

## Préface

The question of gender has preoccupied public discourse of late as a weapon in the debates about gay marriage. For opponents of le mariage pour toutes et tous, “la théorie du genre” is the cause of a profound social malaise, a threat to the very foundations of society and nation. Their arguments are, of course, polemical and they are based on a profound misunderstanding of the concept of gender. There is no single “théorie du genre,” there are only gender studies, attempts to analyze and understand the ways in which differences of sex have been defined, disputed, and changed. Anthropologists, historians, and other researchers have shown again and again that the very notions of “woman” and “man” vary culturally and over time; even if societies take the sexes and the relations between them to be immutable (the dictates of god(s) or nature), the evidence suggests no single, stable, enduring meaning. It is precisely this insistence on mutability that enrages those who defend normative regulations by attributing them to a transcendent source.

Vincent Bourseul contributes a new and original perspective to the fields of gender studies and psychoanalysis by pointing to the reasons for this mutability. For gender studies, he offers a psychoanalytic definition of sex, gender, and sexual identity that refuses simple oppositions between sex (bodies) and gender (social roles that refer to those bodies). Instead, he argues (invoking Freud, Lacan, and Laplanche) that there is an element of fantasy in all of these: gender is “un objet imaginaire à quoi le sexe correspond en tant que processus symbolique.” Bodies are projected surfaces “où la langage trouve la source cible de son action symbolique.” Identity is an unstable category which cannot provide a permanent resolution to the ongoing enigma of sex. Sex, differences of sex, sexuality are enigmas addressed by conscious reflection and unconscious processes which operate never in unison, but always in tension with one another—the unruly unconscious undermines all attempts at reasonable conclusions. Placing the enigma of sex at the center of our thinking means that we have to interpret gender in action, as it is enunciated in response to the enigma, not as a fixed or known thing. This is where Bourseul’s notion of gender opens the practice of psychoanalysis (perhaps it is better to say returns the practice of psychoanalysis) to interpretive approaches that insist on listening to what patients say rather than bringing to bear established ideas about identity, pathology, or perversion.

Bourseul illustrates what this opening might mean in his insightful analyses of cases—le mari enceinte, a trans-sexual, and homosexual men with HIV-AIDS. In his readings, what might otherwise be treated as pathologies or perversions become ways of thinking about the operations of gender—as a relationship between the imaginary and the symbolic—in all of us. As Freud used the “perversions” to talk about the universal aspects of psychic operations (at least in modern Western individuals), so Bourseul reads his cases not as examples of pathological gender identification, but as different ways of thinking non-normatively about gender, sex, and sexuality. He makes the trans

phenomenon a part of the normal questioning of gender, a process of self-articulation involving a quest in which differences of sex and gender are neither pre-determined nor fully known. Transgression of norms is thus not deviance, but the way in which sexuation is realized differently in different individuals.

*Pensées de genre* offers a reconceptualization of the categories of sex, sexuality and gender not only for Bourseul's disciplinary colleagues, but also for a larger public. He contests what often passes for 'common sense' by challenging prevailing concepts and norms. When the concept of gender, as he defines it, enters the psychoanalytic clinic (as well as the historian's repertoire), it brings with it a connection to psychic experience that is without precedent and without limit. A revolutionary instrument to be sure!

Joan W. Scott  
Princeton, NJ  
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