

Essentialism versus Constructivism : Or Who has the Power ?

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As criticism against the Enlightenment ideas that women were inherently inferior to men, Mary Wollstonecraft proclaimed 'If you give women the rights of men, she will also develop the virtues of men'. As a criticism to the early 20th century ideas of women as natural mothers, home-makers and hysterics, Simone de Beauvoir proclaimed that 'one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman'. What neither Mary nor Simone knew was that they positioned themselves in what later would become one of the most heated debates of contemporary feminisms : Does being a woman mean that we are essentially different from men (biological essentialism) or are the differences between women and men a cultural invention (social constructivism) ? That is, does nature make women into women or is it culture that forces women into their women's costumes ?



In the 1980s the debate between essentialism and social constructivism was debated between so-called 'cultural feminists' and 'radical feminists'. Cultural and radical feminists agreed that the world as we know it is patriarchal, but they disagreed on the reasons behind patriarchy : cultural feminists argued that women were essentially different from men and that women's superior capacities of care and nurturing were not duly respected in context of power and politics. Radical feminists argued that women and men were the same, but that men had managed to force women into a situation of inferiority with the help of sexuality and reproduction.

In the 1990s the essentialism versus constructivism debate seemed to have been won by the social constructivism. That is, radical feminists – reinvented as postmodernist or social constructivists – managed to reduce what is viewed as natural/nature/biology/sex to a package of meat and bones with a hole (woman) or a stick (man), while everything else, our emotions, interests, capabilities were proclaimed socially construed and called gender.



The nature/biology/sex and culture/gender debate had a considerable effect on the early 21st century academic discussions about the feminist subject. The predominantly postmodernist debates about feminist subjectivity seemed to force many feminists into a dilemma : either you decided that individual women could become anything within the limits of her cultural context, but this made feminists sound almost like the neo-liberalists that they hated. Or, you decided that women needed to move beyond what was offered as the highest values of our culture (independent, successful, beautiful and rich) and this forced feminists to seek answers in what previous generations of women had viewed as women's essence (relationality, caring and mothering).

Feminists who have succeeded in natural sciences (there continue to be too few of them) have all along argued that there are some differences between women and men, that it is naïve to reduce the differences of 'sex' to a 'hole' or a 'stick', but that while we are becoming better at scientifically identifying differences we continue reading them through our culture, through our socially construed worldviews. The post-9/11 conflicts and the War on Terror have turned some radical and postmodern feminists back towards essentialism : It is men and men's culture that started the war on terror. Hence, there must be inherent differences between women and men, because women are just not capable of such stupidity ?

Hence, post-9/11 and post third world feminist challenges, cultural feminism seems to have a revival in Western feminism, answers are again sought in nature/biology/sex and in the essential differences of the sexes. The revival is coupled with a revival of docile and submissive femininity and in a glorification of mothering. However, the basic question remains : Who has the power ?