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Identity Politics and the Problem of Essentialism – the Question of Political Collectives in a Postmodern Context

RESUMÉ

Det centrale spørgsmål, der vil blive behandlet i denne artikel, er, hvorvidt det er muligt at skabe politiske fællesskaber på baggrund af en postmoderne, anti-essentialistisk ontologi. Den postmoderne kritik af essentialisme gør kategorier så som kategorien 'kvinde' dybt mistænkelige, men uden sådanne mobiliserende kategorier er kampen for ligestilling for kvinder vanskelig eller sågar umulig. Jeg analyserer Iris Marion Youngs forsøg på at løse essentialismeproblemet ved hjælp af en teori om fællesskab som serialitet. Jeg konkluderer, at Youngs teori kun formår at fremstille en forskydning af essentialismeproblemet i stedet for en reel løsning på det.

ABSTRACT

The central question that will be investigated in this article is whether or not it is possible to establish political collectives based on a postmodern, anti-essentialist ontology. The postmodern critique of essentialism makes categories such as 'woman' inherently suspicious, but without such mobilizing categories the fight for equality for women is difficult if not impossible. I will analyze Iris Marion Young's attempt to solve the problem of essentialism through a theory of the collective as seriality. My conclusion is that Young only manages to dislocate the problem of essentialism instead of providing a real solution to it.

EMNEORD

essentialisme, feministisk teori, serialitet, postmodernisme, identitetspolitik

KEYWORDS

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Introduction

Most people know the frustration of being perceived as something they are not. To be victim of a generalization on account of a physical trait or a way of behaving. One might be expected to act in a certain way or like certain things because of one's attachment to a specific social group. Many people even build their personality around trying to stand out from the group they are assumed to belong to in an attempt to be 'truly themselves'. This problem becomes all the more apparent when the social group to which one belongs is a socially suppressed or discriminated group. Then the need to stand out and prove that you are not like 'them' might be even more pressing. One might even hear it as a compliment, when someone says that 'you are not like other girls.' But why is this seen as a compliment? Because belonging to a group always entails some level of abstraction from who one is as an individual. Being seen as different can be empowering and give one a sense of self. At the same time, belonging to a group is necessary to build a sense of identity and establish one's place in the world. All people see themselves as being defined by categories, like nationality, profession, sexuality, age, gender, etc. These categories define who we are, but at the same time, they both surpass and limit our individuality.

For a collective of people to be able to engage in political action, they need to establish themselves as a group or a social collective with common goals and some form of group identity. And if the purpose of the political action is to fight for recognition and equality or against oppression on account of a common characteristic or quality shared by the group, then this need becomes even stronger. The problem of defining the feature or features that are supposedly shared by all women has been at the center of feminist discussions from the start but has taken a particularly productive turn in the last few decades. The debate can be understood as taking place between two opposed philosophical extremes, essentialism and anti-essentialism, sometimes known as social constructivism. The different advocates for the two standpoints both present strong and convincing arguments, which suggests that the (practical and theoretical) solution is to be found in a position that preserves the best of both extremes, without falling victim to the critique presented by either side. But is such a position conceivable? Post-structuralist thinker Iris Marion Young (1995)

presents a theory of the social collective that is supposed to be able to overcome the problems of essentialism and exclusion without abandoning the possibility for group action.

In this article, I will present the notion of essentialism in the context of feminist political theory and show how the notion of a 'female essence' is politically problematic. I will then go on to discuss a possible solution to the problem of essentialism, namely Iris Marion Young's concept of seriality. Finally, I will criticize this theory by arguing that it fails to solve the problem of essentialism properly, instead merely placing the problem in a different sphere.

The problem of essentialism

Postmodernism is a term that covers a lot of different thinkers and theoretical traditions, but one thing that almost all postmodern thinkers have in common is the critique of the idea of a unitary subject possessing an essence that persists over time. This criticism then translates into a skepticism against any kind of social or political group founded on such a notion, as for instance the women's movement. But why is it a problem to think of women as possessing some kind of female essence and deriving their political interests from what is essentially feminine?

First it is necessary to clarify what essentialism means and what its political implications are. Gendered essentialism is, in short, the postulation of a fixed essence which is common to all women. Diana Fuss (1990) describes essentialism as "located in appeals to a pure or original femininity, a female essence, outside the boundaries of the social and thereby untainted" (2). She then connects the idea of an ontological female essence to the political group-defining essentialism that is central to feminist politics. She writes: Essentialism "can also be read in the accounts of universal female oppression, the assumption of a totalizing symbolic system which subjugates all women everywhere, throughout history and across cultures" (2). The female essence is thought to transcend culture and time and is always inscribed in a system of gendered oppression. Such essentialist assumptions are often connected to ideas about biology and followed by a line of preconceptions about

temperament, physical appearance and psychological traits, such as empathy, patience, nurturance, etc.

In modern feminist theory, essentialism is mostly seen as a problem or an obstacle to overcome, though some feminist thinkers do defend the position that women possess a specifically female essence. This is mostly characteristic of the so-called second wave feminists and the French feminist tradition, which stresses the difference between men and women instead of mainly focusing on equality. Robin Morgan, editor of the first anthology of feminist writings *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) followed by *Sisterhood is Global* (1984) and *Sisterhood is Forever* (2003), is a strong defender of such an essentialist view of women and women's issues. In the foreword to *Sisterhood is Global*, she claims that women are inherently more peaceful, more skeptical toward technological advances and more politically impartial than men (Mohanty 1995, 73). From these characteristics, she argues that women would be better political leaders than men and should therefore have more influence in politics. This is an argument built on the assumption of a female essence.

An essentialist approach to feminist theory does have some advantages but leads to several problems. Among the advantages is its ability to create a social collective that is easy to mobilize, assuming that people feel that they can relate to the attributes that are said to be typically female. Essentialism can thereby be very empowering and help suppressed groups claim their own identity, sometimes even stretching so far as to reclaim oppressive and sexist terms, as is the case with the so-called 'SlutWalk' movement. Showing how women may be different from men also helps to reveal how a lot of things are already gendered but from a male perspective. By asserting a female essence, it can become possible to create an alternative to the male perspective that presents a more accurate representation of female experience.

On the other hand, an essentialist feminist theory causes a lot of problems. One problem is the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Claiming some quality or another to be typically feminine mostly reproduces and generalizes misconceptions about women and are often directly sexist. An example is the stereotype that women are more nurturing and caring than men which roughly translates into the assumption that women should be the principle caregivers and if possible stay-at-home mothers. A second problem concerning essentialism is that it is often founded on a blind generalization of the experiences of

women from privileged backgrounds (Grillo 2013, 19). This can be explained as being caused by an attempt to isolate the 'gender'-part of oppression by subtracting forms of oppression referring to race, sexuality or social background. The result is that the "neutral" female experience becomes that of white, heterosexual woman from the Global North because they are perceived as being "without race" rather than as white (19).[1] Thirdly, essentialism can lead to the exclusion of women who for some reason do not possess the qualities belonging to the essentialized category 'woman'. This is particularly clear in the case of transgender-women who are often left out of feminist struggle because they are believed to lack certain female traits or because they might express gender in a non-binary fashion. Transfeminism is anti-essentialist in the sense that it maintains that "those who do not fit neatly into one sex/gender/gender expression category or another can still feel as though they belong inside a gender identity and expression continuum that is not confined within the binary" (Sennott 2011, 103).

In the history of philosophy, essentialism has been contested from various sides. Chantal Mouffe (2005, 75-77) mentions three central philosophical traditions that are all anti-essentialist and have in different ways inspired postmodern thinkers, namely the Freudian psychoanalysis, philosophy of language following Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gadamer's hermeneutics. Existentialism is another philosophical tradition that could be added to the mix. In *Existentialism is a humanism* (2007), Jean-Paul Sartre writes that "existence precedes essence" (20), which, in short, means that first people exist and then they create and define their essence through their actions. All of these theories of the subject and its place in the world determines identity as constructed, socially positioned, internally conflicted, fluid and to some extent unknown to us. This is the philosophical foundation of most postmodern political thinkers. But what does this mean for the construction of social categories and groups?

Groups founded on shared identities, such as the Black Panthers, Femen, RAWA,[2] etc. are all organized around identifying characteristics (race, gender, nationality) but only around *parts* of people's identities. The Combahee River

[1] An example of this criticism can be found in the feminist classic *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) by bell hooks.

[2] Abbreviation for the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan.

Collective, a black feminist, lesbian group from Boston (1974-1980) were united because they did not feel represented in either the black civil rights movement or the women's movement. They felt they needed a group that represented more sides of their identities. All identities belong to several categories and in every group there will be conflict on account of the non-represented sides of the member's identities. In the case of the Black Panther Party, the experiences of the women in the party were different from that of the men, causing internal division and disunity.

So considering these problems of essentialism, it seems that the most rational thing would be to abandon any attempt to unify people under social categories because no social category or group seems to be able to properly represent all the interests of its members. But discarding the term 'woman' as a social category also entails a lot of problems, as mentioned above. Iris Marion Young recognizes this as the dilemma of feminist politics. In her article *Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective*, she expresses the dilemma thus:

> On the one hand, without some sense in which 'woman' is the name of a social collective, there is nothing specific to feminist politics. On the other hand, any effort to identify the attributes of that collective appears to undermine feminist politics by leaving out some women whom feminists ought to include. (188)

If women can in no way be thought of as a social collective, then feminist politics seems to have no subject. This means that they cannot claim to fight for the interests of anyone and thus become powerless. However, any attempt to define the political subject of feminist politics appears to force one into making a list of attributes that characterize women which entails asserting that women possess a certain essence. Is there no getting rid of this dilemma? Is feminist politics inherently essentialist?

A postmodern approach to group identity

Classic identity politics seem to be weakened by the problem of essentialism. The postmodern feminist tradition, which is built on the writings of post-

structural and deconstructionist thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, has more than any other tradition been the focal point of this criticism. But is it possible to establish a new theory of the collective and still stay true to this fluid and anti-hegemonic way of thinking and criticizing? A handful of feminist thinkers have tried. In the following, I will present what I perceive to be one of the most promising and interesting attempts to develop an anti-essential theory of social collectives, namely the theory of seriality developed by Young.

Gender as seriality

Young insists that it is crucial for feminist political action to be able to establish some sort of political collective under the name 'women', but proposes a very different way of thinking about collectives than what we are used to. She draws her inspiration from Sartre and his description of what he calls 'seriality', which is found in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* from 1976. Sartre originally used the term to explain what was unifying the working class as a social collective even though the working class consisted of so many different people and social groups. However, Young finds that the concept is helpful in thinking about women as well. She writes: "Such a way of thinking about women, I will argue, allows us to see women as a collective without identifying common attributes that all women have or implying that all women have a common identity" (1995, 188). Young sees the concept of seriality as a way to escape the essentialism of identity politics without abandoning social collectives altogether. But first she identifies the specific points of anti-essentialist thinkers that will have to be considered in the reconceptualization of the social collective.

Three problems when thinking about women as a social collective

Young starts off her argument for the anti-essentialist rethinking of social groups with a series of statements that aim to leave any notion of a general category of women behind. The purpose of this list is to show the features that will have to be compatible with a new theory of the social collective and the problems which such a theory will have to overcome. The first statement on the

list is championed by Elizabeth Spelman who points to "the mistake in any attempt to isolate gender from identities, such as race, class, age, sexuality, and ethnicity to uncover the attributes, experiences, or oppressions that women have in common" (Young 1995, 188). It is, according to both Spelman and Young, impossible to distinguish the "women part" of any identity, because other identity-building categories influence and meddle with the experience of being a woman. The position that Spelman takes is that "the categories according to which people are identified as the same or different […] are social constructs that reflect no natures or essences" (189). But how are these categories constructed? The answer is: by power relations of privilege and subordination. Because of their privileged position, white middle-class women have had a monopoly on defining 'women' as a group and on describing the misogyny that this group experiences. The experiences of less privileged and suppressed groups of women (such as black, elderly or Muslim women) is thus thought of as 'different' from the norm and, therefore, not relevant in a struggle focusing specifically on feminist issues (189).

The second feminist scholar to be mentioned is Chandra Talpade Mohanty. The point that Young extracts from the writings of Mohanty is how the notion of a single, congruent category of 'women' tends to "regard all women as equally powerless and oppressed victims" (1995, 189). Instead of empirically investigating the conditions of women worldwide, questioning exactly why *these* women suffer and how, theories and studies tend to be underdetermined "finding oppression a priori" (189). This is especially damaging to the women in the Global South, whose struggles for emancipation are overlooked and misunderstood because their cultural backgrounds are misinterpreted, their goals and desires supposedly being the same as those of women in the Global North.

Judith Butler is the last representative of the new theoretic foundation being developed in this text. Butler's writings draw explicitly on postmodern thought, deconstructivism in particular, to conceptually and ontologically unfold the gender-category, discursively as well as biologically. She argues that "the idea of gender identity and the attempt to describe it has a normalizing power" (190). This power consists of two elements: it devalues and alienates some gender identities by posing others as normal and therefore morally superior; at the same time, normalization hides the constructive character of

gender identity, presuming that some genders are 'natural'. This normalization happens in a heterosexual discourse, which is sharply criticized by Butler. This means that the notion of gender mirrors the idea of a biological sex, separating the gender spectrum into two. Any unity of experience that would provide the foundation for a feminist politics would, according to Butler, necessitate the confirmation of heteronormativity. The challenge that feminist theory takes up is to expose the historical and scientific construction of gender and consistently fight to keep this category open and fluid (190).

To summarize, the points that have been listed as starting points and problems concerning the construction of a feminist collective are as follows: 1) Categories are social constructs created as a means of exerting power over certain groups in society that are perceived to be 'different', 2) women are victimized and misinterpreted through the idea of a collective identity, and 3) the socially constructed category 'woman' has a normalizing effect which forces human beings into a conceptual structure where gender is defined by a heterosexual notion of a biological sex.

These are some of the main problems facing any theory of a social collective built on the concept of 'women'. The critical content of these theories is convincing and worth taking on board, but should this discourage women and other suppressed groups from taking political action and fighting for their rights? Young writes:

> These analyses are powerful and accurate. They identify ways that essentializing assumptions and the point of view of privileged women dominate much feminist discourse, even when it tries to avoid such hegemonic moves. […] But I find the exclusively critical orientation of such arguments rather paralyzing. Do these arguments imply that it makes no sense and is morally wrong ever to talk about women as a group or, in fact, to talk about social groups at all? It is not clear that these writers claim this. If not, then what can it mean to use the term *woman?* (191)

Young argues that it is necessary to look at the positive outcomes and insights that have arisen from these seemingly purely critical theories and, with the awareness of this critical tradition, build a postmodern theory of the collective.

The theory of seriality

Young's theory of the social collective is, as already mentioned, founded on Sartre's analysis of the social phenomenon called 'series' (197). But what should be understood by seriality and how does Young apply this theory to feminist politics? First, it is important to understand the distinction between seriality and the notion of a group. Young defines a group thus: "A group is a collection of persons who recognize themselves and one another as in a unified relation with one another" (197). This means that being in a group relies on an element of self-identification and is a conscious choice. One only belongs to groups that one is aware of and of which one would consider oneself to be a member. Being a member means to "mutually acknowledge that together they undertake a common project. Members of the group, that is, are united by action that they undertake together" (198). The group is, according to Young, always focused on some common practical goal, which can be expressed in a statement, contract or pledge. Many of the actions performed in an individual's life are made possible by groups and achieved by groups, but people are not always active in one or more groups, as "groups arise from and often fall back into a less organized and unselfconscious collective unity, which [Sartre] calls a series" (199).

This means that a series is not built on a mutual understanding of a common purpose; the individuals in the series might not even be consciously aware of the meaning of their collective. But what then does positively define the series? According to Young:

> [A] series is a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented […] In everyday life we often experience ourselves and others impersonally, as participating in amorphous collectives defined by routine practices and habits. (199)

The series is *materially* defined by the coincidental sameness of individual needs, schedules, customs and choices. This is best exemplified by the bus example posited by Sartre. Waiting for a bus is a version of a series. The people waiting have a material object (the bus) in common, and they all follow the

'rules' of waiting for the bus. They might even relate to each other in this situation, noticing that an elderly citizen might need help getting on the bus or another member of the series might have questions about the route of the bus. All interaction in one way or another pertains to the material circumstances of waiting for a bus. This does not, however, define them as human beings: "Their actions and goals may be different, and they have nothing necessarily in common in their histories, experiences, or identity" (199). Some might ride the bus because of financial reasons (they might not be able to afford a car), some for political reasons (they might support public transport) and some for circumstantial reasons (their car might have broken down this morning), which means that the series can consist of people of various classes, genders, ethnicities, etc., but in this case they are all coming together in waiting for the bus. In the event that a material problem arises, they may transform into a group: "The latent potential of this series to organize itself as a group will become manifest, however, if the bus fails to come" (199). The material problem might encourage them to act as a group by e.g. calling the bus company or maybe sharing a taxi. This discontent might possibly motivate broader political action in the form of a movement, were the problem severe enough. The main point of the series is that the individual is a part of this collective, not on account of what makes them particular, but because of what they have in common or what makes them anonymous. Sartre describes this as seeing oneself as an 'Other' (201). People in the series are interchangeable (in their function as passengers on a bus) though not identical:

> Membership in a serial collective defines an individual's being, in a sense – one "is" a farmer, or a commuter, or a radio listener, and so on, together in series with other similarly positioned. But the definition is anonymous, and the unity of the series is amorphous, without determinate limits, attributes, or intentions. (Young 1995, 201)

The concept of seriality aims at defining these impersonal collectives, which have no solid borders, defining who is "in and out" on account of some necessary characteristic or trait common to the members of the collective. The collective, nonetheless, plays a role in creating our practical and material everyday life. It is not important in this context how often one takes the bus or how well you know the timetable of the bus, only that the bus is a material object which brings people together. In short, a series is an impersonal,

contingent connection between a collective of people gathered around a material object, each with their own agendas and identities, and each perceiving each other and themselves as an anonymous 'Other'.

What are the advantages of thinking of women as a social series?

Now, one might ask: But what does this have to do with women? How does seriality work to describe women as a collective? And how does this notion of seriality avoid the problems and criticisms posed above by Spelman, Mohanty and Butler? Sartre uses the concept of seriality to analyze the meaning of social classes. This allows him to describe a side of class reality that is different from class consciousness, namely class as the "historical and materialized background to individual lives" (202). Being born into a class means being born with a certain context: a set of power relations which precede the individual and which condition and constrain their options for action. Seriality explains the environment or milieu that "serves as a prereflective background to action" (203). It concerns the structural backdrop of different lives, which is mostly taken for granted. The same is true of gender, when Young uses seriality to identify how women can theoretically be seen as a collective. Young writes: "*Women* are the individuals who are positioned as feminine by the activities surrounding those structures and objects" (203). But what kind of material objects construct the female series?

The "structures and objects" that Young considers define the series that women belong to are for instance: 1) the female body and objects associated with it, 2) pronouns, 3) some artifacts, such as clothes and cosmetics 4) and, to some degree, public spaces (the women's bathroom, women-only mosques, all-girls schools, etc.) (203-5). These structures and objects are, as already mentioned, *not* thought of as identity-creating features, but rather as the backdrop and the props that signify gender in a given society. I will briefly look more closely at the gendered objects listed above. Most prominent perhaps is the notion of some sort of common experience tied to the female body because this seems to be exactly the kind of biological essentialism that has been criticized by Butler. However, Young does not argue that the physical, biological body in itself constitutes the series to which women belong but rather the female body as a

rule-bound object "with understood meanings and possibilities" (204). She mentions menstruation as an example of a process that is not only biological, but also associated with social rules and material objects thereby defining a part of the living space within which women live and act. Even though no woman is defined by needing tampons, this is an object that serializes women to some degree. The need for hygiene products has also historically led women to unite in groups fighting for the removal of taxation from these products or for free and universal access to feminine hygiene products. It is important to stress that menstruation is not being ascribed as an attribute to womanhood or a necessary condition thereof, but as one open series among many that women take part in[3] This is especially important when we consider the possibility of transwomen's participation in feminist struggles. Every struggle is different and is dependent on the specific material circumstances and structures that unite the particular series. The structure that characterizes this particular series is heterosexuality, meaning the binary separation of people into male and female as well as some biological characteristics that are often associated with heterosexuality. Young writes: "The structure of the social body defining these bodily practices, however, is enforced heterosexuality. The meanings, rules, practices, and assumptions of institutionalized heterosexuality constitute the series, women, as in a relation of potential appropriation by men" (204). This structure is enforced by other items on the list, such as (2) pronouns that divide people into 'he' and 'she', and (3) gendered artifacts, such as dresses and high heels. These were some examples of how the concept of seriality can be used to talk about women as a social collective. The collective is founded not on what makes people who they are, but on one anonymous category that shapes and limits their life. Young writes that to say:

> 'I am a woman' at this level is an anonymous fact that does not define me in my active individuality. It means that I check one box rather than another on my driver's license application, that I use maxipads, wear pumps […]. As I utter the phrase, I experience a

[3] Another theory that poses a similar open solution to the problem of essentialized groups is the Wittgensteinian notion of 'family resemblance' as a foundation for the formation of social collectives. This theory has also been applied by feminist thinkers. For more on this see Chantal Mouffe (2005, 78) and Linda Nicholson (1995, 60).

> serial interchangeability between myself and others. (206)

This interchangeability is, according to Young, what makes it possible to put oneself in someone else's shoes and maybe even fight for rights that one does not directly benefit from. Any social category describes an anonymous part of one's personality that one shares with the rest of the group but that, at the same time, is an intimate part of oneself.

Now the question arises as to whether the idea of seriality is capable of avoiding the problems posed by the afore-mentioned anti-essentialists. First off is Elizabeth Spelman. Young agrees with Spelman in thinking that categories are both constructed and a means of power, but rather than therefore abandoning any categorical thinking whatsoever, Young treats this as a condition of life. Human beings live within structures and these structures or series are sometimes suppressive, but they allow us to relate to one another and also to organize and fight against unfairness in society. When it comes to the point that Spelman makes, namely that it is impossible to separate the 'women-part' of human experience, Young seems to change the focus of the discussion. Instead of trying to define which part of one's identity is primarily female (as opposed to, for example, Jewish, Latino or working-class), she asks which practices and objects dictate one's everyday life and how they are inherently gendered. I will discuss in the next section whether or not this poses a solution to the problem of essentialism or merely displaces it.

In relation to Chandra T. Mohanty's claim that essentialist thinking victimizes women and fails to understand fundamental cultural differences, the concept of seriality seems to be rather neutral. This neutrality, I would argue, is maybe one of its strongest features. It does not directly suppose any attributes or characteristics to be female, but is instead an empty concept that has to be filled by the empirical reality. Though Young claims that all people who identify as women somehow belong to the series 'women', the *groups* of women that emanate from this series "are usually more socially, historically, and culturally specified than simply women" (210). Political groups often arise from more specific, local problems and are therefore not merely built on the obstacles of gendered life but also situated around religious, financial or ideological conflicts. As far as I can tell, there is nothing victimizing about Young's use of the concept of seriality. The concept is merely supposed to describe the circumstantial background that makes up the material reality of women's lives.

Only when these circumstances are politically activated (in the formation of groups) is it possible to speak of victims and oppressors. If, for instance, a gendered object such as a bra is seen to be a sign of oppression to some women who might feel pressured into wearing it in order to conform to a sexist beauty standard, the series of people who wear bras might choose to mobilize. This turns them into a group: for example, a group with a political agenda who perform political actions like publically burning bras in the fight against unrealistic body images. In this case, bra-wearing women will be the victims of an oppressive patriarchy that tells them how they ought to look. But until the bra has been politicized, it is just an everyday object that connects the people who wear it through a set of experiences (e.g. a feeling of discomfort or the experience of having to pay 50 dollars for a piece of underwear).

Butler criticized the normalizing tendency of proclaiming a female essence as the center of a female social collective.[4] Again, this appears to be something that Young sees as inevitable. Much like Butler, Young describes how heterosexuality and heteronormativity shape the lives of women and men differently, but where Butler's response is theoretical, (deconstructing gendered stereotypes and categories into scientific and social discourses) Young's response is more practical. All structures are normative and normalizing in some way or another, but it is only 'when the bus breaks down' that this becomes a problem for us (which arguably happens more frequently for people belonging to female series than most male ones). Until this point is reached, the categories are nothing more than constructed facts, shaping reality.

Critique of Young's theory of seriality

Several problems arise in accepting seriality as a way of conceptualizing women as a social collective, but I will only mention one, which is especially relevant to this analysis, given that it has to do with the problem of essentialism.

[4] To sum up Butler's critique, her central point is that any essentialized notion of the gender identity 'woman' will have a normalizing effect, which means that it will 1) devalue alternative gender identities by presenting one interpretation of 'woman' as normal and 2) it hides the fact that gender is constructed by presenting some genders as 'natural.'

The question was briefly touched upon in the previous section and can be phrased as follows: Does the theory of seriality shift the focus from assuming the existence of a shared female identity to essentializing feminine objects? Young repeatedly rejects the idea that women have something in common on account of their similar biology or some sort of typical feminine way of behaving or thinking, but she seemingly finds it unproblematic to characterize certain objects as being feminine. But how do we define which material objects are relevant to feminist politics? Is it birth control pills, tampons and fashion items? Why not chainsaws, footballs and beer? One has to ask oneself: what makes these objects particularly feminine if not their relation to a gendered body? Does Young not have to assume a stereotypical essence of femininity that is represented though these objects? If so, what we have is a vicious circle because a conception of 'women' is needed prior to defining the objects that can be characterized as female. But those objects were supposed to be the basis on which the category of 'women' was to be established. This seems to me to be a mere displacement of the problem of essentialism.

On another note, one of the main political problems of essentialism was the risk of leaving someone out of the social collective who considers herself a woman. Is this problem solved by thinking of women as a seriality? I would say, not really. The openness of the idea of seriality makes it possible to imagine that no one is left out, that everyone who considers themselves women to some degree take part in at least one series that could be characterized as female (no matter how this is to be defined). But what use is this concept if it is not limited in any way at all? It is far more probable that many people who do not consider themselves to be women find themselves belonging to a series that is stereotypically 'feminine'. Cosmetics, for instance, are to Young objects that serialize people as women, but surely she would not think that anyone wearing makeup necessarily belongs to the social collective 'women'. The concept of seriality seems to only positively define who could belong to the category 'women' without ever saying how this category is limited. The concept does not only struggle with the theoretical issue of not being able to avoid essentialism, it is also hard to see the practical application of a collective that seems to have no borders.

Conclusion

I have set out to examine a postmodern way of conceptualizing the social collective of women, which provides the foundation for feminist politics, in the hopes of finding a theory that maintains the practical applicability and organizational strength of traditional, essentialist identity politics. This means a theory that does not define women as possessing a specific set of attributes or qualities, but which can still be used to fight for women's shared interests, assuming that there are any. Iris Marion Young revitalized the concept of seriality originally presented by Sartre as a means to talk about women as a social collective. The series is, in short, an impersonal, contingent connection between a collective of people gathered around a material object or structure. This material object or structure does not define the members of the series as individuals, but rather points to an anonymous side of them that they share with the other members of the series. The series can evolve into a group in the event that some common goal is established. The point of thinking about women as a series is to try to define the passive collective of people that feminist politics refers to when they fight for women's interests. The materiality that ties women together in a series is the existence of gendered objects and structures. This means that belonging to the category 'woman' no longer relies on a set of attributes or qualities that each person in that category shares. Even though this de-essentializes the individuals belonging to a series, it seems merely to replace the essentialized woman with essentialized feminine objects that are ultimately determined by their connection to some pre-existing notion of 'woman'. The question then arises: what makes these objects inherently feminine if not the idea of a female essence?

To conclude, even though the theory has successfully avoided ascribing any specific attributes or characteristics to individuals who see themselves as female, it still relies on the assertion of such attributes or definitions in the sphere of material objects in order to establish a social collective. For Young, the material objects or materialized structures would have to be collectively determined as female for feminist groups to form around them. In my view, this means that this approach has not successfully solved the problem of essentialism, as it allows for, or even necessitates, the reproduction of standard notions of femininity.

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