's Studies/Gender Studies. 'Gender lite' plays a crucial role in sustaining this predicament. Institutionally speaking, 'gender lite' turns out to be very useful: it allows the institution to speak about gender, as the pressure to do so increases, while neutralizing gender's analytical and critical potential. And while such a usage of gender can be traced internationally, its presence and effect in Belgium is striking. There are not even a handful of appointments profiled in Gender Studies in the entire country, yet the first appointment in which gender is merely understood as a parameter (instead of an analytical category) is already a fact. And here the circle becomes vicious: such examples are symptomatic for the fact that there is so little institutional leverage in Belgium to insist on, and further develop, gender as analytical category.

The United Colours of Diversity

This brings me to my second set of reflections, which concerns diversity as a key-term, and which is briefer and less focused on the Belgian context. Diversity is a 'master signifier' encompassing different questions of power and difference, yet it also specifically carries the weight of race and ethnicity. At the same time, one of the failures of gender's new usages is the way in which it is conceptualized without taking into account 'race' and ethnicity. This conundrum finds an expression in 'gender and diversity', an adjoining that is also a separation, and holds the suggestion that gender is not 'diverse' (whatever that might mean), and that diversity is not about gender. This stands in sharp contrast with how gender emerged within the first decades of Women's Studies/Gender Studies: Scott's seminal (1986) conceptualisation of gender includes an analysis of 'race' and ethnicity as crucial dimensions of gender as an analytical category, and in turn relies very much on the sustained efforts by Black Feminists to theorize the intricacies of axes of power – thinkers and activists such as, to name but a few, The Combahee River Collective (1977), Angela Davis (1983),

Patricia Hill Collins (1990), and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), who developed the seminal notion of intersectionality for this approach. Yet the rise of 'gender lite', in connection to the rise of diversity as a key-term, involves an understanding of masculinities and femininities as if these were constituted outside of relations of 'race', class, sexuality – an abstracted understanding which effectively reproduces white, middle-class and straight privileges. This is not to imply that a critical and analytical understanding gender in and of itself settles the multidimensionality of the power/subject relation, as there are indeed different ways to approach the intricacies of power and difference. But it does mean to say that an analytically sound understanding of gender should be able to account for those different sets of power relations.

The discussions of gender and of diversity are informed by very different genealogies. While gender as an analytical category is organically connected to a critical intellectual and political heritage, this is hardly the case for diversity as a term. Diversity never was an analytically sound category nor could it rely on a strong critical political or intellectual movement. Claims to diversity are usually not made by a subject herself ("I am diverse!"). Rather, diversity is attributed to 'others' and spaces (as lacking or having diversity), in accordance to the 'others' present in those spaces, or what Puwar (2004) called "space invaders". Diversity is a label ascribed to "bodies that stick out" (Ahmed, 2012). It is ascribed to people of colour, ethnic minorities or 'allochtones' as some in Belgium still say, and increasingly specifically Muslims, but also queer and gender non-conforming people as well as disabled people are considered 'diverse'. Nothing substantive 'unites' all of these, nothing besides the fact of differing from the norm. In other words, 'being diverse' is an attribution made by the majority, whether of an ethnic, sexual, able-bodied, etc. kind. At the same time, diversity all too often carries the imaginary of ethnicity and 'race', which provides a useful starting point for a reflection on what the term does: it couches questions of ethnicity and 'race' within a wide horizon of different kinds of 'differences', without doing the critical work of thinking those together, which includes thinking the particular ways in which each of these sets of power relations work. There is a long-standing tradition of feminists of colour offering strong critiques of the language of diversity (Ahmed, 2012; Davis, 1996; Mohanty, 2003; Puwar, 2004). I will briefly rehearse three of the problematic dimensions of diversity that this scholarship emphasizes.

Firstly, through its attribution to others, diversity effectively keeps the norm in place, and normalises it as the standard against which someone or something can be measured as 'diverse'. "There is no doubt", Ahmed (2012, p. 58) argues, "that institutional whiteness can be reproduced through the logic of diversity". Indeed, diversity might be one of the more powerful ways to reproduce whiteness. Secondly, diversity belongs to the register of management. It refers to the management of (the image

of) “the self” in assertions that “our” institution, centre, conference, journal, is “diverse”, and subsequently becomes a way of accruing value, or of “feel good politics”, as Ahmed (2012, p. 58-65) puts it. Diversity also refers to the management of ‘others’, that is, the management of difference. Diversity as well as inclusion based on diversity operates as a form of governmentality, as an implicit invitation to ‘others’ to become more alike the self (Ahmed, 2012). In his work on consumption, Baudrillard (1986) points out the ways in which diversity is structurally part of the logic of consumption, of the differentiation upon which late capitalism thrives. Diversity can be consumed; it is “digestible difference”, which also implies that other forms of difference become indigestible (Ahmed, 2012, p. 69). Diversity can be pursued without systemic change, Ahmed (2012, p. 108) insists. Thirdly, and relatedly, diversity is a power-evasive discourse. The term is detached from histories of struggle over inequality (Ahmed, 2012, p. 80). It has in fact become difficult to speak about racism because of how diversity as a key-term functions. Moreover, diversity does not relate to a notion of justice, as we can easily imagine spaces – indeed we inhabit these spaces daily – that are diverse, or actively pursue diversity politics, but are structured by profound injustice which ‘diversity politics’ have no intention addressing.

Renewing the Critical Edge

In sum, the concoction ‘gender and diversity’ sets up our conversations in fraught ways. Both ‘diversity’ and ‘gender lite’ are characterized by profound power-evasive capacities, which convene very well with the neoliberal context increasingly shaping academic life. In such a context, structural questions of inequality and difference are all too easily morphed into the language of diversity. This gives us understandings of gender, ethnicity and sexuality that are increasingly disconnected from material inequality, and accounts for the fact that class analyses sit uneasily with the contemporary language of ‘gender and diversity’ – class is not one of the diversities to be celebrated and balanced. Indeed, the question of class and socio-economic inequality illuminates what the language of diversity does: while it would still strike most of us that ‘celebrating class diversity, getting to know each other’s class cultures (including culinary and sartorial habits), and feeling enriched by cross-class encounters’ is a poor excuse for not addressing material redistribution, redressing power relations, and asking the question what social justice with respect to class might mean, the dominant usage of diversity sees no harm in proposing precisely such a project in relation to ‘race’ and ethnicity, and to sexuality and disability for that matter. The language of diversity makes such claims entirely intelligible, and even desirable. Moreover, it all too easily renders different ways to think about ethnicity and ‘race’ as

suspect: not easy to digest, not enough integrated, possibly too radical, and in any case what Ahmed (2012) calls a “kill-joy”.

If we follow Scott's (2013) concerns with some of the widespread contemporary uses of gender, the Belgian context gives rise to particular concern, given the low degree of institutionalisation of Women's Studies/Gender Studies that does not provide much leverage to further develop gender as a category of analysis. As for the critical edge of diversity, it is not difficult to argue that this has been quasi non-existent from the very beginning – indeed diversity itself is a ‘lite’ version of the concept of difference. This critique, however, should not be taken as a quick argument to simply leave those terms behind and move on to the next set. Indeed, the discussion of the shift from Women's Studies to Gender Studies shows how easily concepts turn out to do precisely what they were meant to prevent. While ‘difference’ provides a critical edge and critical genealogy that by far exceeds ‘diversity’, gender's loss of analytical and critical purchase should, I believe, push us towards renewing a strong analytical understanding of gender, which encompasses strong analyses of ‘race’, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and class. Masculinities or femininities abstracted from such axes of power/difference simply do not exist; femininity and masculinity are always already classed, raced, and shaped by sexuality and (dis)ability in structurally differentiated ways. The renewal of gender's critical edge, which can take place under the sign of feminism and critical theory and practice – but also under the sign of Critical Race Theory, queer theory, or decolonial theory for that matter – can only occur on the condition that this feminism is capable of de-centring majoritarian positions, notably whiteness, middle-classness, able-bodiedness and heteronormativity. The renewal of gender's critical edge, in other words, is tied up with what Deleuze and Guattari (in Braidotti, 1994) have called “becoming minoritarian”, a process of becoming that is never fully achieved.

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Notes

1. A simple expression of this affinity can be found in the name that some significant programmes and centres in the field opted for, i.e. 'Women's and Gender Studies'.
2. The foundational impulse of Women's Studies led to the establishment, in the 1980s, of Universit   des Femmes and Sophia, both associations outside of the academic world. Sophia has been organizing the bi-annual state of the arts conferences in the field of Gender Studies for many years, and also did the ground work for the currently accredited Flemish interuniversity master degree in Gender and Diversity.