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## GENEALOGY OF *GENDER* THEORY? GENEALOGY OF *GENDER* PRACTISE?

### Introduction

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The issue of how gender theories effect gender practices is one of the most challenging and important issues for gender theorists, even more for somebody like me as a philosopher who is mostly concerned with theory and indeed somehow “limited” to the academic discourse. In this respect one could ask, for example, what the new feminist movement FEMEN, founded in the Ukraine 2008, tells us about the contemporary relation of feminist theory and feminist practice. They describe themselves as a “scandal famous organization of topless activists, who defend with their breast sexual and social equality in the world.”<sup>1</sup> FEMEN activists believe that theory does not have the wanted effect on the public media, therefore they count on and trust in their breast activism—their “extreme topless campaigns of direct action”<sup>2</sup>—and wish to become the greatest feminist political movement in the world.

The debate “theory vs. practice,” or “academic vs. public” has a long tradition. However, I am not sure at all if, for example, a sharp distinction between

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1 <http://femen.org/en/about> (accessed October 11, 2012).

2 Ibid.

the “academic sphere” on the one hand and the so-called “public sphere” on the other can or shall be drawn. Rather, I believe that academic institutions themselves are public places and therefore not so much separated from the public, and there is always already practice within the academic field. Put differently, there is not just theory on the side of academic institutions and practice on the side of the public sphere, but there is some theory in practice and some practice in theory, and both spheres are intrinsically interwoven. As for example, philosophical theories are made by concrete genders, teaching is teaching as a certain gender, and in a certain practical way, and to certain genders. Even language is gendered and scientific texts are not without genderness, even if they were produced under the neglect of requested gender sensibility and gender justice. Also FEMEN’s activism is not simply activism, it is based on the insight, that world-wide gender equality will become possible only if feminism is world-wide recognized by public media, and FEMEN activists are driven by fundamental feminist and political demands.

In this essay, I will focus on the second idea, on the practice in theory, means: within academic discourses. I am mainly concerned with the question of how the practice of studying and teaching gender studies, feminist philosophy in particular, has changed during the last 15 to 20 years, and how—for reasons I will outline at the beginning—the theorizing itself has changed since the inauguration of gender research in Europe.

What I will present results primarily from personal experiences, means, from my long-lasting teaching experience at the University of Vienna and other Austrian universities as well as in Germany and in the Netherlands and from my teaching experience in the United States and from several conferences I participated here and there. I am aware that probably my considerations cannot be universalized and will perhaps deviate from other experiences from other contexts (other experiences within the same context not excluded). Methodologically, I will first turn towards theory, in particular to feminist theory and gender studies, as they were established in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until the 1990s.

In my opinion, the history of modern gender studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century presents itself as the history of increasingly differentiating and entirely divergent gen-

der theories, as if an existing theory has always been replaced by an other, better and more advanced theory, so that we can also speak of a genealogy of gender theory, one could also say: evolution of gender theory, from a very first feminism to a more and more complex and differentiated feminist theory, whereas one always replaces the former. They present themselves, in a way, as a history of genealogical or evolutionary progression.

In order to demonstrate this kind of “genealogy” I will turn towards feminist philosophy and philosophical gender studies and present a short characterization of three influential feminist philosophers or gender theorists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, who count as the main representatives in their field. Each of them has developed her own theoretical approach with respect to gendered experience, sexual difference and gender construction in order to promote an adequate feminist understanding and criticisms of their times.

### **Feminist Philosophies of Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler**

Simone de Beauvoir counts as the main representative of the so-called existentialist feminism and as one of the most prominent theoretical agents for equality feminism. Luce Irigaray is regarded as the founder of the so-called difference feminism. Finally, Judith Butler is well known for her poststructuralist feminism. Their theories follow a certain Leitfaden (i.e., guideline, guiding principle). Beauvoir’s Leitfaden is the notion of “existence.” In her seminal work *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir has described “women” from the perspective of their concrete existence. In detail she has, for example, described female body experiences such as pregnancy, childbirth, female sexuality, etc., as nobody else has done this before. Beauvoir argued that “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman”<sup>3</sup> and that no biological, psychic or economic destiny defines her. She is made a woman, and takes over certain gender roles typical for a woman of her time,

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3 Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Thurman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2010, p. 283.

mainly through education and socialization. Moreover, women are made to be the “second” sex, following men as the “first sex” among the human sexes. Due to her second place in the order of gender and the consequences that resulted from such subordination, Beauvoir strictly argued for gender equality—whereas equality in her case means women shall be equal to men or equally treated like men. It is exactly this, her claim for equality that, in the following, has become the main subject of criticism from critics of gender equality—first and foremost from Luce Irigaray. She claimed that equality feminism is the wrong way and therefore needs to be replaced by another feminist approach.

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Luce Irigaray is not so much concerned with describing concrete female experiences and the complete characterization of female existence but with the establishment of a radical sexual difference. Contrary to Beauvoir, she claims that we do not need equality but difference because sexual difference actually does not yet exist in a world that is fully shaped by men. Consequently, she disregards equality demands in favor of thinking of difference and, as she calls it, a “culture of difference.” In her main essay, *Speculum*, originally published in 1974, she argues that, strictly speaking, Western culture and democracies are dominated by a phallographic order, which is to say, characterized by a logic of the One sex—the male. Put differently, any masculine differentiation into two sexes derives from the “a priori of the same.”<sup>4</sup> In such a society, there do not really exist two subjects, and two sexes, two sexualities but only one subject, one sexuality, one sex—the male sex. The female sex is nothing else but a bad copy, a mirror image of the male sex, and a kind of deviation, if not to say anomaly. As did Irigaray herself this can best be demonstrated with Sigmund Freud’s theory of “Femininity” from 1933 where he argued that, in line with his psychoanalytic theory of the oedipal complex, a “little girl” is nothing else but a “little man” (having in mind the female clitoris compared with the male penis).<sup>5</sup> Thus, women are nothing else but

4 Luce Irigaray: *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press 1985, p. 27.

5 Sigmund Freud: Lecture XXXIII: *Femininity*. In *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933 [1932]). *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey, vol. XXII, pp. 112–35, here p. 118.

the other of the (male) same, a little penis. For Irigaray such a thought can only result from a thinking that does not seriously take difference into account. According to Irigaray in Freud's opinion there do not exist two sexes and two sexualities (woman/man, female/male) but only one.<sup>6</sup> Strictly speaking, they cannot be female Others on their own, measured by criteria entirely independent from men's. And because only the masculine subject does exist, Irigaray demands for the implementation of a radical sexual difference, a sexual difference that is based on a fundamental recognition of the other as Other and not of the same. In her *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, originally published in 1991, she claimed: "Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue of our age."<sup>7</sup> She has even blamed equality feminism for being essentially "terroristic" in its character since it does not allow for the development of sexual difference and thus for the recognition of the other as Other. However, her theory of sexual difference did not remain without criticism. In the 1990s she became subject of sharp poststructuralist criticism, among others by Judith Butler.

Judith Butler's *Leitfaden* is the notion of "construction" or "constitution." In contrast to Beauvoir and Irigaray she is not primarily interested in the concepts of existence and difference, but in the idea of construction. Neither does she describe female experiences (or other genders), as did Beauvoir, nor did she want to establish a theory of sexual difference, as did Irigaray. Neither was she seriously interested in equality nor in difference. Mainly she was concerned with the question of how gender is constructed through various discourses, and she also raised the question of the discursive construction of sexual difference itself. Influenced by Michel Foucault she put an eye on how discourses produce what they actually do describe. For this reason she also regarded ideas such as the idea of "sexual difference" as a construction which comes to be problematic the more sexual dif-

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6 For more on Irigaray's interpretation of Freud, see chapter "The Little Girl Is (Only) a Little Boy" in her *Speculum*, pp. 25–34.

7 Luce Irigaray: *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press 1993, p. 5.

ference is conceived of as a system of normative heterosexuality.<sup>8</sup> She also criticized the sex-gender distinction since it implies a concept of a “natural” sex that in her opinion is everything else but simply “natural;” in fact, it is “discursively produced.”<sup>9</sup> Last but not least she critically attacked the concept of “woman” or “women” (in plural), and asked whether such a concept really can serve as the basic fundament for future feminism.<sup>10</sup>

As I said at the beginning, these three approaches are seen as fundamentally divergent and incompatible in academic feminism, and their history presents itself as the history of a kind of genealogical development and progression. This is to say: Irigaray criticized Beauvoir, Irigaray herself was criticized by Butler. For a long time, and perhaps to this day, it seems as if they would have nothing in common, and as if they would exclude each other in every respect. However, I will show that the idea of incompatibility and exclusion must be revised in a certain sense.<sup>11</sup> In the following I will restrict myself to six ideas. They aim at showing some remarkable similarities between these theoretical approaches.

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### Rethinking Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler

(1) First I would like to claim that the mentioned Leitfäden of existence (Beauvoir), difference (Irigaray) and construction (Butler) do not exclude each other necessarily. Rather, in my opinion, it is essential to refer to concrete experiences in order to describe the real existence of women and men, and other genders, and how they do experience their own gendered existence. Simply ignoring concrete experiences of genders means ignoring an important aspect of their being. To say, for example, as poststructuralists sometimes do, that their experiences are only “constructions” and that they need to be “historicized”, does not help

8 Cf. Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge 1990.

9 Ibid., p. 7.

10 See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, chapter 1, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire.”

11 For more on this specific reading of the history of feminist philosophy, see Silvia Stoller: *Existenz – Differenz – Konstruktion: Phänomenologie der Geschlechtlichkeit bei Beauvoir, Irigaray und Butler*. München: Wilhelm Fink 2010.

much to understand their experiences as experiences.<sup>12</sup> For example, if a woman fears walking home alone at night, it does not make sense to respond, this is just because she was made as having fear as a woman. Even if her experience was constructed, it does exist in her concrete life. Secondly, difference is not only a basic experience in every-day experience—for example, gendered subjects share certain experiences but they also differ from each other or make the experience of differing from each other—it is also the very condition under which plurality and diversity can become real. Without difference plurality does not exist.

(2) Poststructuralist followers, in general, avoid any notion of sexual difference. As a consequence they remain strangely indeterminate with respect to “difference.” They argue that a theory of sexual difference is in danger of essentialism and that they contribute to an ontological reification of sexes. Finally, they are charged of reproducing bisexuality and normative heterosexuality—an argument strongly promoted by Judith Butler in her study *Gender Trouble*.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence they do not care so much about “difference.” However, it is not true that such a criticism necessarily implies doing away with it. In her illuminating essay “The End of Sexual Difference?” Butler makes clear that a criticism of sexual difference does not go hand in hand with “making a plea for its end.”<sup>14</sup> As if one ever could! She explicitly refers to Irigaray—for a moment, leaving behind her theoretical skepticism against her—, and clearly states that the interrogation of sexual difference is not to say that feminists should avoid the notion of sexual difference. However, it seems as if a great number of poststructuralist feminists like to ignore the idea, made by a poststructuralist, that the criticism of differ-

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12 The most prominent criticism in this respect comes from the poststructuralist feminist Joan Scott, as presented in her influential article “Experiences” (see Joan W. Scott: “Experience.” In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge 1992, pp. 22–40). I have argued elsewhere, in detail, that Scott’s post-structural criticism of experience cannot be extended to phenomenology, and found it to be inadequate (see “Phenomenology and the Poststructural Critique of Experience.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17, no. 5, December 2009, pp. 707–37).

13 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 54.

14 Judith Butler: “The End of Sexual Difference?” In *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge 2004, pp. 174–203, here p. 176.

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ence does not go hand in hand with the cancellation of difference. Obviously they seem to mix up the “criticism” of something with the “cancellation” of it.

(3) Third, I would like to refer to the issue of equality. In general equality feminists believe that demanding difference is contradictory to demanding equality. Thus, a theory of gender equality would exclude difference demands.<sup>15</sup> However, it is not true that Simone de Beauvoir in her equality feminism does not acknowledge difference or alterity. In her *Second Sex* she argues that the equality of women and men presupposes the acknowledgment of the other as other, that is to say, difference. She regards alterity between women and men as possible, and claims that it “no longer has a hostile character” if their relationship is based on a true “reciprocity,” which means that each partner recognizes the other in his/her freedom and which she calls “generosity.”<sup>16</sup> In her *Ethics of Ambiguity* she even claims that loving somebody means to love her or him in her or his “otherness.”<sup>17</sup>

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Although this aspect in Beauvoir’s thinking is widely hidden, it would be a simplification arguing that Beauvoir’s equality feminism goes without any notion of difference or alterity. Beauvoir scholars, such as the US Beauvoir scholar Debra Bergoffen, have revised the prevalent opinion that Beauvoir’s theory neglects difference and alterity.<sup>18</sup>

(4) On the other hand it is also legitimate to ask if it is really true that difference feminism goes without the idea of equality. We can turn toward Irigaray again. She is radical in demanding sexual difference, and in her criticism of equality it seems she acts without compromise. However, in my opinion she sometimes does not criticize equality as such but a certain concept of equality or the practice of equality, means, a concept that is based on wrong presuppositions. In an article on the necessity for sexuate rights, for example, she argued

15 See, e.g., Nagl-Docekal, who argues that any asymmetry of the sexes must be overcome in order to reach gender symmetry (Herta Nagl-Docekal: *Feminist Philosophy*. Trans. Katharina Vester. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 2004, p. xv).

16 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 414–15.

17 Simone de Beauvoir: *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Kensington 1948, p. 67.

18 Debra Bergoffen: *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*. Albany: State University of New York Press 1997.



for gender-specific rights.<sup>19</sup> Egalitarian models of democracy remain abstract, she says, as long as they do not take into consideration the specific situation of women and men. Equality, she continues, is radical only and only then, if it implies a radical recognition of difference.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly enough this assertion seems to imply that Irigaray is not against equality in principle but just against a certain formation of equality, means, an equality that has no place for difference. It is here again that, in my opinion, Irigaray followers seem to ignore the fact that Irigaray herself is not against equality in principle but just against a wrong interpretation or accomplishment of “equality.”

(5) I would also like to pay attention to another striking and more personal similarity between these three thinkers. Although it seems to be a given that Beauvoir, Irigaray and Butler count as main representatives of feminist thought, it is less clear if they ever had identified themselves as “feminists.” Beauvoir wrote her classic feminist essay *The Second Sex* in 1949, but declared to be a feminist only in 1972 at the advanced age of 64. Concerning Irigaray, nobody would ever deny she is a feminist. Yet, when once she talked about the feminist movement, she said the following: “What the word feminism is concerned, I do not want to make it a matter of debate. Isn’t it another strait jacket, in which, dangerous enough, women are bound to? Another ‘ism’ which leads to senseless quarreling and splits us in our fights?”<sup>21</sup> Finally, what Butler is concerned, she kept on being critical against superficial characterizations concerning her theoretical approach as, for example, post-structuralism, postmodernism or deconstruction. She actually fears the “gesture of conceptual mastery” as kind of violent determination of somebody’s thought.<sup>22</sup> And when asked about her identity she answered that a person is not only characterized by one identity (e.g., being Jewish, being a

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19 Luce Irigaray: “Über die Notwendigkeit geschlechtsdifferenzierter Rechte.” In *Differenz und Gleichheit. Menschenrechte haben (k)ein Geschlecht*, ed. Ute Gerhard et al. Frankfurt/Main: Ulrike Helmer 1990, pp. 338–50.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 343.

21 Luce Irigaray: “Der dunkle Kontinent der Frauen.” In *Zur Geschlechterdifferenz. Interviews und Vorträge*. Wien: Wiener Frauenverlag 1987, pp. 47–61, here p. 53 (my own translation).

22 Judith Butler: “Contingent Foundations.” In Seyla Benhabib [et al.]: *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge 1995, pp. 35–58, here p. 38.

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woman, or a philosopher) but by many and that it is not clear which identity comes first. “It seems we travel, I travel” is her answer in order to say that one’s identity is not fully determined from the very beginning, and not even in the very moment.<sup>23</sup>

(6) Surprisingly, it is not even clear if these so-called “feminists” finally argue in the name of a certain gender. In a remarkable statement at the end of *The Other Sex* Beauvoir says: “The fact of being a human being is infinitely more important than all the singularities that distinguish human beings.”<sup>24</sup> This is to say that simply being human, in her opinion, is infinitely more important than being a male or a female human being. Then, in her conceptualization of female subjectivity, Irigaray, in a provocative but serious way, argued that the woman is a “sex which is not one,” means, a sex which cannot be identified as a certain identical sex. Even more, woman is neither one nor two. And, in fact, it is an indeterminate sex. The following quote is illuminating: “She is neither one nor two. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definition.”<sup>25</sup> Also Butler was not really interested in defining gender. Yet, her gender theory implies a certain kind of gender definition. Her definition of gender or gender identity consists in the claim of its indeterminateness. Butler, as I believe rightly, makes the point that feminists who respectably seek for a complete determination of identity finally fail in the completion of the list of “identities”—they must add an “embarrassed etc.” at the end of their lists.<sup>26</sup> The embarrassment that Butler rightly identified in the rhetoric of the representatives of identity politics results from the uncertainty of

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23 Judith Butler in “Philosophe en tout genre,” a film by Paul Zajdermann (ARTE France & Associés 2006). <http://youtu.be/Q50nQUGiI3s> (accessed August 14, 2013), at the very beginning of part 1/6.

24 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 763.

25 Luce Irigaray: *This Sex which is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press 1985, p. 26. Recently I have argued elsewhere, with the help of phenomenology, that gender must be described as “indeterminate gender,” which means, it resists an essentialist understanding (Silvia Stoller: “The Indeterminate Gender.” *Janus Head* 13, no. 1, Winter/Spring, a special volume on “Interdisciplinary Feminist Phenomenology,” edited by Eva Simms and Beata Starwarska, in print).

26 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 143.

knowing what else to name in order to pinpoint one's identity: race, color, class, age, gender, sex, disability, nationality, etc. What else will be added in the future? We do not know. However, instead of proposing that this incompleteness represents a failure for feminism, Butler argues that feminists can learn from such a principal incompleteness. She believes that "this failure is instructive"—it can be seen as a starting point for a non-essentialist gender concept. It indicates that there is, in principle, something else that could be named, even if we still cannot say exactly what it is.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Simone de Beauvoir aims at a kind of gender concept that counts gender as less important. Luce Irigaray argues that woman is a sex that finally cannot be defined. Judith Butler argues that there is a fundamental indeterminability in one's identity. Must we not conclude that these three feminists or gender theorists finally agree with the assumption that either sexes and genders are less relevant (Beauvoir) or that they actually are something indeterminable (Irigaray, Butler)? Isn't that all a matter of confusion?

### **Historicization of Feminist Philosophy**

Why did I spend my time highlighting several interconnections between Beauvoir, Irigaray and Butler? First, I wanted to indicate that it is not so easy to identify Beauvoir's, Irigaray's and Butler's gender approach as entirely opposite approaches. Though they are different in various aspects—and to be clear, I do not want their theories be made the same—they do not fully exclude each other in every respect, and finally one can find a number of ideas intersecting with each other. In my opinion a strict separation or opposition means a kind of simplification that should be avoided in the scientific context. While in feminist research it is perfectly clear what their differences are and how their theories depart from each other, it is less clear, up to this day, what their unifying ideas are and what these three thinkers, regardless of their differences, share.

Second, this takes me a step further to my main argument. While in the past

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27 Ibid.

these theories were regarded as strictly opposite, in the meantime something has changed with regard to the feminist attitude towards the classics. In my opinion this change has to do with the very fact of a *Vergeschichtlichung* (historicization) of feminist theory—feminist teaching and research. By “*Vergeschichtlichung*” I do not mean a method of making or making appear something historical but the process in which something becomes historical. Feminist classics have reached a certain age: Beauvoir’s ground-breaking seminal work *The Other Sex*, originally published in 1949, has reached an age of 64, Irigaray’s *Speculum* appeared in 1974 in Paris, and Butler’s main gender study *Gender Trouble* was published in 1990, this means 23 years ago. In a certain way they have become part of the mainstream. They are no more on the fringes, placed at the margins of academic discourses, but have settled down in this field, at least to a certain degree. To use a phenomenological term, they have become sedimentations in the academic field.

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For example, in 2002 an anthology of philosophical gender theories, *Philosophische Geschlechtertheorien*, appeared at the German publisher Reclam, edited by the German researchers Sabine Doyé, Marion Heinz and Friederike Kuster. The editors aimed at introducing key-texts on gender theories in the philosophical tradition beginning from early Greek philosophy to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> At the end they have included three feminist philosophers, namely Beauvoir, Irigaray and Butler. To my knowledge, this was the first time ever that feminist philosophers were put into a philosophical anthology by a professional German publisher. Moreover, Gender Studies are part of the curricula at universities, gender conferences all over the world regularly and continuously take place, and publications on gender have become almost unmanageable.

What follows from such a historicization of gender theory? In the following I will provide two interpretations. My first thesis aims at the impact of such a historicization upon contemporary gender theorists. (1) Due to the *Vergeschichtlichung* of feminist theory debates among various distinguished feminist approaches have become less controversial than this was before the case. It seems that one

28 *Philosophische Geschlechtertheorien: Ausgewählte Texte von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Sabine Doyé, Marion Heinz and Friederike Kuster. Stuttgart: Reclam 2002.

must not try to win the battle over several other theoretical approaches anymore. Rather, it seems that meanwhile a kind of generous acceptance of a plurality of theories has taken place in the academic field, among students as well as among teachers. Nowadays it seems that a plurality of theories can be taught at various departments and faculties. For example, courses such as introductory courses or the history of feminist theory and gender studies, in the United States and Austria, give evidence that they have just become part of the history of theoretical feminism, and students do have only an abstract or a vague idea of the times, let's say the early 1980s, in which women started to fight for the implementation of feminist theory in the faculties.

In fact, it was not all too long ago, that it was not without risk to side with difference feminism on a conference organized by post-structuralists. At the beginning of feminist philosophy and gender studies at the universities feminist debates were strongly characterized by a Lagerdenken (i.e., partisan thinking, in-the-box-thinking). One could not easily jump from one to the other or express sympathy with all of them, as I did from the very beginning when I started to engage myself in feminist thinking. In addition I was extremely sensible against the practice of such a hostile Lagerdenken, inside and outside the feminist context, which always implies the strange assumption that there exists something like the "very truth" about the world.

In order to demonstrate the rivalry I give one example: I remember a conference on gender in 1995, organized by some colleagues from the history department at the University of Vienna, and as an interested conference visitor I was curious about learning something from their perspective, the feminist historical sciences. The organizers were known as feminist theorists, and I was also aware of the fact that they were strongly influenced by poststructuralist feminism, in particular by Judith Butler and Joan Scott (the latter is a well-known poststructuralist historian). At this time this was nothing extraordinary but something quite common. Post-structuralism has become something like a scientific hype; it was the leading and dominating approach in feminist theory. One was considered as an old-fashioned feminist if she was something else but a declared poststructuralist feminist. At that time Joan Scott's article on "experience" be-

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came internationally influential. In this article she heavily criticized theories that were based on a notion of experience. She claimed that in order to avoid any essentialism one must historicize so-called “experiences” and understand them as “construction.” When I raised my hand in favor of contributing to the discussion, arguing that feminist theory needs to continue with a positive understanding of experience and should not risk simply doing away with it, even if one takes their historicity seriously into consideration, I was simply interrupted if not to say stopped talking any further by the conference organizers—a kind of counter-example for scientific freedom of speech within a feminist discourse. In the very moment when this happened to me I was pretty much negatively attached if not to say shocked by this sort of academic violent act, but shortly after then understood that feminist theory is in the middle of a theoretical dispute whereas their agents obviously needed to find their place among other academics and academic forces. In several other post-structural feminist circles at that time, it was not possible to seriously talk about “difference.” Because from the perspective of many poststructuralists, or poststructuralist followers, “difference” was nothing else but compulsory heterosexuality (a term Butler used extensively in her *Gender Trouble*), that is, a patriarchal construction. They did not have a positive conception of “difference.” Rather, “difference” was something like a rag to a bull for them and therefore must be avoided as good as possible. That difference is the very presupposition of the poststructuralist claim for plurality and diversity, this idea was not well developed at that time. From my philosophical understanding, however, something must differ from something if there shall be plurality and diversity, as demanded by poststructuralists. Put differently, if plurality and diversity shall become real, things or identities must differ from each other, they must be different from others.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile classic poststructuralist gender theorists have at least partly lost

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29 The same, by the way, happened with equality feminism. It was extremely difficult to promote difference feminism in the 1970s, at times where equality feminism in the line of Simone de Beauvoir was the standard feminism in theory as well as in practice.

their academic power to post-colonial feminism or, for example, critical white theorists, which means that they cannot claim any hegemony anymore. They themselves had to learn that their own approach is and must be an object of negotiation as well as object of criticism.

(2) In line with the first impact, another conclusion can be drawn. Now when these different feminist theories are grown up, it seems that another view on them has become possible. Because gender theory has reached a certain age, and because we keep a certain distance to them, I do believe that another attitude to the above outlined feminist classics is made possible. Seen from the distance, a rethinking of the classic thinkers is at stake. Gender theorists now can read them as if they were mere theoretical texts. Common interpretations of classics are made subject of a rethinking that allows for new future theoretical insights, and perhaps almost forgotten theories will experience a kind of revival. As for example, since some years my students of the history of feminist philosophy and gender studies are highly interested again in the philosophy of Luce Irigaray. While earlier, during the prime time of poststructuralist theory, Luce Irigaray was regarded as an “old hat,” now young intellectuals start to bethink of, or to rethink almost forgotten theorists, including Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. Surprisingly, in German speaking countries publishers have begun to translate Irigaray again, after they have left her behind for a couple of years.<sup>30</sup>

(3) This also has, of course, some, so to say, other “practical” effects. At the beginning of gender studies in Europe (which actually started with the so-called Women’s Studies), it was not possible for men to teach a feminist philosophy course. Even more, at that time male students were excluded from seminars, or at least had a very hard time as a persona non grata. This has changed radically. Nowadays, it is no big issue if female teachers to teach, for example, Men’s Studies or Masculinity Studies, as I do at the Philosophy Department. And men teach Gender Studies, though only a few. I would say, generally speaking, that gender

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30 Two examples for the German speaking countries are Luce Irigaray: *Welt teilen*. Freiburg, München: Alber 2010, and *Das Mysterium Marias*. Hamburg: Les Éditions du Crieur Public 2011.

identity no longer determines who is allowed to speak about what gender and who is not. Students in classes are much more open-minded with respect to different approaches in feminist theory, and it also seems they have developed a certain sensibility for the “historical” gender theories and critically take up what they think is worth taking up, without simply falling into the unproductive and destructive Lagerdenken that has influenced Gender Studies for so many years.

### Conclusion

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The historical fact that, in the meantime, feminist theory and gender theory have reached a certain age does not go without consequences. The beginning *Vergeschichtlichung* of gender theory has effects on the practice of theory. From a certain distance a new rethinking of the classics in feminist theory and gender studies is made possible. Revisions are made with respect to earlier interpretations, and new aspects of their theories may surface in the future. The former and effectual Lagerdenken has been replaced by a refreshed analytical view upon the theories, and it seems that people show a greater acceptability of the diversity of theoretical approaches. One can “do” equality feminism but also believe in post-structural feminism, for example. Perhaps, from an outer perspective, one can argue, as I did in my book *Existenz – Differenz – Konstruktion*, that these three distinct approaches do not only have plenty in common but that—along their *Leitfäden* of “existence,” “difference,” and “construction”—they do also complement each other.<sup>31</sup>

In my opinion we are just entering a very interesting and challenging stage of gender research, and hand in hand with its *Vergeschichtlichung* I believe that it must identify itself and re-define its own position within this changed and

31 Just to give you another example. At the very beginning of my habilitation, when I declared to pay attention to the similarities between Beauvoir, Irigaray and Butler before the background of phenomenology, colleagues were very much surprised to hear that this is ever possible. This was at the end of the 1990s, early 2000. Now, bringing them together in the one or the other way does not seem to be a big challenge anymore. When my book finally appeared in 2010, colleagues reacted much more openly and sympathetically to the research aim. Therefore, something must have happened in the meantime.



changing world. It must accept new challenges, such as: the coming up of new political movements and the power of new scientific research, for example, Men's Studies and Masculinity Studies, not so speak of the so-called global crisis and the negative effects on the gender issue. How will Gender Studies take up the research presented by Masculinity Studies? What is the relation of feminism and the so-called post-feminism? And turning back to what I have mentioned at the beginning: Will and how will new feminist political movements such as FEMEN influence not only feminist movements from all over the world but also the practice of gender theory?

Genealogy of gender theory—genealogy of gender practice? If I follow my own considerations I must conclude that there is neither a genealogy of gender theory nor a genealogy of gender practices. It seems to me that currently we are in a state where a clear, easily identifiable leading feminist theory is, in fact, missing. Rather, it seems that currently a number of different theories coexists or may coexist at the same time. On the more practical level, so to say, one can also observe a variety of gender self-representations and identities that coexist under much better conditions than, for example, 20 years ago. Heterosexuals, lesbians and gays, transgender, and asexuals have begun to live and work together side by side in the academic space and, at least in advanced democratic societies and spaces, have largely given up the politics of separation and exclusion. Some may experience such a together as a loss of one's own identity, some experience it as a new identity, an identity that is characterized by a unity in difference. With this more positive prospect I would like to end up my essay.<sup>32</sup>

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32 An original version of this essay was first presented at the conference "Gender as a Cultural Act: Genealogies, Practices and Imaginations" at the Justus Liebig University Giessen (Germany). My special thanks go again to my friend Ida Černe for her professional help in improving my English language.