Biologically similar and anatomically different?

The one-sex model and the modern sex/gender distinction

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is to discuss some of the problems with the feminist theoretical concepts sex and gender and the distinction between them. The focus is on the American historian Thomas Laqueur's use of sex and gender and his concept of the one-sex model. In the critique of Laqueur and in the search for a more ''inclusive'' sex/gender concept, I draw primarily from the work of Lundgren and Kroon and their version of the concept of the symbolic body, which implies that it is impossible to distinguish between ''only'' body and the symbols of the body.

The idea of two stable, incommensurable and opposite sexes is so fundamental and undisputed in our culture that it is something which is very difficult to think *about*; rather, the idea of two ''natural'' sexes is a place *from which* we are thinking. In feminist theory, however, different notions of the ''naturalness'' of the sexes have been problematized, and some theorists have discussed how sex is linked to the reproductive sphere and biological reproduction – and thereby to heterosexuality (which also appears to be natural) (Butler 1990; Liljeström 1990; Rich 1980). In recent years, several anthropologists have pointed out that the distinction between the sexes is a Western construct and not a biological ''fact'' (Nilsson 1996). They are therefore very critical of the assumption that sex is a universal basis for gender categories. They claim that this is a Eurocentric assumption. The American historian Thomas Laqueur has furthermore discussed the 18th and 19th centuries as a period of reinterpretation of the female body in relation to the male; he argues that the idea of the two incommensurable sexes is a modern idea, even in our Western culture (Laqueur 1990).

In the middle of this process of reinterpretation – around 1800 – some medical manuals on marriage and reproduction were published in Swedish, most of them translated from French and German. Elsewhere I have discussed if and how Laqueur's thesis of a one-sex model applies to these texts (Eriksson 1996). The aim of this article is to discuss some of the problems with the feminist theoretical

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concepts sex and gender, and the distinction between them, with a focus on Laqueur's use of these concepts. The medical manuals mentioned above will be used as empirical material to illustrate this line of argument.

In the critique of Laqueur and in the search for a more ''inclusive'' sex/gender concept, I will draw primarily from the work of Eva Lundgren and Ann Kroon and their version of the concept of the symbolic body. In an article in *Sosiologi idag* (Sociology Today), Lundgren and Kroon discuss this concept, arguing that the body is dynamic: it is a source and producer of symbols, but the symbols simultaneously act on and change the body. Lundgren and Kroon assume that the body is never ''pure'' or un-interpreted. Their aim is to criticize both the understanding of the body as pre-socially ''given'', *as well as* an understanding of the body as only discursively permeated (Lundgren and Kroon 1996, 81). Lundgren and Kroon argue that the body, the bodily signs and body parts are utterly symbolically loaded. They use the concept of the symbolic body because they want analytically to ''keep bodily signs and the symbolic together''. They claim for example that a bodily sign cannot be separated from what it represents if we are to understand the meaning of the sign (ibid, 91). According to Lundgren and Kroon, it is simply impossible to distinguish between ''only'' body and the symbols of the body.

One flesh

In his book *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990), Laqueur argues that until the 18th century, woman and man were perceived as two versions of the same body. The difference between woman and man was, according to Laqueur, socially and legally defined: ''To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes'' (Laqueur 1990, 8).

Laqueur contrasts what he calls the ''one-sex/flesh'' model with the ''two-sex/flesh'' model which, according to him, was ''invented'' during the Enlightenment and became more and more dominant throughout the 19th century (even if the two models existed side by side for a long time). By the late 19th century it was argued that the woman is fundamentally different from the man, and this difference can be demonstrated not just in visible bodies but also in microscopic building blocks. Sexual difference in kind, not degree, seemed by then solidly grounded in nature. Laqueur argues that bourgeois gender norms became tied to two different bodies, and that biology – ''stable and ahistorical'' – was regarded more and more as the foundation for the social order. For example, woman's ''passive'' role at conception – ''the egg is still while the sperm is moving'' – was eventually connected to woman's ''naturally'' passive and susceptible role in other contexts.

Positive advances in science seem to have little to do with the shift in the interpretation of the body, Laqueur argues, pointing to the example of the ''different roles'' at conception, which was ''fact'' long before reproductive physiology could come to its support with any kind of deserved authority. Laqueur argues that the model of two incommensurable sexes was – *and is* – a cultural product as much as the one-sex model was: ''To be sure, difference and sameness, more or less recondite, are everywhere; but which ones count for what ends is determined outside the bounds of empirical investigation'' (ibid, 10).

In the tradition of humoural pathology[1], dating back to classical antiquity, woman and man were, as stated above, perceived as two versions of the same flesh, of one body. All the parts of the male body – including the genitals – had their counterpart in the female. The different female body parts did not even have names of their own; the ovaries were, for example, imagined as female testicles. A specific terminology for the female anatomy was not developed until the 18th century. When depicted, the female body was portrayed as a male body turned inside out, with the penis inside.

According to the one-sex model, the woman was not only supposed to be bodily of the same kind as the man, she was also imagined to have the equivalent function in reproduction and to be sexually similar. In the Hippocratic/Galenic tradition, conception was imagined to take place at the moment of a mixing of female and male seminal fluids – the so-called ''two-seed'' theory – and the simultaneous orgasm of the woman and the man was, according to this tradition, a prerequisite for conception. It should be mentioned that the ancient tradition contained several theories of reproduction; according to the Hippocratic/Galenic tradition, conception was dependent on both female and male ejaculation, while the Aristotelians argued that the man was the only producer of semen, and therefore the sole creator of new life. But in the texts of the Aristotelians, the difference between woman and man seems to be of degree rather than kind, since they also refer to female semen: ''Even in Aristotle's one-seed theory, *sperma* and *catameina* refer to greater or lesser refinements of an ungendered blood, except when they are used as ciphers for the male and female 'principles''' (ibid, 38). The coexistence of the ideas that it is only the man who produces semen, and that both women and men produce semen, can be explained by the fact that according to Aristotle, the male contribution to conception is invisible to the naked eye. The volatile contribution of the male to the future child appears in Aristotelian descriptions more as the ''principle of life'', while the female contribution is of a material kind (ibid, 41ff).

It was the lack of ''vital heat'' which explained women's failure to evolve to a higher degree of perfection along the axis with a male telos. But the bodily, anatomical differences between women and men were not perceived as stable. It was first and foremost women who were thought to be able to turn into men – according to the ancient way of thinking; it is in the ''nature of things'' to move up along the hierarchy, towards perfection. Women were considered to be able to ''push out'' their inner penis if they developed enough vital heat, for example, through intense physical activity or if they took the male role during intercourse.

In the medical manuals that became available to a Swedish-speaking audience around 1800, the one-sex model dominates the representations of anatomy and the theories of reproduction (even if the female and the male bodies sometimes are described as different). When read in detail, the descriptions of the genitals of women and men portray the female organs as imperfect variants of the male, and the sexual pleasure of women is supposed to be somehow connected to an ejaculation of semen and to conception, in accordance with the two-seed theory.

Sex and gender – anachronisms?

In our modern Western ''folk-model'', our ''naturally'' different (and stable) bodies are imagined as the base, the foundation of the categories of gender. In other words, the model implies an ontological hierarchy between body and gender role/gender identity. To a modern reader asking herself/himself what kind of theory of biology for example the late 18th/early 19th century authors of the medical manuals *really* had, what the *bases* of gender were, the texts can appear difficult to interpret. The reason for this is that no unambiguous relations between expected behaviour, bodily characteristics and theories of biology are to be found.[2] The specifically sexual roles can be said to be tied to bodily differences between women and men, but not to biology. Even if there are socially significant differences between female and male bodies, a notion of two fundamentally different sets of inner organs, hormones or reproductive functions is not to be found. Laqueur turns the ''folk model'' upside down; he argues that before the Enlightenment, social roles were natural in themselves and on the same level of explanation as what we Western people of the present would regard as physical and biological ''facts''. He claims that sex, or the body, must be understood as the epiphenonemon, while gender – what we would take to be a cultural category – was primary or *real*.

But one of the problems with Laqueur's conclusions is that even if the human body before the Enlightenment was perceived as an ''open body'', and the woman as a potential man, physical appearance did play a role in the construction of women and men. The presence or absence of male genitalia was decisive for the individual's place in the bodily (metaphysical) hierarchy. To distinguish between sex and gender in the way Laqueur does, and to say that *gender* was the primary category in pre-Enlightenment time, is problematic. Within the one-sex model, gender was also tied to bodily differences, even if these differences were not perceived as stable or definite. ''Female'' behaviour was connected to a body without an external penis, ''male'' to a body with one. *Though there was only one sex, anatomy was crucial for the construction of gender*. These concepts – sex and gender – and the use of them confuses rather than clarifies. The distinction between sex and gender is based on a modern understanding of biology, where biology *both in the sense of inner organs and of anatomy* is assumed to be ''pure'', pre-social. This is one reason for the problems tied to the use of the concepts in the analysis of historical material.

Bernice Hausman points out that researchers on hermaphrodites introduced the concept of gender in the 1950s to denote a social aspect of a sexed identity (Hausman 1995, 183ff). In this sense and usage, gender is linked to modern psycho-sociological conceptions of ''role'' and ''identity'', and as such was unthinkable to pre-modern people, she states. There are also some examples of an anachronistic use of the concept by Laqueur. He writes, among other things, about certain cases where individuals seem to have changed sex spontaneously, or where they came to be defined legally as the other sex than the one in which they had been living. Laqueur seems to be a bit surprised that these changes were carried out with little regard to the ''gender identity'' of the person in question, that subjects were expected to change from socially defined girls to socially defined boys without difficulty or turmoil. He refers to gender identity as something infants acquire very early. But, as Hausman points out, ''The idea of identity as an internally felt sense of self separate from community and family – but nonetheless 'integrated' within the individual as a coherent 'personality' – was foreign to this period as well'' (ibid, 184). It was simply ''unthinkable'' to consider the consequences for any identity.

Laqueur seems to assume that the social role of woman or man is connected to an inner sense of ''being'' one or the other sex/gender. He uses the modern idea of ''wholeness'', which presupposes a correspondence between the outside (role) and the inside (identity), between ''surface'' and ''core'' (Lundgren and Kroon 1996, 79). For example, Judith Butler has problematized the assumption of a correspondence. She argues that an ''expressive model'' – the idea of the (outside) gender role as an expression of the inside, the inner identity – is the result of a discourse of a primary, stable identity (Butler 1990). It is the words, actions, gestures, articulated and performed desires that create the illusion of an inner, organizing ''gender-core'', an illusion which is discursively reproduced to regulate sexuality according to the regime of compulsory heterosexuality.[3]

A symbolic body

Eva Lundgren and Ann Kroon argue that one cannot separate the ''biological event'' of having, for example, a beard, from the ''social event'' which this (bodily) sign implies. According to them, the fact that a beard is a sign of something else – man for example – means that the beard represents something more than itself; it is a sign of ''man'' (cf. Kessler and McKenna 1978). In the same way, the external penis in the one-sex model represented something more than itself: it was a sign of man, and the lack of an external penis represented something more than itself: it was a sign of woman.

Above I argue that the concept of a one-sex model is problematic in a historical context, since ''sex'' is based on a modern understanding of biology, where biology both in the sense of inner organs and of anatomy is assumed to be ''pure'', pre-social. Within the one-sex model, gender was also tied to bodily differences, even if these differences were not perceived as stable or definite. This connection between body and gender and the symbolic implications of the anatomy can be illustrated by a section from one of the 18th-century manuals – the anonymously published German *Gynäologie* – in which women with a clitoris that is ''too big'' (and therefore resembles the male organ too much) are discussed. In such cases, the clitoris can endure being cut down, *Gynäologie* states (1798–1804, Vol. II, Part III, 6). This is very interesting, since this ''too big clitoris'' is also said to be connected to ''perverted'' sexual behaviour in women, for example, that of a woman who has a sexual relationship with someone of her own sex where she plays the active, male role. The logical conclusion of the line of argument in *Gynäologie* is that it is possible to change a woman physically – by mutilating a female organ which resembles male genitals too much – to reshape her into a ''natural'', passive, heterosexual woman.

Even if Laqueur turns the ''folk model'' upside down, he does not draw any theoretical conclusions from his statement that theories of biology are always social constructs. If the assumptions (of both the one- and the two-sex models) about how biology ''is'' are *social constructs*, why cling to the distinction between sex and gender? This sharp distinction must be problematized: sex/gender is *simultaneously* bodily, social and symbolic, or, as Lundgren writes in *Feminist Theory and Violent Empiricism*, ''The body 'is' fundamentally symbolic, the symbolic and the social 'are' always bodily, the social is symbolic and vice versa'' (Lundgren 1995, 227).

The dichotomy of the genders/sexes

There is an (often implicit) ontological hierarchy among the three dimensions of the biological, or bodily, the social and the symbolic in many discussions on sex and gender.[4] Biology – sex – is understood as primary, the given, the social is considered to be derived and more mobile and the symbolic is seen as the most fluid and stratospheric (Lundgren 1995, 226ff). In accordance with Lundgren, I argue that this hierarchy between the bodily, social and symbolic must be questioned. The example of the ''trimmed'' clitoris indicates that the symbolic/social (heterosexual) order can appear (and be experienced?) as more stable than the ambiguous, changeable body.

Lundgren and Kroon come to a similar conclusion, on the bases of different empirical material: the psychiatric assessment of transsexuals. They ask if the *dichotomization* of sexes/genders can be seen as a fundamental – constitutive[5] – rule for gender-constitution in our culture. Lundgren and Kroon argue that this constitutive rule in their material is tied to the modern idea of ''whole'' genders, with the assumption of a necessary correspondence between ''outside'' and ''inside'' (Lundgren and Kroon 1996, 103). Even if modern surgery can change the body and the genitals, the idea of two opposite, incommensurable sexes/genders is reproduced in the psychiatric construction of transsexualism, in the form of two stable, opposite distinguishable *gender identities*. In the case of transsexualism, there is, furthermore, a modification in what is regarded as stable and changeable in relation to the ''folk model''. Here it is the gender identity which is understood as stable and the body as more mobile: the body should correspond to the inner sense, the sense of being woman or man. The body is to be modified, not vice-versa.

Another example of this dichotomization is to be found in the 18th-century medical manuals. In them, women and men are described in dichotomizing and complementary terms, especially in the descriptions of and prescriptions for sexual life. According to the manuals, it is the man who should be active (driving), and it is very important that he *always* have the ability to satisfy the woman. The woman, on the other hand, should be passive. Too much activity, or initiative, on her part is not appropriate (Eriksson 1997, 72ff). The manuals prescribe a love-life based solely on the premises of men, with an obviously eroticized male dominance and female subordination.

But even if the manuals say that women should be very modest in their manners, women are not considered less sexual than men; their sexual needs are a reality taken for granted in most of the manuals.[6] The totally asexual women of the 19th century are here noticeably absent.[7] The manuals contain a ‘‘natural’’ order with a dichotomous organization of women and men, but without a counterpart to this ‘‘natural’’ order in the theories of biology: nature and biology are not the same. Women’s enjoyment and pleasure is, according to the manuals, *necessary* for conception, but the (external) signs of female lust are at the same time considered repulsive and *unnatural*. The ideology of a ‘‘natural passionlessness of women’’ has, in other words, no ‘‘foundation’’ in theories of biology.[8] It is on such ‘‘discrepancies’’ Laqueur bases his ‘‘one-sex model’’, and although this is a problematic concept, the manuals can be said to confirm that the idea of sex difference in the modern sense did not exist at that time.

The model of two opposite sexes seems to be more stable than that of the ‘‘biological’’ bodies, which is in accordance with Laqueur’s claim that the reinterpretation of the body did not occur as the result of medical, scientific discoveries, but rather as a result of political and societal changes. ‘‘The new biology, with its search for fundamental differences between the sexes, of which the tortured question of the very existence of women’s pleasure was a part, emerged at precisely the time when the foundations of the old social order were shaken once and for all’’, he writes (Laqueur 1990, 11). He argues that biology was a way of maintaining the asymmetrical relation of power between women and men in a time when liberal ideas of equality emerged. If woman and man are so fundamentally different that they cannot be measured by the same standard, the liberal principles do not have to include women (*cf.* Hammar 1983; Jónasdóttir 1983; Pateman 1989). When the old world, with its teleological, cosmic order, broke down and the social order no longer was guaranteed by God, another fundament for the social order became necessary. It seems that biology in the modern sense, with all its social and symbolic dimensions and implications, became that foundation.

NOTES

1. The theory of the bodily fluids.
2. It is often difficult to interpret the different perceptions of the human body and to get a clear view on how human reproduction is understood in the manuals. In several of them, various ‘‘models’’ are used at the same time, for example, different versions of the theory of egg and sperm on the one hand, and some version of the two-seed theory on the other. Even if these models are apparently contradictory to the modern reader, the use of both of them seems to be relatively unproblematic to the writers of the manuals. For example, in one part of a text women are said not to be producers of semen, but in another part the fetus is described as the result of the mixing of the maternal and paternal semen, or the female semen is said to be filtrated through the ovaries (*Konsten att göra gossar* 1798, 121; *Gynäologie* 1798–1804, Vol. I, Part II, 18; Vol. II, Part VI, Ch. 12, 34). The two-seed theory is, in other words, very present – not the least as language – and leaves its mark on the naming of anatomical observations. Features of the humoural pathology continued to be present, in new shapes and forms, also in other parts of

medicine, for a very long time (Johannisson 1990, 23ff, 30).

3. She argues that it is the heterosexual matrix which creates a logic connection between sex, gender and desires, and that heterosexual practice thereby becomes fundamental to our understanding of normal, ''real'' women and men (Butler 1990, 151).
4. Lundgren and Kroon (1996) claim that in the sex/gender distinction, feminist theory has taken over the premises of the western Platonic-Christian philosophical tradition, with its hierarchical distinction between body and soul, where the body is the prison, the soul the freedom, the (external) body fixed and the (internal) soul fluid and changeable (*cf.* Butler 1990).
5. See Lundgren's discussion of constitutive and regulative rules (1995, 209ff).
6. It should be mentioned that until the 18th century, women were perceived as more sexual than men.
7. That sex is not only aimed at satisfying the needs of the man is evident, for example, in *Grundelig och säker underrättelse*, which tells of a woman who got such satisfaction from herself that she abandoned her marriage (1806, 56p). The *Rådgifvare före, vid och efter samlaget* of Becker, which is often quite detailed on intimate matters, says that it is bad for both parties if intercourse cannot be consummated to mutual satisfaction (1812, 55). Examples where sexual violence against women is interpreted as an expression of female sexuality and not as abuse are also to be found. See Eriksson (1996, 139).
8. This is in sharp contrast to the medical view on female sexuality a century later, when, for example, bilateral ovariotomy – the removal of healthy ovaries – was used as a cure for an unnaturally strong sexual urge in women (*cf.* Johannisson 1994).

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