

Radical Feminist Conference 2012 – Radically Limited?



In this post, Sarah Burton explores the radical feminist stance of the RadFem 2012 conference organizers in relation to the term ‘women born women living as women’. She considers if indeed it is possible to neatly and clearly delineate the word ‘woman’ and argues that binary and static notions of identity categories obscures the real, tangible ways in which ordinary actors relate to their environment.

How do you construct or define the term ‘woman’? The decision of the organizers of the **Radical Feminist 2012 conference** to limit participation to ‘women born women living as women’ has resulted in heated debate around this very question.



Radical Feminist
Conference Logo
2012

It seems that after nearly a century of feminist activism and thought there still lacks convergence regarding what we mean when we employ such a label. The debate here is complex: it stretches its tentacles far and wide into questions of identity, how it is constructed or defined, as well as divergent interpretations of what feminism is, of whether it is a plural or single discourse, of who gets to be included in that discourse and what we mean when we use certain terms. The focus here is on the notion of gender identity: is it set – and if so how? Or is it constructed – something malleable, performed, fluid? Can one define oneself as a woman or is it all biology? There is a distinct need for identity to be mutable and to acknowledge that conceptions of individual autonomy and agency are greatly impacted by scenarios in which identity is fixed. Predicating understanding of identity on binary categories is enticing: it is clean, simple, neat. But it obscures the real, tangible ways in which ordinary actors relate to their environment.

Before embarking it is necessary to set out some terms of reference. In the scholarship there is still frequent divergence regarding the usage of the words ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. Here I use ‘sex’ to refer to a biological category of genital differentiation and ‘gender’ to refer to the culturally-mediated identity ascribed to a particular biological sex. This may be an inadequate representation of the intricacy of sex and gender identity, but it allows a certain clarity of expression and intention necessary for this analysis.

‘One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman’

Throughout the RadFem 2012 conference literature the organizers repeatedly refer to ‘women’s lived experience’ whilst simultaneously insisting that one must be born female in order to be classified as a woman and thus able to attend the conference. The strong implication of reference to ‘lived experience’ is that it is in the performance of everyday life that one ‘experiences’ being a woman and moreover, that part of being a woman is the quotidian practice of living as a woman – it seems anachronistic that privilege is consistently then placed on biology. The conference literature also focuses on a male-female binary and frequently speaks of the oppression of women via male-dominated structures of society and of male violence. However, the literature concomitantly lacks any acknowledgement that it is the ‘lived experience’ of being a woman – practicing as and being perceived as a woman – which would place one in a position to experience said oppression, rather than the biological fact of one’s reproductive system. By making specific and repeated recourse to the problems faced in everyday life by women living as women, the conference organizers leave themselves open to challenge in regards to their assertion that women/attendees must have female biology (‘born women’) in order to be considered women.



Anatomy may not be destiny, but the belief that it is moulds most lives

One way in which the organizers of the Radical Feminism 2012 conference attempt to make sound their definition of 'woman' is through linguistic slippage, so that 'woman' is elided with the term 'female'. Although Butler (1993) recognizes that the term 'female' is now 'as troubled and unfixed as "woman"' (ix), there is far more consensus in its linguistic usage to mean the biological category of identity characterized by a certain genetic code and presence of particular reproductive organs. The usage of 'woman' however is often more complex and implies not only the presentation of a female body but also of certain behaviour and appearance associated not simply with being female but also with being feminine.

By conflating the terms the conference organizers make a clear attempt to fix female identity as a binary: a woman is born with certain biology and then lives and acts according to that biology. Taking this position demonstrates a rebuttal of the concept of identity as fluid – as something which is lived, performed or experienced, and is not only at odds with much feminist theory (cf. Gillis and Munford, 2004; Foucault, 1976; Bordo, 1993, Haraway, 1991). It is also at odds with much of queer, gender, race and postmodern studies.–Additionally it is contradictory in regards to their own repeated reference to the 'lived experience' of women.

The problematic conjured by this linguistic slippage does not just refer to the fuzzy logic it permits, but also to the binary it invokes that allows identity to be fixed, clearly categorized and demarcated. This process of demarcation thus instils these categories of identity as constructs which have power over the individual rather than being assimilated into an individual's autonomous power to act or exist in a chosen manner .

You can't mistake my biology

To define 'woman' as a category of identity predicated upon specific biological attributes is problematic. It relies on essentialist notions of identity – i.e. those theories which regard 'identity categories as unproblematically representing aetiological characteristics of persons' (Waites, 2005: 541). Given that the fixity of categories of identity has been so frequently challenged, the discourses surrounding the RadFem 2012 conference reliance on biology seems to dismiss not only strong intellectual arguments but the place of purposive individual agency. It ignores advances made in medicine and the law which allow both for the physical alteration of the body to conform to external markers of another sex and also the right to be legally recognized as another sex than that of one's birth. UK law, for instance, allows for the provision of a new birth certificate upon completion of gender reassignment and makes reference to the subject's 'acquired gender'. Clearly then, in terms of medicine, the law and the cultural practice of performance or 'lived experience', sex and gender are malleable: the assignation of sex at birth does not necessarily denote the sex or gender in which a person lives; anatomy does not have to equal destiny. Undoubtedly there are wide-ranging implications in 'choosing' to live in a different sex/gender to that allocated at birth, but the salient point remains, that there is evident provision for doing so.

A sex-gender binary is also problematic given who we leave out in subscribing to it. Excluded are; those who are living in a gender different to the one assigned at birth, those who have surgically altered their body to acquire a different gender, and those who were born intersex and have genetic markers and physical features of both genders. That these are people, who are at greater risk of being marginalised by hegemonic power given that they are already inadequately represented by normative categories of sex and gender identity, surely makes it even more essential to conceptualise identity in inclusive and plural ways. Relying on a sex-gender binary in which these terms are conflated and simplistic views are taken regarding categories of sex and/or gender identity is plainly insufficient in contemporary society as it is blind to the multiple ways in which an individual experiences their body and their self.

What is crucial to recognize here is that identities do not operate in isolation: we are sculpted, shaped by our surroundings, the external forces of perception and denotation of identity that act upon us. This does not only occur in terms of sex or gender. One is never simple male/female, man/woman – one also has a national identity, age, race, ethnicity, socio-economic group, religion and so on. The fact that categories of identity themselves are so manifold points towards the need for interpretations of these categories as fluid, plural, multiple. Continuing to disregard the unstable and supple potential of categories of identity- including sex and gender identity – is hazardous. Doing so places us in the precarious position of theorizing emancipation from a perspective which is at best, tenuous, and at worse, false. In order to fully conceptualize a coherent account of identity we must be cognizant of the multiple and shifting ways in which individuals relate to the social. Not to do so risks blinding ourselves to emancipatory understandings of our own subjectivity.

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Please also see a previous post “[Women born women](#)” for more on this topic.

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