Ruprecht-Karls Universität Heidelberg
Cluster of Excellence – Asia and Europe in a Global Context
Seminar: Gender, Work and Power in Historical Context
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Summer Semester 2014
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Essay 1: In what sense has 'gender studies' as an academic field changed since the 1970s?

Gender Studies: changing approaches from the 1970s

The 1970s represented a decade of changes in most Countries, due to the effect of local activism, to socio-political transformations, and significant events. Along with these historical conditions, also Scholarship began to adapt and reinvent itself, assuming more critical positions in most fields. This general trend involved Sex and Gender studies as well, which encountered a significant turning point in its history.

So, in what sense has "Gender studies" as an academic field changed since the 1970s?

The most influential literatures that were involved in the process discussed themes such as the modification of categories, mainly in a historical understanding. History itself was reconsidered in many aspects, especially through its connection with politics and power relations[1].

We can identify three influential forms of criticism, developed in particular from the 1960s: Postmodernism, Post-structuralism and Deconstructionism[2]. Such theories are usually mentioned together, since they are characterized by a common dialectical strategy. However, they cannot be assimilated under a sole category, nor are they interchangeable.

Starting from the influence of these three critics, in this essay I will try to give an overview of the academic redefinition in the last decades, tracing the evolution of "Gender Studies" within the Scholarship developed in the field, in the Euro-American context, as well as in the Asian one.

Renewing the field: some critical approaches

The critical theories mentioned above are normally identified with some specific authors. In the case of the Postmodernist theory, it was mainly shaped from the studies by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard[3]. Postmodernism has very vague boundaries and promote itself as historical expression. Lyotard affirms that knowledge varies as soon as society begins its post-industrial phase and therefore culture enters the postmodern age[4], finding some common stands with post-historicism and post-structuralism, as well as Marxist-influenced historical concepts. Although being criticized as an "irresponsible", anarchic and randomized vision of History[5], often associated with post-historicist claims by fascism, Postmodern historical approach determines both negative aspects (such as the existential depletion of Western societies) and positive ones: an internationalizing culture, the decrease of totalitarian trends, flexible social structures and so on. Post-modernity includes an increased attention over Human Rights, along with Sexual and Racial equality, features that characterize some major standing points in Gender studies themselves, especially on a scientific rather than historicized basis. In this sense, one notable spokesperson is Donna Haraway, with her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985), which plays with the concept of postmodern and feminism in an attempt to disrupt previously created gender categories[6]. Defining this Cyborg allegory as an ironical Political Myth, Haraway tries to combine postmodernism with socialist feminism, questioning the legitimacy of all social categories and suggesting to adopt a policy of affinity, rather than one grounded on identity.

Right next to the Postmodernist theory there is Post-structuralism, which shares some peculiarities with the first (the "incredulity towards meta-narratives" cited by Lyotard[7], for example), but substantially differs in themes and approaches. Its predecessor, Structuralism, focuses on the language as an universal, complete system, fixed in time and space. On the contrary, Post-structuralism[8] rejects this stability, this integrity, and argues that Language is not a permanent structure, but it is rather the mean that creates and signifies reality, a mutable, interpretative system

with an unstable meaning. Research and knowledge are contextual and positional, depending on individual conditions. There is a harsh critic to those institutions or thought that are not committed to openness, with referral to most ideologies, from Neoliberism to Marxism. Some notable authors of Post-structuralism are Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault as well as Lyotard himself and Jacques Derrida. Many of these have contributed to the development of Deconstruction, too.

In fact, Deconstruction is often seen as a variant of this Post-structural approach, a method that from one side criticizes the categories of a text, while exposing its unacknowledged challenges to its own premises[9]. Derrida's 1967 work "Of Grammatology" provides the analytical model for this framework: he deconstructs several literary texts on language (Saussure, Rousseau, Jakobson…), highlighting its contradictions and making available to the reader's intuition what the texts repress. There is something outside the category of language whose absence is produced by language itself (meaning is created by absence). Derrida's texts themselves are an example of incoherence, even though they provide useful tools to the reader.

Deconstruction and Post-structuralism have been particularly influential on Gender studies and Gender categorization, especially throughout the 1980s, taking a step further from Postmodernism and bringing a wave of critical approaches and scepticism. Along with them, we must also consider another Scholar's contribution to have a complete overview of the academic environment. In the 1970s, Edward Said has developed theories that head towards an interpretation of Deconstruction and Post-structuralism, nurturing a critical reflection over identity and cultural assumptions, and launching the concept of Orientalism[10]. His work articulates from the field of Post-colonial studies and defines the category of Otherness, typically considered the East (opposed to the Western colonial power), as a cultural identity rather than geographical.

Deriving from this academic asset, a notable study in Gender studies' field is Joan C. Williams' work "Deconstructing Gender" (1989), in which she focus on terms and categories such as "Sameness" and "Difference" in the context of feminist studies, debating some scholarly

interpretations[11]. Many insights are shaped in a methodology very similar to Derrida's, and it's notable how Williams explicitly provides a deconstruction interpretation of Difference in her paper.

Following the opportunities offered by Deconstruction and Post-structuralism, in a wider perspective, a notable author is surely Joan Wallach Scott, who challenges the vision of Gender and historical categories, especially in their formal and scholar interpretations, as we can read in "Gender: A useful category of Analysis" (1986) and "*History in Crisis? The Other's side of the Story*" (1989). The first provides a theorization for Gender as significant in politics and power relations, trying to trace the development in history of what would become a generally understood category of analysis. The concept of difference and power relations is further analyzed in the second one, a wider critique over "true", "orthodox" historical narrative[12] that questions the fixity of boundaries in the academic approach and discusses the validity of the pluralization of the subject, suggesting a democratic renewal of history in order to include "Other" versions of History (intended as different standpoint from that of the white, elitarian class).

From West to East: Gendered categories and marginal developments

It is of particular interest to see how the research field has been reshaped from these analyses, also with regards to the East Asian reality. A useful tool to understand the development in the Japanese context, for example, is given by Theodore C. Bestor "Gendered Domains: A Commentary on Research in Japanese Studies" (1985), a workshop's report on possible new directions in Gender Studies in Japan, which evaluates recent issues in the field on a global scale and applies them to Japanese society and culture. In particular, during the workshop here described, some main themes emerged[13], that is the transformations of gender ideologies and roles, the intersection of gender with class and structured inequality, symbolism and constructions of gender roles and differentiations, and gender concepts in an international comparison.

Japan's developments in the field have been shaped by a multiplicity of cultural factors with implications still present nowadays. A recent study by Sakiko Kitagawa, Feminism in East-Asian

Networking (2010) has suggested to assume a postmodernist perspective on Japanese feminism. Her critique points out how Japanese feminism is not even considered as an analytical scholarship, lacks in methodology and is actually too fragmented and ambiguous to define its local position in society, not to mention a trans-national identification[14]. Therefore, Kitagawa asserts that Japanese could benefit from a postmodernist approach, focusing on a cultural self-understanding and subjectivity, in order to redefine the concept of Gender and understand the plurality of its roles in the process of modernization[15]

Shifting from Japanese to Chinese reality, we can consider the paper by Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng, "Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis" (2008) as a synopsis of developments in Gender studies in this particular area, with an overview on Gender history from the 19th century and its contemporary evolution. Deviating from European's general trend, in China "Gender" as a historical and linguistic category have been less influential, but it still developed from the 1970s onwards[16]. As stated by Hershatter and Zheng, Scott's publication "Gender: A useful category of Analysis" (mentioned above) represented a fundamental text for establishing a critical methodology. It encouraged already existing projects to broaden their perspectives, considering the relationship between state, power and gender, and producing a so-called "gender turn"[17] in the 1990s, with an official categorization of the term and flourishing of related scholarship production.

An example of research from this intellectual environment is Shu-Mei Shih's "Gender, Race and Semicolonialism: Liu *Na'ou's Urban Shanghai Landscape*" (1996), which explores the urban literary environment in the Nanjing decade through the figure of Liu Na'ou [18], involving considerations on Colonial/Semicolonial politics of Gender and Race, Western-style mirroring of the Modern woman in urban China, and similar aspects.

Both in European and East-Asian context, apart from the mainstream literature there is a branch of Gender studies not even properly developed before the 1980s, that is Prostitution. From this decade, scholarship on the topic drastically increased, as well reported in Timothy J. Gilfoyle,

"Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity" (1999). Contemporary developments in Gender studies have helped in delineating a symbolic and discursive meaning of prostitution, with a very differentiated and complex monographic scholarship[19]. In this text, Gilfoyle offers an analysis of 19th and 20th century prostitution while considering works by several authors, all published between the late 1970s and the 1990s, and confronting different cultural landscapes (France, Argentina, Russia, Kenya, UK and China). His inquiry highlights the changing discourses on prostitution and new strategies concerning the structure of commercial sex, in an academic sphere that has moved a marginalized subject to the center of historical (and social) study[20].

Prostitution has not been the only marginalized theme within Gender studies, commonly associated with women-related issues, which excluded sexualized categories such as homosexuals and transgender. These reached academic attention in the last decades, as the field changed. As a result, in the early 1990s a "Queer theory" was elaborated. This theory developed discussions over gender from Foucault's, Derrida's and other critical approaches, in particular concerning the nature of gender/sexual identity, rejecting artificial social categorizations. For a glance on the scholarship about this subject, we can consider Stephen Valocchi's "Not Yet Queer Enough: The Lessons of Queer Theory for the Sociology of Gender and Sexuality" (2005), which provides an analysis of recent monographs linked to Queer theory. Through an emphasis on the discursive power of economic, political and institutional processes, his aim is to affirm the Queer theory as a legitimate and useful contemporary social theory[21].

Conclusions

Since the 1970s, the categorization of Gender and its characteristics have experienced a wide investigation, enhanced by a prolific scholar and methodological reinvention. Gender studies as an academic field is surely multi-shaped; the deep analytical efforts have contributed to include some aspects of Gender that were not considered before, such as studies on prostitution, transgender and

homosexuality. At all effects "Gender studies" intertwines concepts belonging to sociology, history, politics, power relations, sexual identity, literature and linguistics. In other words, it has become an open interdisciplinary academic field, which recognizes the plurality of its voices and through them constantly seeks for self-renewal.

Notes

[1] See for example Scott, *History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story*

[2] A useful document for basic definitions and evolution of these theories can be Caplan, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians (1989)

[3] The concepts analyzed in his studies are collected in Jean-Francois Lyotard's sociologic research, The Postmodern Condition, first published in 1979.

[4] Caplan, 263

[5] Raymond Williams, quoted in Caplan, 264

[6] "The Cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self.", as the socialist feminist herself defines it in her essay – Haraway, Donna, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" (1985), 201, later included in Haraway, Donna, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. (1991)

[7] Caplan, 264

[8] As exposed in Caplan, 265-66

[9] Caplan, 267

[10] Said, Orientalism (1977)

[11] In particular, she analyzes and disagree on some "feminist of difference" approaches, Carol Gilligan and Catharine MacKinnon above all. Williams, Deconstructing Gender (1989)

[12] Referred mostly to Historians in the first half of 20th century, but also to many Postwar approaches. Anyway, as Scott points out, there have been developed some premises for a new historical approach, theorizing its multiplicity and condemning historical discrimination. Scott, *History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story*, 682-88

[13] Bestor, Domains: a Commentary on Research in Japanese Studies, 285

[14] Feminism in Japan has assumed the shape of a social movement, more than an academic field. Some philosophers have even made an attempt to analyze regional issues, such as the "comfort women" one, in a comparative perspective, but have encountered many difficulties in doing so, due to their undefined method. Kitagawa, Japanese Feminism in East-Asian Networking, 35-36

[15] Kitagawa, 38

[16] Hershatter, Zheng, Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis, 1412 (and following)

[17] Hershatter, Zheng, 1418

[18] Founder of a Chinese modernist literary movement called new sensationism. Shih, Shu-Mei, Gender, Race and *Semicolonialism: Lui Na'ou's Urban Shanghai Landscape*, 934

[19] Gilfoyle, Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity, 118-120

[20] Gilfoyle, 140

[21] Valocchi, Not Yet Queer Enough: The Lessons of Queer Theory for the Sociology of Gender and Sexuality, 750-2

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