

Green feminism and the riddle of the binary sex

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Many years ago a monk was coming out of a monastery that was under the leadership of the great Zen man, Rinzai. Halfway across a bridge over a river, he met some monks from another Buddhist school. One of the monks stopped him and, referring to the river below, asked, "how deep is the river of Zen?" The Zen monk, who was just returning from a session with Rinzai, a teacher legendary for his direct actions, without the slightest hesitation replied, "find out for yourself", and began to throw the monk off the bridge. Fortunately he was saved by his two friends, who persuaded the first monk to stop (Belasik, 1990, pp. 9-10).

The feminist's question

The green movement was born during the 1960s as a reaction to modernity - the industrial, resource consuming way of life in the West. The women's movement was an important branch from the start, along with global peace and solidarity issues. Thirty years later, identity politics washed over the greens as well as the universities and some of the movement became "queer." But what does feminism have to do with green ideology and what can queer theory teach a green feminist?

Well, how deep is the river of Zen? Over the years, I have often wondered why it is always women who write about feminism. I have therefore avoided to express too much of an opinion about that, nevertheless not succeeded to be quiet. And now, once again, I will say something about feminism, as I am a woman. I was thrown into the Zen water thirteen years ago due to my entry into a political movement. Still, I do not know if I found either the green ideology or the green feminism. Ideology, which at best should express something about how we ought to live our lives – usually gets stuck in its own terms and reduced to abstractions. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you what green feminism *is*. What I can do is to say something about how it is to *be* a green feminist, because you have to be a feminist in this world, no matter what you think about feminism.

I write these words because I am female, which means that some readers may think that the male perspective is ignored here. But I hope you will understand why I need to write in this way and maybe it will bring you a new understanding of gender power-relations. Let me also state that despite my dissatisfaction with abstractions, I must make use of them. I therefore hope that the leaps from the abstract to the concrete, between **feminism** and the **feminist**, are not too abrupt. I may also prepare you that

the text dwells on an issue that has perhaps been a non-issue for you until now. But for me it has been personal and necessary to answer the question: is "women" really a relevant political category? What is it, then, that ultimately unites women with each other and forms the foundation of the feminist subject? The question and its follow-up question are important because of their impact on policy. Feminists are faced with many difficult choices, both in private life and in politics. When is it justified with affirmative action? Should there be a Women's Association in the Green Party? Shared parental leave or not? Stay at home with kids or go to work? Should I try for a "feminine-look" in high heels or be able to walk unimpeded? Getting advantages because of feminine role play or "becoming one of the guys"? Should there be special women's laws to counter sexist violence and, if so, how extensive should they be? Is it all right to dress a small boy in feminine-coded clothes as a political statement, in spite of the risk that he will be teased? When are we to use neutral or gendered pronouns? When should the binary sex be made visible and when should it be irrelevant? All of these choices are not always black and white, but they have to be made and each and one will either reproduce the gender power-orders or challenge them.

The dualism of man or woman

My ambivalence towards feminism is grounded in the notion that it seems to cement the woman as "the other", subordinate gender that feminism set out to liberate. As a child I had an instinctive aversion to belonging to this second sex. Not that I did not like being a girl, but because there were discordant overtones tainted by being identified by one's gender. The gaze at a woman differs from the gaze at a man. After a brief glance, and an observer categorizes you as either male or female, followed by an expectation of *what* you are (not who you are). Moreover, Eva was made out of Adam's ribs, not vice versa. Consequently, being a woman is not the starting point for what it is to be human.

This instinctive aversion meant that as an adult I sought for an intellectual solution to my problem with being seen as a woman. I thought the key to gender equality could may be found in the discourse about sex. In linguistics, gender is considered a binary noun; twofold and signifying two physical entities. Even if you are born with a chromosomal abnormality and do not fit as a man or a woman, grammar forces us to choose. You must be either male or female. But is it mandatory for humanity to be divided into two types that is also reflected in our names, personalities, fashion choices, family situations, etc.? Hardly! Other cultures permits gender divisions that are not allowed in Western culture (Barrett, 2002, s 33).

The obligatory, language-based view of sex as a binary concept implies that a woman, as a person and as a concept, is someone relative to a man. A division of this kind is called a *dichotomy*. A woman is defined in relation to what she is, that a man is not, and a man is defined in relation to what he is, but a woman is not. A dichotomy tends to lead to that one of the parties in the relationship becomes dominant, in being primary and a little better. The dichotomy thus becomes a *dualism*. In the dualism woman-man the man has the "superordinate" position and this is what constitutes patriarchy/the gender power structure.

The Western mindset is full of similar dualities. The most obvious expression of dualistic philosophy is possibly the 1600 century philosopher René Descartes' famous argument "I think, therefore I am". These few words accommodate two dualities that may seem insignificant to our understanding of feminism, but upon closer inspection, they turn out to be fundamental for any given aspect of Western thinking. For Descartes, the self is implicitly in contrast to the other, and the thought/sense is implicitly in contrast to the body. (Moon 2011). Descartes does not say, for example "we have relationships, therefore we are." Nor does he say: "I think and feel, therefore I am." (See section: Facts and values!) Two other dualistic dichotomies we will touch upon in the remaining text are "male/female" and "human/nature". For a longer discussion about further opposites, see for example Lotta Hedströms "Introduktion till ekofeminismen" from 2007.

Eco meets Queer

During my delving into green feminism, I've come up against two perspectives: ecofeminism and queer theory. Both perspectives are challenging the woman/man dualism, but from radically different perspectives. In queer theory, I found the analysis of how linguistics always favours or disadvantages different groups in society. Identity labels such as man, woman, man, mom, dad, Swedish, Indian, Finland-Swedish, Jewish, Muslim, homosexual, heterosexual, etc., are fixed in a language game of constructed differences and sometimes dichotomies. Many of these constructed differences serve power interests in society, and I cannot define myself or my reality outside these differences and dichotomies. I am, as it were, imprisoned in the linguistic structure. The true meaning of a concept always slips away when we try to define it, because the definition is relative to some other definition, which in turn is relative. (Butler 1990: 54). This is the, often misunderstood, core of post-structuralism in which queer theory belongs. It claims that there is no truth about man that can be found in the language. This does not mean that there is no truth outside language, just that we cannot take a neutral position from which we articulate this truth. ~~The one~~ ~~and~~ only thing a feminist can do, according to my reading of post structuralism, is critically examine a discourse on the basis from another discourse. And with this unsentimental conclusion, post structuralism had given me a place to rest in for the time being. People may well *believe* that I am Woman, but no one can tell the truth.

As it happens, I still rest among the post structural relativities, hiding from all sorts of would-be truth-tellers. But pretty soon after meeting with queer theory, I began to look for what is outside the discourse. Because even if concepts are mutually relative, reality is not necessarily relative. Reality is more than language, so what is it that the discourse, as it were, is leaning on? And how can we find a place in language that is neutral enough for us to be able to formulate an (green) ideology? The location from which we can say "this is right and this is wrong." "The planet is poisoned and people are abused." "Wrong!" Where do we find these values that will stop us from eradicating species and wiping out forests, raping and killing those who are weaker than ourselves?

In ecofeminism I found a willingness to take such a standpoint. It was the realization

that man's oppression of nature and other species is associated with man's oppression of women. These oppressions are part of a comprehensive, dualistic master ideology in which power relations are mutually reinforced (Hedström, 2007). Man's oppression of nature is a result of us seeing ourselves as separate from nature instead of being a part of it. The oppression of nature is intimately interwoven with the oppression of women because she is seen as closer to nature and to emotion. Along with the white man's norm, the rational mind's rule over sentiment, culture over nature, the industrialized world over developing countries in a colonial master ideology. Must this be the case? Is dualism an inevitable part of what it means to be human (Plumwood, 1993: 61)? The eco feminist Val Plumwood does not think so. Dichotomies of man / woman, man / nature, white / black, etc. can be dissolved, paving the way for a post-colonial identity. The problem, says Plumwood, is not the gender binary, the actual division into two. It is the dichotomy that is the problem. Therefore, ecofeminism does not deny that there are differences between men and women. For if we deny the differences and the *Other* only acquires a moral value to the extent that it is incorporated into the self, this remains an unresolved dualism. The Cartesian dualism (I think, therefore I am) does not lie in the distinction in itself, but in the radical separation (dichotomy) between the Self and the Other. (P. 61-63, 112, 180.162, 191). Plumwood is therefore not impressed by queer theorist Judith Butler's feminist agenda, in which parodies of gender (a play on gender roles) are assumed to be able to release mankind. If women take on androgynous and male practices and vice versa, this is just a continuation to the game played in the master ideology. Parodic identities are not independent as they are defined *in relation* to the object of the parody, which has its origins in the master ideology (Plumwood 1993 s 63).

Butler has certainly never claimed that queer identities can be independent. Her point is that parodies help to illustrate that the dominant discourse incorrectly leads us to believe that there is such a thing as the "natural". But could it be so insidious that gender parodies supports the "colonial starting point" in the same manner queer theory argues that the concept of women supports that this category stays oppressed? Is queer theory guilty of the same mistake that it tries to counter? Possibly both yes and no. The outcome of a gender parody depends on the timing of the queer practice. There is a time and place for everything. But Plumwood has pinpointed what has haunted me since I got a "queered" gaze at the world. Queer practices can be liberating, but they are not emancipation, *per se*. The queer is still imprisoned as being contrary to the convention, though imprisoned with rainbow coloured handcuffs.

The riddle of sex

With the conclusion of queer theory's ignominious shortcoming at hand, the question arises whether Plumwood's cry for a post-colonial identity could join up with my (and Butler's) search for what the discourse is "leaning" on. Butler had searched for the order of things beyond the discourse, of course. And she had defended queer theory against detractors by claiming that "the point has never been that" everything" is discursively constructed" (2011: p 7). In her book *Bodies that matter* (2011), Butler argues in line with the psychoanalytic thesis that the discourse about man-woman is structured around the psychic phallus energy. According to Butler, this energy is the ego's psychological experience of and identification with *control*. In our culture,

phallus is represented of the male genitalia, whereas control is associated with men, and women are associated with the lack thereof. To have or not to have a phallus is the starting point for the discourse of the binary sex, but it is the identification with the phallus - or lack thereof - which constructs the person's gender. Thus, the phallus is sometimes represented by women and this blurs the binary concept of sex and gender. Consider, for example, the phrase "she has balls."

Which gender a person has - how much phallus (masculinity) or little phallus (femininity) - is a psychodynamic result of the socialization in the primary family. There is no automatic binary gender related to sex, even if our cultural decoding of the child's sex is in principle binary. Sex and gender have, therefore, still little to do with each other. The binary (physical) sex is irrelevant to gender until it is loaded with psychological (phallus) energy.

True or not on the psyche's subconscious levels, Butler's phallic theory helped me barely halfway. Her search in psychoanalysis led namely to a dualistic error in the understanding of the psyche and the body. When psychic energy (phallus / control) is seen as possible to analytically separate from the body, and then have an associated correspondence in one body part (the male organ), it is a manifestation of radical distinction, a dualism. What if psyche energy cannot be separated from the body mass that harbours it? Butler's theory was too inadequate to ensure my feminist survival and I still needed to know, what is it that ultimately unites me with other women? It could not be reduced to psychic energy, neither to our body parts. Why would a vagina unite me more with some people than a union on the basis that I have the same eye colour or skin colour? I do not have, by cultural definition, more in common with blue-eyed whites than brown-eyed people of colour. But the Western culture categorization of me as Female implies that I have more in common with people with vaginas than people with penises. Is it because women have uteruses and give birth? Many women have no children, do not want children. Is it a question of sexuality, that women spend their life with and desire men? Many women do not desire men, but desire other women. Is it a matter of personal traits, such as women being more caring and sweet? Many women are passively aggressive, not at all caring. I recapitulate: the sex mystery could not be solved solely by ecofeminism but neither by queer theory.

The grammar of the body

I continued my search for the feminist subject in linguistics. A marginal part of philosophy known as *embodied linguistics* gave me a surprising idea about the solution. Embodied linguistics states that all concepts exist because they are linked to our body, "concepts only exist by virtue of being embodied in a being" (Lakoff 1987: 318). It is simply not possible to construct abstract concepts that do not have a counterpart in our bodily experience. Concepts can never be arbitrary (as post structuralism suggests), but are always motivated by a physical core. Concepts are often metaphorical and / or idealized models of reality and must be so for us to express ourselves rationally about our often-complex experiences (p. 27). We are unaware of many metaphors and they can be difficult to detect because they are composed of several layers of other metaphors. Some metaphors are original and

universal because they are part of all human experience; others are culturally conditioned and therefore interchangeable. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999)

Let's say that the conceptual pair man-woman is an idealized model of reality, to use the terminology of Lakoff and Johnson. When we use the epithet "woman", this is a generalized idea of what properties this person represents, primarily physiological, but also psychological, emotional and social. This generalized notion is a simplification of reality and does not fit all that yet are labelled "woman." Similarly, there is a non-realistic idea behind the concept of a "man". The basis for the binary model of sex must be a human experience and physical experience of a dichotomy. The experience of this dichotomy is certainly not universal, but very widespread. What then is the physical essence of this experience?

Using Butler's phallus theory - but without the dual mistake - the idea of the binary sex may be attributed to the experience of control in the encounter with the Other. A key factor to control is the body's physical size and strength. Men are in general stronger with potentially more control than women. It is an opportunity for control manifested in bodily size in comparison with other bodies. In this comparison some of us get reduced to being "the other sex" - the one with the power and control comes first. What ultimately unites women in other words, is the *potential* disadvantage. When a woman is raped or assaulted because she's a woman, she cannot say: "Stop. Sex is a social construction! Go and rape someone your own size, thanks." There's a physical reality that cannot be ignored. I depend on others to not do me wrong, even though they could, the same way that the child is dependent on adults not to misuse their power. And in the same way that nature and animals are dependent on that man does not misuse and exploits his/her power. Being a green feminist then, is to acknowledge these power asymmetries, which in principle cannot be changed because they are part of our biology. Some of us will always be stronger and others will be weaker. Those who are stronger have a responsibility to manage their power with restraint. We must admit to our own strength when we have the superior position, but also our weakness when we are under-privileged. The feminist subject is therefore obvious. Belonging to the political subject Woman is definitely not a matter of choosing identity. It is not a matter of feeling like a woman or not, considering oneself as a woman or not, behaving like a woman or not. It is a position in a power order, which is always binary. Superior or subordinate.

A postmodern interpretation: sex as adjectives and verbs and nouns

"But what about those who do not feel like either a man or a woman?" cries the queer voice. Those who are both, or neither. Or transgender? Must their experience be denied? No, not if we distinguish between gender power-relations on the one hand, and the (post-colonial) identity on the other. Sex may have an objective dimension within the collective and a subjective dimension within the individual. What this means for practical policies needs to be discussed further, but the gender discourse need not be binary if we dare to renew our language in a postmodern interpretation of grammar. Modern grammar does not allow me to both be and not be a woman at the same time. Sex can never be shades or degrees, as it is a noun. Queer theory has therefore wanted to see sex as a verb, as something you *do* (Butler 1990). But

grammar provides a third option. Adjectives behave differently from both nouns and verbs. I may be old and young at the same time, depending on whom I compare myself to. I may be tall, but maybe not as tall as you. If sex could also be an adjective, as a complement to sex as a verb in some contexts, and a noun in some contexts, could it be that my sex/gender is female, but not as much as person x, though more female than person y?

The green, feminist subject

What has feminism got to do with green ideology and what can queer theory teach a green feminist? You tell me. Green ideology cannot be dictated to others, it must be lived. Promoting political change is a piece of art. Being a woman is an even more challenging artwork and I do not know if I master it at all. I have told you about my distaste for being seen as a woman, as the "Other" sex. And that I did not understand what ultimately unites me with those other creatures who are also called women. But now I have found the feminist ground mark. For me. I have come to the conclusion that what unites me with other women is not possible to select or reject, just as I cannot choose if I want to be human, or perhaps rather a bird, fish, or in between. I am free to be a non-woman in the sense that I do not have to *define* myself as a Woman. I do not need to *feel* like a Woman. I am also free not to *behave* like a Woman. Nevertheless - this changes little the way you look at me. I do not know how to say it any clearer than that. The feminist subject is in addition **green** when we apply this power analysis on the human relationship to animals and nature. So I'm back where I started. I do not like to be seen as a woman - to be measured and tracked for short, too thin and too weak to hold the control that gives the privilege of belonging to the first sex. But I must live with it.

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