Dismantling Noah’s Ark¹

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Feminist theory and research have shown us that gender is a linchpin of social orders, but they have not seriously envisaged a social order without gender. Examination of the various bases of gender demonstrates that gender is essentially a social construction, and the relations between women and men are essentially social relations. What is socially constructed can be reconstructed, and social relations can be rearranged. A social order is possible without gender as an organizing principle. This paper takes forward tendencies and policies in postindustrial societies to show how, if carried through, they could be used to construct a nongendered social order.

...[t]hou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee. And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female.³

“Did she have a boy or a girl?” I asked. “Why do you want to know?” said my 13-year-old.⁴

It is a paradox of feminist politics that women must act politically as a group in order to defuse gender as a discriminative status. In the current climate, and no doubt for a long time to come, if women are to gain anything like equal representation in existing institutions, they must push for their rights as women. Another necessary political stance has been the valorization of women’s characteristics and special perspectives to counter their devaluation in male-dominated cultures. However, both strategies have limits that caution us to keep in mind that equal rights for women as a group and the celebration of the female are effective only as short-term politics. The permeation

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³King James Version, Book of Genesis.

⁴Conversation between author and child, 1982.
of existing institutions with gender inequality makes the long-term goal of equal opportunity within them a sham (Eisenstein, 1981). Glorifying womanliness consolidates female unity and power, but when pushed to extremes it comes dangerously close to reviving the cult of true womanhood and the ideology of separate spheres (Jagger, 1983; Stacey, 1983a). The long-term goal of feminism must be no less than the eradication of gender as an organizing principle of postindustrial society.

Feminist theory and research have shown us that gender is a linchpin of social order, but they have not seriously envisaged a social order without gender. Examination of the social bases of gender demonstrates that gender is essentially a social construction, and the relations between women and men are essentially social relations. What is socially constructed can be reconstructed, and social relations can be rearranged. A modern social order is possible without gender, and I would like to sketch what it might look like. So that it is clear what I mean when I speak of gender as a set of oppositional relationships that sustain and are sustained by institutionalized patterns of behavior, I begin by analyzing the concept of gender as a social construct.

THE SOCIAL BASES OF GENDER

Gender supposedly rests on an obvious physiological and biological dichotomy, but it can be argued that the concept of physiological and biological dimorphism emerges from our firmly held belief in two and only two genders. In everyday life and in scientific research, Kessler and McKenna (1978) argue, we first attribute sexual dimorphism, and then look for evidence of it in order to have “good reasons” for the original sorting of people into the categories “female” and “male.” From the perspective of dialectical materialism, Alison Jagger (1983, pp. 109-112, 125-132) points out, physiological sex differences are socially produced by differences in diet, exercise, work, and selective breeding, and reproduction and sexuality are as socially constructed as they are biologically based (see also Longino & Doell, 1983; Naftolin & Butz, 1981). Most human beings produce both androgens and estrogens, and these are chemically converted into each other, so that “the endocrine nature of the human species is hermaphroditic” (Briscoe, 1978, p. 31). Physiological sex differences may be quantitative, but the boundaries between “female” and “male” are socially located and differentiated by what Gayle Rubin calls a “sameness taboo... dividing the sexes into two mutually exclusive categories, a taboo which exacerbates biological differences between the sexes and thereby creates gender” (1975, p. 178, her emphasis).