THE POLITICS OF
'SEX' AND 'GENDER'

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ABSTRACT

The sex/gender distinction has been critical in the development of the feminist movement at two levels. Theoretically, it has provided a conceptual framework within which to analyse and assess the developmental processes through which the gendered identities of 'women' and 'men' are constructed. Politically, it has served to support the claim that the natural functions of the female body do not necessitate any particular role or function for women. It has therefore functioned to support the feminist battle against biological determinism and for a relation of equality between women and men.

This thesis is principally concerned with the implications of the rejection of this sex/gender distinction in contemporary Anglo-American feminist theory. At a theoretical level, I examine the implications of this rejection for: firstly, theories of embodiment and, secondly, theories of agency. At a political level, these theoretical issues are connected to three important concerns raised in contemporary Anglo-American feminist debate: the political representation of 'woman' as the subject of the feminist movement; the representation of 'women's concerns' in the political arena; and, the meaning and function of women's political agency.

I trace the conceptual shift in the accounts of sex and gender provided by Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler in order to consider how it is that a 'crisis of identity' has been heralded in contemporary feminist theory in the context of precisely such accounts of gender as that provided by Butler. I argue that the specific shift in conceptual frameworks which takes place across the work of Beauvoir and Butler does indeed provide the context for theoretical and political 'trouble' in feminism. However, this trouble should not be associated solely with the rejection of the nature/culture framework against which the categories of sex and gender have been aligned, but more specifically with the performative framework through which Butler reconfigures those categories.
In conclusion, I argue that the conceptual framework through which the categories of sex and gender are negotiated in the aftermath of the rejection of the sex/gender distinction does have a critical impact on the way in which we can address the theoretical and political concerns raised in contemporary feminist debate. However, the rejection of a framework in which the categories of sex and gender are aligned with the realms of 'nature' and 'culture' does not necessarily give way to a loss of an account of embodiment or agency. Rich accounts of both remain possible within the terms of a framework in which those categories are construed wholly within the realm of 'culture'.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a prevailing sense of crisis in contemporary Anglo-American feminist debate, a sense that the instability and indeterminacy of contemporary accounts of sex and gender are undermining the very foundations on which feminism is built. There is, as Judith Butler remarks, "a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism" (Butler 1990, vii). As a movement which has, historically, sought to represent the needs and concerns of the gendered identity category 'women', feminism has appeared to rely upon a universal, stable or 'fixed' conception of that category in order to ground its theoretical and political claims. It has relied upon the idea that there is a subject of feminism ('woman') who is an agent for women's needs and concerns and who can be defined as a subject of political representation.

In recent years, feminism has been criticised, however, for its assumption of authority over the experience of women and for its general presumption that, simply on the basis of a shared anatomy, women have immediate access to and knowledge of the lives of other women. It is by no means clear that all women need or want the same things. In this thesis I will show how the very legitimacy of the political representation of 'women' and of 'women's concerns' is challenged by contemporary accounts of sex and gender. Such accounts contest the assumption that reference can be made to any universal notion of what it is to be a 'woman' or what constitutes 'women's concerns'. Also subject to challenge in such accounts is the notion that individuals are at some point 'free' from their social construction as gendered. Women's 'agency', and therefore their capacity to actively contest dominant gender paradigms, is conceived as itself socially constructed, itself a product of 'highly gendered' relations of power in society.
This thesis situates itself in the context of this climate of 'crisis' in contemporary feminism. Is feminism really in a state of crisis? What shifts in conceptual frameworks have been made such that a crisis is heralded? I locate an important source of perceived theoretical and political 'trouble' for feminism in a broad shift in conceptual frameworks which has taken place in approaches to and conceptions of sex and gender. That shift is from a framework in which these categories are understood to be conceptually distinct and are aligned with the realms of 'nature' and 'culture', to one in which that distinction is rejected and both categories are construed wholly within the realm of 'culture'.

Theorists of a sex/gender distinction have claimed that sex is a wholly natural or biological category, independent of and distinct from the cultural construction of gender. On this basis, they have claimed that our gender is in no way fixed or determined by the nature of our sex. The rejection of this distinction and the accompanying shift in conceptual frameworks is perceived to have both positive and negative implications for feminism. On the one hand, rejected in the new conceptual framework is the notion of a wholly 'natural', 'fixed' or 'determined' category of sex which somehow pre-exists and is a passive basis for the cultural construction of gender. It is argued that sex is itself subject to cultural construction. On the other hand, this new way of construing sex is perceived to be problematic politically for feminism in so far as it appears that what we mean when we refer to sex is unstable and indeterminate. That is to say, in the new conceptual framework, not only is gender construed as culturally constructed, and therefore as 'unstable', malleable and negotiable, but so too is sex. This instability in the meaning or content of both sex and gender is thought to be problematic for the feminist movement in so far as that movement appears dependent upon a stable conception of either sex or gender.

The shift to construe the categories of sex and gender wholly within the realm of culture has also had a critical impact upon how feminists address the issue of what it might mean to live or embody a particular kind of body. In so far as sex is understood to be, like gender, wholly culturally constructed, it is no longer clear what role or status the material 'fact' of the body actually has in the cultural construction of gender. Is there anything inherently significant about the actual material or biological makeup of the body? Is, for example, our embodiment in sexually different bodies relevant to our cultural construction as 'women' and 'men'? If we reject the notion of sex as a separate, biological category, distinct from gender, do we dismiss as irrelevant to our gendered subjectivity the sexual differences between subjects? Do we also undermine the possibility that the political
representation of 'women's concerns' can be based in the sexed specificity of the female body?

The new conceptual framework further suggests that we live and act from within a highly gendered cultural context. We are never, as agents, 'free' from gender such that we could be in a position to actively choose that gender. However, in so far as we are wholly socially constructed, and 'always already gendered', a point of concern which is raised in feminism is that we are, as a consequence of this view, socially determined. Politically, the important question for feminism is then whether we have the capacity to actively resist our determination by dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies. If we do reject a notion of agency which affirms our capacity for some degree of self-determination, do we necessarily give up on the possibility that we might contest our gender? That is to say, do we undermine the possibility that we can actually change or modify our gender?

The principal concern of this thesis is to investigate what it has meant for the theoretical and political concerns of feminism to have rejected a distinction between sex and gender and to have moved beyond the nature/culture framework within which such a distinction is drawn. In the thesis, I explain how the sex/gender distinction has been formulated and how it has borne a critical relation to the political concerns of feminism. I explain on what basis the distinction has been rejected and the implications of this rejection for theories of embodiment and agency. Finally, I explore the implications of the rejection of this distinction for three political concerns which are raised in contemporary feminism: the representation of 'woman' as the subject of the feminist movement, the representation of 'women's concerns' in the political arena and the issue of agency.

In the course of the thesis I trace the shift in conceptual frameworks which I have outlined through an examination and evaluation of the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. I begin with Beauvoir whose work, I argue, provides a pivotal point of reference for contemporary accounts of sex and gender. It serves to illustrate the problems involved in maintaining a distinction between sex and gender and aligning those categories with the realms of 'nature' and 'culture'. In my assessment of Beauvoir's work, I argue that the problems she confronts in attempting to maintain such a distinction return in contemporary accounts of those categories. My interpretation of her as not, ultimately, a theorist of a clear cut distinction between sex and gender allows for a repositioning of her work in the context of contemporary debate and a re-evaluation of the contribution her work makes to such debate.
In the chapters which follow I argue that it is the attempt by Beauvoir to incorporate an account of agency or freedom with an account of identity which avows, on the one hand, the significance of our embodiment in materially and sexually different bodies and, on the other, the sense in which we are socially constructed as gendered, which is repeated in contemporary accounts of sex and gender. Despite clearly rejecting the nature/culture framework in terms of which Beauvoir defines these categories, the issues of agency, embodiment and social constructivism remain critical in the reconfiguration of those categories by contemporary feminists. For this reason, thinking back through Beauvoir's work and the problems raised within it provides an important way of considering and evaluating how these issues remain points of concern in contemporary accounts of these categories despite the shift in conceptual frameworks which such accounts have made.

Although Butler is just one theorist who has actively sought to contest the sex/gender distinction, her reconfigured account of sex and gender wields considerable influence in contemporary Anglo-American feminist theory. Her work has also been a focal point for the voicing of serious concerns regarding the 'instability' of contemporary accounts of gender and the state of 'crisis' in contemporary feminism. It therefore provides an important means through which to assess what the theoretical and political problems for feminism are currently perceived to be and what relation these problems bear to accounts of sex and gender.

In her account of sex and gender, Butler provides a direct critical response to Beauvoir. Her work illustrates the problems involved in, firstly, rejecting the distinction between sex and gender which Beauvoir attempts to maintain and, secondly, moving 'beyond the binary frame' (Butler 1990, x) which supports such a distinction. Butler argues, against Beauvoir, that sex is not a natural category which precedes and is distinct from gender. Rather, both sex and gender are in fact sorts of cultural performances, produced and constrained through highly gendered relations of power. I raise the following questions in relation to Butler's work. I question, firstly, how Butler might understand and theorise the fact of our embodiment in materially and sexually different bodies within the terms of an account of sex and gender in which sex is itself perceived as a product or effect of social construction. Secondly, I raise a particular concern in relation to her rejection of an account of agency, such as Beauvoir's, which suggests that we have the capacity to control or determine the significance of our body and our gendered identity. I ask whether the rejection of such an account undermines the idea that women are capable of contesting those dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies which govern the
construction of their gendered identity. Such a capacity is perceived to be critical to the aims and objectives of the feminist movement. We will see that critics make a connection between these issues and the capacity of Butler's account, and accounts like hers, to articulate and address issues of representation and agency as they are raised at a political level for feminism.

In the second half of the thesis I assess the conceptual shift which takes place across the work of Beauvoir and Butler in the light of these 'inadequacies' or 'troubles' which are identified in accounts such as Butler's of sex and gender. In the context of this shift, I ask whether the rejection of the sex/gender distinction and the nature/culture framework on which it is based necessarily gives rise to 'trouble' for feminism. Can Butler respond to the theoretical and political problems which are raised in critiques of her work?

I argue that this perception of 'trouble' or 'crisis' for feminism has emerged from a fundamental confusion of theoretical and political issues concerning representation and agency, a confusion manifest in a debate between Seyla Benhabib and Butler. I raise two principal political concerns in the context of this debate: first, I question whether Butler's critique of the identity category 'woman' undermines the representative commitments of the feminist movement; second, I consider whether her account of agency is strong enough to support the emancipatory and democratic objectives implicit in her political vision for feminism.

Through an analysis of the political implications for feminism of Butler's performative account of gender I consider her response to these questions. I argue that critics, Benhabib included, misconstrue what some of the political implications for feminism of her performative account of gender actually are. Although the framework through which Butler addresses these issues has limitations, I argue that she is taxed wrongly with being unable to address the issues of political representation and agency and, as a consequence, for undermining the very basis of a 'feminist politics'.

In conclusion, I argue that the framework through which sex and gender are configured does have a critical impact on the capacity of feminists to address the political issues of representation and agency as they are raised in contemporary debate. Some frameworks do tell a stronger story than others about how 'women' and 'women's concerns' might be represented and theorised in the political arena. I also argue that while accounts such as Butler's provide us with very little indication of precisely what role individuals and collectives have in the cultural construction of
gender, this is not tantamount to a denial that change and transformation in dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies actually occurs, nor is it tantamount to a concept of women as passive agents. There is not, therefore, a crisis surrounding the issues of representation and agency in contemporary feminism, nor is feminism failing or undermined by such accounts.
CHAPTER ONE

Simone de Beauvoir: Freedom in Relation to an Embodied Existence

The primary purpose of this chapter is to assess Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 1949, 295) and its apparent implication that a clear cut distinction is posited by her between sex and gender. Beauvoir's claim supports the central thesis of her account of the condition of women in The Second Sex, that is, that the nature of the female body in no way necessitates or 'causes' the gendered identity of 'woman'. Indeed, it is precisely on the basis of this thesis that Beauvoir has been positioned by many contemporary critics of her work as a 'theorist of the sex/gender distinction', that is, a theorist who draws a sharp distinction between the biological category of sex and the social construction of gender. In evaluating Beauvoir's account of the female body and the gendered identity of 'woman', I will argue, however, that Beauvoir ultimately fails to maintain such a sharp distinction between the categories of sex and gender and consequently fails to maintain the central thesis of her work. This failure, I will suggest, has important implications not only for how we understand the content of her own account of sex and gender but also how we understand the contribution her work makes to contemporary debate over these categories.

In this chapter I will be concerned to set out how and on what basis Beauvoir attempts to maintain a distinction between the categories of sex and gender in her account of the condition of women. I will also begin to outline some of the tensions which emerge in her account and which work to undermine the distinction which she seeks to draw between those categories. In the course of the chapter I will identify the conceptual and political implications of this failure by Beauvoir to ultimately maintain the central thesis of her work. These implications arise from the problems
which I claim Beauvoir confronts in attempting to give an account of 'agency' or 'freedom' on the basis of both an embodied and a socially constructed account of gendered identity.

The chapter will be divided into three sections. In the first section I will provide an account of the conceptual basis of Beauvoir's account of the condition of women in an 'existential ethics'. For Beauvoir's account of women, I will explain, such an ethics points specifically to the freedom women possess to transcend the limitations and constraints of the female body. It therefore functions to strongly support her claim that the gendered identity of 'woman' is distinct from the female body and, consequently, that women's role in society is not determined by the biological functions of their sex. Beauvoir's account of the female body is not, however, wholly consistent with the existential model of subjectivity upon which she depends. Indeed I will claim in this section that her account of the relation between the reproductive function of the female body and the subjective existence of women offers a significant challenge to the distinction between sex and gender which theoretically guides her work. In the second section of the chapter I will move on to consider in more detail the way in which Beauvoir attempts to resolve these emerging tensions in her account of the condition of women. Specifically, I will consider how she attempts to maintain a distinction between sex and gender despite the problems she confronts in doing so. These problems emerge precisely in the context of her understanding of the socially constructed character of gender. In the third section of the chapter I will reflect on why it is important for Beauvoir to maintain a distinction between sex and gender, and what this distinction brings to her account of women's 'agency' or 'freedom'. I will begin to consider two critical implications of the failure by Beauvoir to maintain a distinction between sex and gender, both of which I will analyse in more detail in chapter two of this thesis. First of all I will outline the implications this failure holds for Beauvoir's vision of social and political equality between women and men. Secondly, I will consider how this failure suggests that we need to re-evaluate both the position Beauvoir holds in the (historical) context of debate over sex and gender and the contribution which her work makes to contemporary feminist debate over these categories.

Section One

An existential ethics

Beauvoir explains that her account of women is presented from the perspective of "an existential ethics" (Beauvoir 1949, 28). Throughout her account, she draws explicitly upon the existential model of subjectivity provided by Jean-Paul Sartre in
**Being and Nothingness**, a model which is intended to be universally applicable to women and men alike. Central to this account is the notion that each subject exists in the world as both facticity and transcendence. Our 'facticity' corresponds to those aspects of our existence which are 'given': that is, "it is my place, my body, my past, my position in so far as it is already determined by the indications of others, finally my fundamental relation to the other" (Sartre 1943, 489). However, on an existential account, our facticity is only one element of our existence in the world. We are, according to existentialism, fundamentally free in so far as we are always capable of transcending 'that which we are'. Our facticity is given meaning only by and through us. For this reason we are never simply our facticity. While it plays a part in the way we live out our existence in the world, it by no means constitutes the meaning or nature of that existence. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir applies this account of subjectivity to the lived existence of women, focusing specifically on the relationship between the female body and the gendered subject 'woman'. This relationship, understood through the theoretical framework of existentialism, will be the focus of my analysis of Beauvoir's work in this section.

In the introduction to *The Second Sex* Beauvoir argues that the realm of the 'universal' is a space occupied and defined by men. That is, supposedly gender-neutral, universal, accounts of 'humanity' are invariably gender-biased and have been defined and differentiated through and by men, "thus," she argues, "humanity is male" (Beauvoir 1949, 16). Beauvoir argues that historically, women have been denied access to these so-called universal accounts of humanity. It is specifically the reproductive function of the female body which, she argues, has given rise to women's exclusion from universality. This exclusion is not a natural result of the anatomical nature of the female body. Rather, it is an exclusion which has been constructed and enacted by society. 'Woman' has come to be defined as the female body, as reproductive, as "sex - absolute sex" (Beauvoir 1949, 16). She has thus become tied to the private, familial sphere in which she acts out her 'natural' maternal and domestic functions. On the basis of her sex, she has come to be defined as the Other to man, through whom she lives out her existence. While Beauvoir is well aware of the force of this definition of woman, she is at pains to point out its status as a purely socially constructed one, imposed on the occupant of the female body by society as though true and natural to that body. She also emphasises the part women themselves play in perpetuating this social definition of their sex. Firmly believing in the fundamental freedom of subjects and in their basic capacity to transcend their facticity (hence their body and situation), Beauvoir is led to the conclusion that women are themselves ultimately responsible for their social definition as 'Other' to man. These arguments are critical to Beauvoir's claim in *The*
Second Sex that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 1949, 295). They function to support her claim that there is a distinction between sex and gender.

Beauvoir's account of woman is based on the premise that beyond all other qualities, woman is, like man, a human being, a separate individual (Beauvoir 1949, 14). There is no 'essential woman', nor any 'essential man'. She does not want to deny, however, that 'women' and 'men' do exist. The critical point she wishes to make is that these gendered identity categories are social constructions. They are not caused by or natural to the anatomical attributes of each sex. Beauvoir thus seeks to draw a sharp distinction between the nature of one's sex and the social construction of one's gender. However, as I have suggested, this distinction is not always clear cut in Beauvoir's analysis. Several ambiguities arise in Beauvoir's argument which bring into question the extent to which one's sex 'influences' or intervenes in the social construction of one's gender. These ambiguities are, as I will explain, particularly apparent in her account of the reproductive function of the female body.

It is clear at several points in The Second Sex that Beauvoir perceives the reproductive function of the female body, if left to its natural development, to be a concrete obstacle to the achievement of complete liberty (Beauvoir 1949, 705). Indeed it becomes increasingly apparent that in order to aspire to an authentic existential life, this functional element must, according to Beauvoir, be brought under control. This idea that women must find a way of overcoming, through suppression, the natural functional development of the female body rests uneasily with the existential account of the body upon which Beauvoir explicitly depends. In existential terms, it is understood that our body is an essential part of our facticity and thus a crucial element of the way we exist in the world. Both Sartre and Beauvoir want to argue that the body is a perspective which we live and a point from which we extend our consciousness to the world (Beauvoir 1947, 41; Beauvoir 1949, 39; Sartre 1943, 326). It is a condition of transcendence. In Beauvoir's account of the female body, this existential definition of the body comes into play. However, the extent to which the body limits our capacity for transcendence becomes a crucial issue in her account of the reproductive function of the female body. It becomes unclear to what extent the oppressive nature of that reproductive function acts as a concrete obstacle to woman's transcendence of her body. More significantly, it becomes unclear whether a woman can act in good faith to an ideal of subjectivity which requires her to both suppress an essential function of her bodily existence and, at the same time, recognise and respect her body as a condition of transcendence.
So far, I have provided a very broad picture of the specific problematic which emerges from Beauvoir's work, that is, the tension between Beauvoir's account of the reproductive function of the female body and the existential model of subjectivity upon which she depends. We have seen that Beauvoir argues from the very beginning of The Second Sex for an account of gendered identity as wholly socially constructed. Although gender is presented as a socially constructed category imposed on the occupant of the female body as though true and natural to that body, the reader will have begun to see already the sense in which there is a constant slippage in her work to a model of the female body as a concrete obstacle to a fully 'free' or autonomous subjective existence. It therefore becomes unclear to what extent women are actually 'free', on her account, to construct their role or identity in society. It becomes unclear, that is, whether the socially constructed character of gender really does imply the sort of 'freedom from the body' which Beauvoir appears to want it to imply. The way in which Beauvoir understands the relation between the nature of the female sex and the gendered identity of woman therefore comes to bear a critical relation to her overall appeal to an existential account of the freedom of women.

An issue which further complicates Beauvoir's existential account of women is the emphasis she places on our position within the concrete world; that is, our position as subjects within the greater historical, social and economic situation. Indeed Beauvoir is particularly concerned in The Second Sex to account for how we 'act out' our gender in the world, and with the reasons for why we take up and assume particular roles. In the Introduction to the text, she argues that women have become 'Other' to man not through a series of historical events nor through any natural condition (Beauvoir 1949, 19). "If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential", she writes, "it is because she herself fails to bring about this change" (Beauvoir 1949, 19). Yet Beauvoir is concerned to emphasise immediately after this statement that the reason why women in particular have not assumed appropriate responsibility for their role as subjects in the world is because "[they] lack the concrete means for organising themselves into a unit" (Beauvoir 1949, 19). She therefore recognises that certain power structures in society have provided women with a concrete obstacle to the full assertion of their freedom. Society has therefore played a crucial role in maintaining the oppression of women.

This conclusion appears to be an obvious and reasonable one, yet I want to suggest that it provides serious problems for the existential basis of Beauvoir's analysis. While Sartre actively acknowledges the fact that we live and act within concrete social structures (historical, economic or otherwise), he argues that such
structures do not have the power to provide a concrete obstacle to our subjective freedom (Sartre 1943, 553). While existentialism thus contains within it an acknowledgement that our existence is always 'situated', that 'situation' does not provide a natural obstacle to our freedom. As such, only we can be responsible for how far we let it impede our projects in the world. It is evident throughout *The Second Sex* that Beauvoir is keen to promote this treatment of our situation in relation to our freedom. Most importantly, it provides a means for her to argue that since the oppression of women is a socially constructed situation, and since women are, like men, essentially 'free', then responsibility for perpetuating that oppression lies only in the hands of women themselves. Women are the authors, that is, of the social construction of their gendered identity. The fact that society has also conspired to produce and perpetuate a particular view of woman as inferior to man, and that this view has been institutionalised, should hold little sway in an existential analysis of the condition of women as more or less free. Yet, problematically, Beauvoir also insists on emphasising the extent to which such 'conspiring factors' do intervene in women's freedom to achieve 'authentic subjectivity'. Indeed she argues that "a truly socialist ethics will find most embarrassing the problems posed by the condition of women" (Beauvoir 1949, 90).

What we have seen here, in broad terms, is a significant tension emerging in Beauvoir's work between, on the one hand, her theoretical alliance with an existential model of subjectivity and, on the other hand, an account of the condition of women which brings into question several critical elements of that model. It is important to keep in mind at this point the sense in which this tension takes the shape of an attempt to, on the one hand, provide an account of identity or subjectivity as wholly subjectively and (by implication, for Beauvoir) 'freely' constructed and, on the other hand, provide an account of the way in which the material facts of our existence play a role in the construction of that identity. Needless to say, precisely what role these material facts play in the construction of identity has significant consequences for the very sense in which we can understand that identity to be wholly subjectively and 'freely' constructed. In the case of Beauvoir's account of the condition of women, therefore, the extent to which the female body and the social and economic conditions provided for that body, are shown to play a significant role in the construction of women's subjective existence will have important implications for the very sense in which we can understand women to be 'free' to constitute and take responsibility for their own position as subjects in the world. It will also have important implications for Beauvoir's overall thesis that the biological and material situation of the female body does not bear some significant relation to the gendered
identity of 'woman'. That is, it will bring into question the very claim that there is a sharp distinction to be drawn between sex and gender.

Before moving on to a more detailed consideration of the way in which Beauvoir attempts to resolve these emerging tensions in her work, it is important that we pause for a moment and reflect on some of the broader conceptual relations that are being drawn here. The most significant relation which I want to bring out is between her account of sex and gender and her commitment to an existential model of freedom. For indeed what is clear even at this starting point of my analysis of her work is that her account of the reproductive function of the female body as, in its natural state, oppressive, brings into question her concurrent claim that women are 'free' to fully subjectively interpret and construct the meaning and significance of their sex. Were sex and gender to be, as she wants them to be, wholly distinct, the relation between the female body and the subjective existence of women would not be one in which the reproductive function of that body intervened in or 'influenced' the construction of the gendered identity of woman. Yet, having suggested that there is something inherently oppressive about the reproductive function of the female body and, moreover, that this function must be suppressed in order for women's freedom to be achieved, Beauvoir clearly blurs the distinction she has sought to draw between sex and gender. Furthermore, she clearly sets up a critical relation between her account of sex and gender and her understanding of women's 'agency' or 'freedom'. I will go on to suggest at a later point in the chapter that the nature of this relation holds important implications for her vision for the achievement of equality between women and men in the political sphere.

**Section Two**

*The ethics of ambiguity*

Beauvoir does, however, as I have suggested, attempt to address and resolve some of the tensions which I have identified as emerging in her work. Indeed, in addressing these tensions, she does not perceive herself to waver from the existential perspective which she takes up at the beginning of her analysis of the condition of women. In explaining the manner in which Beauvoir approaches these tensions I will therefore begin here by providing a brief outline of her attempts to develop an account of the 'ethics' of an existential analysis of existence in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This attempt is important in terms of the concerns of this chapter because of its endeavour to reconcile the fact of our existence in materially situated bodies with our existential capacity to take responsibility for the significance such facts hold in the way in which we exist in the world. It endeavours to explain the relation
between the nature of our sex and the apparently 'free' social construction of our
gender.

Beauvoir argues in the essay that our existence is essentially ambiguous. It is
ambiguous, she claims, because we are constantly in the process of co-ordinating the
two fundamental aspects of our existence: our facticity and our transcendence. The
ethics of ambiguity which Beauvoir proposes denies that the world has some
objective existence, foreign and external to man (Beauvoir 1947, 17). It proposes
that the world has meaning only in so far as subjects attribute meaning to it. Thus
"only the will of men decides" (Beauvoir 1947, 19) what meaning the world will
have in relation to each man. It is our nature as both facticity and transcendence
which, according to Beauvoir, allows for a perpetual redefinition of our role and
purpose in the world. This perception of existence as ambiguous gives way to an
ethics in which values are essentially 'man-made' or, in other words, 'socially
constructed' concepts.

While values are, basically, man-made, Beauvoir, as I have noted, emphasises
the fact that man is himself embedded in society historically, socially and
economically. It is from this 'situation' that he applies his rules and values to the
world around him. Thus the 'ethics of ambiguity' is not free of historical, social or
economic forces. In relation to Beauvoir's account of woman in The Second Sex,
this ethical aspect of existentialism has important implications. First of all, it
provides Beauvoir with a means of attributing to women ultimate responsibility for
their position and role in the world. Secondly, and perhaps more problematically, it
attributes particular significance to the context of that responsibility. For as she
herself writes, "the less economic and social circumstances allow an individual to act
upon the world, the more the world appears to him as given" (Beauvoir 1947, 48).
Thus the more a person or group of persons is constrained or oppressed by social,
historical or economic circumstances, the 'less free' they will feel themselves to be.
While Beauvoir is careful to note that this appearance of being 'less free' is precisely
that, an appearance, it is nevertheless a source of critical tension in her work. As I
will go on to demonstrate, it becomes unclear in Beauvoir's account to what extent
the constraints imposed upon women by their social, historical and economic
circumstances do ultimately intervene in their freedom to take full responsibility for
the construction of their role and position in the world.

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1 Indeed Beauvoir goes so far as to mention that there are situations in which man's basic freedom is
threatened to such an extent by concrete social forces that the only transcendent action can be suicide,
the ultimate annihilation of existence (see Beauvoir 1947, 32; Beauvoir 1972, 41).
In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir argues that women have, historically, been positioned as Other and inferior to man. Women's role as 'Other' has not only achieved theoretical or abstract force but has pervaded the representation of women within legal and social institutions. Despite the extreme force of this construction and representation of the role of women, Beauvoir consistently appeals to its nature as socially, and thereby 'freely', constructed. The positing of 'woman' as Other and inferior to man has resulted not, she argues, from any essential or natural role of woman but rather from a role imposed upon woman on the basis of her bodily function as reproductive. The reproductive function of the female body is thus posited by Beauvoir as critical in the construction of woman's social position as Other to man.

A crucial part of Beauvoir's project in *The Second Sex* is to address why it is that women have assumed a role in society which ties them so closely to the reproductive function of their bodies. In assuming such a role, women, she argues, have reduced their bodies to the status of "brute facts" (Beauvoir 1947, 41) and have equated those facts with their existence and role in the world. However the body is not, according to Beauvoir, a brute fact (Beauvoir 1947, 41)². Indeed, in seeking to draw a distinction between sex (or the body) and gender, Beauvoir clearly aligns herself with a conception of the body as in no way determinate of our role or function as a subject in the world. At this point, however, I will address two specific points of tension which problematise this account of the body and its relation to the existential account of subjectivity offered by Beauvoir. Firstly, to what extent does the reproductive nature of the female body ultimately contribute, on Beauvoir's account, to women's acceptance of their social position as 'Other'? That is, to what extent does the reproductive function of the female body contribute to the social construction of 'woman'? Secondly, and consequently, to what extent do the social and economic conditions provided for the female body play a significant role in producing and perpetuating a particular interpretation of that body? Furthermore, what might this imply for our understanding of women's 'agency' or 'freedom'? I will suggest, in response, that Beauvoir's own account of the condition of women brings into question her existential claim that subjects must themselves take ultimate and individual responsibility for their position and role in the world.

I will turn to the first point here. In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir presents a picture of women and men as distinct according to the relationship which each has to their body. The female body, due to its anatomical structure is perceived (by society) as

² I will later go on to demonstrate, however, the sense in which Beauvoir is ultimately inconsistent on this point.
passive, a receiver rather than a creator of life. The act of sexual intercourse is experienced by woman, Beauvoir argues, as an act of invasion not only of her body but of her individuality. Man, on the contrary, penetrates and withdraws from woman and, in so doing, is understood to retain his individuality. Thus while woman's body becomes "a resistance to be broken through. . . the male body finds self-fulfilment in activity" (Beauvoir 1949, 53). It is important to note here that, in the case of both women and men, Beauvoir makes a crucial connection between the body and the fulfilment of individuality. While she presents man as essentially at one with his body, she constantly describes woman as at odds with her own (Beauvoir 1949, 54). Man's individuality is fulfilled in the activity of his body. Woman, on the contrary, "is at once herself and other than herself" (Beauvoir 1949, 54). She identifies the reasons for woman's self-alienation as emerging most significantly in the functional development of the female body (Beauvoir 1949, 59); that is, in puberty (menstruation), sexual initiation, maternity, and menopause. Of all these bodily developments, maternity is, as I have already mentioned, singled out by Beauvoir as "[the] one feminine function that it is actually almost impossible to perform in complete liberty" (Beauvoir 1949, 705). The natural development of the female body is thus clearly presented by Beauvoir as at odds with woman's capacity for transcendence.

The relationship between woman and her body is presented by Beauvoir as more complex than that between man and his body. It is a relationship which appears to separate a woman's own individuality as a subject from the physiological aspect of her existence. In the case of man, these aspects are well-integrated in accordance with the existential model of subjectivity (Beauvoir 1949, 57). Beauvoir writes,

[Woman] submits to [her physiological nature] as if to some rigmarole from outside; her body does not seem to her to be a clear expression of herself; within it she feels herself a stranger. Indeed, the bond that in every individual connects the physiological and the psychic life - or better the relation existing between the contingency of an individual and the free spirit that assumes it - is the deepest enigma implied in the condition of being human, and this enigma is presented in its most disturbing form as woman (Beauvoir 1949, 286).

Like Sartre (Sartre 1943, 56), Beauvoir recognises here one of the 'deepest enigmas' of subjective existence: the co-ordination of one's nature as both facticity and transcendence, both physiological and psychic. However, unlike Sartre, Beauvoir argues that in woman this enigma is present "in its most disturbing form". It is the reproductive nature of the female body which lies at the heart of this enigma for woman. Beauvoir goes on to argue that the extent to which woman's freedom is limited by her physiological characteristics can be measured only by the society in
which she lives. Her own condition as more or less free is thus dictated to a large extent by the conditions society provides for her. "Society alone is the arbiter" (Beauvoir 1949, 67) of the extent to which maternity impedes in or intervenes in her individual life.

To summarise here, Beauvoir presents to her readers two interrelated implications for the condition of women of the nature of the female body. Firstly, she presents a picture of the female body as alienating in its natural, reproductive, state. Secondly, she argues that the extent to which this 'natural' body causes woman, as an individual, to be more or less free depends upon the judgement and conditions of society as a whole. We have seen that, in principle, neither Sartre nor Beauvoir attribute meaning or value to the (natural) body in and of itself. Nevertheless, neither theorist would deny that the human body has certain functional characteristics which an individual necessarily experiences as part of her/himself. The tension in Beauvoir's work arises, however, when she identifies one such functional characteristic (reproduction) to be a real, natural, hindrance to freedom and, in particular, a hindrance to women's freedom.

The obvious resolution to this tension in Beauvoir's work is to appeal, as she does, to both her and Sartre's argument (an argument which, at this stage, appears somewhat circular) that no natural characteristic of the body can actually ultimately be 'naturally oppressive' or a 'natural hindrance to freedom'. However we must think carefully here about precisely why this is not a satisfactory resolution in this case. To do this, it is important to examine Beauvoir's own suggestions for how women, and society, can transcend the 'limitations' of the female body. The most important suggestion Beauvoir puts forward concerns the need for increased availability of contraceptive control over the function of reproduction. Reliable contraception, Beauvoir argues, would provide woman with a control over a body hitherto prey to forces out of her control. No longer would woman be 'the prey of outside forces' (Beauvoir 1949, 64). Like man, she would be at one with her body. Beauvoir thus proposes that concrete changes in the way in which the female body is 'administered' by society can provide women with a freedom from their body hitherto unknown (Beauvoir 1949, 67). However, in advocating increased availability of contraception, Beauvoir is effectively addressing only a 'symptom' of what is really at issue here. She provides many suggestions for ways in which society can 'counter' the demands of reproduction, but fails to acknowledge that, germane to all this, her perception of the natural state of the female body is one organised around a definition of the reproductive function as both oppressive and alienating. Her suggestions provide women and society with a way to manage and effectively 'hide' this fact about the
female body. However, 'hiding' the reproductive function of the female body (and, moreover, arguing that this function must be hidden in this way in order for women to achieve authentic freedom) amounts to an active denial of the facticity of that body, a denial which leaves women, and society, in a position of bad faith to the existential model of subjectivity as both facticity and transcendence.

Beauvoir's efforts to provide women with a means of transcending the limitations of their bodies is, in summary, problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it requires that women (and society) find a way of controlling and manipulating the female body such that those limitations no longer interfere with or intervene in the project of authentic subjective existence. The way in which such control is shown to be achieved is through a collapsing of the natural female function of reproduction into a kind of 'neutrality', a neutrality which mimics precisely the relationship which man has to his body. This results in what is effectively a denial of the female body in so far as it is a reproductive body. Most significantly, Beauvoir incorporates this strategy of control into a list of strategies necessary for women to gain control of their lives and assert their capacity for transcendence. It is thus intrinsically bound up with her idea of what is necessary in order for women to come to terms with, and enact, their subjective freedom. However, in so far as it is necessary, on her view, to deny an essential aspect of the facticity of the female body (of that which is given about that body) in order to authentically 'exist one's freedom', then women are being asked by Beauvoir to act in bad faith to the existential model of subjectivity.

The second reason for why Beauvoir's account of the female body is a problem here is that a kind of dualism emerges in her argument in which the body is perceived as an object of manipulation and control, an object which, once neutralised, can become manageable as a part of lived experience. On both Sartre's and Beauvoir's accounts of the body, we are told that the body is "the instrument of our grasp upon the world" (Beauvoir 1949, 65), "it is at once a point of view and a point of departure" (Sartre 1943, 326). Our body is "co-extensive with the world" (Sartre 1943, 318). However, in Beauvoir's account of the female body, we are told that the reproductive function of that body submits women, more than men, to the forces of the species. More than the male body, therefore, the female body is the object of functional developments which 'rob' her (to a certain extent) of her individuality. The notion that a woman's 'individuality' [her 'free spirit' (Beauvoir 1949, 286)] can be reclaimed through a series of medical and social practices illustrates the way in which the female body is delineated by Beauvoir as alien to women's lived existence. 'Woman' is thus sharply distinguished from the female body which is posited in relation to her as alien and peculiar. While it is indeed
Beauvoir's thesis that 'one is not born but rather becomes a woman', this does not imply that 'woman' exists disembodied. Indeed, as we have seen, the fact of our embodiment is absolutely critical to the account of subjectivity which Beauvoir wants to provide.

It seems, therefore, that there is considerable tension in Beauvoir's arguments. On the one hand, she has provided an account of subjectivity in which subjects themselves take responsibility for the value and significance which their body and situation hold in their lived existence. However, on the other hand, Beauvoir has presented an account of the female body (in so far as it is a reproductive body) as a concrete obstacle to the full assertion of this fundamental freedom. The female body is presented as central to women's complex and difficult road to existential transcendence. A clear opposition thus emerges between women's individual, existential possibilities (that is, their freedom) and the natural state of the female body.

While it appears, therefore, that women have themselves played a role in perpetuating their social definition as 'other' and 'inferior' to man, Beauvoir also perceives the nature of the female body as reproductive to have contributed to the perpetuation of this role for women in society. Furthermore, in so far as she perceives a natural intervention to have taken place in the possibilities afforded to women in society, Beauvoir's account of women stands in contradiction to one of the principal tenets of existential theory: that our freedom itself creates the obstacles from which we suffer (Sartre 1943, 495).

In response to this contradiction in Beauvoir's work, I want to suggest that at least two significant implications for her own arguments have emerged. First of all, if women are, as Beauvoir argues, limited by their facticity in their quest for authentic existential subjectivity, and if achieving that subjectivity requires the objective manipulation of that facticity, then it seems important to question whether Beauvoir's account of the female body is actually at odds with (and hence implicitly critical of) the existential model of subjectivity. The difficulties Beauvoir confronts in reconciling the reproductive function of the female body with the existential model of subjectivity suggest the way in which that model depends on a male, non-reproductive body as its ideal. This dependence is reflected both in Beauvoir's consistent reference to man being 'at one with his body' and thus fully aware of the possibilities his freedom affords him and in her arguments that, were society to provide appropriate administration of the reproductive function of the female body,
women would be able to participate in the public sphere on an equal footing with men.

Secondly, this tension in Beauvoir's work brings into question her overall thesis that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 1949, 295). If the nature of the female body does indeed intervene in the subjective existence of women, this intervention being understood as natural and leading to degrees of freedom in subjective existence, then it seems important to consider whether Beauvoir ultimately succeeds in maintaining the central thesis of her work. My arguments suggest that while Beauvoir strongly resists an account of identity in which the body plays a significant role in the construction of our gendered identity, the problems she confronts in theorising the precise relation that does exist between our sex and our gender give way to a substantially less clear distinction between those categories than her overall thesis suggests.

Section Three

Freedom in relation to an embodied existence

Before moving on to a consideration of the implications of this failure by Beauvoir to maintain a sharp distinction between sex and gender, it is pertinent to stop and reflect here first of all on why the maintenance of a distinction between these categories is important for Beauvoir. I want to suggest that it is clearly important at two related levels - conceptual and political. Conceptually, I have shown in what sense a distinction between sex and gender supports Beauvoir's claim that the nature of the female body in no way necessitates or causes the gendered identity of 'woman'. Gender is therefore, for Beauvoir, critically conceived of as a wholly socially constructed category, not fixed or determined by the nature of sex. Most significantly, it is clear that as a socially constructed category, distinct from sex, Beauvoir understands the content (or meaning) of gender to be malleable or negotiable. It is precisely this malleability or negotiability in the content of gender which allows her to claim that the meaning or significance of 'woman' as a gendered identity category can be modified.

At a political level, this conception of gender, as socially constructed, and as distinct from sex, lends critical force to Beauvoir's vision for equality between women and men in the social and political spheres. That is to say, if the gendered identities of women and men are, as Beauvoir claims, wholly socially constructed, and if they bear no necessary relation to female and male bodies, then those social
constructions can, according to Beauvoir, be modified and changed. In short, they can be rendered 'equal'.

When the conceptual distinction between sex and gender blurs, however, Beauvoir's critical understanding of the content of gender as pure social construction is brought into question. Consequently, the support for her conceptual and political arguments, outlined above, is broken down. I want to suggest here that the blurring of the distinction between sex and gender thereby has at least three important implications for how we interpret Beauvoir's account of the condition of women. First of all, it brings into question precisely how malleable or negotiable the content of 'gender' actually is for Beauvoir. The suggestion that sexual difference, and, in particular, the reproductive function of the female body, does play a role in the construction of gendered identity, must lead us to question whether there are in fact elements of our embodied existence which do, for Beauvoir, intervene in some significant way in the construction of our gendered identities. If so, the content of our gendered identity clearly can not be understood to be wholly malleable or negotiable. Indeed at some level, the content of our gendered identity can be understood to be in some degree unconstructed.

Secondly, and consequently, the breakdown of the sex/gender distinction also brings into question Beauvoir's claim that women really are, in a properly (or authentically) existential sense, 'free' to change and negotiate the content of their gendered identity. Women's freedom or agency can, on Beauvoir's account, be understood to be critically limited, relative to their male counterparts, both by their embodiment in reproductive bodies and by their social construction as 'women'. Furthermore, this freedom or agency can be understood to be comparatively limited at two levels - individual and political. As individual agents, it appears that women are not wholly free to interpret and construct the meaning or significance which their sex holds for their gendered identity as 'women'. For example, at one critical point (at the point at which Beauvoir identifies the reproductive function of the female body to be an obstacle to the achievement of complete liberty), their sex is presented as being relatively unconstructed and appears beyond their individual, existential, capacity for transcendence. At another point, their gendered identity as 'women' is presented as highly constructed, such that it appears almost socially determined - this is the point at which Beauvoir emphasises the role society plays in providing the means to 'make up for' the 'oppressiveness' of the reproductive function of the female body. The construction of their identity as 'women', therefore, can not be understood to be wholly an effect or product of free subjective constitution. At a political level, this relative lack of agency or freedom experienced by women has important
implications for the possibilities open for change and emancipation from those roles traditionally assigned to women in the political sphere. If women really are constrained by the nature of their sex, on Beauvoir's account, then the political possibilities open to them will not be the same as those open to men and may well be, on her account, comparatively limited.

Thirdly, and this relates to both the points just made, the apparent simplicity of Beauvoir's political vision for equality is brought into question by the breakdown of the sex/gender distinction. That is, if the content of gender is not pure social construction, then Beauvoir's reliance on its malleability at a political level is undermined. Achieving equality between women and men at a political level will not, therefore, simply involve changing or modifying the social construction of their respective gendered identities, but will consist in the far more complex task of renegotiating within the political arena the representation and role of women and men as differently 'sexed' (embodied) political agents.

I will address these three implications and, in particular, the specific character of the relation between Beauvoir's conceptual account of the categories of sex and gender and her political vision for equality, in considerably more detail in the next chapter. So far, I have drawn an important relation between the breakdown of the distinction Beauvoir seeks to draw between the categories of sex and gender and the implications this breakdown holds for her understanding of women's agency (or 'freedom') at an individual and a political level. It should also be clear that the difficulties Beauvoir confronts in maintaining a distinction between the categories of sex and gender suggest further important implications for the position we understand her to occupy in the broader terms of feminist debate over these categories. Beauvoir has traditionally been classified as a theorist drawing a sharp, apparently unproblematic, distinction between the categories of sex and gender. However, as we have seen, her work exemplifies the serious conceptual difficulties involved in an attempt to make a distinction between those categories. While she seeks to retain a sense of subjects as, in an existential sense, 'free' to assume and take responsibility for, the form of their gendered identity, she, at the same time, understands both the body itself and society to play significant roles in producing and perpetuating particular gender roles for subjects. Ultimately, therefore, there is a real problem for Beauvoir in reconciling her faith in an existential account of freedom, with both an embodied and a socially constructed, account of gendered identity.

I have, in conclusion, made several claims in this chapter all of which will be drawn upon and extended in chapter two. First of all, I have identified in Beauvoir's
work a particular problematic at work in her desire to provide an account of agency or freedom within a broader conception of identity as both embodied and subject to social construction. I have suggested that this problematic emerges within the context of her account of the female body and its relation to the subjective existence of 'woman'. I have claimed that the way in which this tension emerges in Beauvoir's work has important implications both for her own theoretical basis in existentialism and for her traditional classification as 'a theorist of the sex/gender distinction'. In so far as the notion that there is a clear cut distinction to be made between the categories of sex and gender is undermined by the tensions of her own account of the condition of women, I have suggested that we can resituate Beauvoir within the terms of contemporary debate over these categories. We can also reassess the contribution her work makes to such debate.
CHAPTER TWO

Sex and Gender in Beauvoir's Vision for Equality between Women and Men

In this chapter I will consider in more detail the link I have drawn between Beauvoir's failure to maintain a distinction between the categories of sex and gender and her vision for equality between women and men in the social and political arenas. I will argue that the collapse of the distinction between these categories in her work, which I have described in chapter one, gives way to a more complex account of her vision for equality than is frequently attributed to her. Specifically, I will claim that the breakdown of the distinction between these categories suggests that her vision for equality between women and men is not ultimately one of sameness or neutrality with regard to the sexed and gendered identity of persons. Furthermore, I will suggest that it is the implicit recognition by Beauvoir of the significance of elements of sexual difference to the process of gender construction which must necessarily lead us to rethink the meaning and significance of the central thesis of her work, "that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 1949, 295). In conclusion, I will argue that her problematic account of the process of gender construction illustrates several critical ways in which the categories of sex and gender operate in the context of the political concerns of feminism. As such, it makes a significant contribution to the overall project of this thesis, which is to consider what the positive rejection of a distinction between these categories means for these concerns.

In this chapter it will therefore be my primary concern to reach a better understanding of two aspects of Beauvoir's work. First of all, I will address the question of precisely how Beauvoir's account of the categories of sex and gender functions to support and enforce her own vision for the emancipation of women in
the social and political spheres. I will then consider how this vision is affected by the tensions and ambiguities which I have identified in that account. An analysis of these aspects of Beauvoir's work is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, it will allow us to consider in more detail the relationship between Beauvoir's conceptual account of the categories of sex and gender and the more pragmatic equity issues which she perceives to be confronted by women as both 'sexed' and 'gendered' agents in the social and political spheres. Secondly, it will allow us to consider the implications of a breakdown of the distinction between those categories for the vision of equality between women and men which is presented by Beauvoir.

At the end of the previous chapter I suggested three important implications of the failure by Beauvoir to maintain a distinction between the categories of sex and gender, all of which I claimed relate in significant ways to the vision for equality which is outlined in her work. First of all, I claimed that the breakdown of the distinction between sex and gender suggested that the content or meaning of gender is not, for Beauvoir, purely socially constructed and therefore is not ultimately as malleable and negotiable as she might have us believe. Indeed, it appears, on Beauvoir's account, that the nature of our sex provides precisely an *unconstructed* element to the overall process of the construction of gender. Secondly, I claimed that this unconstructed element to gender also suggested critical implications for Beauvoir's account of women's agency or freedom at both an individual and a political level. I argued that, for Beauvoir, women's agency could be understood to be limited relative to men's both by their embodiment in a reproductive body and by the force of their social construction as 'women'. Thirdly, I claimed that Beauvoir's vision for equality between women and men is substantially complicated by these limitations which are identified by her on women's agency. These implications will be addressed in more detail as they arise in the course of this chapter.

In the first section of this chapter I will provide an account of the nature of Beauvoir's vision for equality between women and men. I will begin to outline in this section some of the general ambiguities and tensions which emerge in this vision. In the second section I will consider in more detail those factors in women's economic, social and psychological situation which, according to Beauvoir's account, complicate the achievement of this 'equality' and which work against the emancipation of women from those roles traditionally assigned to them in the political sphere. I will argue that these tensions work to further undermine the distinction she seeks to draw between sex and gender and consequently also bring into question the possibility that equality might be achieved in the form she envisions. In the third section of the chapter I will consider this problem of 'situation'
in the context of her attempt to develop an account of women's agency or freedom on the basis of both an embodied and a socially constructed account of gendered identity. I will argue that this problematic in Beauvoir's work suggests, most significantly, some important political implications of the critical breakdown in the distinction she seeks to draw between the categories of sex and gender. In the fourth section of the chapter I will address the question of how we, as contemporary critics of Beauvoir, can understand and interpret the breakdown of this distinction in her work in the context of the political concerns of feminism.

**Section One**

**Beauvoir's vision for equality**

Beauvoir's vision for the future of intersubjective relations is elaborated in the final part of *The Second Sex*, 'Towards Liberation'. This vision is of particular importance to the concerns of my analysis of Beauvoir's work because it provides us with a concrete example of the relationship Beauvoir seeks to draw between her conceptual, existential, account of the condition of women and the more pragmatic equity issues which she understands to be confronted by female agents in the social and political spheres. In the previous chapter, I briefly addressed some issues raised by Beauvoir, the resolution of which she perceived to be critical to the possibility of women's emancipation from her traditional role as 'other' and inferior to men. In particular, I made reference to her arguments for increased availability of contraceptive control over the reproductive function of the female body. There are several other issues raised by Beauvoir which are also of critical importance to her vision for equality between women and men in the social and political spheres. As in the case of her arguments concerning contraception, however, these issues also raise some important questions concerning Beauvoir's conceptual analysis of the categories of sex and gender.

I suggested in chapter one that Beauvoir's arguments for the increased availability of contraception for women appears to take the form of a requirement, or prerequisite, for the achievement of 'authentic existential freedom'. This prerequisite for freedom seems to imply, I claimed, that women must successfully control or manipulate the reproductive functions of their female body in order to act in society on an equal footing with their male counterparts. I argued that such a 'prerequisite' in Beauvoir's account of women seemed at odds with the existential claim that "no physiological destiny imposes an eternal hostility upon male and female" (Beauvoir 1949, 725). In the final chapters of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir sets out in more detail, and in relation to her own vision for future intersubjective relations, further
requirements which must be met in order for women to act in the social and political spheres on an equal footing with men. I will argue in this chapter that, along with the requirement of contraceptive control over the reproductive function of the female body, these requirements suggest critical tensions which break down the conceptual distinction she seeks to draw between the categories of sex and gender. That is to say, they bring into question the claim that our sex in itself bears no meaningful relation to the construction of our gender.

In order to address in more detail the implications of this breakdown of the distinction between sex and gender I will turn firstly here to give an account of the nature of Beauvoir's vision for the emancipation of women from those traditional gender roles assigned to their sex. How does Beauvoir understand such emancipation to be achieved? Of paramount importance in Beauvoir's vision for the emancipation or liberation of women from the domestic or familial sphere is their achievement of economic independence from men. Until such economic independence is achieved, she argues, no other civil liberties can have meaning (Beauvoir 1949, 689). Significantly, Beauvoir insists that although economic independence from men is essential to the possibility of women's emancipation, it is nevertheless not equivalent to or constitutive of such emancipation. The gaining of employment is not, she argues, useful in and of itself but must be accompanied by 'some broader sense of achievement in social, political and psychological goals' (Beauvoir 1949, 690-1; my italics). Already, therefore, we can see that her sense of precisely what constitutes 'emancipation' for women is more complex than it initially appears. While women must, on her account, gain economic independence from men in order to begin to act from a position of relative 'liberty' from the ties which ordinarily bind them to the private sphere, such financial independence is not enough for women to experience full emancipation from that sphere. Women's achievement of financial independence from men does not, therefore, consequently mean that they can immediately occupy an equivalent or identical situation to men. Yet we may well ask precisely what Beauvoir means when she argues that some broader sense of achievement must be experienced by women in terms of social, political and, in particular, psychological goals.

In terms of progress towards achieving equality between the sexes in the social and political arenas, Beauvoir notes that the very nature and structure of both theoretical and institutional attitudes towards women at work in such arenas remain a powerful and limiting force with respect to women's capacity to achieve liberation from their oppression in traditionally domestic roles. The fact that those arenas have been dominated and, to a large extent, defined, by men remains a serious problem
for those women attempting to enter such arenas on equal terms with their male counterparts (see Beauvoir 1949, 689). A considerable part of the move towards equality in the workplace will therefore consist in a wholesale endeavour on the part of both women and men to change the very structural and institutional attitudes which gear that workplace towards the concerns of male employers and employees. This is of course an enormous task, and one not easily or lightly achieved. For Beauvoir's account of the condition of women, it also gives way to some important theoretical issues concerning the power of 'situational' factors to conspire against women's freedom from oppression. As I have noted in chapter one, Beauvoir's existential account of the relation between our situation and our freedom is such that our situation, while necessarily a condition of our freedom, cannot be understood to be an actual impediment to freedom. Nevertheless, Beauvoir's strong emphasis on the power of structural and institutional factors to act as a concrete obstacle to women's freedom from oppression suggests that there is a great deal more to the perpetuation of women's oppression than mere unwillingness to accept their existential nature as free (that is, bad faith). 'Situation' appears to hold considerably more sway in Beauvoir's account of women's oppression, therefore, than an existential analysis would theoretically allow.

Beauvoir's emphasis on the power of our situation to act as a concrete obstacle to the authentic assumption of our liberty has important implications for her work. We have seen (in chapter one) in what sense it is at odds with the classic existential argument that our situation is not an impediment to freedom. What we have not considered in detail, however, is in what sense this emphasis affects her vision of equality between women and men in the social and political spheres. Consideration of this issue is particularly relevant here. For if women are, on the basis of their sex as female, confronted with unique obstacles in their quest for equality or equal treatment in the social and political arenas, then some important questions arise concerning the very possibility of them ever, except theoretically, achieving the equality envisioned by Beauvoir. Indeed, as we have seen, the very freedom or agency which women are understood by Beauvoir to hold with respect to the construction of their gendered identity is brought into question by the emphasis she places on the oppressive nature of their sex and the force of their social construction as 'other'. Meanwhile, it is clear that men's social and political situation is not critically affected by the nature of their sex and is, comparatively speaking, strongly supported by their stereotypical gender roles. So what exactly would it take to

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1 It is also a task which brings to the fore the issue of what it might mean to address 'women's concerns' within an arena which Beauvoir explicitly perceives to have 'retained the form men have given it' (Beauvoir 1949, 689).
achieve a relation of equality between such diversely situated subjects? Is it enough for Beauvoir to appeal to their existential freedom as a basis for equality, particularly given her clear indication that the reproductive function of the female body provides a concrete limitation on women's actual capacity to authentically assume such freedom?

An important part of assessing these questions is determining precisely what sort of relation of equality Beauvoir is envisioning between women and men. Is the goal to have women and men acting from, effectively, the same situations as one another? Or is it rather a matter of providing women and men with the same opportunities for action in the social and political spheres and the same treatment with respect to their status in those spheres? Determining the nature of Beauvoir's vision for equality will be the task of the next section. I will also be concerned to address more closely the question of how the breakdown I have identified in the distinction Beauvoir seeks to draw between the categories of sex and gender affects precisely the nature of this vision for equality.

Section Two
'Situation' and equality

I want to suggest here that Beauvoir's vision for equality between women and men is operative at two, interdependent, levels. At one level, as we have seen, Beauvoir offers several practical suggestions for change in the social and political arenas. Women's achievement of economic independence is of primary concern amongst these suggestions, although, as we have seen, its achievement is by no means constitutive of equality. At another level, however, Beauvoir offers us a vision for future relations between the sexes, relations which she perceives to be based on mutual and reciprocal respect. It is precisely this vision which provides the basis for her understanding of what it would ultimately take to achieve equality between women and men. "The quarrel will go on," she argues, "as long as men and women fail to recognise each other as equals" (Beauvoir 1949, 727-728). Achieving a relation of equal exchange between women and men is therefore fundamental to Beauvoir's overall vision for equality.

Needless to say, there are several issues which complicate this vision of equality offered by Beauvoir. Of primary significance amongst these is the question of whether or not a 'relation of equality' between women and men as envisioned by Beauvoir is actually achievable and, perhaps, whether or not it is desirable. A primary obstacle to the achievement of Beauvoir's envisioned relation of equality
between the sexes is the traditional perception that what women and men have to give to that relation is in fact not of equal value (Beauvoir 1949, 731). Such a perception originates both in traditional social attitudes towards women and in women's own perception of themselves. In general, Beauvoir argues, there is a refusal on the part of both women and men to think of each other and themselves, as simply free (Beauvoir 1949, 699). Their perception of each other remains bound up in the mutual assignment of traditional roles and functions, which determine precisely a relation of unequal exchange. What would it take to overcome such traditional attitudes towards gender roles? Beauvoir's comments in the concluding section of *The Second Sex* suggest that there are at least two principal factors which must be achieved in order for a relation of equal exchange between the sexes to be possible. First of all, women must be given the means to remove themselves from a position of dependence on men. Here, again, we can recognise Beauvoir's insistence on economic independence as a primary factor in the struggle towards equality. Were women provided with "a living strength of their own", Beauvoir argues, their relation of dependence on men would be abolished (Beauvoir 1949, 733). As I have already noted, however, the achievement of such economic independence will by no means, in itself, provide women with a relation of equality with their male counterparts.

The second factor which will influence the possibility of a relation of equality between the sexes is a much more complex one. It consists in the overcoming of a perception of women and men as occupying, necessarily, a subject-object relation. For, once economic independence is achieved, the new 'independent' woman emerges, according to Beauvoir, against the scene of a peculiar conflict. "[Woman] stands before man," she writes, "not as a subject but as an object paradoxically endowed with subjectivity; she takes herself simultaneously as self and other, a contradiction that entails baffling consequences" (Beauvoir 1949, 727). Traditionally, 'woman' has occupied the role of 'other' in relation to 'man'; her function has been defined and differentiated in relation to him. Once economic independence is achieved, however, the previous economic necessity of her dependence on him is removed. She is capable of sustaining herself, separate to man. Beauvoir understands this transition to create confusion in the roles of both women and men precisely because it undermines the economic relation of dependence traditionally at work between them. That is to say, while a woman may begin to recognise herself to be independent from man, he may continue to view her as his 'other', his dependant. At the same time, a woman may, despite her economic independence from him, maintain a perception of herself as in some sense 'other' to
him. The freeing up of the economic ties between them may not therefore immediately effect a relation of equality between them.

The most significant point to make here, however, is Beauvoir's thesis that the origin of the traditional relation of dependence (inequality) between women and men lies in their economic and social situation, rather than in their biological makeup. The relation between their sex as female and male and their gendered identities as women and men is therefore in a critical sense for Beauvoir not causal or deterministic. The conflicts which persist between the sexes are, she argues, of our own making. They merely mark, she argues, "a transitional moment in human history" (Beauvoir 1949, 725). Once women achieve economic independence from men, she argues that they can begin the critical passage to be recognised as men's equals. She understands the primary obstacle to such recognition to be the tendency to, despite the achievement of economic independence, remain trapped in those roles traditionally assigned to them by society.

Beauvoir does ask, nevertheless, whether it is in fact enough to change laws, customs, public opinion, and the whole social context, for women and men to become truly equal (Beauvoir 1949, 734). Her response to this self-directed question is consistent with the overall thesis which I have identified of her account of the condition of women. If we were to respond, she argues, that there is something about or peculiar to women which renders their relation to men as always and necessarily one of inequality and dependence, then, she argues, "that would be to admit that the woman of today is a creation of nature; it must be repeated once more," she argues, "that in human society nothing is natural and that woman, like much else, is a product elaborated by civilisation" (Beauvoir 1949, 734). So, in summary, 'woman' is, according to Beauvoir, a product of moral, social and cultural construction. To this end, her destiny is malleable, and is not determined by or through the anatomical structure given to her by nature. To recapitulate a point made in chapter one, the content or meaning of gender is critically understood by Beauvoir to be distinct from sex, to be socially constructed and, as a consequence, to be malleable or negotiable. Furthermore, it is clear this understanding of the content of gender as socially constructed supports and enforces the possibility of equality between women and men.

Central to Beauvoir's vision for equality is, therefore, this idea that 'women' and 'men' are wholly socially constructed identities. In so far as this makes their destinies equally malleable then the only obstacle to equality can be the very nature of their socially defined role or function. If women are, therefore, required by society
to bear children and to play the role of primary nurturer and carer of those children, then their relation to men at a social and political level will necessarily be one of inequality. They will remain bound to the private, domestic sphere, dependent on men for financial support. Was maternity to be made voluntary\(^2\), however, this situation of dependence on men would, according to Beauvoir, be somewhat relieved. Likewise, she argues that, were girls brought up with "the same demands and rewards, the same severity and the same freedom, as her brothers, taking part in the same studies, the same games, promised the same future, surrounded with men and women who seemed to her undoubted equals" (Beauvoir 1949, 735), then the relation between women and men would not be seen by her to be one of unequal exchange. Importantly, her own destiny, as a woman, would not be perceived by her to be necessarily guided by the reproductive functions of her body.

We have seen so far what vision for equality Beauvoir has. She envisions a world in which women and men recognise and respect each other as free and independent agents. At this point it is important to consider in more detail, however, the question of where our anatomical make up (our sex) as female or male figures in Beauvoir's vision for equality between the gendered, socially constructed, identities of women and men. While it is clear that the anatomical make up of each individual is not in itself explicitly attributed significance in Beauvoir's vision of equality, we may well want to consider what function, if any, she understands our sex to serve, given that we do necessarily exist embodied in the world, in that vision. Indeed, we should consider what the nature of Beauvoir's vision for 'equality' is such that our sex remains, apparently, insignificant within it. If women are to be recognised as the 'equals' of men, are they required to become, in all but a fundamentally biological sense, identical to men? In other words, is Beauvoir's vision for equality ultimately a vision of sameness between women and men with respect to their sexed (as 'female' and 'male') and gendered (as 'women' and 'men') identities? Moreover, if it is not one of sameness with respect to these categories of identity, how might social and political equality be theorised? How, that is, might the character of women's and men's political agency be affected by an account of political agency which does consider the sex and gender of persons to be relevant to that agency?

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\(^2\) Aside from contraceptive control providing women with more choice with regard to sexual reproduction, Beauvoir also discusses the possibility for responsibility for the rearing of children to rest with the state, thereby alleviating women of such responsibility. See Beauvoir 1949, 733.
Section Three
'Situation' and freedom

We have already seen the sense in which Beauvoir has argued that theoretical and institutional attitudes towards women are a powerful and limiting force in their bid for equality in the social and political arenas. "In order to explain her limitations," Beauvoir writes, "it is woman's situation that must be invoked. . ." (Beauvoir 1949, 723). "Women lack the concrete means," she argues, "for organising themselves into a unit" (Beauvoir 1949, 19). A considerable shift needs to occur, therefore, in two principal areas before equality between women and men can be achieved. Firstly, a shift needs to occur in attitudes towards women and, secondly, in the opportunities and means available to women to transcend the limitations of their situation. At issue for us here is the question of what implications this emphasis on the limiting force of situation has for the shape of Beauvoir's vision for equality. A significant implication would appear, first of all, to be the implicit affirmation on the part of Beauvoir that women's freedom to transcend their traditional roles is in fact limited (more than men's) by factors beyond their control. While the existence of certain constraints is not in itself, on Beauvoir's account, incompatible with the existential idea of liberty (Beauvoir 1949, 78), one may nevertheless conclude that the very existence of such constraints on women in particular necessarily puts them in an unequal situation relative to their male counterparts. Most significantly, it puts them in a situation in which they find it difficult, both socially and psychologically, to reconcile the fact of their situation with their existential condition as necessarily free.

This difficulty which is experienced by women is part and parcel, we could argue, of the human condition as understood by existentialism. Women simply experience the fundamental ambiguity of existence when confronted simultaneously by their facticity (their situation) and their transcendence (their freedom). So, what exactly is the problem in Beauvoir's account of women's situation here? As we have seen, what marks Beauvoir's account of the condition of women as particularly problematic is the considerable emphasis which she places on women's situation as limiting, and limiting in a manner for which women cannot themselves hold full responsibility. Ultimately, it is precisely this lack of individual responsibility for the limitations of their situation which is a problem for Beauvoir's account of women's situation in relation to their existential freedom. In so far as women's situation conspires against their freedom, therefore, there seems to be a sense in which the condition of women is in fact at odds with an existential account of subjectivity. For, the reader will remember that on that account, it is we ourselves who bear
responsibility for the obstacles from which we suffer (Sartre 1943, 495). This problem in Beauvoir's account of women has, as I have suggested, particular implications for the shape of her vision of 'equality'. Critical to this vision is the achievement of an equal recognition between women and men of each other's (and their own) existential freedom. The difficulties which Beauvoir identifies in women's capacity to recognise and respect their own freedom will therefore have a critical impact on the ultimate potential for achievement of that relation of equality.

There is, therefore, a particular conflict in Beauvoir's writings between her account of women's economic, social and political situation and her existential account of freedom. On the one hand, it appears that this conflict can be reconciled by appealing to the existential argument that our situation should always be understood to be a condition of our freedom. In this sense, we can never understand the existential account of freedom to deny the reality of human existence as necessarily 'situated'. On the other hand, however, in so far as Beauvoir presents the specific situation of women (as opposed to the specific situation of men) as, firstly, a concrete obstacle to their freedom and, secondly, (at least in part) beyond their individual control and responsibility, women's situation provides the existential account of freedom with a clear example of the way in which our situation can actually intervene in our freedom. Such intervention is clearly at odds with the existential claim that it is we ourselves who hold responsibility for the extent to which we allow our situation to be a hindrance to our freedom. This emerging contradiction between Beauvoir's account of the situation of women and their existential freedom repeats itself in her arguments concerning the psychological and sexual situation of women. However, while the general pattern of contradiction between 'situation' and 'freedom' is maintained in these arguments, it will become clear that they in fact provide a new and distinct problematic for Beauvoir's work. I will turn now to address Beauvoir's consideration of those psychological and sexual factors which intervene in relations of equal exchange between women and men.

Beauvoir's insistence that economic, social and political equality must also be accompanied by a sense of achievement in psychological goals is of particular interest in terms of the concerns of this chapter for two reasons. First of all, it seems difficult to pin down and assess what Beauvoir does in fact mean by 'achievement' in psychological goals. Secondly, and perhaps more problematically, it implies that there is a critical link between the mental state of women and their 'freedom' from oppression. That is to say, change in the mental state of women appears essential to their capacity to act on their existential condition as free. Some critical questions emerge from these points. Firstly, it seems imperative that we consider how
Beauvoir proposes that psychological change might in practice be achieved. Secondly, we should question how malleable the psychology of women is conceived to be, such that significant change is possible. Is it enough to claim that the socially constructed character of that 'psychology' implies its malleability? I will consider these questions in the course of the following discussion.

Beauvoir argues early on in her assessment of women's progress towards liberation that "the fact of being a woman today poses peculiar problems for an independent human individual" (Beauvoir 1949, 691). That is, while women are inherently, on her existential account of identity, free and independent individuals, she nevertheless understands there to be problems peculiar to them which intervene in that independence. Beauvoir identifies the origin of these 'peculiar problems' as the different lived experiences of women and men. "for when [a woman] begins her adult life she does not have behind her the same past as does a boy; she is not viewed by society in the same way; the universe presents itself to her in a different perspective" (Beauvoir 1949, 691). Beauvoir's point here is, at least in part, that the way in which women are brought up to perceive themselves in particular (generally traditional) roles, can, and does, have a concrete impact on their later, adult, perspective on society and their role within it. A change in psychological perspective would therefore seem to require, at the very least, a significant change in the education and upbringing of female children.

Yet such a change in the social construction of 'women' does not seem to be all that might be required to effect a sense of achievement in 'psychological goals'. Indeed, it is precisely the complexity of Beauvoir's arguments on this point that make it necessary to closely assess the relation between her claims concerning the psycho-sexuality of women and her understanding of women as existentially free. Beauvoir makes the following important statement in the final chapter of The Second Sex: "even under the most favourable circumstances...[woman's] situation...is not equivalent to man's. The differences depend both on traditional attitudes and on the specific nature of feminine eroticism" (Beauvoir 1949, 696; my italics). Not only does Beauvoir therefore want to emphasise the significant impact that traditional attitudes towards women can have on their situation in society, but she is also concerned to identify a 'specific nature of feminine eroticism' as contributing to that situation. Most significantly here, Beauvoir's comments suggest that this 'specific nature of feminine eroticism' necessitates or determines difference, based on the nature or form of the female body, between the lived experience of women and men.
To emphasise further this difference between the lived experiences of women and men, Beauvoir argues that the situation of the 'emancipated' woman is marked by a peculiar conflict. This conflict takes the following form:

she refuses to confine herself to her role as female because she will not accept mutilation, but it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex. Man is a human being with sexuality; woman is a complete individual, equal to the male, only if she too is a human being with sexuality. To renounce her femininity is to renounce a part of her humanity (Beauvoir 1949, 691-2).

The conflict experienced by the emancipated woman is unique precisely because of her new-found 'emancipated' role. She is no longer caught in her traditional, domestic role, in which the functions of her sex are seen to correspond precisely to her maternal and nurturing functions in the home. As a woman liberated from these functions, she acts out her projects in the social and political spheres as a free, independent, human being. Yet, at the same time, Beauvoir argues, this independence is in conflict with her 'femininity', which corresponds to her sex as female.

This leaves Beauvoir in a peculiar theoretical position. For, despite emphasising throughout The Second Sex that 'women' are socially constructed and defined, bearing no necessary relation to the natural function and role of the 'female sex', she here refers repeatedly to 'the specific nature of feminine eroticism' as conflicting and intervening in the role of the emancipated woman. What exactly does she mean here? First of all, we have seen that Beauvoir makes reference to this conflict as taking place between the emancipated woman and the specific nature of feminine eroticism. This conflict therefore emerges only after independence has been gained from those traditional roles ordinarily accorded to women. Yet, to step back here for a moment, it is also true to say that Beauvoir identifies conflict in the situation of the unemancipated woman. Beauvoir's descriptions of the processes of puberty and sexual initiation in The Second Sex emphasise the very sense in which women, even in an oppressed state, experience their body as 'other' to themselves. So in what sense is the situation of the emancipated woman different to that of the unemancipated woman here? In both situations Beauvoir identifies a conflict between women's capacity for transcendence (their freedom or agency) and their specifically female sexual development. What is particularly significant about the situation of the emancipated woman is the sense in which, despite having achieved some degree of freedom from her former state of oppression, she does not escape the conflict resulting from her bodily situation. Indeed, the conflict is, precisely because
of her emancipation, even more pronounced. This is because her role in society is no longer structured around the relation she bears to her body.

So, on the one hand, we have an account of women as moving towards a wholesale liberation from their traditional role as bound to the private, domestic, familial, sphere. At the same time, however, Beauvoir argues that, once such liberation is achieved, there will nevertheless remain a conflict between a woman's new-found liberty and her sex as female. Critical to Beauvoir's arguments here, both in the case of the emancipated woman and in that of the unemancipated woman, is an account of the female body as the site of particular, essential, qualities and desires which are at odds with her existential nature as free. This account of the female body is given renewed emphasis by Beauvoir's reference to the specific nature of feminine eroticism.

In the first instance, Beauvoir's comments on the specific nature of feminine eroticism appear to provide us with a very similar tension to that which I identified as operating between her account of women's economic, social and political situation and their existential freedom. That is to say, the idea that the emancipated woman experiences a conflict between her 'feminine eroticism' and her (new-found) independence suggests, in general terms, a conflict between her (sexual) situation and her (existential) freedom. I have suggested previously that the repetition of such a pattern of tension in Beauvoir's work is problematic precisely because of the sense in which it suggests that women's situation in particular is in conflict with their existential condition as 'free' (men's situation, in comparison, is not, on Beauvoir's account, in conflict with their existential condition as free). In this specific case, however, where the conflict lies between what Beauvoir identifies as women's sexual situation and their freedom, there is something even more significant at work than just repetition of this familiar pattern of conflict. Indeed, what makes Beauvoir's comments concerning eroticism especially significant and, ultimately, problematic, for Beauvoir is the sense in which they imply that there is a specific set of qualities or desires which mark the female body as a site for 'feminine eroticism'. Such an implication is quite clearly at odds with Beauvoir's emphatic arguments against attributing 'inherent' or 'innate' qualities to the anatomical attributes of each sex. How can we understand this clearly undesirable implication of Beauvoir's arguments here?

First of all, we need to consider in more detail precisely what is at issue in Beauvoir's claim that the 'specific nature of feminine eroticism' will engender a particular 'difference' in the lived existence of 'women'. Beauvoir claims that,
Beauvoir's statement suggests something very important about the way in which she understands both women and men to experience or 'live' their bodies. Indeed, it suggests that the specific nature of feminine eroticism is such that woman will experience her own body and those around her in quite a different way to the way in which man will experience his body and those around him. It seems right to be somewhat curious now about how Beauvoir means to fit the conceptual implications of this statement into her overall argument that the nature or form of our sex as female or male will have no significant relation to our gendered identities as women or men. Indeed, the claim that the specific nature of feminine eroticism will provide woman with a particular, 'special' relation with her body and with those around her is quite clearly a claim which attributes critical significance to the relation between sex or sexuality and gender. That is, it suggests that the sex actually intervenes in the process of gender construction.

Beauvoir's emphasis on the importance of taking into account 'the specific nature of feminine eroticism' tells us, at the very least, that sex and sexuality remain critical categories in the overall account of the process of gender construction which she wishes to provide. Recognition of these factors is apparently essential to our being a 'complete' or 'full-scale' human being. Critically, it tells us that Beauvoir does have an understanding of our sex and sexuality as related in a very important way to the construction of our gendered or 'lived' identities (as 'women' and 'men'). Beauvoir's claims concerning feminine eroticism therefore provide us with a fresh but ultimately problematic angle on her account of gender. On the one hand, we have an understanding of Beauvoir's overall thesis that the nature of our sex in no way determines the form of our gender (reflected in the familiar argument that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'). Yet, on the other hand, Beauvoir wants to suggest that there is something specific to the female sex (namely, feminine eroticism) which causes women's attitude or perspective towards the world to be different to men's. Before addressing the question of how best to understand these

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3 Jo-Ann Fuchs supports this point, arguing that "although Beauvoir denies early on in The Second Sex that anything human is innate or totally 'natural', she comes dangerously close in her descriptions of female eroticism, to affirming what she should be denying, by her own standards" (Fuchs 1980, 309).
two conflicting arguments in the broader context of Beauvoir's work, it is important to get a clearer sense of their immediate implications.

I have suggested already the sense in which the conflictual nature of Beauvoir's arguments concerning feminine eroticism differ from the more general tensions at work in her account of women's situation in relation to existential freedom. The primary difference between these conflicts in her work lies in the very direct sense in which the former arguments attribute essential qualities or desires to the female body. That is to say, Beauvoir's arguments suggest both that the female body is a site for particular, 'feminine', desires and that women's lived experience of their bodies (as sexually different bodies) will, as a consequence, be fundamentally different to men's. I have pointed out the sense in which these arguments suggest a critical link between our sex as female or male and our gendered (or 'lived' identities) as women or men. This critical link which is drawn by Beauvoir between the nature of our sex and the construction of our gendered identity is a problem precisely because of the sense in which it conflicts with her overall thesis which rallies against such a link. If we are to take seriously, therefore, Beauvoir's claims both that the female body is a site for specifically feminine desires and that the nature of these desires is in conflict with women's newly-found independence, then we must contest the consistency of her concurrent claim that the nature of our sex is conceptually and practically distinct from our gender. That is to say, we must contest the claim that Beauvoir consistently supports a sex/gender distinction.

At this point, it is pertinent therefore, that we reconsider the conceptual categories of sex and gender which are at work in Beauvoir's arguments here. The claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman (Beauvoir 1949, 295), is understood as being one about the relation between the categories of sex and gender. More specifically of course, it is understood as being a claim about the relation between the female sex and the gendered identity of 'woman'. Significantly, it is this claim, that there is a critical distinction between the nature of the female sex and the gendered identity of woman, that provides the basis for Beauvoir's argument that there is no biological foundation for the inequalities and differences which exist between women and men at an economic, social or political level. The foundation for such differences lies, on Beauvoir's account, in the social construction of the gendered identities of 'women' and 'men'. It is this appeal to the socially constructed nature of gendered identities which consequently paves the way for Beauvoir's arguments concerning the possibility of equality between women and men. The distinction between the categories of sex and gender therefore, in a highly significant sense, functions to support her vision for equality between women and men.
Yet the claim that Beauvoir maintains a distinction between the categories of sex and gender is, as I have argued, a problematic one. It is of course true that the central thesis of *The Second Sex* implies such a distinction but I have identified several points at which this distinction is quite explicitly undermined. Most significant amongst these points is her reference to the specific nature of feminine eroticism as contributing to a fundamental difference in the lived experience of women relative to men (Beauvoir 1949, 740). In attributing specific qualities and experiences to the female sex, Beauvoir ultimately undermines the possibility of a clear cut distinction between the categories of sex and gender. Indeed, it seems that the nature of our sex is understood by Beauvoir to have a critical impact on the way in which we live and act in the world as gendered subjects.

It is important now to think through more specifically the implications of this conceptual collapse for her vision for equality between the sexes. At one level, Beauvoir's vision has appeared to be, at least in principle, one of complete equality or *identity* between the sexes. As we have seen, paramount within her vision of equality is the reciprocal recognition between the sexes of each other's freedom as individual, independent, human beings. This vision is therefore one of *sameness* in so far as it promotes this ideal of absolute equality above all else. Yet this vision of sameness is not necessarily tantamount to a claim that women should 'become like men' or forgo the significance of their sex or gender difference in order to be equal to men. Equality, that is, should not immediately be understood to be undermining of 'difference' or a claim of 'sameness'. Indeed, to complicate her vision for equality, we have also now witnessed the sense in which Beauvoir identifies concrete *inequalities* and *differences* between the sexes, both in the way in which each sex is constructed as gendered at a social and political level, and, most significantly, in the way in which the nature of our sex is 'lived' or 'experienced' by each subject at a sexual or physiological level. So how can we, as critics, understand Beauvoir's identification of inequalities and differences in relation to her vision of absolute equality? In particular, how can we understand these inequalities and differences in the context of theorising women's agency at a political level? That is to say, what impact might these inequalities and differences have on how we understand the character of women's actions as 'sexed' and 'gendered' agents in the political sphere?
Section Four
Re-situating Beauvoir

In the great majority of critical readings of Beauvoir, her vision of absolute equality between the sexes is understood as tantamount to a vision of sameness or neutrality. Specifically, Beauvoir is criticised for encouraging women to 'become like men' (either in body or in 'spirit') in order to achieve the sort of equality which she envisions⁴. The tensions which are at work in Beauvoir's account of the condition of women are generally understood by critics to be the result of her attempted reproduction of the Sartrean concept of freedom and her allegedly unsatisfactory analysis of the conditions of possibility of women's oppression (and hence also the conditions of possibility of women's status as other)⁵. In failing to provide an adequate account of the conditions which make oppression possible, critics claim that Beauvoir's vision for equality provides an ideal version of potential relations between subjects in which the specifics of the situation (social and/or biological) of each sex is ultimately perceived to be insignificant⁶. An important link is therefore made by such critics between the vision for social and political equality Beauvoir proposes and her account of the categories of sex and gender as distinct from one another. Presumed in her vision for equality, it is claimed, is a conception of subjects as potentially gender neutral and, in all significant senses, disembodied.

In such critiques of Beauvoir's vision of equality, I have claimed, it is presumed that she has a conception of the categories of sex and gender as fundamentally distinct. In order for absolute equality (understood as 'sameness') to be possible, it is thought that sexual difference must clearly be insignificant to her

⁴ See, for example, the criticisms raised by Chanter 1995, 75-76; Evans 1987, 172; Gatens 1991, 113, Lloyd 1984, 101; Mackenzie 1986, 184.
⁵ See, for example, Chanter 1995, 72; le Deuff 1980, 280; le Deuff 1989, 55; Mackenzie 1986, 148. Michèle le Deuff argues that Beauvoir quite possibly attempted to stretch existentialism "beyond and above its means" (le Deuff 1989, 55) without acknowledging that its treatment of situation is in fact inadequate and inappropriate in explaining the material causes of the oppression of women. Indeed, le Deuff argues that the concepts of authenticity and freedom guide Beauvoir’s analysis of the condition of women in such a way that the sheer force of social and historical determinations are denied (le Deuff 1980, 280). She is therefore highly critical of Beauvoir's failure to think through the conditions which make oppression possible and which conspire to perpetuate women's status as 'other' to men. In Beauvoir's reduction of the problematic to one at work between individuals, le Deuff argues, the very enormity of the social, historical and institutional forces which perpetuate dominant gender paradigms is left unacknowledged. In a more recent critical account of Beauvoir's work, Tina Chanter argues, like le Deuff, that Beauvoir did indeed fail to adequately account for the relation between the role of culture and history and the status of women as other. (She in fact identifies the reason for this failure as originating in Beauvoir's attempt to fuse Sartre's concept of absolute freedom with Hegel's concept of other). Chanter writes, "[Beauvoir's] belief in absolute freedom allowed [her] to underestimate the role history has in determining women as other" (Chanter 1995, 72).
⁶ See for example, Gatens' criticisms of Beauvoir in Gatens 1983 and Gatens 1991.
account of the process of gender construction. Indeed, a critical issue in arguments against Beauvoir's vision of equality is precisely her failure to think through the possible implications of sexual difference in her analysis of future relations between the sexes. Yet, in the light of my discussion of Beauvoir's work, it is debatable whether sexual difference is ultimately insignificant for Beauvoir. As I have claimed, this brings to the fore two important questions. Firstly, how does an understanding of sexual difference as significant in the construction of subjects as gendered impact upon our understanding of her vision for equality as a vision of 'sameness'? Secondly, how does such an understanding impact upon our conception of women's agency at a political level?

In response to this, it seems important to note first of all that at least two levels of analysis are at work here. At one level, Beauvoir has provided us with an account of sexual difference as formative in the psycho-sexual construction of 'women' and 'men' (Beauvoir 1949, 740). At another level, however, she has given us an account of subjects as, potentially, absolutely equal, both socially and politically. How should we understand the link between these two levels of analysis? Should we, like a great number of Beauvoir's critics, argue that, despite the specifics of Beauvoir's account of sexual difference, her vision for equality is ultimately one which denies difference and promotes sameness as an ideal towards which we must strive in order to achieve 'equality'? Or, should we reassess this ultimate picture of equality-as-sameness on the basis of her specific account of sexual difference as critical to the lived experience of subjects?

It is my claim that, at the very least, the argument can be made that Beauvoir does not seek to 'deny difference' in her vision for social and political equality between women and men. The emphasis she places on the significance of sexual difference in the lived experience of women and men is clearly inconsistent with the possibility that 'women' and 'men' will ever, effectively, be the same as one another with respect to their experiences as gendered subjects in the social and political spheres. I am not alone in making this claim. Toril Moi, for example, proposes that Beauvoir can be interpreted positively, as affirming the significance of sexual difference in subjective experience. There is, she argues, in The Second Sex, "a

7 Marilyn Frye, for example, argues that "in Beauvoir's struggles at the end of The Second Sex, it becomes clear that her picture of oppression implies that women's liberation involves leaving differences of anatomical morphology and function nameless and without significance in respect to selfhood" (Frye 1996, 995).
8 See, for example, Butler 1986; Butler 1987; Kruks 1990; Kruks 1992; Moi 1994; Singer 1990.
9 Like Moi, Linda Singer claims that Beauvoir's account of the condition of woman does indeed offer us with a theory of sexual difference. Indeed, Singer goes so far as to claim that 'while Beauvoir does not yet occupy the position of the valorised feminine operative in the discourse of contemporary
recognition that women will never be free unless they establish a sense of themselves as female, as well as human" (Moi 1994, 209-210). However, I would agree with Moi that, despite this affirmation of the importance of sexual difference in the construction of subjects, there remains in Beauvoir's work a failure to think through the actual relationship which can be seen to exist between the anatomical and the social (Moi 1994, 163). That is, there is a failure to think through what the effects of sexual difference might actually be at a social and political level. I would argue, along with Moi, that despite this failure, Beauvoir's emphasis on the importance of acknowledging sexual difference must at least give rise to a sense of 'equality' as something other than 'sameness' (Moi 1994, 209). Beauvoir's vision for equality is not tantamount to a denial of the significance of sexual difference in the construction of gendered identity. Furthermore, she clearly wants to argue that the fact of sexual difference should not lead to a relation of political inequality between women and men. That is, it should not lead to a relation in which, on the basis of their sex as female, women are understood to be (politically) inferior to men.

In summary, the breakdown of the distinction between the categories of sex and gender in Beauvoir's work suggests important implications for how we understand her vision for equality between women and men in the social and political spheres. Most significantly, it suggests that Beauvoir is not ultimately guilty of consistently denying the significance of our sexual difference in the construction of our gendered identity. I have suggested so far that Beauvoir does want to deny the relevance or significance of sexual difference in the context of political actions or activities in so far as such sexual difference has traditionally been understood to necessitate women's inferiority (and hence inequality) in relation to men. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that the categories of sex and gender are not politically irrelevant ones for Beauvoir.

feminism, her writing of the oppressed feminine makes the emergence of such a position possible" (Singer 1990, 332). Indeed she claims that Beauvoir repositions the Sartrean concept of freedom from autonomous individuals to a situation of relatedness and affinity (Singer 1990, 325). Sonia Kruks also offers a positive interpretation of the tensions of Beauvoir's account of women's situation in relation to their existential nature as 'necessarily free'. Indeed, she argues that the combination of Beauvoir's emphasis on the limitations of women's situation and her insistence on women's autonomy gives rise to an account of subjectivity which "can avoid both essentialism and hyperconstructivism" (Kruks 1992, 92). Significantly, Kruks notes that "by stressing that reproduction and sexuality are socially and culturally constituted phenomena, Beauvoir avoids the essentialism of biological reductionism. But she also avoids hyperconstructivism by arguing that reproduction is ontologically fundamental" (Kruks 1992, 105). I agree with Kruks here that Beauvoir does indeed attempt, even if only implicitly, to give a combination of an account of subjects as, on the one hand, autonomous and, on the other, products of social and cultural forces. Nevertheless, I think it would be naive to presume that this combination ultimately succeeds in Beauvoir's work. The important point which Kruks does make clear is the sense in which Beauvoir's work offers a more complex picture of the construction of subjects than we, as critics, often assume.
In identifying several ways in which our sex intervenes in the process of gender construction, I have argued in this chapter that Beauvoir thereby identifies two factors which limit women's freedom or agency relative to men: their embodiment in a reproductive body and their social construction as 'other' to men. At a political level, I have claimed that this implies that achieving a relation of 'equality' between women and men will not be a straightforward task of modifying the social construction of women, but will involve the more complex task of investigating and negotiating how sex-based attributes come to occupy positions of particular significance in the process of our construction as gendered political subjects. Analysis of the relation between the categories of sex and gender is therefore critical, and politically important, in terms of Beauvoir's overall vision for equality.

Beauvoir's work has therefore illustrated very clearly the sense in which sex and gender are important sites of analysis in the investigation of the character of women's (and men's) agency at a political level. One's sex as female or male may be thought of as relevant to one's construction as a subject in the political sphere in precisely the same way as it is relevant more generally to our construction as 'women' and 'men'. That is, it is a critical part of the makeup of one's 'subjectivity'. It may thereby be understood to intervene in, though not determine, the character of our actions or activities in the political sphere and, in some cases, may ground or form an important basis for, particular actions or activities. It may, that is, play an important role in the political representation of women and men as differently sexed subjects with, on this basis, some different needs and concerns in the political sphere. While Beauvoir's analysis of the condition of women suggests clearly which aspects of the female sex may limit women's agency or freedom, and so be criticised on this basis, it is nevertheless true to say that the breakdown of the distinction between sex and gender in her work does suggest the political importance of investigating the relation between 'sex' and 'gender' and, on this basis, makes an important contribution to feminist theorisation both about the conceptual framework in which we might understand these categories and about their relevance to feminist political concerns.

I want to suggest in conclusion, therefore, that in the context of the political concerns of feminism, Beauvoir's problematic account of the categories of sex and gender can be understood to provide an important and useful contribution to our contemporary negotiation of these concerns. Her work illustrates, first and foremost, the problems which are inherent in drawing a clear cut distinction between these categories. We can see that those categories operate in a relation of critical
interdependence, each partially dependent upon the other for its meaning or significance in the overall construction of subjects. Her work also clearly suggests the sense in which recognising subjects as both 'sexed' (embodied in sexually different bodies) and 'gendered' (socially constructed) against a framework of analysis in which these categories are not conceptually distinct, provides a framework of analysis which makes possible a rigorous investigation of the relation between the sex-based attributes of persons and their socially constructed gendered identities. That is, it clearly allows for an investigation of the content or meaning of our social and political construction as 'women' and 'men'.
CHAPTER THREE

Contemporary Responses to the Sex/Gender Distinction

Beauvoir's claim in *The Second Sex* that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman has provided a critical reference point for debate over the categories of sex and gender in contemporary feminist theory. Indeed, the distinction which is implied in this statement between sex and gender has, arguably, provided a critical foundation for the development of the feminist movement. The sex/gender distinction has been critical in the development of this movement at two levels, theoretical and political. Theoretically, it has provided a conceptual framework within which to analyse and assess the developmental processes through which the gendered identities of 'women' and 'men' are constructed, separate from the biological functions of our sex as 'female' and 'male'. Politically, it has served to support the claim that the natural functions of the female body do not necessitate any particular role or function for women in the political domain. The sex/gender distinction has therefore functioned to support the feminist battle against biological determinism and for a relation of equality between women and men.

Yet in the work of Beauvoir herself it is clear that this distinction between sex and gender is not drawn unproblematically. It is debatable, that is, whether the category of sex can be conceived of as wholly distinct and separate from the cultural construction of gender. Despite what I have identified as a clear breakdown in the distinction between sex and gender in Beauvoir's work, she remains classified by many of her critics as a theorist of a sex/gender distinction, and is strongly criticised on this basis. For this very reason, however, her work serves two important purposes in the context of contemporary feminist debate over the categories of sex and gender.

1 Evelyn Fox Keller goes so far as to suggest that modern feminist studies actually emerges with recognition of a sex/gender distinction (Fox Keller 1987, 37).
First of all, it serves to illustrate the problems involved in drawing a sharp conceptual distinction between those categories. Secondly, it suggests very clearly some of the political implications for feminism of the breakdown of the sex/gender distinction. In both cases, it serves as a pivotal reference point for contemporary feminist negotiations of the categories of sex and gender.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First of all, it is to consider why, despite its importance in the development of the feminist movement, the sex/gender distinction has been rejected in contemporary feminism. Secondly, it is to consider some specific responses to this distinction in contemporary feminist debate in which an attempt is made by theorists to renegotiate the conceptual framework through which we understand those categories. This chapter will focus specifically on introducing some of the theoretical issues which emerge in the context of contemporary attempts to renegotiate these categories. My consideration of these theoretical issues will later serve as a critical basis for my more detailed analysis of the political implications for feminism of the rejection of the sex/gender distinction.

The chapter will be divided into three sections. In the first section I will provide a brief outline of some accounts in which a version of the sex/gender distinction is actively maintained by feminist theorists. This outline will serve as a backdrop for a more detailed consideration in section two of how and on what basis this distinction is rejected by a number of contemporary feminists. I will argue in section two that a subtle but important distinction can be drawn amongst the approaches taken by such feminists towards the categories of sex and gender. Some, I will claim, reject the sex/gender distinction but nevertheless continue to make reference to the categories of sex and gender within the terms of a conceptual framework in which those categories are separate, yet critically interdependent, categories of analysis. Others, however, reject the sex/gender distinction and, further, reject reference to those categories as separate categories of analysis. In short, the latter group of theorists collapse the category of sex into that of gender. For these theorists, therefore, the category of gender absorbs that of sex. In the third section of the chapter I will argue that the framework through which we construe the categories of sex and gender has important implications for the way in which we understand and theorise two issues of specific concern for feminist theory: firstly, for how we understand the meaning or significance of our embodiment in sexually and materially different bodies; and, secondly, for how we theorise agency.
Section One

The sex/gender distinction

As I have claimed, Beauvoir's attempt to draw a distinction between the categories of sex and gender has emerged as a defining moment in feminist theory. It demonstrates an attempt to clearly distinguish between bodily (or natural) categories and gender identity categories. It also illustrates the difficulty in theorising embodied existence and agency on the basis of such a distinction. While Beauvoir offers persuasive arguments against attributing a causal or deterministic relation between 'natural sex' and 'gendered identity', we have seen the sense in which she confronts serious conceptual difficulties in theorising the precise relation that does exist, given that existence is necessarily embodied, between the body and our gendered identity. Indeed, as I have argued, the difficulties confronted by Beauvoir, whether explicitly recognised by herself or not, serve as a pivotal reference point for contemporary responses to the sex/gender debate.

There has been a rich legacy of feminist theorists who, like Beauvoir, have attempted to draw a clear cut distinction between the categories of sex and gender. Ann Oakley, for example, in 1972, argued that a distinction should be drawn between 'sex' and 'gender', "'sex' [being] a biological term: 'gender'. . .a psychological and cultural one" (Oakley 1972, 158). The question of what role biology might play in the cultural construction of gendered identity is explicitly raised by Oakley, but her ultimate conclusion is that its role is minimal. Gender, she claims, bears no necessary relation to an individual's own attributes (Oakley 1972, 204). In 1975, Gayle Rubin's paper on "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" marked an effort to distinguish between biological sex and the cultural construction of gender. In this paper, Rubin draws on accounts of identity provided by Lévi-Strauss and Freud. In these accounts she identifies the way in which the process of transformation of biological females and males into 'women' and 'men' is presented as taking place in the context and structure of particular social systems. According to Rubin, it is specifically within the context of kinship systems

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2 Many feminists drawing a distinction between sex and gender found support in the research carried out by Robert Stoller, a psychologist, in the late 1960s (see Stoller 1968). Stoller argued, on the basis of his empirical research, that gender is wholly socially constructed and not the determined result of biological sex. I will not discuss his work here except to cite it as highly influential in supporting feminist struggles against biological determinism and for relations of equality between women and men.

3 Rubin ultimately claims that both sex and gender, together, form a socially constructed system. Nevertheless, I have positioned her along with Beauvoir and Oakley here in so far as she clearly talks about the process through which biological females and males are transformed into 'women' and 'men'. Like Beauvoir and Oakley, that is, she also understands biology itself to play a minimal role in the social construction of gender.
that this process takes place (Rubin 1975, 159). These kinship systems function to regulate and structure the way in which gendered identities are formed. Kinship, Rubin argues, is "the culturalisation of biological sexuality on the societal level" (Rubin 1975, 189). What is important for us to note here is the way in which Rubin presents this process of gender formation as one in which females and males are originally 'raw materials' so to speak, and, through the process of culturalisation, are transformed into 'women' and 'men'. There is, therefore, a sharp distinction drawn by Rubin between biological sex and gendered identity. Gender is defined as a product of the social relations of sexuality (Rubin 1975, 179). For Rubin, then, like Beauvoir and Oakley before her, gender categories are socially imposed on apparently 'raw' or 'neutral' biological females and males.

To summarise here, in Beauvoir's, Oakley's and Rubin's accounts of gendered identity, gender is presented as a socially constructed identity category, imposed on biological females and males. In each account, no natural significance, in terms of the constitution of identity, is, in principle, attached to the biological makeup of persons. Any significance that is attributed to biology is understood to be wholly cultural. On the basis of these arguments, Beauvoir, Oakley and Rubin all suggest that material changes in culture will make way for a revolution in gender categories. For Beauvoir, changes in the socio-economic conditions provided for women will change the way in which gender categories have relegated woman to the position of 'other' and inferior to man. For Oakley, gender is "a matter of social ascription" (Oakley 1972, 204) and therefore subject to social and cultural change. On Rubin's account, a revolution in gender categories will take place in the specific context of structural, cultural and social change in kinship systems (Rubin 1975, 199-200).

In two more recent contributions to debate over the categories of sex and gender, the distinction between those categories is also encouraged despite the problems identified and recognised in actually drawing such a conceptual distinction. Sandra Harding, for example, proposes that "we should continue insisting on the distinction between culture and nature, between gender and sex... even as we analytically and experientially notice how inextricably they are intertwined individually and in cultures" (Harding 1986, 662). Further, in response to some contemporary efforts to define the category of sex, along with gender as a product or 'effect' of social construction, Marilyn Friedman seeks to challenge the claim that "the biological concept of sex identity...has...no basis in the nature of developing human bodies" (Friedman 1996, 84). She contends that feminism ought to maintain the concept of a biologically given sex identity (Friedman 1996, 78). The
category of sex should therefore, according to Friedman, be conceived of as, at some point, conceptually and analytically distinct from that of gender.

Section Two

Critiques of the sex/gender distinction

Despite the significance of their contribution to some of the founding emancipatory objectives of the feminist movement, attempts such as Beauvoir's and Oakley's to distinguish between the categories of sex and gender have been brought into question by many contemporary feminist theorists. At issue in much of the critical writing on the debate is the question of whether or not the distinction between sex and gender is as clear cut as Beauvoir and Oakley, for example, would have us believe. The sex/gender distinction is criticised on two principal grounds. First of all, it is criticised for appearing to assume an account of sex or the body as a wholly natural, pre-social, 'neutral' or passive object on top of which rests cultural meaning or gender. The categories of sex and gender thus come to be directly, and apparently unproblematically, aligned with the respective realms of 'nature' and 'culture'. A second criticism which is raised against the sex/gender distinction is that it appears to assume that there is some point at which we are 'free' from gender. That is to say, it appears to imply that there is some point at which we are 'neutral' or 'unconstructed' and then a point at which the cultural construction of our gender begins. This is exemplified by Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.

Despite there being general agreement over what is wrong with a sex/gender distinction, I want to suggest here that contemporary contributions to the sex/gender debate are nevertheless critically divided in their attempts to renegotiate the categories of sex and gender. Furthermore, this critical division has, as I will later draw out, very important theoretical and political implications for feminism. The two sides of this 'critical divide' can be distinguished principally, I will claim, in terms of the respective conceptual framework through which each understands the relation between the categories of sex and gender. Despite rejecting the dualistic framework which supports the sex/gender distinction, one side, I will argue, retains a conceptual framework in which those categories can be understood to operate in some form of significant relation to one another. The nature of our sex on this approach, can be

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understood to play a role, though not a fixed or determinate one, in the construction of our gendered identity. Likewise, the meaning or significance of our sex will be partially determined by the network of cultural meaning in which it is lived and experienced by us. The other side, however, reject not only the binary framework which supports the sex/gender distinction, but, further, a framework which separates those categories at any level of analysis. That is to say, theorists on this side resist any attempt to draw a significant relation between sex and gender. The category of sex on this view is quite literally absorbed by that of gender. At this stage, I will be concerned to draw out in more detail the position taken by the former side of this 'critical divide' and will only very briefly discuss the latter. In the next chapter I will provide a much more substantial critique of the work of Judith Butler, a theorist whose account of gender is a clear example of the latter position.

Moira Gatens is a good example of a theorist who, I want to claim, takes up the first of these two positions which I have identified on sex and gender. First of all, she offers a strong critique of the sex/gender distinction. She is highly critical of any account of gendered identity which posits the body as a neutral or passive surface upon which cultural meaning or gender is inscribed (Gatens 1983, 144; Gatens 1996, 4). According to such accounts, she argues, 'consciousness' or our 'psyche' is attributed primary and determinate status in the process of identity construction while the body figures merely as a surface upon which this process takes place. Gatens argues, against this view, that there is no neutral or passive body upon which gender can be inscribed. There are, she argues, only female and male bodies. This sexual difference is of crucial importance to the social significance which these bodies take on. The body, she argues, "can and does intervene, to confirm or deny, various social significances" (Gatens 1983, 149; Gatens 1996, 10). Gatens argues, therefore, that the fact of sexual difference must play a very important role in our understanding of the construction of gendered identity. She is consequently highly critical of the sex/gender distinction for positing an apparently neutral body which bears only an arbitrary relation to the process of gender construction (Gatens 1996, 4).

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6 I will be using the work of Judith Butler (see Butler 1986, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995b, 1995c) as my primary example of this approach to the categories of sex and gender. However, her approach has been extremely influential in contemporary Anglo-American feminist theory, particularly in so-called 'postmodern' feminist theory. I will discuss other examples of feminist theorists who take roughly her approach to sex and gender in chapter five. In so far as her approach can be classified as one in which sex is understood to be wholly an effect or product of social construction, it can also be identified as one which is strongly influenced itself by the work of Michel Foucault on the body (see Foucault 1975, 1976a, 1976b, 1980). I will discuss the influence of Foucault on her account of these categories, and on feminist theory more generally, in chapter four.
While it is clear from my analysis of Beauvoir's work on this subject that she would agree with Gatens in recognising 'the fact of sexual difference', she would nevertheless want, in principle, to reject Gatens' claim that this fact actively intervenes in or influences the construction of gendered identity. Furthermore, despite some inconsistencies which undermine her arguments in this respect, she would also, in principle, want to reject the claim that the body bears more than an arbitrary relation to gender. Gatens, on the contrary, places considerable and explicit emphasis on the fact of our embodiment in sexually different bodies and on the way in which we live out these bodies in the world. Indeed, she argues that in any analysis of gender we must take as the object of our analysis not the physical, anatomical, body, but the body "as lived, the animate body - the situated body" (Gatens 1983, 150; Gatens 1996, 11).

This effort by Gatens to theorise the relation between our sex and our gender distinguishes her not only from theorists of a sex/gender distinction, but also from other contemporary feminist theorists who seek to reject that distinction. While she clearly distances herself from any account in which the body or bodily experiences are understood to cause or necessitate particular social meaning or significance, she nevertheless makes the claim that "some bodily experiences and events...are likely, in all social structures, to be privileged sites of significance" (Gatens 1996, 9). She therefore clearly identifies a sort of interpretative relationship between the way in which we live in and assume a materially sexed body and the way in which we are constructed and construct ourselves as gendered. The process through which gender is constructed is therefore not, for Gatens, entirely independent of the materiality of sex.

An apparently similar relationship is drawn by Evelyn Fox Keller between sex and gender. She argues that "gender is a fundamentally relational construct which, although not determined by sex, is never entirely independent of it. In spite of cultural variability and psychological plasticity, it means something - though, for many individuals, perhaps not a great deal - to identify oneself as being of one sex and not of another" (Fox Keller 1987, 43). Fox Keller highlights a very important

7 I am referring, in particular, to the claims I make in chapter two here.
8 I have emphasised here the sense in which Beauvoir would want *in principle* to reject Gatens' identification of a significant relation between our sex and our gender. My analysis of her work in chapters one and two suggests that Beauvoir does ultimately draw a relation between sex and gender. Nevertheless, in so far as she explicitly subscribes to a framework of analysis in which those categories are fundamentally distinct, it is clear that such a relation is ultimately, and *in principle*, antithetical to her project.
9 Genevieve Lloyd concurs with Gatens' thesis here, arguing that "with gender there are no facts of the matter, other than those produced through the shifting play of the powers and pleasures of socialised, embodied, sexed human beings" (Lloyd 1989, 21).
point here in raising this issue of what it means to be, or to identify oneself as, of one
sex or another. The point here is that despite what particular meaning or significance
sex might hold in any given society or culture, it is more than likely that the fact that
one is sexed in one way or another will mean something in terms of the social
construction of gendered identity. It will not, that is, mean nothing.

This may seem quite an obvious point, but I want to suggest that it is in fact a
vital one. Indeed in the context of the second group of theorists which I have
identified as rejecting the sex/gender distinction, it is ultimately the most critical one.
I will discuss the approach taken by this second group of theorists only briefly here.
These theorists seek to reject the claim that there is a relation to be drawn between
sex and gender. Indeed, as will become clear in my analysis of the work of Judith
Butler, they claim that, in all significant senses, sex is gender. There is therefore no
point at which we can make the claim that the fact of our embodiment in a materially
different body will intervene in the social significance or meaning which that body
takes on. For these theorists, the materiality of the body is, at any level, absolutely
inseparable from its social significance. Indeed, they claim that the body is purely an
effect or product of its social significance. Sex is therefore just as much of a social
construction as is gender. As I have mentioned, I will discuss this approach to the
categories of sex and gender in much greater detail in the next chapter. At this point,
it is important only to get an initial sense of how this approach is clearly distinct
from that offered by such theorists as Gatens.

It is clearly distinct from the first approach, I want to claim, in terms of the
weight which it accords to 'social construction' in its account of the categories of sex
and gender. To recapitulate, both Gatens and Butler (as I will demonstrate) agree that
the sex/gender distinction wrongly posits the body as a wholly natural, pre-social
entity which is immune to the processes of social construction. Nevertheless, Gatens,
as we have seen, places considerable emphasis on the way in which the body does
intervene in the process through which it acquires social significance (Gatens 1983,
149; Gatens 1996, 10). For Gatens, that is, there is a relation to be drawn between the
body and its social construction. The process through which our sex is constructed
does not begin or originate in a pre-social, passive or neutral body but there are
nevertheless points at which that body is more a wholesale product of its social
construction than others. That is to say, at some points, for Gatens, the very
biological functions of the body will serve as "privileged sites of significance"
(Gatens 1996, 9) in its social construction. There is no point at which the body is
wholly unconstructed, but there are nevertheless points at which less emphasis or
weight is accorded to its status as constructed. For Butler, however, I will go on to
claim that the body is always, in theory, wholly and purely a product or effect of social construction. There is never a point at which the biological functions of the body intervene in any significant way in the process of social construction. In short, the body or sex is always just as much of a social construction as is gender.

I have suggested that these two approaches to the categories of sex and gender, one represented in the work of Gatens and the other, in the work of Butler, can be distinguished on the basis of the different conceptual frameworks within which these categories are negotiated. Gatens' retains a conceptual framework in which the categories of sex and gender are interdependent categories of analysis. As such, she talks about the relation between sex and gender. For Butler, however, as I will go on to argue, sex is wholly absorbed by gender. Sex as such itself disappears as a legitimate, separate, category of analysis. There is no significant conceptual relation to be drawn by Butler, I will claim, between the actual materiality of our sex and the processes through which it is socially constructed as sex.

**Section Three**

*Some implications for theories of embodiment and agency*

In this section of the chapter I want to introduce some important implications of these different conceptual frameworks for the way in which we theorise two issues of specific concern for feminist theory: embodiment and agency.

First of all, I want to suggest that the framework through which we understand the categories of sex and gender will have important implications for how we approach the issue of our embodiment in materially and sexually different bodies. In order for Beauvoir to maintain her allegiance to an existential account of freedom, we have seen that she slips into a clearly dualistic conception of the relation between the body and our subjective existence, in which we are thought capable of transcending the very facticity of that body. The approach taken by Gatens clearly addresses this issue of embodiment. Indeed for Gatens, analysis of the way in which we 'live' our bodies is the only way in which we can properly understand the relation between our sex and our gender, or rather the relation between "a person's biology and the social and personal significance of that biology as lived" (Gatens 1996, 11). For Gatens it is therefore clearly the case that a framework in which sex and gender are identified as separate, yet critically interdependent, categories of analysis, is vital in reaching an adequate understanding of our embodiment, or the significance of our body-as-lived. I will suggest in the next chapter that, in accounts such as Butler's, where sex is understood to be purely a
product or effect of gender, this analysis of the process through which the materiality of the body is constructed and experienced or 'lived' provides a weaker account of embodiment than that which is suggested by Gatens' work.

I want to suggest also here that the framework through which we understand the categories of sex and gender has important implications for the way in which we think about the issue of agency. In Beauvoir's work, the reader will recall that she understands our 'agency' to refer to, quite literally, our 'freedom'. That is to say, for Beauvoir, we are, as subjects, always, indeed condemned to be, free. Our agency or freedom is, in principle, absolute and transcends our facticity. For this very reason, her account, on the one hand, of the significance of our embodiment in sexually different bodies and her emphasis, on the other, on the force of women's social construction as 'other' are problematic. In short, they appear to provide concrete obstacles to what she understands to be women's agency or freedom. The point to draw out from Beauvoir's work here is that these two aspects identified by her in the condition of women (their embodiment and their social construction) are understood to have a critical bearing on their agency or freedom. Furthermore, it is precisely the breakdown of the distinction between the categories of sex and gender which gives way to problems in her work. A clear cut distinction between those categories would, as I claimed in my analysis of her work, support an account of women as 'free' from the limitations of their body. That is, it would support her claim that women can be freed and, significantly, have the capacity to free themselves from the constraints of their body and their situation.

Similarly, the respective frameworks through which theorists such as Gatens, on the one hand, and Butler, on the other, configure those categories have important implications for how they theorise agency. In rejecting the sex/gender distinction, both Gatens and Butler reject the notion that there is a point at which we are 'free' of gender. They reject the notion of agency presupposed by Beauvoir's account of sex and gender in so far as they claim that it suggests that we have the capacity to control our body and our gendered identity. While Gatens does not specifically address the issue of agency as it might be theorised on the basis of her own work, it is nevertheless clear that the subject is not, for her, ever 'free' from its sex or gender in the sense implied by Beauvoir. The subject, for Gatens, is always a sexed subject, and what it means to be a sexed subject will be different according to the body and the historical situation which one occupies. Indeed, it is precisely the significance of this sexed body which Gatens claims is obscured by the sex/gender distinction (Gatens 1996, 30). The way in which we 'live' our bodies and the way in which that body is constructed and represented in culture therefore has a significant impact on
our agency. That is to say, it is clear that, for Gatens, we always act from within a highly 'situated', highly 'gendered' cultural context.

Butler does, much more explicitly than Gatens, address the issue of agency in the context of her critique of the sex/gender distinction. Indeed we will see in the next chapter precisely how she contests any reference to a subject who precedes or is at some point free of their gender such that they might be in a position to actively choose or 'take up' that gender. Butler's rejection of the notion that we have some sort of objective control over gender does, however, leave her subject to serious criticism in contemporary feminist debate. If we are 'always already gendered', what role do we play in our social construction as gendered? Are we wholly socially determined? The loss in Butler's work of an account of agency which clearly attributes subjects with a capacity to actively participate in their social construction as gendered is understood by many critics of Butler to leave her with a version of social determinism which rests uneasy with the emancipatory objectives of the feminist movement. That is to say, it appears to imply that women cannot, as Beauvoir suggested, be freed or free themselves from dominant gender norms.

In conclusion, I have claimed in this chapter that the framework through which the categories of sex and gender are understood by feminist theorists will have important implications for the way in which they theorise the issues of embodiment and agency. What it has meant for feminism to reject the sex/gender distinction will therefore be different according to the new framework within which these categories are negotiated. In the course of this thesis I will be arguing that it is precisely through these two different frameworks which I have identified that different possibilities open up for feminism in theorising the issues of embodiment and agency in the context of the political concerns of feminism. In the next chapter, I will look in much greater detail at the framework through which Butler understands the categories of sex and gender and the specific implications which this framework holds for her own account of the issues of embodiment and agency. In providing a critique of her work on sex and gender, I will begin to introduce some of the possible political implications which emerge from her theoretical account of these issues. I will consider how her work has contributed to a sense of 'crisis' in contemporary feminist debate.
CHAPTER FOUR

Which Bodies Matter?
Judith Butler's Response to the Sex/Gender Distinction

Judith Butler's work on gender has made a significant, and particularly influential, contribution to the sex/gender debate in contemporary feminist theory. Like many of her contemporaries, she offers a strong critique of a conceptual framework in which the categories of sex and gender are understood to be distinct from one another. In criticising the sex/gender distinction she also calls for feminists to renegotiate and rearticulate the very framework through which these categories are theorised. Yet, as I have suggested, Butler's approach to the categories of sex and gender has some important distinctions from other approaches taken towards those categories in contemporary feminism. As I claimed in the previous chapter, Butler not only moves away from a conceptual framework in which those categories are understood to operate in direct relation to the realms of 'nature' and 'culture', but she wholly collapses the category of sex into that of gender. That is to say, for Butler, the category of sex is literally absorbed and displaced by that of gender. I want to claim in this chapter that this movement by Butler to a conceptual framework in which the category of sex is absorbed by that of gender has important implications for feminism at two levels: theoretical and political. Indeed I will claim, in the same vein as I did towards the end of the last chapter, that this conceptual framework ultimately impacts upon the way in which she can articulate and address two issues of theoretical and political concern for feminism: firstly, how we understand the meaning and significance of our embodiment in materially and sexually different bodies and, secondly, agency.

1 See Butler 1993, 5.
The focus of this chapter is, however, like the last chapter, largely theoretical. I will be primarily concerned to draw out in some detail at a theoretical level the issues of embodiment and agency as they emerge in the context of Butler's work. This will provide the basis for an extended analysis of the implications her conceptual account of the categories of sex and gender has (and is perceived to have) for feminism at a political level in later chapters. In the first part of the chapter, I will provide a brief account of Butler's response to the sex/gender debate, the difficulties we confront in assessing her work in the context of this debate and her specific critique of the sex/gender distinction. I will go on to outline her reconfigured account of the categories of sex and gender in her performative account of gender.

In the second part of the chapter I will provide a critique of this account. I will raise two criticisms of Butler's work, corresponding to the issues of embodiment and agency. Firstly, I will claim that Butler's account of the materiality of the body as inseparable from its materialisation, and the absence of a framework of analysis in which a relation can be drawn between that materiality and its materialisation, precludes valuable analysis of the possible effects of that materiality on its materialisation. Furthermore, she does not provide us with a strong account of what it might mean to 'live' or 'embody' a particular kind of body. Secondly, I will claim that Butler does not provide us with a strong account of how we act, both individually and collectively, as agents in the world. Her account of agency is, I will claim, lacking in content in the sense that it gives us only a weak sense of what makes us, as individuals, capable of active and deliberate resistance to dominant gender norms and hierarchies. It is also unclear, I will claim, how Butler can give an account, on this basis, of what sorts of conditions make collective agency possible.

Part One

(i) Butler troubles gender

I will begin by considering, firstly, the principal concerns of Butler's work and, secondly, the difficulties we face in carrying out our critical assessment of that work. A primary concern of her work is to challenge the way in which we have traditionally defined and understood the gendered identity category of 'woman'. She questions the assumption, frequently made in accounts of that category, that 'being female' is a natural fact about 'women', arguing instead that both our sex and our gender are in fact sorts of cultural performances, produced and constrained by relations of power in society. She thus contests the claim of many feminists before her (for example, Beauvoir and Oakley) that sex is a biological foundation which
precedes and is distinct from gender. That is, she rejects the arguments that it is a neutral or passive surface upon which gender is inscribed and that it is somehow ontologically prior to and distinct from gender. She wants to suggest rather that both sex and gender are effects or products of social and cultural forces.

Butler's account of sex and gender can also, as I suggested in the previous chapter, be distinguished from other, more contemporary, responses to the sex/gender debate. For example, while Gatens places considerable emphasis on theorising and accounting for the relation between our gendered identity and our embodiment in sexually different bodies, Butler wants to deny that such a relation can be theorised. For Butler, as I will go on to demonstrate, the very act of theorising a relation between our sex and our gender entails the presumption that these categories are at some level, conceptual or otherwise, substantially distinct. She wants to deny such a distinction. It is important to note, therefore, that the specific character of Butler's rejection of the sex/gender distinction (that is, her movement to a framework in which sex is absorbed by gender) makes the critical task of theorising a relation between sex or the body and gender redundant on her account. To demand an account of the nature of the relation between our sex and our gender is to presume that those categories can be thought of as, at some level, substantially distinct and it is to presume that there is an accountable relation between them. For this reason, the very terms of her account of the categories of sex and gender make a critical assessment of this particular relation in her work conceptually difficult.

Can we nevertheless make such an assessment? Can we legitimately tax her in terms of a terminological distinction which she actually rejects? We have seen that, for Butler, gender "absorbs and displaces 'sex'" (Butler 1993, 5). Similarly, she makes reference to "the indistinguishability of psychic and bodily formation" (Butler 1993, 22) and "the indissolubility of materiality and signification" (Butler 1993, 30), in each case emphasising the sense in which she wants to wholly collapse the traditional 'nature/culture' framework against which the categories of sex and gender, 'body' and 'psyche', 'materiality' and 'signification', have been aligned. However, although she clearly does contest the very possibility that we can make any reference to a framework in which these categories are distinct, we will see that, in the end, it is not actually clear that she succeeds in undermining such a possibility, or, in not making reference to a distinction between those categories herself. For this very reason, it is absolutely critical that we do consider the performative framework through which she construes those categories in the light of the framework which it is so clearly a reaction against. It is important that we question how consistently, for instance, Butler actually avoids positing the materiality of sex as a category of
analysis. That is to say, we must question whether she does actually succeed in giving an account of sex as 'wholly cultural' and doing away with any reference to its materiality as a site of analysis. Furthermore, we must question whether the linguistic distinction she makes in actually referring to or 'naming' the categories of sex and gender tracks a conceptual distinction.

In assessing Butler's work it is critical that we understand how, and through what means, she claims to move beyond the distinction which has been drawn between those categories in feminist theory. It is important, that is, to understand both how she moves beyond the sex/gender distinction as it is traditionally conceived (against a nature/culture framework) and, further, how she moves beyond a framework in which a clear cut distinction is rejected but a relation is nevertheless drawn between those categories (such as, for example, is drawn in Gatens' work). In making this move in conceptual frameworks, it is important that we also assess whether or not Butler ultimately succeeds in resolving the very problems which she understands to be at work in a sex/gender distinction. As I have suggested already, these problems principally concern how she articulates and addresses the issues of embodiment and agency.

In order to address these issues, it is imperative that we begin by getting a clearer sense of the specific grounds on which Butler challenges the sex/gender distinction. She contests the distinction for a number of reasons. Firstly, she argues that assumed in such a distinction is an immutable notion of sex. That is, there is an assumption that our sex is a natural and unchangeable fact about our existence which holds a significance quite apart from social or cultural forces. This separation of the category of sex from the forces of society and culture suggests, according to Butler, dependence on a sort of "presocial ontology" (Butler 1990, 3) which remains stable and intact despite external (cultural) changes in its interpretation and signification. That is, it suggests that our sex somehow pre-exists its gendered signification (Butler 1990, 7). The discontinuity which this implies between sex and gender (as between 'nature' and 'culture') is contested by Butler. She claims that there is no 'presocial ontology'. Our 'being', she argues, can only be understood and theorised within the terms of the social, historical and cultural (Butler 1990, 3-6). This particular critique of the sex/gender distinction, and the movement to construe those categories wholly within the realm of 'culture' is, as we have seen, characteristic of contemporary responses to that distinction.

Butler goes further, however, than just pointing out the sense in which sex is not immune to the processes of social construction. For Butler, as we have seen, any
distinction which is drawn between the categories of sex and gender is ultimately a non-distinction. Since all categories of identity are always already gendered on her account, there is no sense in which gender can be distinguished from or operate in some kind of meaningful relation to sex. Such categories of identity as sex, and the body function only, she argues, to "create the effect of the natural, the original [or] the inevitable" (Butler 1993, x). Our traditional reliance on seeing the categories of sex and the body as original and fundamental to the constitution of gendered identity is therefore brought into question by Butler's critique of the very sense in which we understand them to be original and fundamental. According to Butler's account, these categories of identity are themselves effects, products, of relations of power. In so far as they have functioned to 'ground' our understanding of identity we have misunderstood the process through which these categories come to carry such fundamental significance. Instead of considering how it is that gender has come to be attributed to particular bodies, therefore, Butler seeks to question "to what extent the body comes into being in and through the marks of gender" (Butler 1990, 8). Rather than assuming sex or the body to be the fundamental or original starting points of an analysis of gender categories, Butler asks that we consider first and foremost the way in which sex and the body have themselves 'come into being' through gender categories.

A further point contested by Butler in her critique of the sex/gender distinction is the possible implication of that distinction, that there is a sort of neutral subject or agent 'behind' or logically prior to, gendered subjectivity. She thus contests the view held by some sex/gender theorists that subjects are somehow capable of 'choosing' or 'adopting' their gender, as though gender is simply a bit of clothing we take on or off an otherwise neutral foundation of identity. Gender is not, therefore, for Butler, simply a set of "free-floating attributes" (Butler 1990, 24-25) from which we pick and choose at will. Neither are we, as subjects, ever free from gender, such that we could be in a position to choose the nature of that gender. Butler therefore denies that we, as subjects, can play an 'externally constructive' or objective role in the constitution of our gendered identity (a role which appears to be attributed to subjects in Beauvoir's account of gender, for example). Yet, at the same time, she explicitly commits herself to some form of agency in her account of gender, devoting a significant part of her work to articulating how to incorporate such a notion within the terms of a constructed account of identity (Butler 1990, 32). "Gender," she argues, "is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (Butler 1990, 24-25). I will return to Butler's re-

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2 Butler uses the example of Beauvoir in making this point: see, for example, Butler 1986, Butler 1987.
conceived notion of agency and the problems it invokes in the course of this discussion. At this point, however, we can note that in Butler's account of gender there is an attempt made to incorporate both an account of gender as constructed and a concurrent rejection of the idea that gender is wholly determined by social or cultural forces. It is in her formulation of 'gender as performance' that Butler attempts to incorporate these apparently polarised views of gender.

Before moving on to Butler’s performative account of gender constitution, it is important to summarise here, firstly, the two specific arguments which she raises against deployment of a sex/gender distinction and, secondly, the critical relation which is operative between those arguments. First of all, she claims that such a distinction presupposes a conception of the category of sex as 'raw material' or 'brute fact' which acts as a 'tabula rasa' for the inscription of cultural meaning (or 'gender'). Secondly, she claims that the process of gender constitution which this conception of the category of sex implies is one which presumes that we are at some point free from gender and, at that point, await cultural inscription. So we can see clearly here that it is precisely in rejecting the sex/gender distinction and attempting to move 'beyond the binary frame' upon which that distinction is based that Butler can also be understood to reject a particular account of agency: an account which represents the subject as at some point free from the mediation of culture, capable of actively choosing or taking up its gender. Significantly, she considers such an account of agency to be at work in Beauvoir's account of sex and gender.

Butler’s rejection of this particular account of agency has important implications both for the theoretical imperatives of her own work and the way in which those imperatives have been critically received in the context of the political concerns of contemporary feminism. In rejecting that account which she understands to be at work in a sex/gender distinction, Butler nevertheless attempts to deploy a concept of agency in her performative theory of the process of gender constitution. Indeed, as we will see, she is committed to giving an account of subjects as resistant to the potential determination of culture. Such resistance is critical to the very possibility that the gendered identities of 'women' and 'men' might be disassociated with those roles against which they have been biologically, historically and politically defined. Amongst her critics, however, it is a point of contention whether the concept of agency which Butler deploys (where agency, as we will see, is located in resistance) is adequate to the possibility of such

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3 See Butler 1990, x.

4 As I have mentioned, I will assess these political implications of Butler's rejection of the sex/gender distinction in the second half of this thesis.
'disassociation'. For this reason, it is a further point of contention whether, in rejecting the account of agency she does, Butler ultimately 'gives up the basis' for a feminist politics. That is to say, it is a point of critical concern whether giving up a notion of agency such as is deployed by Beauvoir ultimately implies that we are determined by culture and can play no role, for example, in the social construction of 'women'. However, while there is considerable division of opinion over, firstly, what should or would constitute an adequate account of agency for the purposes of a feminist politics and, secondly, whether Butler herself provides an adequate account for such purposes, there is nevertheless general agreement that some account of agency is itself critical to feminist political concerns. For this very reason, the way in which it is defined and deployed by Butler is of central importance to our assessment of the political implications for feminism of her work.

In moving 'beyond the binary frame' of sex and gender Butler therefore attempts to move beyond what she understands to be problematic accounts of the body and agency. However, her own account of those issues is not without problems, particularly when it is assessed in relation to the political concerns raised in contemporary feminism. I will now give a more detailed account of Butler's performative account of gender with a view to assessing in the following section the impact of that account on the issues of embodiment and agency.

(ii) Butler's performative account of gender

Gender is performative, according to Butler, in the sense that it is not a stable or fixed point of agency, but rather is an identity category created and constituted through "a stylised repetition of acts" (Butler 1990, 140). Gender, Butler argues, is "the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1990, 33). It is important to note here then, that Butler does not understand gender to be a deliberate, imitative act, in the sense generally invoked by the term 'performance'. Rather, gender is performative, in the sense that its meaning is constituted dramatically and contingently through sustained social performances (Butler 1990, 139-141). A performative act, Butler argues, is one which,

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5 Susan Hekman claims that Butler does indeed give up the basis for a feminist politics. She suggests that Butler does this both in her rejection of the particular account of agency which I have outlined and also in her rejection of a 'real' material body outside of discourse (Hekman 1995a, 156). Monique Deveaux also expresses concern with respect to this 'loss of agency' in Butler's performative account of gender (Deveaux 1994, 239).
brings into being or enacts what it names, and so marks the constitutive or productive power of discourse. . . For a performatative to work, it must draw upon and recite a set of linguistic conventions that have traditionally worked to bind or engage certain kinds of effects (Butler 1995c, 134).

Gender is therefore understood by Butler to be constituted through a set of repeated and sustained social performances within the context of the regulatory conventions and norms dominant in society. The ultimate effect of these repeated performances is an appearance of substance, an appearance of gender as a natural expression of particular bodies. For Butler, understanding gender to be performative therefore affirms the sense in which it appears over time to be stable and fixed to particular bodies.

In the performance of gender, the 'performing subject' holds no prior or objective status in the act of performance. Unlike in accounts such as Beauvoir's, therefore, we get no sense that for Butler there is any point at which the cultural construction of a subject's gender actually begins. Nor do we get a sense that we can transcend our gender in the sense implied by Beauvoir, where transcendence implies a degree of freedom from that gender. We are, for Butler, 'always already gendered'. Indeed, subjects are actually constituted and produced through and by their repeated performances of gender norms. The performative character of gender creates only the illusion of a 'prior subject', and, in so doing, she argues, it actually masks the conventions and norms of which it is in fact a repetition (Butler 1993, 12).

We can see then that Butler is careful to distinguish between the familiar term 'performance' and her notion of performativity in order to emphasise the sense in which the latter notion does not refer to a singular act, such as is implied by the term 'performance'. The reduction, she argues, of performativity to performance "would be a mistake" (Butler 1993, 234). The very performativity of gender is supposed to convey the sense in which it is always a repeated act, which reiterates norms. In so far as it is construed performatively, it is precisely this repetition and reiteration which works to rigidify and institutionalise gender. The repetition and reiteration of norms therefore constitutes the apparent 'stability' of gender. "If a performative provisionally succeeds," she argues, "it is . . .only because that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices" (Butler 1995a, 157).

6 Butler again makes reference to the distinction she is drawing between 'performance' and 'performativity' in an interview in Radical Philosophy. In this interview she emphasises the importance of understanding the notion of performativity "through the more limited notion of resignification" (Osborne & Segal 1994, 33).
At the same time as the performativity of gender works to rigidify and institutionalise gender norms, however, the very activity of this repetition or citation of norms suggests for Butler the possibility that those norms can be subverted. That is, it suggests that there can be *variation* in the repetition of norms. Indeed, as we will see, it is precisely in this variation in the way in which subjects actively repeat norms that Butler locates agency. 'Agency' is in this case understood to be a resistance to dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies.

Butler finds support for her performative account of gender in her analysis of drag in the documentary film "Paris is Burning". In drag, Butler argues, we witness, in an exaggerated form, the sense in which gender is both imitative and contingent (Butler 1990, 136). That is, to the extent that drag 'imitates genders', it reveals the sense in which those genders are themselves imitative and inscribed contingently on the surface of bodies (Butler 1990, 136-137). Butler argues that the performance of gender in drag is not only destabilising, but also subversive of the distinctions between natural and artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer, which she perceives to be at work in our traditional understanding of gender as expressive of, or inherent in, sex. She argues that drag effectively mocks any appeal to a notion of 'true' gender identity (Butler 1990, 137). It further illustrates the sense in which the very repetition of gender norms is (or can be) *subversive* of those norms.

Yet, as an aside, this effort to compare drag performance with the process of gender constitution (as imitative and contingent) is, I think, ultimately inappropriate for her overall arguments concerning the performative constitution of gender. In drag we witness a deliberate, imitative act. Indeed, we witness the impersonation of gender, by someone who in a deliberate and active way has assumed that gender 'on top of' his/her own. No matter how authentically the drag queen acts out her role, it remains the case that there is a subject, an actor, preceding that act. That subject has a gendered identity which, in a very significant sense, *precedes the act of drag* (indeed, this seems to be the very point, or purpose, of drag: it is an act of impersonation). For this very reason, I want to suggest that in so far as Butler wishes to avoid an account of gender as "a locus of agency from which various acts follow" (Butler 1990, 140), the example of drag does not appear to support such an account. It seems, therefore, to be an inappropriate example of Butler's performative account of the process of gender constitution7.

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7 Butler does in fact later claim that drag should not be construed as a paradigm for what she means by the 'performativity' of gender. See her interview in Osborne & Segal 1994, 33.
This account of drag does serve to highlight, however, one significant problem which is faced by Butler in her account of gender. As we have seen, Butler wants to argue that in the performance of gender, there is no 'performing subject' who holds a prior or objective status in the act of performance. Yet at the same time, she wants to hold on to some account of agency, in which subjects have a capacity to disavow or alter the gender assigned or attributed to them by and through relations of power in society. She wants, therefore, to provide an account of gender which is neither "fatally determined" by those norms and conventions at work in 'the production of subjects' nor "fully artificial and arbitrary", randomly assigned and passively received by subjects (Butler 1990, 146). In order to locate possibilities for resistance against those norms and conventions governing gender paradigms and hierarchies, Butler argues that we must seek to understand the processes through which gender is produced and enacted by and through subjects. Agency, Butler argues, can be located within those processes through which gender is performed and sustained by subjects. Indeed, it is precisely within "the possibility of a variation on [the] repetition" (Butler 1990, 145) of those sustained social performances that Butler locates her 'redefined' notion of agency. In locating agency as such within the very construction and performance of gender, Butler appears to successfully incorporate it within the terms of an account of identity as constructed. Nevertheless, several problems plague this formulation of agency. I will introduce the nature of these problems in the following part of the chapter.

**Part Two**

(i) *The trouble with Butler's account of sex and gender*

In this part of the chapter I will be providing an extended critique of Butler's performative account of gender. Specifically I will be addressing her accounts of the issues of embodiment and agency, both of which I consider to raise important concerns for our understanding of the implications her work has for the theoretical and political concerns of feminism. My critique of Butler will at this stage remain primarily theoretical in focus. This theoretical critique will, however, as I have suggested, serve as an important basis for the conclusions I later draw concerning the political implications of her work.

In moving beyond the terms of the sex/gender distinction, Butler rejects the claim that our sex holds any natural or basic significance with respect to the construction of our gendered identity. Indeed sex is, for Butler, like gender, constituted performatively. It therefore seems important to question where, if
anywhere, the material reality and sexed specificity of the body might figure in this performative account of the categories of sex and gender. An evaluation of Butler's response to this question is important for two reasons. Firstly, the reader will recall accounts of those categories which are provided by other feminist critics. In some of those accounts (such as that which is provided by Gatens), a clear cut sex/gender distinction is rejected but commitment is nevertheless maintained to a theory of gender which avows the significance of our embodiment in materially and, importantly, sexually different bodies. In such accounts, the categories of sex and gender therefore remain intact, but the relation between them is retheorised. For Butler, however, sex is always already gender, and, as a consequence, there is no relation to be drawn between those categories. It is important, in this context, that we consider what the rejection of this relation between the categories of sex and gender might mean for our assessment of Butler's work, and whether, in the end, she can avoid reference to some form of distinction between those categories. Secondly, and consequently, it is important to clarify what function the materiality of the body serves, if it serves a function at all, in the context of Butler's performative account of gender.

In order to address Butler's response to this issue of the materiality of the body, I will begin here by providing a brief overview of her account of the body which is outlined in Gender Trouble. I will then give a more detailed account of her specific response to criticisms raised against that account of the body in Bodies That Matter. These criticisms principally concern her failure to adequately address the materiality of the body and the function or operation of that materiality within the terms of her performative account of gender. In my assessment of Butler's response to this issue I will argue that the performative framework through which she construes the categories of sex and gender leads her to an inadequate theorisation of the relation between the actual materiality of the body and its materialisation. In so far as she construes these categories performatively she collapses any relation which might be drawn between them. I will argue that her failure to address this relation between the materiality of the body and the way in which we 'live' that materiality leaves her critically lacking a rich account of embodiment.

A significant part of Butler's project in Gender Trouble consists in her attempt to denaturalise bodily categories; that is, to reject a conceptual framework in...
which the categories of sex or the body are understood to correspond to 'nature' or to that which is natural or 'fixed' about us. Although she does not seek to deny the material fact of the body, she does attempt to relieve that body of its association with all that is 'natural', 'original' and 'prior to culture'. What we think of as irrefutable and unchangeable about the body is, according to Butler, a product of how that body is materialised, or how it becomes significant, for us. That is, for Butler, the body is itself constituted and defined performatively, within "a cultural field of gender hierarchy" (Butler 1990, 139). As such, it cannot be attributed with the status of 'the natural' in so far as such a status implies that the body can in some way be understood objectively, apart from its location and institution in relations of power. The category of 'the natural' is, for Butler, itself an effect of relations of power.

This begs the question, however, of how Butler understands the category of sex or the body to operate in the performative constitution of gender. To recapitulate here, in rejecting a distinction between the categories of sex and gender, Butler effectively collapses those categories into one another. That is to say, she claims that sex is always already gender and cannot be theorised or thought independently of gender. Indeed, sex is gender. Yet the very language which she uses to describe the rejection or collapse of this distinction, as we will see, suggests the separability of those categories. Should we be concerned about such a linguistic distinction? Does it track a conceptual distinction? If so, does it hold any critical significance for her rejection of the sex/gender distinction? In order to consider this issue, I will look briefly at a statement made by Butler which highlights some reasons for why we might want to claim that it is significant to our analysis of her work.

Butler claims that the fact "that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various facts which constitute its reality" (Butler 1990, 136; my italics). This is a curious statement which appears to have some important implications for how we might understand and assess Butler's account of the body in relation to her rejection of the sex/gender distinction. In so far as Butler locates the "reality" of the body in its "various facts" she appears to locate its 'ontological status' precisely in its functional or biological characteristics. However, if there is, as she says, no distinction to be drawn between the materiality of the body and its materialisation, we may well question how she can make such a distinction between this 'reality' and the apparent reality in which we live out our existence in the world, in gendered bodies. In other words, if the reality of the body

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10 In Bodies That Matter, she argues that "neither of these essays," she argues, "is meant to dispute the materiality of the body" (Butler 1993, 17).
does indeed lie in its 'various facts', then should we not be concerned to give an account of the relation which is at work between those various facts and our own experience and interpretation of them? The suggestion that there is a distinction to be made here, between the reality of the body and our experience of that reality, appears to pose considerable problems for Butler's arguments against reference to a body which, at some level, exists apart or distinct from its gendered significance. That is to say, it appears to suggest that the linguistic distinction between 'materiality' and 'materialisation' does unavoidably track a conceptual one.

The question of how the category of sex or the body operates in her performative account of gender constitution is complicated by this question of whether or not the linguistic distinction necessarily or unavoidably tracks a conceptual one. It is unclear whether Butler ultimately defers to, and indeed cannot avoid deferring to, a basic distinction between the various facts which constitute the material reality of the body and the gendered body. Butler does herself claim that "to concede the undeniability of sex or its 'materiality' is always to concede some version of sex, some formation of 'materiality'" (Butler 1993, 10-11). The question which is pertinent here is whether such an implied distinction is actually inconsistent with her project to move 'beyond the binary frame' of sex and gender, or whether it is, ultimately, an unavoidable and incidental point. Insofar as Butler does not want to deny the material reality of the body, it does indeed seem unavoidable not to make some sort of basic linguistic distinction between its status as a material fact and the way in which we experience and interpret that fact as a gendered body. It is clear, nevertheless, that anything more than such a basic distinction would be inimical to Butler's project, which concerns precisely the rejection of any conceptually significant distinction between those categories. That is to say, Butler would clearly be concerned to relieve any distinction which might be drawn between the material fact of the body and the gendered body of any weight, import or significance. In the light of the problems I have raised, however, it seems imperative that we question whether she ultimately succeeds in this task and so gets beyond the problems she initially observed in traditional appeals to a sex/gender distinction.

Butler clearly attempts to carry out this task in Bodies That Matter. There, she concedes that there are some 'facts' about our existence which cannot be dismissed as 'mere construction'. Nevertheless, she wants to claim that the irrefutability of such facts "in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what means" (Butler 1993, xi). So, what Butler has done here is accept, on the one hand, that there are certain irrefutable facts about the body and about bodily existence which she simply cannot deny but, on the other hand, argue that what is
important about these facts, or what 'matters' about them, is the way in which we choose to interpret or affirm them. What is important about the body is not, she argues, its functional characteristics but rather, the way in which significance is attributed to the body, and how that process (of attributing significance) gives effect to and constitutes that body.

For Butler, the material fact of the body is 'constructed', therefore, in the sense that that materiality itself only becomes intelligible to us through and within the terms of culture. We only have access to the functional characteristics of the body through this 'screen' of culture. "Bodies only appear," she argues, "only endure, only live, within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas" (Butler 1993, xi). So, while there is a distinction to be made at some basic level, between the material fact of the body and the body to which we have access, she claims that it is not of the same character as that which is presupposed in a sex/gender distinction. Sex is not, on her account, a raw, natural, object which precedes and awaits its cultural inscription. The material fact of the body is inseparable from its materialisation as a gendered body. It is only ever intelligible to us as a gendered body.

This view of the body, as intelligible only through and within culture, is critical to the way in which Butler wants to account for 'the material fact of the body'. She argues that "what constitutes the fixity of the body... will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as an effect of power" (Butler 1993, 2; my italics). In conceiving of materiality in this way, a crucial shift of emphasis is made by Butler. The body is, she argues, a fixed, material object, but the process through which it is perceived as material (that is, the process of materialisation) constitutes that very materiality. The materialisation of the body as a sexed body is therefore one and the same thing for Butler as its materiality. The distinction between the materiality of the body and its materialisation, as between sex and gender, is therefore, in a critical sense, collapsed by Butler. Significantly, once we understand bodies in this way, as "not thinkable apart from [their] materialisation" (Butler 1993, 2), we can no longer 'theorise' the category of 'bodies' except in so far as that category is theorised as produced and constituted through a domain of cultural intelligibility.

Ultimately, this way of understanding the materiality of the body has important implications for how we might want to position Butler within the terms of the sex/gender debate. For indeed as we have seen, Gatens suggests that the material, sexed specificity of the body intervenes in the social significance those bodies take
on. While she rejects a clear cut sex/gender distinction, and suggests the constitutive interdependence of those categories, she nevertheless talks about the functional, material characteristics of the body or sex as significant in the process of gender construction. To repeat here, Gatens writes that the body "can and does intervene, to confirm or deny, various social significances" (Gatens 1983, 149). The body or sex is therefore clearly presented within a framework in which it can be understood as a legitimate, indeed critical, category of feminist analysis. This distinction between the conceptual frameworks through which Gatens and Butler theorise the categories of sex and gender is reflected well in the following statement which is made by Butler. She claims that

if gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties but, rather, is replaced by the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption and gender emerges, not as a term in continued opposition to sex but as a term which absorbs and displaces 'sex' (Butler 1993, 5).

This statement clearly sets out the sense in which Butler understands the category of 'sex to be absorbed by that of 'gender. Any relation which could be drawn between the categories of sex and gender is, quite literally, collapsed. As I suggested in the last chapter, the emphasis or weight which Butler accords to the body or sex in the process of social construction is therefore in a significant sense distinct to that which is accorded to that category by Gatens. Butler, as we have seen, is concerned precisely to critique the notion that the materiality of the body is in any way in itself significant to its materialisation. She wants to claim that the process of materialisation actually constitutes materiality. Indeed she is highly critical of attempts made by feminists to find theoretical or political foundation for their arguments in "the sexed specificity of the female body" (Butler 1993, 28). In comparison, Gatens is not suggesting that the sexed specificity of the female body can be thought of or theorised wholly independently of its social significance. What she is claiming, however, which distinguishes her from Butler, is that that materiality, that 'sexed specificity', nevertheless remains an important and legitimate category of feminist analysis. In so far as Butler wants to wholly collapse the distinction between the body or sex and gender, I want to claim that she is suggesting precisely the illegitimacy of such an analysis.

The rejection by Butler of a relation between the materiality of the body and its materialisation could lead us to raise a number of accusations against her, some more accurate than others. We could argue, for example, that in so far as she rejects the idea that the very materiality of the body intervenes in the processes through
which it is constructed as a body, the body is, by implication, passive in those processes\textsuperscript{11}. However, such an argument disavows the sense in which in the performative construction of gender it is precisely the body which 'repeats'. Indeed, as we have seen, the body is itself constituted through a "a stylised repetition of acts" (Butler 1990, 140). In so far as it repeats, therefore, the body is not, for Butler, wholly passive in the processes through which it is constructed as a body. Neither, however, is it active in the sense which Gatens' account of the body, for example, appears to imply. It does not 'intervene in' the social significance which it takes on, in so far as such 'intervention' implies that it is a locus of agency, that it is somehow categorically or conceptually separate from gender or partially constitutive of gender. The performativity of the body suggests, for Butler, the impossibility of such a relation of intervention between its materiality and its materialisation.

A further argument that could consequently be raised against Butler is that in so far as she seeks to wholly collapse the distinction between sex and gender, she precludes rigorous analysis of the very materiality of sex. It is true to say that the performative framework precludes analysis of that category as a separate site or unit of analysis, distinct from gender. At one level, however, this merely suggests the sense in which sex can only ever be interpreted or 'theorised' through and within the terms of 'culture'. In so far as she specifically construes those categories performatively, however, Butler does actually seek to suggest more than this. Indeed, a more accurate claim to make against Butler in this respect is that she rejects a relation between those categories even within the terms of 'culture'. That is to say, even a relation of interdependence is ruled out in so far as such interdependence suggests the separability of those categories. The sense in which we might draw a relation of constitutive interdependence between those categories within the realm of 'culture' is therefore precluded by her performative account of those categories.

\textsuperscript{11} Peter Dews raises this issue in the context of Foucault's treatment of the body. Indeed, he suggests, in response, that 'without some evocation of the intrinsic forces of the body, without some theory which makes the corporeal more than a malleable tabula rasa, it is impossible to reckon the costs imposed by an infinitesimal power over the active body' or the sacrifice involved in the 'individualising fragmentation of labour power'" (Dews 1987, 163-164). I take him to be suggesting, at a general level, here that without a conception of the body as active in some way in the processes through which it is constructed as a body (with certain needs, desires and 'sites of significance'), account cannot be given of how forces of power interact with that body and combine to produce and construct that body in particular ways. In the context of Butler's account of the body and the criticisms I raise here concerning the framework through which she conceives of that body, I would agree with Dews that in order to address particular theoretical and political concerns, that body needs to be understood as more than just a malleable 'tabula rasa' for cultural meaning. I suggest here that Butler cannot ultimately be accused of appealing to a notion of the body which is passive in the processes through which it is constructed.
In terms of content, I want to suggest that both of these aspects of her account of the body (firstly, the particular sense in which it is active and, secondly, the collapse of the relation between the materiality of sex and its materialisation) impacts upon the strength or 'richness' of her account of embodiment. The value of comparing the performative framework through which Butler construes the categories of sex and gender with the framework provided by Gatens lies precisely in the way in which Butler's framework offers a qualitatively different account of those categories than Gatens'. Their accounts of those categories are different even despite both clearly rejecting the nature/culture framework on which sex/gender distinction is based and moving to a framework in which both categories are construed wholly within the realm of 'culture'. While Butler is clearly able to give an account of the sense in which the significance of our sex and the way in which we 'live' or embody that sex is a result of the way in which that sex is socially constructed, in Gatens' work we nevertheless get a stronger story of how it is that particular sex-based attributes come to occupy particular sites of significance in the social construction of gender. Moreover, we get a much stronger sense of how the materiality of sex, might play an active role, though never a fixed or determinate one, in its social construction as sex. Content-wise, the account of embodiment which emerges from Gatens' work is conceptually richer if only for the attention which is explicitly paid to the relation between those categories.\textsuperscript{12}

The weight or emphasis which Butler places on social construction in her account of sex and gender is wholesale. As I claimed in the last chapter, sex is, for Butler, just as much of a social construction as gender. Indeed, for Butler, the process of social construction is wholly responsible for who we are and for what we embody. The claim, however, that we are purely effects or products of social construction should make us, and inevitably does make us, wonder whether we are, for Butler, ultimately socially determined. It should make us wonder, that is, whether we make any individual or material contribution at all to the process through which we become subjects or whether we are wholly subject to the various forces of power in which we are situated. It is to this 'problem of agency' that I will now turn.

(ii) the problem of agency

First of all, Butler is not alone in her bid to 'redefine agency' within the terms of an account of identity as wholly socially constructed. Most obviously, she owes some theoretical debt to Michel Foucault, for whom this problem or question of

\textsuperscript{12} I will return to this issue in the conclusion to the thesis.
agency is also critical. Indeed, she affirms her debt to Foucault in *Bodies That Matter* where she writes that,

this text accepts as a point of departure Foucault's notion that regulatory power produces the subjects it controls, that power is not only imposed externally, but works as the regulative and normative means by which subjects are formed (Butler 1993, 22).

Butler concurs with Foucault in so far as he construes power as a diverse, fragmented field of forces which is productive and constitutive of subjects. Like Foucault, she rejects the traditional definition of power as a quality or capacity which is inherent in subjects. She also denies that subjects are the starting points or origins of relations of power and that power is something which is primarily causal, exercised over subjects in a repressive or limiting manner. For Butler and Foucault, the individual is "an effect of power" (Foucault 1976a, 234). An individual is therefore, in a critical sense, understood by both to be constituted by power rather than a source or origin of power or a 'locus of agency'.

The 'problem of agency' arises for Butler, as it does for Foucault, in response to this notion of the individual as constituted or produced by relations of power. 'Agency' is traditionally conceived as a capacity of the individual, a capacity to be, for example, constituting with respect to their identity. Indeed, the reader will recall the sense in which, for Beauvoir, agency is understood as an essential or inherent capacity of subjects through which they can exercise control or power over their facticity and their identity. In so far as such a notion of agency is clearly rejected by Foucault and Butler, both are criticised for ending up with an account of subjects as wholly determined by the matrix of social and cultural forces in which they are situated, unable to actively resist or reject the constitutive power of those forces.

Butler's performative account of gender is therefore critically informed by Foucault's account of power. However, it would be inappropriate to read that account as derivative of Foucault. Nor is it the purpose of this thesis to compare the work of Butler and Foucault. However, it is pertinent that we consider very briefly some feminists' responses to Foucault and the potential problems which they identify in the impact of Foucauldian theory on the theoretical and political concerns of feminism. This will provide a general introduction to some of the specific problems

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Foucault's account of power is elaborated in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1975) and *The History of Sexuality vol. 1* (Foucault 1976b). In the latter text, he defines it as 'the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate...power is not an institution and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name we attribute to a complex strategical situation in a particular society (Foucault 1976b, 92-3). See also Foucault 1976a, 1980, 1983.
which emerge in Butler's work in giving an account of agency or freedom on the basis of her own performative account of gender.

Broadly speaking, feminist criticism of Foucault is characterised by two principal claims. First and foremost is the claim, just outlined, that his account of identity as constructed lacks an account of agency. That is, it lacks an account of subjects as having some capacity to actively contest those regimes of power by and through which they are produced. Second is the claim that his model of power pays insufficient attention to the operation of gender in relations of power. These claims give rise to two specific problems which many critics argue limit the use of Foucauldian theory for feminism. First of all, it is argued that in failing to give an adequate account of agency, Foucault's model of power cannot account for or explain strategies of empowerment or emancipation for women. Such an account or explanation is understood to be critical to the aims and objectives of feminism. Secondly, it is argued that his failure to pay specific attention to the operation of gender in structural and institutional relations of power implies a dismissal or denial of the significance of women's particular experience of power.

Despite the serious problems which have been identified in his work, Foucault's model of power and his account of identity as wholly constructed or produced by and through relations of power has been extremely influential in feminist theory. As we have already seen, Butler is an example of a feminist who is indebted to such an account of identity. Indeed many feminists argue, along with Butler, that although Foucault's account of identity provides a conception of subjects as effects or products of regimes of power in society, this does not necessarily result in a wholesale social determination of subjects. Indeed, in so far as Foucault locates resistance in all relations of power, the relationship between individuals and society will always, such critics argue, be one of conflict, rather than passive resignation. That relations of power are always accompanied by (or concurrent with) resistance implies the very operation of agency. Yet, in response to this argument, other critics complain that "if subjects are constituted within disciplinary regimes of power, who is it that resists... how is resistance possible?" (Bartky 1995, 14)

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14 See, for some examples of where these claims are made: Bartky 1995, Deveaux 1994, Harstock 1990.
15 Monique Deveaux gives a very good summary of these arguments in her paper on "Foucault and Empowerment" (Deveaux 1994).
16 See, for examples of where this claim is made: Hekman 1995b and Sawicki 1988.
17 "Where there is power," Foucault argues, "there is resistance" (Foucault 1976b, 96). Indeed, he argues that relations of power never exist by themselves. On the contrary, they are always accompanied by some form of resistance or struggle. "Every power relationship implies, at least in potentia, a strategy of struggle" (Foucault 1983, 225).
Pointing out the operation of resistance in relations of power is not sufficient for such critics to explain or predict how subjects might, in practice, actively contest those relations. In so far as Foucault has dispensed with "the constituent subject" (Foucault 1980, 117) critics question where we can locate this resistance, this power to avoid being wholly constituted and thereby determined by regimes of power.

As I have claimed, this problem of defining and locating agency within the terms of an account of subjects as products or effects of power clearly emerges in the context of Butler's performative account of gender. Like Foucault, Butler claims that the death of the constituent subject does not necessarily lead to the death or dissolution of subjective resistance to social determination18. Indeed, she claims that "construction is not opposed to agency, it is the necessary scene of agency" (Butler 1990, 147). The very character of identity as constructed, according to Butler, allows for the possibility of resistance and transformation which is agency. The critical task for feminism, argues Butler, is to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by (those constructions), to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them (Butler 1990, 147).

In defining gender as performance, Butler attempts to achieve this critical task. Although gendered identities are always constituted and produced through regulatory norms and conventions in society on her account, there is nevertheless continual potential for variation in the way in which those identities are produced by and through particular subjects. Agency is therefore redefined by Butler as "a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not in a relation of external opposition to power" (Butler 1993, 15).

Yet in defining agency in this way, two critical issues remain problematic19. First of all, like Bartky, it still seems right to inquire further into what the nature of the subject is, for Butler, such that it is, in practice, capable of resisting, reiterating and rearticulating its gender within the context of social regulatory norms and conventions. How can a subject both be produced by and resist norms and conventions from which, on Butler's account, there is no escape and through which,

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18 For Foucault, Bartky argues, "the disciplinary practices of modernity that construct the modern subject do not limit liberty; they are, says Foucault, 'the foundation of the formal juridical liberties'" (Bartky 1995, 181). He argues that "power is exercised over free subjects and only in so far as they are free" (Foucault 1983, 221).

19 Later in the thesis, I will identify further problems which emerge from this account of agency, such as the perception that it undermines the very basis of a feminist politics.
they are constituted? Secondly, even if we agree with Butler that the sort of resistance she identifies is possible, does that account of resistance really, in practice, allow for an active disruption and subversion of those dominant gender paradigms by and through which we are produced as gendered subjects? In other words, is 'resistance' really enough to constitute 'agency'?

Despite Butler's account of agency as resistance providing only a weak sense of how we might resist wholesale social determination, it is clear nevertheless that her account does not preclude the possibility of agency altogether. That is to say, her account does not, for example, render us wholly incapable of making choices or decisions or participating in projects. She is not in the business of denying this sort of agency. Nevertheless, she is claiming that this agency is itself socially constructed. Our 'agency' is therefore clearly not, in the same sense as it is for Beauvoir, about or equivalent to our 'freedom', nor is it about what makes our choices, decisions or projects our own.

Butler's account of agency leaves out a story about what makes our actions peculiar to us as individuals. Indeed, we have seen the sense in which Butler wants to avoid talk of gender as "a locus of agency from which various acts follow" (Butler 1990, 140). We have also seen in what sense she rejects feminist attempts to find either theoretical or political foundation in "the sexed specificity of the female body" (Butler 1993, 28) and so conceive of that body as a possible source or 'locus' of agency. At a theoretical level, therefore, this means that we get very little sense, as individuals, of what sorts of things constitute us as particular, unique, agents and how we might, as individuals, actively and deliberately contest the construction of our gender. Instead, we get only a general sense of the possibility of agency or, what appears to amount to the same thing, transformation, as a possibility which manifests itself in the processes through which we are constructed as subjects.

All this begs the question of what the content of Butler's account of agency actually is. What, for Butler, is the basis upon which we act as individuals? In short, where does our agency come from? How is resistance possible? Furthermore, if gender, for example, is not a 'locus of agency' how can we talk about and represent, collectively, 'women' at a political level? What makes collective agency possible? On Butler's account of agency I want to suggest that we get very little sense of how we might locate and identify common sources for collective agency. If the sexed specificity of the female body is precluded as a possible source or locus of agency, and if gender is also considered too broad and malleable a category to establish collective needs and concerns, then we must question what sort of collective agency
is possible on Butler’s account. These theoretical questions clearly have pertinence in the context of the political concerns of feminism and it is precisely in the context of these concerns that I will discuss them in more depth.

(iii) conclusions

At this point, however, I will draw together the arguments I have raised against Butler so far in my theoretical critique of her work. I have identified two important points which are made by Butler in her performative account of gender, both of which serve to respond to her initial twofold critique of the sex/gender distinction. That twofold critique raised the following claims: firstly, that a sex/gender distinction wrongly implies that the category of sex is a natural or ‘raw material’ on top of which rest various cultural (or gendered) significations; and, secondly, that also wrongly implied in such a distinction is the idea that we are, as subjects, at some point ‘free from gender’ and, only consequently, take up our gender. In Butler’s performative account of gender construction, we can understand her to respond to this twofold critique in making two strategic moves. First of all, in claiming that the materiality of the body is one and the same thing as its materialisation, Butler effectively collapses any significant distinction which might be drawn between these categories. Secondly, she claims that in so far as this distinction is collapsed, our sexed and gendered identity emerges only as an effect or product of the process of materialisation. There is not, therefore, a subject which precedes its materialisation as a gendered subject. These two strategic moves made by Butler are not, however, unproblematic. Indeed, it is clear that although Butler claims to move beyond the problems which inhere in a sex/gender distinction, some critical questions which were pertinent to that very distinction remain unresolved. These questions principally concern what these moves mean for our inquiries into, on the one hand, the materiality of the body and, on the other hand, agency.

I have claimed in this chapter that Butler’s account of the materiality of the body precludes reference to that materiality as, in itself, an important and legitimate category of feminist analysis. It is important to point out here that retaining a framework in which the body, or sex, is construed as a legitimate category of analysis does not necessarily return us to a kind of biological determinism. This is illustrated well by the comparison I have made between Butler’s work and that of Gatens’. It does nevertheless leave open, rather than closed, the question of how that body or sex might intervene in the overall process of gender construction. Ultimately, I have claimed that Butler’s move to a framework in which the distinction between those categories is wholly collapsed allows her to avoid
discussion of the possibility that the biological and functional characteristics of bodies might contribute in a variety of ways to our experience as embodied subjects in the world. Furthermore, this move gives us only a weak sense of how it is that particular aspects of particular bodies consistently come to 'matter'.

The second problem which I have identified in this chapter as clearly emerging out of Butler's work is that of giving an account of agency within her performative theory of the process of gender. As I have suggested, this problem is perceived to be particularly significant in the context of the political concerns of contemporary feminism. A particular point of concern which is raised is the question of whether her account of agency as resistance is capable of supporting a politics which calls for an active and deliberate challenge to dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies. This question arises precisely because of Butler's rejection of an account of agency which understands subjects to be sources or 'loci' of agency and instead locates agency within the processes through which norms are repeated and reiterated by subjects. Her location of agency in such processes appears to undermine the idea that individuals might actively and deliberately challenge their construction as gendered. In so far as the feminist movement has historically demonstrated a commitment to contesting dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies, it therefore begs the question of whether her account of agency (as resistance to norms) is, in practice, capable of supporting such a movement.

The theoretical problems I have identified in Butler's account of the issues of embodiment and agency obviously have important implications for our assessment of her work. What I have not yet discussed in depth, however, is what implications these problems have for our understanding of the political consequences of her work. This is particularly pertinent given the climate of 'crisis' in which her work is received. In the following chapters I will show in what sense Butler's performative account of gender has contributed to a perception of 'crisis' in contemporary feminist debate. I will explore in more depth the question of what it is about the conceptual shift in the frameworks through which the categories of sex and gender are configured by theorists such as Butler which has provoked 'trouble' with respect to the political concerns of feminism. Why is there a sense of 'trouble' in feminism? On what grounds would such accounts of gender as Butler's contribute to this sense of trouble? Could such trouble culminate in "the failure of feminism" (Butler 1990, vii)?
CHAPTER FIVE

Beauvoir, Butler and the 'Crisis of Identity' in Contemporary Feminism

In the previous four chapters I have been considering in detail the approaches of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler to the categories of sex and gender in the context of debate over these categories in feminist theory. An important theoretical shift in approach to these categories has taken place between the work of Beauvoir and Butler. While Beauvoir is concerned to give an account of those categories as conceptually distinct, Butler attempts to move beyond a distinction between those categories and indeed 'beyond the binary frame' which supports such a distinction. Nevertheless, despite the temporal and theoretical distance which separates their work, the problems Beauvoir and Butler face in giving adequate accounts of the categories of sex and gender are remarkably similar in character. For both, these problems lie in the difficulties they face in providing accounts of agency which are based in both embodied and socially constructed accounts of identity.

Criticism of Butler has focused on the accounts of the body and of agency which emerge from her performative theory of gender. Although the basis for criticism of Beauvoir's work is different, we have seen that it is nevertheless focused around precisely the same issues. In attempting to maintain a distinction between sex and gender she is criticised, for instance, for providing an account of the body which presumes that it is in some way a pre-social, passive entity which awaits cultural inscription. In addition, her account of agency is criticised for appearing to suggest that subjects are at some point 'free' from their gender and therefore free from the 'highly gendered' relations of power in which they are situated.
Paradoxically, however, the inadequacies which critics have identified in Beauvoir's work concerning her accounts of the body and agency, can also be understood to be her strengths when it comes to comparing her work to Butler's. Indeed Butler is accused precisely of losing a strong, stable, account of the materiality of the body and of losing an account of agency which attributes subjects with the capacity to actively resist determination by dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies. In rejecting Beauvoir's accounts of the body and agency, accounts which Butler understands to be implicit in the sex/gender distinction, she is also perceived in this context to have foregone these particular strengths. Furthermore, in forgoing these strengths she is accused of contributing to a 'crisis of identity' in contemporary feminism. Her account of gender is understood to destabilise the very basis upon which the political representation of 'women' is sought and to present an account of subjects as having little control over or capacities for resistance to their construction as gendered.

The principal concern of this chapter is to consider why Butler's performative account of gender and the shift in conceptual frameworks which she makes away from Beauvoir in that account might be considered to contribute to such a crisis. How has Butler's rejection of a distinction between sex and gender come to be connected with political issues surrounding identity and identity categories in feminism? Does rejecting the sex/gender distinction necessarily effect the sort of instability in those categories which undermines feminism's political commitments? What is it about the shift away from Beauvoir which might be a cause for concern for feminism? Furthermore, how have all these issues concerning 'sex', 'gender', 'identity' and 'agency' come to be connected in contemporary feminist debate? Are all these connections drawn legitimately?

In this chapter we will see that the conceptual shift which takes place between Beauvoir and Butler provides the context for some broader theoretical and political concerns which are critical to contemporary feminist debate. Indeed, I will argue that this shift is in fact a rehearsal or instance of why and through what means those concerns have emerged. In the first section of the chapter I will consider in more detail the specific shift in conceptual approach to the categories of sex and gender which takes place between the work of Beauvoir and Butler. I will be particularly concerned to map out in this section what specific conceptual manoeuvres Butler makes in response to Beauvoir such that a 'crisis of identity' is now heralded in the context of precisely such accounts of gender as that which is offered by Butler. In the second section of the chapter I will consider at a more general level this state of 'crisis' in Anglo-American feminist theory and the sense of unease which
characterises feminist responses to accounts of gender offered by such theorists as Butler. I will be concerned in this section to think through more specifically the question of what it is in the conceptual framework through which theorists such as Butler construe the categories of sex and gender that has contributed to this climate of crisis in contemporary feminist theory. In the third section of the chapter I will address the question of what is at stake in the various responses that have been made to the accounts of sex and gender dominant in contemporary Anglo-American feminist theory. In other words, what is it that critics are uneasy about in these accounts? Secondly, I will consider whether these concerns are raised legitimately or whether they in fact emerge from a fundamental confusion and conflation of issues.

Section One

Conceptual manoeuvres: Beauvoir to Butler

In detailing the conceptual shift which takes place between the work of Beauvoir and that of Butler I will be making particular use of Butler’s direct critical response to Beauvoir which is expressed in two specific articles on her work, “Sex and Gender in The Second Sex” and “Variations on Sex and Gender”1. In these articles, Butler provides her own specific critique of Beauvoir’s account of the categories of sex and gender. She also begins, in response to Beauvoir, to formulate her own account of those categories. It is therefore in the space of these two articles that we can most effectively consider the nature of the shift in conceptual approach to the categories of sex and gender which is made by Butler away from Beauvoir. I have already provided a detailed account of Butler’s approach to the categories of sex and gender in chapter four. At this stage, therefore, I will be stepping back from the specific detail of Butler’s performative account of those categories in order to consider the conceptual manoeuvres which underlie that account. In considering the nature of these manoeuvres which are at work between Butler and Beauvoir I will be particularly concerned to identify what it is that Butler rejects in Beauvoir’s approach to the categories of sex and gender, and what she actually seeks to incorporate within her own, reconfigured, account of those categories. I will question what it is about her shift away from Beauvoir’s approach to those categories which she understands to distance or protect her from the problems of that approach.

Butler identifies a consistent tension in Beauvoir’s account of ‘woman’ whereby gendered identity is apparently understood by Beauvoir to be, on the one hand, a cultural construction and, on the other hand, a product of choice (Butler 1986 and Butler 1987. See also criticisms raised by Butler concerning Beauvoir’s account of sex and gender in Butler 1989 and Butler 1990.)

1 Butler 1986 and Butler 1987. See also criticisms raised by Butler concerning Beauvoir’s account of sex and gender in Butler 1989 and Butler 1990.
1986, 37). That is, gender is, according to Butler, understood by Beauvoir to be both an effect of the situation in which a person lives and, concurrently, a product of a prereflective decision made by an autonomous individual. Butler claims that Beauvoir's project in *The Second Sex* is, at least in part, an attempt to reconcile the tension between 'social determinism' and 'free will' which seems to be implied by this account of gender. What is particularly significant about Butler's critique of Beauvoir here is the sense in which she takes up this central tension which is operating in Beauvoir's account of the categories of sex and gender, and employs it positively within her own account of those categories. In doing so, she attempts to reconcile those elements of Beauvoir's account which she understands to be critical to an adequate account of the construction of gendered identity, and to dispense with those elements of Beauvoir's account which limit or undermine that account. In particular, therefore, she actively works against implicit or explicit conceptual dependence on a dualistic framework in her account of the categories of sex and gender. As I have suggested in chapter four, this involves a conceptual shift on the part of Butler from an account of sex as a 'natural' category and gender as a 'cultural' category to an account of both sex and gender as 'cultural'.

At this point, therefore, we can see that the most obvious or immediate shift which takes place between Butler and Beauvoir is a shift in conceptual frameworks. While Beauvoir appears to depend upon a conceptual framework in which the categories of sex and gender are roughly aligned with the realms of 'nature' and 'culture', Butler seeks to contest the distinction between these realms, and indeed seeks to claim that the realm of 'nature' is in fact a product or effect of 'culture'. Significantly enough, she suggests in these articles on Beauvoir that the tensions of Beauvoir's account of gender indicate the possibility of precisely such a claim. Beauvoir's theory of embodiment, she argues, "seems implicitly to ask whether sex was not gender all along" (Butler 1987, 134). According to Butler, that is, Beauvoir's account of sex is such that sex could itself be understood to be a category which is 'always already' gendered and culturally bound (see Butler 1986, 49). Despite this implicit suggestion which Butler identifies as operating in Beauvoir's account, she remains highly critical of the tendency of Beauvoir to slip into and reproduce a dualistic framework in her account of those categories (Butler 1990, 12). An essential part of her conceptual shift away from Beauvoir is therefore her explicit rejection of such a framework.

Obviously, a rejection of the conceptual framework which Butler understands to have supported a sex/gender distinction has significant implications for her own approach to those categories. Significantly, I want to suggest that the shift Butler
makes away from a nature/culture framework to what I will broadly name 'the realm of culture' entails a number of assumptions about the nature of the latter realm. To recapitulate for a moment, Butler has argued that the nature/culture framework wrongly, indeed incoherently, implies a number of claims. Most significantly, it appears to imply that there is a point at which we are free from the mediation of culture. Our 'nature' is therefore at some point understood to be fixed and stable, 'raw data' awaiting signification. As we have seen, Butler disputes the notion that there is such a point, free from the intervention or mediation of culture. Her argument that our sex is always already 'gendered' relies upon the claim that both categories can only ever be understood within the realm of culture. So, what is it about the realm of culture which distances Butler from the problems which she understands to be produced by Beauvoir's account of those categories?

Butler's claim that the categories of sex and gender can only be understood within the realm of culture appears to rely most significantly upon a perception of that realm as highly malleable or negotiable. Conversely, it is Butler's claim that those who appeal to a 'realm of nature' do so based on a perception of that realm as in some way fixed or non-negotiable. That is, her argument that both our sex and our gender are perpetually in the process of construction, signification and resignification, implies a perception of those categories as open to a continual process of change and transformation. It suggests that those categories are 'fluid' in the sense that they are continually in the process of being negotiated through and within the terms of culture. It also suggests that the nature/culture framework which Butler rejects is rejected by her precisely because of its apparent implication that sex is a category which is fixed or 'non-negotiable' and is sustained outside the realm of culture. Indeed, Butler suggests that the one thing which is certainly right about Beauvoir's conceptual claims concerning the category of gender is the sense in which she argues that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 1949, 295; my italics). The identity category of 'woman' is, Butler argues, correctly identified by Beauvoir as a term or category in process, "an ongoing discursive practice...open to intervention and resignification" (Butler 1990, 33).

Yet despite this general agreement with Beauvoir on the question of the cultural construction and malleability of the category of gender, there are nevertheless further criticisms to be made by Butler concerning the general framework upon which Beauvoir depends in order to theorise both sex and gender. We have already seen the sense in which Butler criticises Beauvoir's tendency to rely upon a dualistic framework in her account of the categories of sex and gender. A related criticism which is presented by Butler in her articles on Beauvoir concerns
the account of agency or freedom which she understands to inform Beauvoir's analysis of the process of gender construction. Again, I want to suggest that Butler's criticism of Beauvoir's account of this issue and her conceptual shift away from the problems she understands to be at work in that account, is dependent upon her own allegiance to an analysis of the categories of sex and gender which is grounded firmly and wholly within the realm of culture.

In Beauvoir's work, Butler argues, there is a very strong sense in which the subject actively and willingly takes on its gender. Gender is therefore at some level reduced by Beauvoir to a product of choice. Presumed in such an account of gender is, Butler argues, an agent with the capacity to, at some point, choose their gender free from the constraints or influences of their particular situation. The body thus comes to be understood as merely a passive medium for the various 'identity choices' made by its fully autonomous 'owner'. Beauvoir's account of agency or freedom thus appears to be removed from, and to a certain extent opposed to, her account of the cultural construction of subjects. In comparison, agency, for Butler is specifically defined as 'a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not in a relation of external opposition to power' (Butler 1993, 15). The 'autonomous' capacities of the subject are therefore understood to be operative only within the power relations of which that subject is itself a product. In reconfiguring the notion of agency in this way, Butler attempts to reconcile critical elements which co-exist problematically in Beauvoir's account of gender.

We can see here that a further conceptual shift is made by Butler away from Beauvoir in her reconfiguration of the notion of agency. This shift is away from an account of agency in which subjects are apparently understood to be at some point capable of fully autonomous action or judgement and of transcending the limitations or constraints of the culture or society in which they act, towards an account of agency as 'radically situated', constructed and constituted but in a critical sense also enabled by, the realm of culture. It is a shift away from the account of agency or freedom such as that offered by Beauvoir where it refers to a capacity of subjects, towards an account which instead construes agency as an effect of subjects, an effect, that is, of the processes through which subjects are constructed within the realm of culture. Once again, this shift relies upon a perception of the realm of culture as in an important sense malleable or negotiable. Indeed, we have already seen (in chapter four) the sense in which it is precisely this malleability, this 'openness to transformation', which grounds Butler's claims concerning the very possibility of agency - that is, concerning the potential for individual subjects to resist a wholesale social determination. Resistance is possible, Butler claims, precisely because, as
subjects, we are always 'in process'. Agency can be located, she argues, within "the possibility of a variation on [the] repetition" (Butler 1990, 145) of those sustained social performances which constitute our identities. It can therefore be located in the processes through which gender norms are negotiated (repeated) by subjects.

So far, I have identified a general conceptual shift which is operating across the work of Beauvoir and Butler. Butler's response to Beauvoir's account of the categories of sex and gender demonstrates very clearly the sense in which she seeks to distance herself from the conceptual framework which grounds that account. For Butler, sex is not a fixed or originary point of reference on top of which rest various cultural significations. Rather, it is itself constituted as an effect or product of those significations. Nevertheless, it is also clear that Butler is very much aware of the tensions at work in Beauvoir's account of gender, and the sense in which Beauvoir seems implicitly to suggest a more complex account of the categories of sex and gender than might first be apparent. Indeed, in her reconfigured account of those categories, Butler can be understood in an important way to draw upon and attempt to work with those tensions which operate tenuously in Beauvoir's work.

Yet Butler's movement to 'the realm of culture' (that is, her shift away from the nature/culture framework) is not, as we have seen in chapter four, without its problems. Indeed, in so far as it is perceived to contribute to a 'crisis of identity' in contemporary feminism, it appears to throw up a considerable number of new, serious, conceptual and political concerns. Moreover, it is not just in the context of her explicit rejection of Beauvoir's conceptual framework that these problems are understood to emerge. That is to say, it is not just in the context of her movement to a framework in which sex and gender are negotiated wholly within the realm of culture that concerns emerge. As I suggested in chapters three and four, these problems and concerns emerge more specifically in the context of her wholesale rejection of a framework in which the categories of sex and gender can be understood as in any way distinct. They emerge in the context of the weight or emphasis accorded to social construction in her account of those categories and through her understanding of the process of social construction as necessarily effecting a wholesale malleability in those categories.

That they emerge more specifically in these contexts is illustrated by my comparison in chapters three and four of her work to that of Moira Gatens. Indeed, we saw that although Gatens similarly seeks to move 'beyond the binary frame' of sex and gender and also seeks to construe those categories within the realm of culture, the relation she draws between sex and gender and the relative emphasis she
places on the process of social construction within that realm clearly distinguishes her framework from Butler's. For Gatens, that is, the fact that the categories of sex and gender are socially constructed does not necessarily mean that they are entirely malleable and negotiable, nor does it mean that there will not be material facts about us which consistently operate as privileged sites of significance in the process of social construction. While Butler is clearly not denying that certain aspects of our sex come to be constructed as particularly significant, she does want to deny that the actual materiality of sex intervenes in that construction. For Butler, as we have seen, materiality is itself a construction - what we come to know as sex is just as much of a social construction as is gender. What implications might this have for feminism?

Putting aside for a moment the differences between Gatens' and Butler's understandings of the relation between sex and gender, is the general shift to construe both categories within the realm of culture a legitimate cause of concern for feminism? This conceptual shift destabilises the meaning or content of those categories. In so far as Butler construes sex, for example, to be a 'wholly cultural' category she has, and deliberately seeks to have, no stable or fixed conception of precisely what constitutes that category. In this sense, efforts to base a political movement on the basis of a stable category of sex (for example, to base the feminist movement on the sexed specificity of the female sex) are rendered problematic. The instability of the category destabilises the very unity which identity-based political representation appears to promote. In view of this, it is significant that Butler should herself point out the sense in which this instability in meaning has given rise to a sense of 'trouble' in feminism, and in particular to a sense of trouble concerning the relation between feminist theory and politics. It is interesting, that is, that she should perceive her own theoretical commitments to be a source of trouble (or at least a perceived source of trouble) for a movement to which she is herself committed (Osborne & Segal 1994, 32).

Butler is therefore well aware that her account of the categories of sex and gender and her specific attempt to move "beyond the binary frame" (Butler 1990, x) which has supported our understanding of those categories, has had a 'troubling' affect on feminist theory. She herself makes the connection between accounts of gender and the problems raised in contemporary feminist debate. Feminism confronts a problem, she argues, when the gendered identity category of 'women' is used in order to denote a common, universal, unified, identity - even in the plural.

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2 I will return to this question in considerably more detail in the conclusion to the thesis. At this point, I am more specifically concerned to explore the question of how the general shift in frameworks is perceived to be troublesome for feminism.
she claims, it is a troublesome term (Butler 1990, 3). For Butler, it is precisely in moving beyond the binary framework which has supported our understanding of the categories of sex and gender that 'trouble' emerges for feminist theory.

The conceptual shift which we have seen take place from the work of Beauvoir to that of Butler clearly demonstrates this attempted movement 'beyond the binary frame'. We have seen the sense in which this movement, for Butler, relies upon the perception that going beyond that frame facilitates a fluidity or malleability in our account of the categories of sex and gender which was disavowed in the context or terms of the previous (binary) framework. Yet, in the light of the account I have given here of the conceptual shift between Beauvoir and Butler, it seems pertinent that we consider a number of important questions. First of all, why does Butler consider this shift 'beyond the binary frame' to have become a cause for anxiety for the relation between feminist theory and politics? Is this anxiety specific to her own renegotiation of those categories as performative? Does Gatens' understanding of those categories, for example, provide a similar 'cause for anxiety'? Secondly, does this shift to 'the realm of culture' necessarily mean that the categories of sex and gender are so unstable and malleable that nothing can be represented or 'named' without immediately being called into question, contested, and disrupted? Does the socially constructed nature of those categories necessarily imply their instability? Thirdly, and relatedly, does this instability and fluidity necessarily undermine the possibility that 'women' and 'women's concerns' might be represented in the political arena?

Each of these questions serves to highlight important theoretical and political concerns which have emerged not only in the context of Butler's work but also, more generally, in the context of her contemporary feminist theorists. That is, they serve to highlight the current climate of debate over what implications the account of sex and gender which is offered by such theorists as Butler has for the political concerns of the feminist movement. Before moving on, therefore, to a consideration of potential responses to these questions, it is important to get a clear understanding of the theoretical and political climate in which her work is received and in which these questions have come to hold increasing significance for some specifically feminist political concerns. Consequently, we can see how the conceptual shift between Beauvoir and Butler has provided us with a clear example of how and through what means these concerns have emerged. We can also begin to consider in more detail precisely what is at stake in responses to these problems in terms of the articulation

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3 This is a question which I will return to in the conclusion to this thesis.
of specifically feminist political concerns. Are such concerns necessarily undermined or 'troubled' by contemporary accounts of sex and gender?

Section Two

The 'crisis of identity' in contemporary feminism

Let us look back first at how these concerns are identified by Butler. At the very beginning of Gender Trouble Butler gives us an account of the way in which feminist theory has historically relied upon and assumed that there is a stable, existing, identity of 'woman' for whom political representation can be sought. However, she goes on to tell us that this identity category has become a source of contest in contemporary feminist theory. It is no longer understood to be stable or determinate and its viability as a category of political representation has consequently been challenged (Butler 1990, 1). For this reason, 'trouble' has arisen in feminist theory. Indeed, she tells us of the concern of some critics that this 'troubling' of gender categories may ultimately result in the failure of feminism (Butler 1990, vii). Butler is by no means alone either in heralding a 'crisis of identity' in feminist theory or in expressing concern about the implications of such a crisis for the feminist movement.4

The 'crisis of identity' which is proclaimed by many contemporary feminist theorists finds its foothold or foundation in a number of significant criticisms raised both from within and outside the feminist movement against the (historical) claims of that movement to represent the needs and concerns of the subject group or identity category 'women'. Feminism has, in short, been widely criticised for its foundation in white, Western philosophical traditions, for its neglect of the fact of the multiple identities contained within the category 'women' and indeed for the very misrepresentation which that identity category entails. It has been criticised for its assumption of authority over the experience of women5, for attempts to reduce the category of 'women' to a common biological basis (that is, 'all females') and/or for attempts to reduce the category to one of shared experiences, such as motherhood, oppression or dependence. In general, therefore, there is strong disagreement within contemporary feminism over attempts to define or reduce the category of 'women' to any common or shared characteristics, to 'universalise' or 'totalise' the biology or lived experiences of women. Any attempts to presume authority over the category, to


5 Kathleen Jones specifically addresses this 'trouble with authority' which has become critical to feminism's attempts to 'define itself' - Jones 1991.
pretend to represent it as though it is a homogenous group, are generally interpreted by contemporary feminists to be both normative and exclusionary, and as such to be denying or dismissive of difference\textsuperscript{6}.

Aside from these general concerns which are raised against the representative claims of the feminist movement, we have seen that the rejection by many contemporary feminist theorists of the sex/gender distinction is understood to have contributed to this 'crisis of identity' in contemporary feminism in a number of ways\textsuperscript{7}. Both sex and gender (and hence the categories of 'females' and 'women') have come to be understood as fluid categories, with endless interpretative and transformative potential. No longer is gender understood to be a cultural inscription on or over a fixed or stable category of sex. Rather, both our sex and our gender are understood to be products or effects of culture. There is no 'originary point', no natural origin of sex which can be understood to stabilise or ground our account of the construction of gendered identity. The term 'woman' is therefore rendered unstable at one level because it no longer refers directly or necessarily to 'the female sex'.

It seems important to note also that, as well as this conceptual instability which has arisen through the rejection and collapse of particular conceptions of the categories of sex and gender, the instability of the category 'woman' also has its source more generally in a relatively new-found awareness and attempted avowal of the diverse make-up or construction of identities and identity categories\textsuperscript{8}. We are more aware, that is, of the descriptive limitations of identity categories and, most significantly, of their normative implications. For example, in naming or defining 'woman' as the subject of the feminist movement, we inevitably constitute that

\textsuperscript{6} See, for example, criticisms raised in Alcoff 1988, Butler 1990, Butler 1995b, Young 1990c.

\textsuperscript{7} As I argued in chapter three, although many contemporary feminists reject the sex/gender distinction, the ways in which they seek to reconfigure the categories of sex and gender differ. I argued in that chapter that the different conceptual frameworks through which they reconfigure those categories changes considerably the theoretical and political implications of their work. Despite the many differences amongst approaches to those categories, however, I merely want to suggest here that the general rejection of a distinction between those categories is perceived to have contributed to the crisis of identity in a number of ways.

\textsuperscript{8} A similar view is argued for by Gianni Vattimo in his work The Transparent Society (Vattimo 1992), in which he argues that modern interpretations of the subject have been challenged in contemporary thought because of advancements in information technology. Indeed he suggests that these advancements have in fact precipitated the birth of a postmodern society. Minority groups, he argues, have new-found access to a network of communication in which they can voice their opinions. The notion of a single, universal, explanation to history and to identity is therefore brought into question by the very differences which such communication can be seen to represent. Whether one agrees with Vattimo's ultimate analysis or not, the point remains clear that there is a greater sense of awareness in contemporary Western society, of the diversity and multiplicity of identities represented in the world. Furthermore, there is a distinct move to acknowledge the immense complexity involved in forming a theory of identity which takes into account precisely that diversity and multiplicity.
identity category in such a way that certain identities are excluded from that 'name' or definition. The very act of describing or naming the category 'woman' is therefore in a critical way productive or constitutive of that very category. Indeed, Butler argues that identity categories in general are never merely descriptive, "but always normative, and as such, exclusionary" (Butler 1995b, 50). The dangers we face in using them, therefore, as the grounds of a feminist movement lie precisely in appearing to sanction those normative implications. To the extent that feminism has been concerned to represent 'women', this categorical instability (this difficulty in defining the gendered category 'woman') is perceived by many critics to problematise the grounds upon which the feminist movement has based itself, for if we cannot 'fix' or 'stabilise' the definition or constitution of that category, how can we presume to represent its needs and interests?

We can see here, therefore, that concern over 'naming woman' is expressed at three related levels in contemporary feminist theory. At one level, there is concern over the conceptual category of 'woman', over how that category comes to be defined and constituted in particular ways. There is a related concern at this level over how, once defined, that category operates normatively, and so excludes or denies differently or 'abnormally' constituted identities. At another level, there is concern over the conceptual instability of the category 'woman' in so far as it has historically operated as the (representative) subject of the feminist movement. A critical link can therefore be drawn between the conceptual instability of the term and its viability as a category of political representation. Over and above these fundamental levels of concern is the more general issue of the way in which gender is frequently privileged as a category of identity over the many other categories which function to construct subjects in a variety of equally important ways - categories, that is, such as the race, class and ethnicity of subjects.

I want to suggest here that these levels of concern correspond broadly to three related projects or theoretical imperatives which are dominant in contemporary Anglo-American feminist theory. First and foremost amongst these is a project to 'denaturalise' gender categories. That is, a project to reject any account of gender which assumes a 'natural' (a priori) basis for the construction of gendered identity. The category of 'gender' is understood in the context of such a project to be wholly a product or construct of culture. Secondly, there is a related project to reject

9 Butler's understanding of identity categories as inherently oppressive and 'dangerous' is sharply criticised by Nancy Fraser. She suggests that 'non-identity', or the absence of such categories could be understood to be equally 'dangerous'. Butler, Fraser argues, has forced debate over these categories towards unnecessary extremes (Fraser 1995a, 71). I return to this point later in the chapter.
essentialist accounts which attribute a necessary and causal link between the categories of sex and gender. Thirdly, there is a strong movement within contemporary feminist theory to 'avow' or 'affirm' difference, 'difference', that is, both within the gender category 'woman' as well as across the categories of race, class and ethnicity.

As I have suggested above, these projects or imperatives dominate the general theoretical direction of some contemporary Anglo-American feminist theory. We have seen already the sense in which such projects are incorporated within Butler's account of gender. Teresa de Lauretis is another example of a feminist theorist who draws upon such projects in her account of gender\(^\text{10}\). In short, de Lauretis argues for an account of gender as representation. She argues, similarly to Butler, that the category of gender is the product of various social technologies and institutionalised discourses (de Lauretis 1987, 2). Gender is not, she argues, a property of bodies or a quality which is originally existent or inherent in human beings (de Lauretis 1987, 3). Rather, it is a cultural construction which is always operative in the construction and constitution of individual subjects. In understanding gender or gendered identity in this way, we can see clearly the sense in which the projects I outlined above underlie de Lauretis's account. She rejects an essentialist or 'naturalist' account of the relation between our anatomical sex and our culturally constructed gender (gender is not, she has argued, a property of or inherent in bodies). She also goes on to make the claim that, as the subject of the feminist movement, the category of 'Woman' should be understood wholly as a theoretical construct which is always open to progress and change. There will be a constant slippage, she argues, between the representative category of 'Woman' and women as historical beings (de Lauretis 1987, 10). This slippage is indicative both of the differences which are always operative across women in society and of the slippery nature of the term which represents them ('Woman'). The political representation of 'women' is therefore for de Lauretis, as it is for Butler, always a problematic endeavour.

Linda Alcoff also proclaims the ultimately problematic nature of the concept 'Woman', arguing that it is a category which is crowded with over-determination and misogynist discourse. The very historical construction of that concept, that 'cause' which feminism struggles to represent is, she argues, itself one which requires deconstruction (Alcoff 1988, 257-258). Like de Lauretis and Alcoff, Iris Marion Young also seeks to expose the difference and diversity operative between and

across those who fall within the categorical umbrella of the term 'women'. The focus of Young's work is more specifically, however, a development of a 'politics of difference', that is, a politics which actively recognises and affirms 'difference' as a positive resource in political struggle (Young 1990c, 319). Young argues for both institutional and ideological affirmation of the differences which are inherent within subjects and subject-groups.

The call to affirm 'difference' in accounts of identity and to acknowledge the normative function of identity categories has had a profound impact on contemporary feminist theory. Yet, as I have suggested, this impact has been neither unproblematic nor entirely well-received. Indeed, despite the significant theoretical insights which have been brought to feminism by such theorists as Butler, de Lauretis, Alcoff and Young (among others), significant concern has been raised over how to reconcile these theoretical insights in our accounts of sex and gender with the political objectives of the feminist movement. This concern finds particularly virulent expression amid debates over the potential theoretical alliance of feminism and 'postmodernism'.

Rosemary Tong, for example, expresses concern for the political implications which are the consequence of such calls for 'difference' to be affirmed by feminism. She argues that "as much delight as we may take in the postmodern feminist assault on unitary answers, it is not clear...that we can sustain any sort of community including the feminist community in the midst of total multiplicity, diversity and profusion" (Tong 1989, 232). Likewise, Daryl McGowan-Tress criticises Jane Flax's advocacy of an alliance between feminism and postmodern theory on the grounds that, in his view, postmodern theory will not produce 'the deep understanding that women and society as a whole want and need'. "Without the possibility of a coherent self," he argues, "liberation becomes impossible" (McGowan-Tress 1988, 197). Seyla Benhabib also raises the criticism that postmodernism undermines what she perceives to be the 'feminist commitment to women's agency and sense of selfhood' (Benhabib 1992, 229). The disruption and destabilisation of the category 'woman' has, according to Benhabib, had a disastrous affect on the feminist cause. In support of this view, Patricia Waugh argues that "women began to seek a subjective sense of agency and collective identity within the terms of modernity at precisely the moment when postmodernists were engaged in the repudiation of such discourses..."

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11 Young has written a considerable amount on this issue of recognising and affirming 'difference' in feminist political action (see, for example, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c).
12 For just a few examples of this debate, see the collections of essays published in Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, Fraser (eds.) 1995; Butler & Scott (eds.) 1992 and Nicholson (ed.) 1990.
In yet another example of this view, Susan Bordo comments that "it is disquieting that academic feminists are questioning the integrity of the notion of a 'female reality' just as we begin to get a foothold in these disciplines that could most radically be transformed by our (historically developed) 'otherness'" (Bordo 1993, 240).

These are just a sample of the many concerns that have been raised in response to the radical critique of identity categories which has been operative in contemporary feminist debate and, in particular, in debate over the potential theoretical alliance of feminism and postmodernism. They are focused primarily on the serious political implications for feminism of the categorical instability of the term 'woman'. Two important political implications are cited by critics on the basis of this categorical instability. Firstly, it is claimed that this instability brings into question the possibility (or legitimacy) of a representative lobby group for 'women' and 'women's concerns' in the political arena. Secondly, it is claimed that in destabilising the category of 'woman' we lose or disallow the concepts of 'selfhood', 'agency' and 'autonomy' which have historically been attached to our understanding of subjectivity. That is, in moving to an account of subjects as constituted rather than constituting, an understanding of the subject as a 'locus of agency' (as author of its own destiny) appears to be lost. The implication of such a loss is generally understood to be a critical endangerment of the emancipatory ideals of the feminist movement, since it appears to render impossible the capacity for subjects to resist wholesale social determination.

I will return to these issues of political representation and agency in the third section of the chapter. At this point, however, it is important that we reflect for a moment on the issues which have been raised so far. We have witnessed the sense in which great concern has been raised over the apparent incompatibility between the theoretical imperatives which underlie some contemporary accounts of sex and gender and the political objectives of the feminist movement. These theoretical imperatives centrally concern a desire to develop an account of the categories of sex and gender which avoids essentialism or 'biological determinism' and which avows 'difference'. Yet in attempting to incorporate such imperatives within an account of these categories, theorists such as Butler have been accused of disallowing notions such as autonomy and agency which have traditionally been understood to be attributes or capacities of the subject. Such notions are taken by many theorists to be

13 See, for example, Benhabib 1992, Benhabib 1995a.
14 See, for an example of this argument in relation to Foucault's account of the way in which subjects are constructed or produced through and within relations of power in society, Bartky 1995, 183.
essential to the fulfilment of the emancipatory objectives of the feminist movement. The potential for women to actively resist dominant gender paradigms and to represent themselves as a unified group on the political stage is thus seen to be threatened by the theoretical imperatives which ground the projects of a significant number of contemporary feminist theorists.

It is clear, therefore, that our theoretical account of the categories of sex and gender is understood to be of critical significance for the development of a framework in which some particular feminist political concerns can be addressed. The significance of the relationship between our account of those categories and the development of a framework in which these concerns can be articulated and addressed has been established at the level of Butler's own particular account of the categories of sex and gender and in the difficulty she herself perceives in reconciling her theoretical projects with the representative requirements of the political arena. It has also been established more generally as of pivotal importance to the concerns of contemporary feminist theory, particularly in the context of debate over the potential alliance of feminism and postmodernism. For, as we have seen, this debate is centrally concerned with the question of how accounts of gender provided by so-called postmodern feminist projects might be reconciled with the requirements or objectives of the feminist political movement.

It is pertinent here that we think back for a moment to the way in which this relationship is also established across the work of Beauvoir and Butler. How should we understand their work, and the conceptual shift which takes place between them, in the context of this relationship? Is it significant here? I want to claim that the conceptual shift which takes place between Beauvoir and Butler is indeed significant here, for a number of reasons. In short, I have argued in this chapter that the most obvious or immediate shift which takes place between the approaches taken by Beauvoir and Butler towards the categories of sex and gender is a shift in conceptual frameworks, from one in which those categories are aligned with the realms of 'nature' and 'culture' to one in which they are both construed within the realm of 'culture'. In response to Beauvoir, we have also seen that Butler rejects the notion of agency which she understands to be implied by or presumed in Beauvoir's account of sex and gender. That is, she rejects the notion of agency as a capacity of subjects through which they exercise deliberate control over their body and their identity, as if they were at some point 'free' of that body and identity. She develops a new, reconfigured, account of agency in which it is understood to be an effect of subjects, at work in the processes through which subjects are constructed in culture. Significantly, however, it is in the context of this rejection and renegotiation of
Beauvoir's account of agency that Butler is accused of actually 'losing' an adequate account of agency for the purposes of a feminist politics.

It is therefore precisely in the context of this shift in conceptual frameworks, demonstrated across the work of Beauvoir and Butler, that a 'crisis' is heralded in contemporary feminist theory. The high degree of malleability which such theorists as Butler attribute to the categories of sex and gender suggests the instability of those categories. This instability appears to render them both indefinable and unrepresentable. As such, it appears that the gendered identity category of 'women' can no longer be referred to as a legitimate category of political representation. Furthermore, the rejection by Butler of a notion of agency which clearly attributes subjects with the capacity to act on and contribute to their construction as gendered appears to lend itself to a version of social determinism which rests uneasy with the emancipatory objectives of the feminist movement. That is to say, it appears to imply that women, for example, do not have the capacity to resist their determination by dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies, and thereby contest the very construction of their gendered identity.

Section Three

Theoretical imperatives versus political objectives

In this section of the chapter I will be concerned to address in more detail two questions which have arisen in the previous sections relating to this general shift in conceptual frameworks. First of all, what is at stake in the various responses that have been made to the current climate of crisis in contemporary feminist theory? What is it that critics are concerned about and are their concerns legitimate? Secondly, what relation do the theoretical imperatives of some contemporary feminist theorists bear to the articulation of some specifically feminist political concerns? For what reasons might these theoretical imperatives problematise the articulation and representation of such concerns? The sense of unease voiced by critics about the general shift in conceptual frameworks which I have outlined above is voiced in relation to, or on the basis of, at least three 'specifically feminist' political concerns: firstly, the representation of 'women' as a gendered identity category and as the subject of the feminist movement; secondly, the representation of 'women's concerns' in the political arena; and, thirdly, the notion of agency, a particular conception of which is thought to be critical to the idea that women can be

15 The specific debate which takes place between Butler and Benhabib over this problem of agency and its relation to the broader political concerns of the feminist movement will be addressed in greater detail in the next chapter.
freed, and indeed can free themselves, from traditional gender roles. Each of these concerns is 'specifically feminist' in so far as it has historically been understood to be critical to the articulation and achievement of the emancipatory objectives of the feminist movement, a movement which has been committed to representing and addressing the needs and concerns of 'women'.

First of all, I will address the questions of what it is that critics are concerned about and whether those concerns are legitimate. At a general level, we have seen that the climate of crisis in contemporary feminist theory is the result of concern over the critique of identity categories (such as sex and gender) provided by theorists such as Butler. Indeed, this critique has certainly, at a superficial level, 'troubled' those categories in a way which has disrupted and disoriented the very foundations of specifically feminist political concerns. That is to say, it has undermined traditional appeals to such identity categories as 'woman' as the apparently unproblematic 'subject' represented in and by feminism. If 'woman' no longer represents a stable, coherent, identity then basing a political movement on precisely such an identity appears problematic.

Yet we may nevertheless want to question whether the instability of this identity provides more than superficial trouble for the articulation and representation of such political concerns. How serious is this theoretical 'trouble'? Firstly, it is clear from earlier discussion in this chapter that the primary source of 'trouble' is the shift in approach to the categories of sex and gender (in some feminist theory) from dependence on a nature/culture framework to a framework in which those categories are understood and interpreted only through and within the realm of culture. In making this shift, it appears to many critics that the categories of sex and gender are thrown into disarray. Yet the significance of this very shift has been called into question by some feminist theorists. Diana Fuss, for example, makes the claim that while the realm of 'nature' is reconfigured by constructivists as always a product or effect of culture, this simply seems to shift or displace the 'encounter with essence' onto the concept of sociality (Fuss 1989, 5-6). In other words, when theorists such as Butler reject the nature/culture framework in favour of a framework in which those terms are understood as wholly within the realm of culture, we might question whether the problems or 'dangers' of the previous framework are simply shifted or deferred into another realm (in her case, that of culture)\(^\text{16}\). We might therefore

\(^{16}\) Indeed, Fuss also claims that the shift to the realm of culture seems to be predicated on the presumption that "the category of the social automatically escapes essentialism" (Fuss 1989, 6). This is similar to the claim I made earlier in this chapter, that the shift by some feminist theorists away from the nature/culture framework to a 'wholly culture' framework seemed critically dependent on a perception of that latter framework as highly malleable or negotiable. This perception appears to be
question what 'trouble' is really made and what dangers are really avoided, by the conceptual shift away from the nature/culture framework.

Secondly, critics express general unease with the idea that identity categories are always 'oppressive' or 'dangerous'. Nancy Fraser, for example, is highly critical of Butler for apparently claiming that identity categories are always, necessarily, oppressive (Fraser 1995a, 71). Fuss also questions whether strategic use of those categories must always be dangerous (Fuss 1989, xii). It is therefore unclear whether the shift to the realm of culture must necessarily imply that the categories of sex and gender are so unstable and malleable, so 'troubled', that nothing can be represented or named without immediately being called into question. That is, it is a point of contention whether identity categories in general, or the use of them for the purposes of political representation, are always inherently troublesome.

To summarise here, therefore, a number of important points arise when considering the question of whether theoretical trouble necessarily gives rise to political trouble. Firstly, our response to this question is critically dependent on whether we understand the shift away from the nature/culture framework to a framework in which all things are understood through and within the realm of culture, to be one in which all things become malleable and negotiable, and as such 'troublesome' in the first place. We may want to claim, for example, that the general shift in conceptual frameworks provides no new or peculiar implications for the political concerns of feminism. On the other hand, we may decide that although contemporary accounts of sex and gender have destabilised the grounds upon which political representation has been constructed, there is nevertheless nothing wrong with strategic use of those categories for political purposes. A strategic deployment of those categories might still avow their instability. Furthermore, it may well enrich our understanding of such categories.

Whether or not we agree, however, that 'trouble' has arisen legitimately in feminist theory under the influence of this general shift in conceptual frameworks, those issues which are consistently referred to as 'troublesome' are, as I have suggested, those of political representation and agency. Both are, at some level, considered pertinent to the articulation and fulfilment of the 'emancipatory

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17 We might want to contest Fraser's assessment of Butler on this point. While Butler is certainly highly critical of identity categories on the basis that they are both normative and exclusionary in character, she nevertheless understands them to hold strategic importance. On this basis, therefore, she would not want to claim that they are always necessarily oppressive.
objectives' of feminism. That is to say, they are perceived to be highly relevant to, firstly, the *voicing* of concern over the role and treatment of women in the political arena and, secondly, the *implementation* of changes and improvements to that role and treatment.

From my account of the current state of 'crisis' in contemporary feminism in this chapter, it is clear that the issue of political representation is understood to be 'troublesome' at two levels. First of all, we have seen that the representation of 'women' as a gendered identity category and as a definable 'group' has been problematised. As a category of identity, it is no longer understood to be stable or determinate and the very 'content' or 'meaning' of that category is brought into question. A political movement which is based on precisely such an unstable identity is considered to be substantially weakened because of that instability. Relatedly, the political representation of 'women's concerns' is also considered highly problematic. This is not only because the use of gender has been problematised as a legitimate category of representation but because sex is also no longer understood to be a fixed or stable category of analysis. In so far as efforts might be made to represent concerns specific to the female sex, therefore, it is no longer clear whether that sex can actually be drawn upon as a legitimate category of political representation. Furthermore, without (in some cases) a conceptual framework in which a relation is drawn *between* sex and gender the question arises of how to understand and theorise the relation between our embodiment in sexually and materially different bodies and our actions or activities as gendered subjects in the political arena. Do any of our needs and concerns in that arena bear a significant relation to the particular kind of body which we 'live'? Would the representation of such needs and concerns be impossible without a fixed or stable conception of what constitutes the category of sex?

We have also seen in this chapter (and in chapter four) in what sense the traditional notion of agency as an attribute or capacity of subjects has been brought into question through some contemporary accounts of sex and gender and how the loss of such an account is thought to undermine the 'emancipatory' objectives of the feminist movement. If we reject an account of agency which clearly attributes subjects with the capacity to actively and deliberately challenge their construction as gendered, it is questioned whether we can maintain support for a movement which seeks to free women, and have women free themselves, from traditional gender paradigms and hierarchies. Conceiving of agency as a capacity for control over the construction of gender appears, to some critics, to be essential to the very possibility of such 'freedom'. 
I have outlined so far those issues which are frequently referred to as issues of 'specifically feminist political concern' and, at the same time, as issues which are, on some accounts, thought to be problematised by the theoretical imperatives grounding many contemporary accounts of sex and gender. However, I have also suggested in this chapter that despite broad agreement over the general direction or 'impetus' of those theoretical imperatives, there is substantial disagreement over the relation which those imperatives bear to the articulation of these concerns. It is to this issue that I will now turn.

Opinions concerning the relation between contemporary accounts of sex and gender and the articulation of feminist political concerns are, I want to claim, divided into two distinct camps. On one side, many theorists who are themselves advocates of an undermining, subversion or deconstruction of identity categories such as sex and gender claim one of two things. Some claim that there are in fact no necessary political consequences of a radical critique of identity categories. Wendy Brown, for example, suggests that such a critique has "no necessary or inevitable political entailments" (Brown 1995, 32). Butler similarly claims that "there are no necessary political consequences" of the theory she promotes (Butler 1995b, 41). Others claim that, where there are such consequences, they do not undermine the possibility of addressing issues of specifically feminist political concern. Denise Riley, for instance, claims that we can affirm the troublesome nature of the category 'women' and perceive feminism as ''the site of the systematic fighting out of that instability'' (Riley 1988, 5). She argues that we can do this without fearing that it leaves us in "a vague whirlpool of 'postgendered' being" (Riley 1988, 5)18. On the other side, many critics, as we have seen, have argued that the critique of identity categories is in fact undermining or subversive of the very possibility of a feminist politics19.

What exactly is at issue or at stake in these divided opinions? First of all, I want to suggest that central to them is a fundamental difference in approach to the question of what relation does or ought to exist between theory and politics. Broadly speaking, while theorists such as Butler seek to understand what theoretical conditions allow for (or provide the conditions of possibility for) particular sorts of politics and for particular sorts of political problems, conversely it seems, others (such as Benhabib) begin with an account of the political objectives of feminism, and strive towards an account of subjectivity or identity which is consistent with

18 See also Riley 1992, 121. Chantal Mouffe is also critical of critics who claim that the deconstruction of 'essential' identities leads to an impossibility of a feminist politics - see Mouffe 1992, 371.
19 See, for example, Benhabib 1992, 229; Bordo 1993, 240; McGowan-Tress 1988, 197; Waugh 1992, 198. These examples were cited in the second section of this chapter.
such objectives. Part of the difficulty, therefore, in considering the disagreement in the first place, is understanding the very different perspectives from which these divided opinions originate, and the different angles at which they collide with one another in contemporary feminist debate.

Nevertheless, I do want to suggest here that certain claims can be made about the nature of the disagreement that is taking place in these different opinions which are expressed in contemporary feminist debate. It is certainly right to claim that there is profound disagreement over what sort of account of subjectivity or identity can or should support particular political objectives. More specifically, we have seen the sense in which there is strong disagreement over what sort of account of the categories of sex and gender is consistent with the emancipatory objectives of the feminist political movement. Following on from this, it is clear that there is disagreement over the meaning of such notions as 'agency', 'autonomy' and 'selfhood' and how these notions should be incorporated and understood in the context of both the theoretical and political objectives of the feminist movement. Furthermore, it is clear from these two points, that there is also more fundamental disagreement over precisely what the theoretical and political objectives of the feminist movement are or should be.

If one thing is clear at this point, therefore, it is that there are an array of concerns being voiced in contemporary feminist debate, most of which circle around these issues of political representation and agency. While these concerns are voiced in relation to the same sorts of issues, however, it is also clear that the adequacy or inadequacy of particular theoretical approaches to these issues is being assessed against quite a diverse array of criteria.

For example, amidst the differing opinions which are expressed here, the question of what the political objectives of feminism actually are seems to be left 'unasked'. It seems assumed, that is, that we all understand what is meant by a feminist politics and what might be inconsistent with the objectives of such a politics. Significantly, it is precisely our assumptions about the nature or constitution of a feminist politics which guides our criticism of particular theoretical imperatives as 'politically dubious'. We have seen, for example, how Tong, McGowan-Tress, Benhabib, Waugh and Bordo all criticise the potential alliance between postmodern theory and feminism on the grounds that the theoretical imperatives of that theory will not provide an adequate framework within which to address the political objectives of a feminist movement. On the other hand, Butler, Brown, Riley and Mouffe all claim in different ways that the critique of identity categories which they
promote or advocate does not lead to an 'impossibility' of a feminist politics. However, these differing opinions over the relation between particular theoretical imperatives and the political objectives of the feminist movement all beg the question of precisely what is meant by a 'feminist politics' or by 'the political objectives of a feminist movement'. Do Tong, McGowan-Tress, Benhabib, Waugh and Bordo mean the same thing by these terms as Butler, Brown, Riley and Mouffe? When 'feminists theorise the political' in the book of the same name (Butler & Scott (eds.) 1992), what exactly is it that they seek to theorise, and are the contributors to that book all theorising about the same thing?

In general terms, it seems that a number of things could be meant by a 'feminist politics'. Furthermore, precisely what it is that is meant in any particular case will determine to a large extent the legitimacy or adequacy of the criticisms raised against it. At one level, for instance, a 'feminist politics' might refer to a practical political movement which struggles for social, political and legal reform for women. That is, it could be understood to be a politics which addresses practical issues such as equal rights, equal pay, equal opportunity and so on. In the context of such a politics, where the representation of women in the political arena is of paramount importance, it is arguable that troubling of the category of 'women' may indeed facilitate negative political implications. That is, if the category of 'women' is undermined as a legitimate category of representation, then this might hinder rather than promote the needs and interests of women, as political actors, in the achievement of any gender-based practical political objective.

At another, more abstract, level, however, a 'feminist politics' might refer to a theoretical movement which strives to critique, negotiate or renegotiate some of the major concepts in political philosophy which have historically excluded women. In this case, such concepts as 'equality', 'liberty', 'justice' and 'autonomy' might figure significantly in any account of a feminist politics. Indeed, it seems clear from the little we know so far of Benhabib's criticisms of postmodern theory that it is precisely the concepts of 'autonomy', 'agency' and 'selfhood' which she understands to be undermined by such theory, and these concepts are, she claims, essential to the emancipatory objectives of the feminist movement. While Benhabib might well want to argue for the significance of our negotiation of these concepts in determining the terms through which we negotiate issues at a more practical level, it is nevertheless primarily in the context of such abstract political concepts that she establishes what she takes to be a framework for a specifically feminist politics.
When Butler and her contemporaries herald a 'crisis' in contemporary feminist theory and are criticised for failing to provide a viable framework in which to address the political objectives of feminism the following question must therefore be asked: what do we mean by such objectives and in precisely what sense are such objectives undermined by the framework in which sex and gender are theorised? It is only in thinking through such questions that we can go on to answer more definitively the question of what it actually means for the contemporary political concerns of feminism to have rejected the sex/gender distinction. For indeed, as I have argued in this chapter, not only is there clear disagreement over precisely what the objectives of the feminist movement consist of, but it is also clear that opinions differ over whether the theoretical 'troubling' of the categories of sex and gender in contemporary feminist theory necessarily gives rise to political trouble for feminism.
CHAPTER SIX

Theorising the Political

In the previous chapter I was concerned to give an account of the general shift in approach to the categories of sex and gender which has taken place in contemporary Anglo-American feminist theory. This shift has been from a framework in which those categories are roughly aligned with the realms of 'nature' and 'culture' to one in which they are understood to operate wholly within the realm of 'culture'. I placed this general shift in conceptual frameworks in the context of the current climate of 'crisis' which has been heralded in contemporary feminist theory and discussed the perceived implications of this shift for some issues of feminist political concern - specifically, for the issues of political representation and agency. Despite this general shift to the realm of 'culture' having provoked concern with respect to these issues, however, it does appear that there is something more specific going on in these conceptual manoeuvres which is 'troubling' with regard to those issues than just this general shift.

In this chapter I want to examine why, having rejected the sex/gender distinction, the framework through which Butler reconfigures those categories is particularly problematic in terms of the articulation and representation of these political concerns. We have seen that Butler's rejection of the sex/gender distinction and her shift to construe those categories within 'the realm of culture' is indeed indicative of a more general shift in feminist theory. In particular, it is indicative of the general theoretical direction taken by so-called 'postmodern' feminism. However, I will argue in this chapter that while this general theoretical direction does indeed have certain problematic implications for the political concerns of feminism, it is Butler's performative account of sex and gender which provides the basis for more specific political concerns. Explaining precisely what these concerns are and how
they emerge in the context of her account of sex and gender will therefore be the primary concern of this chapter.

The chapter will be divided into two sections. In the first section I will give an account of a dialogue which takes place between Benhabib and Butler in the collection of essays *Feminist Contentions*¹. In the context of this dialogue I will address in more detail the question of the political implications for feminism of Butler's rejection of the sex/gender distinction and her reconfigured account of those categories as performative. There are two levels at which this debate between Benhabib and Butler is useful for the purposes of addressing this question. At a general level, the debate between them illustrates the nature of the disagreement that takes place in contemporary feminist theory over the relation between the rejection of the sex/gender distinction in so-called 'postmodern' accounts of gender and the construction of a 'feminist politics'. At a more specific level, it offers a direct critique of Butler's rejection of that distinction and her performative account of those categories against the backdrop of this disagreement. In this section I will argue that, despite both rejecting the sex/gender distinction, Benhabib and Butler disagree over what is lost or gained in moving beyond this distinction. While Benhabib claims that Butler *loses* an account of agency, Butler considers herself to *gain* one. While both agree that some account of agency is politically important for feminism, they disagree over precisely what sort of agency is required in order for specifically feminist political concerns to be addressed.

In the second section of the chapter I will address the issue of how Butler understands her performative account of gender to be responsive to the criticisms raised by theorists such as Benhabib against her work at a political level. In other words, I will address the question of how she understands the theoretical imperatives which ground her work to relate to or support what she understands to be the broader political concerns of feminism. I have already claimed, in chapter four, that what is wrong or inadequate about Butler's performative account of sex and gender at a *theoretical* level is that it fails to give a strong or meaningful enough account of our embodiment and our agency². In this section and in the conclusion to the thesis, I will argue that these theoretical inadequacies ultimately give way to some political inadequacies in her work. These inadequacies lie in addressing those two issues which I have identified as of particular political concern for feminism: political representation and agency. I will conclude by arguing that these political inadequacies have their origin in the specific manner in which Butler reconfigures

¹ See Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, Fraser (eds.) 1995.
² See my analysis of Butler's work in chapter four.
the categories of sex and gender as performative and the implications this reconfiguration has for the issues of political representation and agency.

Section One
Feminist contentions: Benhabib versus Butler

(i) Benhabib's critique of Butler

Seyla Benhabib's critique of Butler has two principal targets. The first target is the critique of identity categories and identity politics which she understands to be at work in so-called postmodern theory. The second is Butler's account of gender as performance. These targets are related. That is to say, her critique of Butler operates as a specific example of the way in which she understands a postmodern critique of identity categories to give way to a subversion of the foundations of a feminist politics.

Benhabib claims that the critique of identity categories raised by postmodern theory gives rise to an 'identity crisis' for feminism. As we have seen, Benhabib is by no means alone in making such a claim. She argues that this identity crisis "may eliminate not only the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory ideals of the women's movement altogether" (Benhabib 1995a, 20). Benhabib's argument is based on the claim that, in its strong form, postmodern theory promotes a dissolution of the subject which in turn dissolves the concepts of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity and autonomy (Benhabib 1995a, 20). Postmodern theory has debilitating implications for feminism precisely because, according to Benhabib, the ideal of the autonomous, self-directing subject is replaced with a fractured, opaque self (Benhabib 1992, 16). Given that women's sense of self is already fragile, that their history has been written by others and that they have not been able to fully control their lives, Benhabib claims that this fractured, opaque, self of postmodern theory can only provide women with a more fragmented and fragile vision of themselves and their future (Benhabib 1992, 16). As such, it is a particularly damaging account of subjectivity and one which does not further the emancipatory objectives of the feminist movement. The norms of autonomy, choice and self-determination in the legal, moral and political arenas are vital, Benhabib claims, for women's struggles to be successfully voiced and acted upon (Benhabib 1992, 16). Indeed, she claims that the project of female

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3 See my analysis of the current 'state of crisis' in contemporary feminist theory in chapter five.
emancipation is *unthinkable* without recourse to a regulative principle on agency, autonomy and selfhood (Benhabib 1995a, 21).

It is important to note, however, that there are reasons for why we might want to question Benhabib's arguments even at this preliminary stage. First of all, we might want to claim that she has mischaracterised postmodern theory (or has, at the very least, selectively interpreted it in its strong form) and has suggested wrongly that its theoretical imperatives give rise to a dissolution of a conception of the subject. Secondly, we might want to question her claim that a feminist politics requires recourse to particular regulative or normative principles in order to support its emancipatory objectives. I will come back to these questions later in this discussion. At this stage, it is pertinent that we first consider how she makes a specific critique of Butler's theory of performativity as an example of how she understands this 'dissolution of the subject' and subversion of the emancipatory objectives of feminism to be operative in postmodern accounts of subjectivity.

As I have claimed, Benhabib uses Butler's theory of performativity as an example of the debilitating implications for feminism of a radical critique of identity categories and identity politics. As such, she understands Butler's theory to be an instance of how a 'postmodern' account of the subject disallows or dispenses with the ideals of autonomy, choice and self-determination. Benhabib claims that Butler's theory of performative gender constitution cannot give us "a sufficiently thick and rich account of gender formation that would also explain the capacities of human agents for self-determination" (Benhabib 1995b, 110). She explicitly locates her critique of Butler as operative at two levels of analysis. At one level, she questions the sorts of social research paradigms which Butler relies upon in coming to an account of gender constitution as performativity. Benhabib argues that Butler's theory of performativity "still presupposes a remarkably deterministic view of individuation and socialisation processes which falls short of the currently available social-scientific reflections on the subject" (Benhabib 1995b, 110). She therefore understands Butler's theory of performativity to go too far in its explanation of subject constitution, in so far as it tends towards attributing too much power to culture (society/discourse) as a constitutive force, and too little power to individuals to resist wholesale cultural determination. The power of individuals to resist such determination is, she claims, evident in contemporary psycho-sexual developmental accounts of subjects. In this sense, therefore, she is not only making a general claim about such power being necessary, on her view, to any account of subjectivity, but

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4 Indeed, this is a claim some critics have made against her - see, for example, Fraser 1995a, 65.
she is claiming that social-scientific accounts demonstrate the actual capacity of subjects to assert such power.

At another level, Benhabib questions what normative vision of agency follows from or is implied by Butler's theory of performativity (Benhabib 1995b, 111). That is, she questions the character and function of the conception of agency which is operative in Butler's theory of performativity. Ultimately, Benhabib wants to contest Butler's claim that her theory of performativity can in fact give an account of agency. Benhabib claims that Butler "wants to extend the limits of reflexivity in thinking about the self beyond the dichotomy of 'sex' and 'gender'" (Benhabib 1995a, 21). There are two issues which Benhabib is bringing together in making this claim. The first concerns the notion of 'reflexivity'; the other concerns 'the dichotomy of sex and gender'. The claim that Benhabib wants to make here is that the capacity of subjects or selves for self-reflection (that is, 'reflexivity'), a capacity which she appears to understand to be essential to 'agency', is brought into question by Butler's project to move beyond the sex/gender dichotomy. She therefore understands Butler's project to be, at least in part, an attempt to both get beyond the binary framework which has supported the categories of sex and gender and to locate agency in that reconfigured space. It is precisely within the terms of this project that Benhabib suggests problems emerge for Butler in providing an adequate account or explanation of agency.

The reader will recall the sense in which Butler does indeed attempt to make this conceptual shift 'beyond the binary frame' in her analysis of the categories of sex and gender and how it is, as Benhabib suggests, precisely in making this shift that problems emerge in her work. Nevertheless, we have not yet considered in detail why these problems emerge and, specifically, why such critics as Benhabib might want to argue that agency, autonomy and selfhood are disallowed by Butler's account of the categories of sex and gender. What exactly is the nature of the relation Benhabib wants to draw between Butler's shift 'beyond the dichotomy of sex and gender' and her account of agency? Does Butler's theory of performativity ultimately disallow an account of agency? Moreover, do Benhabib and Butler have the same understanding of agency?

To address the first question here, it is clear that Benhabib is making the claim that in Butler's project to move 'beyond the binary frame' of sex and gender, the possibility of agency is lost, but where exactly is it lost? Furthermore, what is presupposed by Benhabib about the character or form of agency such that this character or form is lost in Butler's account? Benhabib's critique of Butler is levelled
at precisely the point at which Butler collapses the dichotomy of sex and gender - that is, the point at which Butler seeks to claim that sex is a product or effect of gender, not a basic or originary point on top of which are imposed various cultural significations. As we have seen, Butler's performative theory of gender constitution relies upon an account of sex as 'always already gender'. In other words, the category of sex does not pre-exist gender, nor does it provide an ontological foundation for various gendered significations. In Situating the Self, Benhabib expresses an explicit allegiance to Butler's claim that the category of sex is not simply an anatomical fact. Indeed, she agrees with Butler (along with Londa Schiebinger and Jane Flax), that "the construction and interpretation of anatomical difference is itself a social and historical process...Sex and gender are not related to each other as nature to culture" (Benhabib 1992, 192). Yet, despite her claim that the opposition of sex and gender must itself be questioned (Benhabib 1992, 192), she remains highly critical of Butler's reformulation of those categories in terms of the notion of performativity, and it is precisely in this reformulation that Benhabib understands agency to be lost.

Butler's theory of performative gender constitution cannot, Benhabib argues, "do justice to the complexities of the ontogenetic origins of gender in the human person" (Benhabib 1995b, 108). While it gives us some account of how meaning is constructed and how significance comes to be attached to our gendered identities, it nevertheless fails, according to Benhabib, to give an explanation of the structural and developmental processes which are in fact involved in individual socialisation (and hence in the construction of our gendered identities). It also fails to give an account of the capacities individuals possess for some degree of self-determination. We can begin to see here the sense in which Benhabib and Butler are at odds with one another. On the one hand, Butler wants to claim that "there is no ontologically intact reflexivity to the subject which is then placed within a cultural context" (Butler 1995b, 46). She is critical of accounts of the subject (such as Benhabib's) which characterise it as 'self-reflective', 'self-determining' or 'autonomous' on the basis that, in her view, they presume a subject which has the capacity to deliberate or act outside of its cultural context. Benhabib, on the other hand, talks about there being "ontogenetic origins" of gender in the subject and claims that these origins cannot be explained or accounted for by Butler. Nevertheless, against Butler's characterisation

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5 See, for an example of where Butler makes this claim, Butler 1993, 28.

6 This claim is only briefly articulated by Benhabib. It seems important to note that it is ostensibly a curious one given that Butler's theory of performative gender constitution seems to be precisely a theory about the structural and developmental processes which are operative in the construction of identity (such as identification and repetition for example). Nevertheless, the point Benhabib is concerned to make, over and above her general uneasiness with the social research paradigms which guide Butler's work, is that Butler's theory of performativity does not provide an adequate explanation of the capacity of subjects for some degree of self-reflection and self-determination.
of her, she explicitly seeks to contest the claim that the subject deliberates or acts outside of its cultural context. Indeed, her aim in *Situating the Self* is precisely to work against such a claim. Her argument is rather that subjects have the capacity to challenge their 'situatedness', to contribute to the constitution of their own identity and to their own place in the world (Benhabib 1992, 8), and it is precisely this capacity, captured in part by the term 'reflexivity', which she understands to be lost or disavowed by Butler's theory of performativity. It is clear here that Benhabib and Butler critique one another on the basis of largely caricatured accounts of the claims each in fact seek to make. As such, the disagreements between them can be understood to be somewhat hazier than they initially appear. This mischaracterisation of the views against which both Benhabib and Butler formulate their own theoretical and political positions is an important issue and is one which I will come back to at a later point in the chapter.

What is clear, nevertheless, at this stage is that it is at this critical point, this disagreement over the origins or explanation of gender constitution, that Butler and Benhabib understand each other to diverge. Most significantly, it is at this point that Benhabib understands Butler to undermine the possibility of autonomy, choice and self-determination. In providing an account of gendered identity as performatory and so failing, according to Benhabib, to give an account of the capacity of subjects for self-reflection and self-determination, she understands Butler's account of the construction of subjectivity to be ultimately (socially) deterministic. Moreover, she questions whether the dissolution of the concepts of agency, autonomy and selfhood is in fact necessary to contesting the supremacy of heterosexist and dualist positions in the women's movement (Benhabib 1995a, 21). She therefore questions the need for Butler to take as radical a position as she does in order to achieve particular theoretical ends.

In the context of this discussion, the most significant critical outcome of Benhabib's critique of Butler on this issue is the way in which she relates it to the very possibility of a feminist politics. For Benhabib, the possibility of a feminist politics depends upon an account of subjects as agents - that is, as capable of self-reflection and some degree of self-determination. Since, for Benhabib, Butler's project precludes such an account, she also understands it to undermine the possibility of a feminist politics. It is important to note, in summary, that in order to make this claim, Benhabib is clearly making three more basic, related, claims. First of all, on the basis of a very brief critical analysis, she is claiming that Butler's performative account of the categories of sex and gender necessarily gives way to a problematic political vision. Secondly, in making this claim, she is clearly making
some important assumptions about the nature of a feminist politics and about the sorts of theoretical projects which feminists ought to pursue (or ought to envisage) in order to support such a politics. Thirdly, in claiming that Butler's theory of performativity disallows agency, she is making some significant assumptions about what might in fact constitute 'agency'. For indeed, it is clear both that a notion of agency is employed by Butler and that this notion is critical to Butler's understanding of the transformative possibilities of her account of gender constitution. It is clear, therefore, that Benhabib and Butler are at odds with each other on a number of significant points. In Butler's response to Benhabib, it will become even more clear to what extent these points of disagreement or divergence determine the ultimate force of their critiques of one another.

(ii) Butler's response to Benhabib

In considering the general form of Butler's response to Benhabib, it is apparent, first and foremost, that she takes a very different approach in comparison to Benhabib towards the 'problem of politics' which emerges within debate over the possible alliance of feminism and postmodernism. Indeed, she would question Benhabib's critical claim that feminism must articulate a 'stable' subject in order to ground a feminist politics. She claims that it is rather that "a specific version of politics is shown in its contingency once these premises are problematically thematised" (Butler 1995b, 36). That is, the character of the political arena is itself brought into question once the premises upon which it is based (premises such as the very 'stability' or 'unity' of the subject) are shown to be problematic. For example, once an identity category (such as 'women') is no longer understood to represent a unified, stable, identity ('woman'), then the legitimacy of identity-based politics is itself brought into question. So, rather than question whether a stable subject is necessary in order for a feminist politics to be possible, Butler asks what the structure of the political domain is such that a stable subject is presumed to be necessary. Indeed, she claims that the contingency of that very domain is revealed as soon as the stability of the subject is brought into question. From the very beginning, therefore, it is clear that Butler and Benhabib approach the debate over the relation between theory and politics from very different footings.

Butler also differs from Benhabib in offering a radical critique and renegotiation of traditional formulations of the notion of agency. Specifically, she is

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7 I have referred here to Butler's critique of traditional, liberal, formulations of agency as 'radical' in comparison to Benhabib's own account of agency. Benhabib, however, is not uncritical of liberal accounts of agency. Indeed, in so far as Butler is construing the liberal account of agency as one in
critical of the 'autonomous', 'rational' subject of liberalism, broadly construed. She is critical of such formulations precisely because, in her view, they disavow both the 'situated' and the 'constituted' character of subjectivity. That is, they disavow both the fact that we always act from and within a cultural schema and, most importantly, that we are constituted by and through those very acts. Indeed, as we have seen, Butler rejects Beauvoir's version of the sex/gender distinction on precisely these grounds, that is, on the grounds that it presupposes an account of the subject as at some point 'free' from gender and as capable of deliberately 'taking up' their gender. She claims that the idea that there is a 'doer behind the deed', an idea she attributes to liberal formulations of agency, is installed by theorists only in order to "assign blame and accountability" (Butler 1995a, 150-151). That is, it is a fictive structure set up for the purposes of morality. For Butler, the 'doer' is constituted in and through the 'deed'. Her theory of performativity is aimed precisely at capturing the sense in which signification and action are coincident. Yet, significantly, Butler wants to claim, contrary to Benhabib's criticisms of her, that agency is not lost or disallowed here. "To claim that the subject is constituted is not," she argues, "to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency" (Butler 1995b, 46). Butler therefore contests the claim that having an account of subjects as constituted necessarily gives rise to an account of subjects as determined. In so far as the subject is the site of endless transformation and resignification and in so far as its constituted character is never fixed but always in process, Butler claims that resistance is always possible. 'Agency' is therefore located by Butler in the very instability of the subject.

In response to Benhabib, therefore, Butler is evidently highly critical of the claim that a subject must be 'stable' or 'grounded' in some way in order for agency to be possible. Indeed, she argues that such stability disavows the constituted and transformative character of the subject. Butler argues that Benhabib misconstrues her theory of performativity "by grammatically reinstalling the subject 'behind' the deed, which subjects are somehow 'disembedded', 'disembodied', 'abstractly rational', etc., Benhabib would concur with Butler in criticising such an account. Nevertheless, the accounts of agency which they ultimately provide in response to their critiques of liberalism differ sharply from one another. This difference in their responses to the liberal account of agency is largely due to their different characterisations of that account.

8 Wendy Brown concurs with Butler on this point, claiming that what worries feminists about the critique of identity categories in postmodern theory is the deprivation of "the moral force that the subject, truth and normativity coproduce in modernity" (Brown 1991, 78). Indeed, Brown suggests that in terms of making a 'feminist future' we need to loosen our attachment to such 'modern' conceptions of subjectivity and morality - like Butler, she argues that we need to rethink the conditions that make particular forms of politics possible.

9 This claim of Butler's concerning the subject as 'the site of endless transformation and resignification' further emphasises the sense in which her account of the subject as socially constructed is reliant on a conception of the 'realm of culture' as highly malleable and negotiable.
and by reducing...the notion of performativity to theatrical performance" (Butler 1995c, 135). It is clear here then that Butler and Benhabib fundamentally disagree on how we might conceive of agency. Moreover, both theorists are guilty of caricaturing, to some extent, each others' conceptions of agency. While Benhabib wants to claim that Butler's performative theory of gender constitution is ultimately deterministic, Butler criticises Benhabib for offering an account of agency which implies that subjects are at some point capable of action which transcends the limitations of the situation or context from which they act and, most significantly, through which they are constituted. I will consider in more detail this question of the different conceptions of agency which inform the critiques of Butler and Benhabib at a later point.

A further important and critical disagreement which divides the work of Benhabib and Butler is reflected in their different approaches to the political domain. Their approaches are different for a number of reasons. Firstly, we have already seen the sense in which Benhabib and Butler approach the 'problem of politics' from different angles. While Benhabib appears to hold a particular conception of the character of the political arena and deduces from that character the necessary subjective conditions for political action, Butler appears to look to the conditions which make particular political action possible and critically consider from that perspective the character of the political arena. These different angles inevitably give rise to different understandings of the norms and requirements of the political arena. Butler disagrees with any project which seeks to set out the norms or requirements of political life in advance of political action. These norms and requirements, she claims, only come to be articulated in and through political action (Butler 1995c, 129). Benhabib, on the other hand, talks about the importance of striving towards autonomy as an ideal in political life (Benhabib 1995a, 21). She also suggests the importance of 'utopian thinking' as a "practico-moral imperative" (Benhabib 1995a, 30). Indeed, as we have already seen, she claims that "social criticism of the kind required for women's struggles is not even possible without positing the legal, moral and political norms of autonomy, choice and self-determination" (Benhabib 1992, 16). Norms, Benhabib claims, facilitate expression of the demands of justice and

10 Butler asks, in response to Benhabib's criticism of her, "what notion of 'agency' will that be which always and already knows its transcendental ground, and speaks only and always from that ground? To be so grounded is nearly to be buried: it is to refuse alterity, to reject contestation, to decline that risk of self-transformation perpetually posed by democratic life: to give way to the very impulse of conservatism" (Butler 1995c, 132).

11 Indeed she notes that "any effort to give a universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that that guarantee of solidarity is required in advance, will necessarily produce factionalisation, and that identity as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement. Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary" (Butler 1995b, 50).
human worthiness. Utopias "portray modes of friendship, solidarity and human happiness" (Benhabib 1986, 13). So while Butler claims that the setting up of norms and requirements in advance of political action disavows the sense in which norms and requirements are constituted only in and through such action, Benhabib claims that we need to set up such norms and requirements in order for political struggle to be possible and for the demands of political life to be met.

The curious point to note, however, concerning Butler's contribution to this issue is the sense in which she ultimately confesses the imperative, in the reality of political life, "to set norms, to affirm aspirations, to articulate the possibilities of a more fully democratic and participatory political life" (Butler 1995c, 129). Indeed, she suggests, for example, the strategic and political importance of retaining the category of 'women', a category which she has brought into question, in order to make particular political claims (Butler 1993, 222; Butler 1995b, 49). Whenever this is necessary, she argues that we must simply be aware that such categories are not fixed or determinate but always sites of contest (Butler 1993, 221; Butler 1995b, 50). She therefore wants to claim that in problematising that category she does not want to prevent it from being used in order to serve particular ends, but rather to open it up to the possibility of resignification and transformation. Indeed, for Butler, the problematic character of the category ultimately enables such resignification and transformation.

How can we understand Butler's critique of identity categories and her critique of identity politics in relation to this ultimate appeal to the norms and requirements of the political arena? Butler provides very little material which directly addresses the programmatic implications of her critique of identity categories12. Indeed, part of the difficulty we have in assessing her work is working out precisely what her programmatic vision for a feminist politics might be given the theoretical imperatives which guide her work. Nevertheless, given the criticisms which such theorists as Benhabib raise against her work, it seems imperative that we question what possible direction a feminist politics would take on the basis of the various critiques she makes of identity categories and identity-based politics. Does Butler, as Susan Hekman claims, ultimately give up the basis for a feminist politics (Hekman 1995a, 156)?

To address this question, let us return here to some claims Butler does explicitly make concerning the strategies we might employ, as feminists addressing

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12 Indeed, she explicitly claims in *Bodies That Matter* that her text "is not intended to be programmatic", but nevertheless hopes it will be 'productive' in some way (Butler 1993, xii).
the concerns of 'women' in the political arena. Despite being insistently critical of the
descriptive force of the category 'women', we have seen that Butler endorses
strategic use of that category to serve particular political ends. She claims that "to
understand 'women' as a permanent site of contest, or as a feminist site of
antagonistic struggle, is to presume that there can be no closure on the category and
that, for politically significant reasons, there ought never to be. That the category can
never be descriptive is the very condition of its political efficacy" (Butler 1993, 221).
As in the case of her account of agency, we can see here the sense in which Butler
understands categorical instability to give rise to political efficacy. That is, in so far
as the category 'women' is always open, always a site of contest, the possibilities for
transformation and resignification, both within that very category and in its
deployment in the political arena, are never-ending.\(^\text{13}\)

Butler's claims here are critically informed both by her theory of
performativity and her critique of Slavoj Zizek's analysis of political signifiers as
"empty signs which come to bear phantasmatic investment of various kinds" (Butler
1993, 191). Butler claims that understanding the category of 'women' as a political
signifier in this way avows the sense in which that signifier unifies the category it
seeks to represent and, simultaneously, constitutes that very category. The
performative power of the political signifier therefore lies in 'enacting that which it
names'.\(^\text{14}\) The critical force of the political signifier consists in its failure, ultimately,
to fully or comprehensively describe or represent that which it names. It is precisely
this open-ended character, this inability to ever fully establish or describe the
identity to which it refers which, Butler claims, constitutes the possibility of an
"expansive rearticulation" (Butler 1993, 218) of that identity. So, in summary, the
performative character of the signifier is the very condition of its agency.

'Agency' is therefore located by Butler in the performative character of the
political signifier. It is not an attribute or 'power' of subjects, through which they
assert control or 'authorship' over action or signification. Indeed, we have seen
already the sense in which Butler is highly critical of an account of agency which
implies that the subject is somehow the exclusive 'origin' or 'owner' of action or
signification (Butler 1993, 227). The subject, for Butler is constituted in and by a
signifier (such as 'woman'), where "to be constituted" means 'to be compelled to cite

\(^{13}\) Butler is not alone in seeing the political importance of retaining the category of 'women' while
remaining insistently critical of the character of its possible construction and deployment. Drucilla
Cornell argues, like Butler, that leaving the term open and never fixing its constitution "yields endless
transformative possibility" (Cornell 1995c, 87). Like Butler, Cornell is critical of identity-based
politics. Cornell relies instead on what she refers to as "an explicitly political enactment of mimetic
identification as the basis for solidarity" (Cornell 1995c, 71).

\(^{14}\) See Butler 1995a, 150; Butler 1995c, 134.
or repeat or mime' the signifier itself" (Butler 1993, 220). Agency is located in this very action of at once being brought into being by and repeating or miming the signifier itself. Possibilities for 'agency', and therefore for change and transformation, lie in the very activity of repetition and identification. Furthermore, such activity is not, for Butler, entered into deliberately or voluntarily but rather is a process which subjects are compelled to enter into in so far as they are constituted in and through relations of power in society.

At this point it is pertinent that we step back for a moment and consider the accounts against which Butler is formulating her own position on agency. Butler caricatures traditional, 'liberal', accounts of agency in so far as she presumes that they, necessarily, install a 'doer behind the deed'. That is, they assume a subject which is at some point capable of acting outside or beyond the limitations or constraints of the discourse or culture within which they are situated (Butler 1995b, 42). Indeed, we have already seen the sense in which Butler accuses Beauvoir of ultimately assuming precisely such a subject in her account of gendered identity. Likewise, she is critical of Benhabib for, firstly, apparently investing subjects with the capacity to deliberate or act outside of their cultural context and, secondly, criticising her own account of performativity with such a conception of the subject in mind (Butler 1995c, 135). Yet we have also seen the sense in which both Beauvoir and Benhabib are specifically concerned to 'situate' the subject and thereby emphasise precisely the sense in which subjects act from within a specific social and historical context. How are we, therefore, to understand Butler's critique of their conceptions of agency and in what sense are those conceptions distinct from her own?

In assessing Butler's critique it is clear that Beauvoir and Benhabib ultimately differ from Butler in three important ways. Firstly, they differ in the relative strength of the agency or freedom which they attribute to subjects. Broadly speaking, while Beauvoir and Benhabib clearly equate agency with subjective capacities for choice or self-determination, Butler locates agency in resistance, in the 'possibility of a variation on repetition' of those various sustained social performances which constitute our identities (Butler 1990, 145). Secondly, they differ in their accounts of where, in what theoretical and political space, agency takes place. For Beauvoir and Benhabib, agency is clearly a capacity of the subject, while for Butler, it is an effect

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15 Butler concludes, "[this] resignification marks the workings of an agency that is (a) not the same as voluntarism, and that (b) though implicated in the very relations of power it seeks to rival, is not, as a consequence, reducible to those dominant forms" (Butler 1993, 241).
16 See, for an example of where Butler makes this claim, Butler 1990, 8.
of the subject (Butler 1995c, 134). That is to say, it is not, for Butler, a quality or attribute which subjects somehow possess and deliberately exercise, but rather is an effect of the very processes through which they are constituted as subjects. Thirdly, Butler and Benhabib disagree over both the theoretical and political implications of their respective accounts of agency. While Butler understands both Beauvoir and Benhabib to be guilty of installing a 'doer behind the deed', Benhabib is critical of Butler for apparently doing away with a 'doer' altogether (Benhabib 1992, 16). Both Beauvoir and Benhabib insist on an account of agency in which there is a subject who acts, a 'doer' who 'does'. In so far as Butler criticises such a formulation she is attempting to emphasise the sense in which there can be no separation of the 'doer' from the 'deed'. The 'doer', for Butler, is always constituted in and through the 'deed'. Yet in so far as she wants to emphasise this simultaneous 'constituting' and 'constituted' character of the 'doer', she is accused of losing a valuable account of agency, an account which construes it as precisely about the sort of control the 'doer' has over their 'deeds'.

The characterisations Butler and Benhabib provide of each others' notions of agency inevitably contribute to the different assessments each make of the political consequences of those notions. Indeed what the debate between them illustrates so well is how issues in debate over the political consequences for feminism of particular notions of agency have come to be confused and conflated. Benhabib understands Butler's theory of performativity to have debilitating consequences for the emancipatory objectives of a feminist politics in so far as she perceives the subjective capacities of 'choice' and 'self-determination' to be missing from it. Yet, in response, it seems that Butler is less concerned with the question of whether or not 'choice' or 'self-determination' is possible than with the question of how such choice or self-determination comes about. She is therefore (to some extent) justifiably wary of the very terms through which her work is assessed (Butler 1995c, 128). The debate is characterised by Benhabib as one about 'losing' or 'disallowing' capacities for self-determination and self-reflection, while it is understood by Butler to be about reformulating how agency comes about and under what terms it is effected or established. As she herself states, the task for feminism is actually to "locate strategies of subversive repetition" and to participate in those practices of repetition that constitute identity (Butler 1990, 147). The task is therefore to find ways of disrupting and destabilising the very processes through which we are constructed as subjects and, in so doing, open up possibilities for change and transformation in our identities.
Despite the very different angles (and apparent cross-purposes) at which Benhabib and Butler enter debate with one another on this issue, it is abundantly clear that both invest considerable political importance in their respective conceptions of agency - for both, that importance consists in the possibility for transformation and resignification of the subject and of cultural and political relations (Benhabib 1995b, 108; Butler 1995b, 46). Ultimately, therefore, we are left with the question of what sort of account of agency is consistent with the possibility of such transformation and resignification. Clearly, both Benhabib and Butler consider each others' accounts to be inadequate (or incoherent) with respect to this possibility.

In summary, three critical issues characterise the debate between Benhabib and Butler. Firstly, there is a fundamental disagreement between them over how to understand the origins and operation of agency. Secondly, despite agreement over the political importance of agency, there is a division of opinion over the question of precisely how it does or ought to operate in the political domain. Thirdly, there is specific disagreement over the implications for a feminist politics of particular conceptions of agency.

We have seen that the primary focus of Benhabib's critique of Butler is the notion of agency which emerges from Butler's performative account of sex and gender and the inadequacy of that notion for the articulation and representation of what she perceives to be issues of specifically feminist political concern. However, I want to suggest here that even if we disagree specifically with Benhabib over the question of precisely what such issues are, or how we might go about addressing them, we are still left with the question of whether Butler's performative account of those categories provides an adequate framework in which to address and support either its own implicit political commitments or those issues of political representation and agency as they are debated in the broader context of the Anglo-American feminist theory in which she is situated. In the next section of this chapter I will address this question. I will begin by considering in more detail precisely what sort of political commitments are implicit in Butler's work and how she understands the issues of political representation and agency to be addressed in the context of such commitments.
Section Two

Butler 'theorises the political'

Aside from Butler's explicit reference to the strategic importance of retaining the category 'women' in order to meet particular political ends, she does make some general comments in her work which suggest that a particular vision for a 'feminist politics' does, at least implicitly, inform her work. First of all, Butler suggests that feminism must engage in a critical analysis of its own grounds in order to avoid losing its "democratising potential" (Butler 1993, 29). Moreover, she clearly positions herself in Bodies That Matter in the context of theorists committed to 'radical democratic theory'. In support of this suggested commitment to 'radical democratic aims', we have already seen the way in which she appeals to "a more fully democratic and participatory political life" (Butler 1995c, 129). In this section I will address three questions. Firstly, what does such a commitment, even if only implicitly, entail for Butler and how is it to be understood within the terms of her theory of performativity? Secondly, how is the issue of political representation addressed within this theory? Thirdly, how might Butler, in response to critics such as Benhabib, reconcile her account of agency with this apparent commitment to radical democratic aims?

To address the first question here, I will not endeavour to give a comprehensive account of the various aims and objectives espoused by theorists committed to 'radical democratic politics'. Rather, I will be concerned to draw out precisely what it is that Butler draws upon in her own account of such aims and objectives and how she seeks to deploy some aspects of them within her own vision for a 'feminist politics'. In drawing upon the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), Butler identifies several aspects of their theory for a radical democratic politics which she understands to be pertinent for understanding her own conception of the performative function of the political signifier. For Butler, as we have seen, the political signifier (such as 'women') is politically effective precisely because of its power to produce and constitute its political field and its simultaneous failure to ever fully describe or represent that which it names. Like Butler, Laclau and Mouffe subscribe to the view that political signifiers are productive and constitutive of the political field. They also claim that all political signifiers are contingently related to one another. In so far as such signifiers are always in themselves incomplete (that is, in so far as they always fail to fully describe or represent that which they name), they can and should be perpetually

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17 See my reference to Butler's comments on the performative power of the political signifier earlier in this chapter.
rearticulated in relation to one another. Laclau and Mouffe claim that this process of rearticulation is productive of new subject positions and new political signifiers and, consequently, new linkages between these positions and signifiers can become the rallying points for politicisation (Butler 1993, 193). Laclau and Mouffe therefore understand politics to essentially be "a practice of creation, reproduction and transformation" (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 153). They insist on understanding the domain of the political as "the space for a game which is never 'zero-sum', because the rules and the players are never fully explicit" (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 193). Radical democratic theoretical and political potential consists precisely in this productive and constitutive character of the political domain.

Critical to the aims and objectives of a radical democratic politics is, therefore, an exposure and avowal of "the necessary error of identity" (Butler 1993, 229). In other words, critical to such a politics is a recognition of the necessary failure of identity categories to ever comprehensively define or represent the identity to which they refer. Butler understands the democratising potential of identity categories to consist in mobilising that necessary error and so exposing that which they exclude (the abject). Such exposure and mobilisation is vital, according to Butler, to the very democratising potential of a feminist politics. It is precisely in this sense then that Butler understands the category of 'women' to have "open and democratising potential" (Butler 1993, 221). For this reason, she is specifically critical of the claim that problematising the identity category 'women' necessarily leads to an 'impossibility of a feminist politics' (see Butler 1993, 188). Indeed, for Butler, the problematic character of that category is itself constitutive of its democratising potential. Leaving that category open and so never understanding it to have a fixed or determinate set of references, will leave it open to challenge and therefore open to the sort of change, transformation and resignification which feminism might seek.

In summary, therefore, it is clear that Butler situates herself in the context of political theorists who see radical democratic potential in the incompletion of the political signifier and relations between political signifiers. Although Butler is not explicit in providing us with a programmatic vision for a feminist politics, it is clear that the recognition and mobilisation of 'the necessary error of identity' which is operative in Laclau's and Mouffe's radical democratic theory is pertinent in the

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18 We have seen, in chapter five, in what sense Mouffe is also critical of claims that a critique of identity categories necessarily leads to an impossibility of a feminist politics (Mouffe 1992, 371). In a similar vein to Butler (although with more practical political principles in mind) she suggests rather that such a critique is necessary in order to reach "an adequate understanding of the variety of social relations where the principles of liberty and equality should apply" (Mouffe 1992, 371).
context of her own understanding of the possibility and democratic potential of a 'feminist politics'. Indeed Mouffe, like Butler, appeals to the (postmodern) critique of identity categories precisely because of the sense in which that critique demonstrates the multiplicity of subject positions which ultimately contribute to the constitution of a single agent (Mouffe 1988, 35). Mouffe claims that it is this multiplicity which should be the site of politics - for her, a full understanding of politics is impossible without a theory of the subject as precisely a decentred, destabilised agent (Mouffe 1988, 35).

As I have claimed, two issues of specifically feminist political concern emerge in the context of Butler's theory of performativity and, more specifically, in the context of her theory of the performative function of the political signifier outlined above. The first is the issue of political representation; the second is that of agency. I will turn firstly here to the question of how the issue of political representation is addressed in these contexts.

We have seen here that the content of the identity category of 'women' is never stable or fixed. In so far as it is 'a performative', or functions performatively, according to Butler, it constitutes itself as a category at the point at which it is 'named'. Its content is in this sense highly malleable and negotiable. Indeed it is this very malleability which, for Butler, determines its 'democratising' potential. It is, for Butler, a category which is open to a continual process of transformation and resignification. Yet we may well ask what this malleability implies for the question of whether we can ever talk about there being some meaningful or substantial account of the content of that category. For example, is the term 'women' simply an "empty sign" (Butler 1993, 191) which we invest with whatever meaning we choose at any given time? In so far as that category of 'women' does operate as such an empty sign, what does this effectively mean for the political representation by the feminist movement of 'women' and 'women's concerns'? How do such things come to be represented? Is our representation of them always strategic and temporary? Is this a problem?

19 Mouffe writes, "we are in fact always multiple and contradictory subjects, inhabitants of a diversity of communities, constructed by a variety of discourses and precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject-positions. Thus the importance of the postmodern critique for developing a political philosophy aimed at making possible a new form of individuality that would be truly plural and democratic" (Mouffe 1988, 44).

20 It is important to note here that Butler's theory of the performative function of the political signifier obviously has implications for all political signifiers, not simply that of 'woman'. However, I am concerned here to think quite specifically about its implications for the political concerns of feminism and, for this reason, I am focusing on the 'political signifiers' of 'women' and 'women's concerns'.
One consequence of the way in which Butler construes the gender identity category 'woman' as 'an empty sign' is that that category and those concerns which we might identify as unique to that category, are wholly malleable and negotiable. On Butler's account, there can be no meaningful or substantial content which is specific to or determinate of that category or concerns except that which we invest in them. Furthermore, even at the point at which we 'name' that category and so invest it with meaning or content, that meaning or content is shifting. That is to say, in so far as it can never 'fully describe or represent that which it names' its meaning can never be fixed and it will mean different things at different times and in different contexts. For this reason, the political representation of 'women' and of 'women's concerns' will always be, for Butler, a slippery affair.

The implications of this 'slipperiness' for the feminist movement are, as I suggested in the previous section and chapter, different according to the different political contexts in which they are assessed. For example, in so far as it has historically been a movement which has specifically sought to represent 'women' and 'women's concerns', it is clear that for Butler such representation can never be entirely legitimate. Indeed, Butler specifically seeks to point out that "identity as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement" (Butler 1995b, 50). That movement can never legitimately prescribe a fixed content or meaning to the categories of 'women' or 'women's concerns'. In this sense, that is, in so far as feminism is understood as primarily a representative movement or lobby group for a particular group or particular concerns, its political force does appear substantially weakened by Butler's theory of performativity. However, in the context of her vision for a 'radically democratic politics', the open and transformative potential of the category of 'women' appears to provide general support for such 'radically democratic' aims. On the one hand, therefore, Butler's performative account of gender can be understood to weaken identity-based politics. On the other hand, it could be understood to enrich our understanding of gender and so enrich our understanding of the processes through which 'women' and 'men' are constructed in particular ways.

The second issue of specifically feminist political concern which emerges in the context of Butler's theory of the performative function of the political signifier is that of agency. As we have seen, Butler understands the political domain to be productive and constitutive of subjects. It is also clear that in so far as this production and constitution is an ongoing and transformative process, it is one which, according to Butler, gives rise to the possibility of agency or resistance. The question which arises at this point, therefore, is whether Butler is rightly or wrongly
accused by critics such as Benhabib of ultimately disallowing agency and so 'giving up the basis' for a feminist politics. What sort of agency is actually 'disallowed' by Butler and is this the sort of agency feminism actually requires in order to fulfil its 'emancipatory' objectives? Is Butler's conception of agency ultimately inadequate for accounting for the sort of resistance which might be required in order for subjects to avoid wholesale social determinism? How is resistance possible? Is such resistance enough to enable the democratic and emancipatory aims implicit in her political vision for feminism?

Wendy Brown's work offers some significant insights for the purposes of addressing these questions. Furthermore, it illustrates very well how feminist political concern surrounding the issue of agency has come to be confused because of disagreement over precisely what sort of agency is necessary in order to ground or support particular political aims. Brown points out that a problem which is critical for feminists today lies in discerning how we might formulate a discourse of freedom which is appropriate to contesting antidemocratic configurations of power (Brown 1995, 7). In other words, she, like Butler, posits 'democracy' as the ultimate goal of her political vision and is concerned to think about what sort of account of agency is necessary for the fulfilment of that goal. As a consequence, she is specifically concerned to think about how formations of power in contemporary society might be 'democratised' and how we might contribute to strategies which avoid an account which renders subjects "unresisting vehicles of its objectionable contemporary functions" (Brown 1995, 34). That is to say, she wants to avoid an account of subjects as constituted and thereby determined by the relations of power in which they are situated and to think about how subjects might in practice resist such determination. Significantly, therefore, Brown seeks to think through what it is that is actually involved in contesting and subverting those relations of power in which we are situated while avowing the sense in which those relations are not something we can actually overcome or actively control.

Brown's work is significant in bringing into focus two critical issues which are directly relevant to our assessment of Butler's conception of agency. Firstly, while clearly aligning herself with a conception of power as productive and constitutive of subjects, Brown affirms the necessity of defining strategies of resistance to such power21. Secondly, she explicitly attempts to articulate the sort of

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21 I outlined this specific point concerning the need to define strategies of resistance to power earlier in the thesis in the context of feminist critiques of Foucault's notion of agency (see chapter four). Indeed one of the principal criticisms which is raised by feminists against Foucault's notion of agency is that it fails to account for or explain strategies of empowerment or emancipation for women. As I
power which is entailed by the *actual practice of freedom* by subjects. Considering her work in relation to that of Butler’s conception of agency (and the claim that that conception gives rise to a problematic political vision) yields some important insights. First and foremost, Brown claims that the mere existence of resistance (as a mode of agency or freedom) is not enough to successfully contest or arrogate power. "[Resistance] by itself," she argues, "does not contain a critique, a vision, or grounds for organised collective efforts to enact...resistance-as-politics does not raise the dilemmas of responsibility and justification entailed in ‘affirming’ political projects and norms" (Brown 1995, 49). In other words, resistance by itself is not enough to make possible the successful undermining of contemporary configurations of power, nor is it sufficient to raise the moral framework necessary for affirmative political action. Furthermore, resistance does not necessarily give rise to a particular (democratic or emancipatory) political direction (Brown 1995, 22).

As I suggested, the issues raised by Brown here raise some important points which are significant in our assessment of the political implications for feminism of the performative framework through which Butler develops her account of agency, an account which, as we have seen, is defined primarily in terms of *resistance*. In summary, these principally concern the need she identifies for, firstly, defining strategies of resistance to power, secondly, establishing grounds for collective agency and thirdly, raising the moral framework necessary for affirmative political action. All of these points suggest the need for a stronger account of agency than the notion of resistance which is provided by Butler. That is to say, they suggest the need for a stronger account of what role subjects may actively play in their construction as gendered, on what grounds they might strengthen that role in the political arena through collective action and how they might set up appropriate aims and objectives which contest their determination by the highly gendered relations of power in which they are situated. I want to suggest here, therefore, that while Butler cannot be accused of *disallowing* agency or of wholly undermining the basis for

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22 Indeed she insists that freedom "requires for its sustenance that we take full measure of power's range and appearances - the powers that situate, constrain and produce subjects as well as the will to power entailed in practicing freedom" (Brown 1995, 25; my italics).

23 Indeed, Brown argues that "what postmodernity disperses and postmodern feminist politics requires are cultivated political *spaces* for posing and questioning feminist political norms, for discussing the nature of ‘the good’ for women" (Brown 1995, 49). She therefore suggests the importance of, firstly, identifying and critically assessing feminist political norms and, secondly, considering the potential common values that might emerge for women in the political arena. Significantly, Benhabib raises a similar ‘requirement’ for feminism. She argues that what is needed is a feminist critical theory is to develop a theory that is both emancipatory and reflective. Its task should be twofold: firstly, to explain, through critical, social-scientific research, the condition of women, and, secondly to anticipate, normatively and philosophically, a utopian condition for women (a condition towards which we should strive) (Benhabib 1992, 152).
feminist political action, we are nevertheless justified in considering her conception of agency *inadequate* to explain or provide an account of the *actual practice* of freedom by subjects or groups of subjects in the political arena.

In this light, Benhabib's claim that Butler's theory of performativity is inadequate to explain the capacity of subjects for self-determination holds some critical force (Benhabib 1995b, 110). Likewise, Linda Nicholson raises a legitimate concern when she claims that Butler needs more accounts of precisely how agency is possible than the one she provides (Nicholson 1995, 11). Further, Nancy Fraser is certainly right to suggest that Butler's framework is unhelpful in thinking about the normative and intersubjective concerns of the social totality (Fraser 1995b, 164).

The notion of agency which emerges from Butler's performative account of gender therefore has some important implications for the political concerns of feminism. What this chapter has demonstrated, however, is the sense in which this notion has come to be confused in debate over those concerns. There is confusion amongst feminist theorists over what agency actually means, over what sort of agency might be required in order to support feminist political objectives and over what such objectives actually are. Although I have concluded by arguing that Butler's account of agency has some specific inadequacies with respect to her capacity to address feminist political concerns, we are left to question what sort of framework *does* provide us with an adequate 'conceptual apparatus' through which to address such concerns as they are raised in contemporary feminist debate.
CONCLUSION

The Politics of Sex and Gender

I began this thesis by asking the question of what it means for the theoretical and political concerns of feminism to have rejected the sex/gender distinction. In the course of the thesis it has become clear that the rejection of this distinction is associated with a number of different theoretical and political issues in contemporary feminist theory. I have focused specifically on the connections which are drawn between the rejection of this distinction in contemporary accounts of sex and gender and the political issues of representation and agency. However, the grounds upon which these connections are drawn are not always clear. It is not always clear that the theoretical 'troubling' of the categories of sex and gender should necessarily give rise to serious political problems for feminism. For this reason, I concluded the previous chapter by asking what sort of account of sex and gender would provide an adequate framework through which to address the issues of political representation and agency as they are raised in contemporary Anglo-American feminist debate.

It will by now be clear just how difficult a question this is to answer given the shifting nature both of the issues themselves and the debate in which they are raised. In the previous two chapters I have provided an account of how these issues are raised in the context of debate over the alliance of postmodernism and feminism in contemporary Anglo-American feminist theory. This debate provides an important context in which to assess the current 'climate' of feminism. However, it is clear from my analysis of the dialogue between Benhabib and Butler that disagreements frequently arise in this debate precisely because of the different grounds upon which each theorist contributes to that debate. That is to say, each has different theoretical and political commitments which intervene in the possibility of their being able to
engage with one another effectively. A situation has therefore arisen in which theoretical and political issues are frequently confused and conflated.

We have seen, for example, in what sense the issues of political representation and agency are defined and approached differently by Benhabib and Butler and are assessed against different conceptions of what might constitute a 'specifically feminist' politics. Despite the fact that both Benhabib and Butler agree on the political importance for feminism of issues such as representation and agency, we are left to assess the conceptual frameworks through which they approach such issues, and the different political motivations which are at work behind them, with very little in the way of fixed context or criteria.

Nevertheless, I want to suggest in conclusion that we can, as critics, make some productive responses to the initial question raised in this thesis if we consider in more detail the theoretical and political connections which have been made and the issues which have been drawn together through contemporary accounts of sex and gender. The task of this concluding chapter is therefore to sort through these various connections between accounts of sex and gender, theories of embodiment and agency and the political issues of representation and agency, with a view to establishing whether the rejection of the sex/gender distinction has really given way to a 'crisis' in contemporary feminism.

It is my claim that the conceptual framework through which the categories of sex and gender are negotiated in the aftermath of the rejection of the sex/gender distinction does have a critical impact on the way in which we can address the theoretical and political concerns raised in contemporary feminist debate. That is to say, some accounts of those categories do provide a stronger, richer account of our embodiment and our agency than others. This leads them to better address these issues as they are raised in the context of the specifically political concerns of representation and agency.

I will first consider in what sense the framework through which sex and gender are configured impacts upon the relative strength of the accounts given of embodiment and agency. In the second section I will move on to address the connections which have been drawn between the theoretical 'troubling' of the categories of sex and gender and the political issues of, firstly, the representation of 'women' as a category of identity, secondly, the representation of 'women's concerns' and, thirdly, agency.
Section One

Sex, gender and theories of embodiment and agency

In this thesis I have claimed that the sex/gender distinction has been rejected in contemporary feminism for two primary reasons, each of which bears an important relation to the nature/culture framework against which that distinction has historically been aligned. I will address the first of these reasons here. The distinction has been rejected on the grounds that it presupposes a conception of sex as somehow pre-social, a 'tabula rasa' which passively awaits cultural inscription. At a theoretical level, it is claimed, firstly, that this distinction fails to capture the sense in which sex is itself a construction of culture and, secondly, that it fails to capture the sense in which we are essentially embodied beings.

The rejection of the sex/gender distinction has therefore involved a rejection of a conception of sex or the body as unrelated, or only arbitrarily related, to gendered identity. It is argued that in presupposing a conception of sex or the body as unrelated to or distinct from gender, the sex/gender distinction disavows the very sense in which we live in and through bodies which play a role in the construction of our identities as gendered subjects. The question raised in the light of this rejection, however, is how to theorise the categories of sex and gender once a distinction between those categories has been rejected. Given that we are essentially embodied beings, precisely what relation can we draw between our sex and our gender? What sorts of problems does the drawing of such a relation entail? What impact, for example, does our embodiment have on our agency?

We have seen that, initially, making a distinction between sex and gender was a feminist gesture because it undermined the historically dominant claim that women's inferiority in the social and political spheres is a natural result of their sex as female. That is, the distinction provided foundation for the claim that the nature of the female body in no way necessitates or 'causes' the gendered identity of 'women'. Indeed we have seen that it is precisely such an argument which grounds Beauvoir's claims concerning, firstly, the possibility that women can be emancipated from the traditional roles assigned to them and, secondly, that a relation of equality between women and men can be achieved. Indeed, one of the strengths of her account of the condition of women is precisely her insistence on the irrelevance of sex to the

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1 To recapitulate here, in the sex/gender distinction, it is claimed that sex is aligned with the realm of 'nature' which is associated with that which is fixed or given, prior to culture. Gender is aligned with the realm of 'culture', which, by contrast, is associated with that which is wholly malleable and negotiable.
construction of gender roles. If we now draw a critical relation *between* sex and gender, if, for example, we place particular emphasis on the significance of our embodiment in materially and sexually different bodies in the processes through which we are constructed as gendered subjects, do we thereby undermine the possibilities for emancipation and equality which Beauvoir envisioned?

My analysis of Beauvoir's work has demonstrated the sense in which her attempt to draw a clear cut distinction between sex and gender, and her consequent insistence on the possibilities for emancipation and equality, is brought into question by the collapse of the distinction between sex and gender in her work. She affirms the importance of our embodiment in subjective existence. The body, she argues, is indeed a perspective 'which we live'. It is an essential part of the way in which we live out our existence in the world and therefore appears to play a critical role in our construction as gendered subjects. However, tensions emerge in her account precisely because of her desire to maintain a distinction between sex and gender despite this affirmation of our essentially embodied existence. This is largely a result of her dependence on an existential account of freedom. As a consequence of this dependence, she makes constant reference to the body as something which is ultimately an obstacle to our freedom. It is referred to as something which we can, and should, transcend. It is in this sense defined as something which we have some capacity to control and manipulate. It is, in short, something over which we have agency.

The framework through which sex and gender are theorised by Beauvoir is therefore very much one which assumes a one-way relation between those categories. That is, it is a relation in which gender is a cultural inscription in or over sex. Sex is construed as itself *passive* in the social construction of gender. Critical to her account of sex is precisely her claim that it *lacks* significance in the processes through which we are constructed and construct ourselves as gendered subjects. Although for Beauvoir we are essentially embodied beings, and therefore cannot 'escape' our bodies, we are nevertheless understood to control the nature or character of that embodiment. Indeed it is clear that such control is necessary, on her account, in order to achieve the goals of emancipation and equality. For Beauvoir, that is, women's emancipation from traditional gender roles and their achievement of a relation of equality with men rely upon the undermining of the causal link which has historically been drawn between the sex-based attributes of females and the gendered identities of 'women'. In my analysis of Beauvoir's work it is clear that undermining this causal link necessitates the control and manipulation of those sex-based attributes.
Despite the very strength of Beauvoir's argument being her insistence on the fundamental equality of all human beings and our freedom to transcend the limitations of our situation, her account is substantially weakened by the difficulty she confronts in theorising embodiment, or what it means to embody a particular kind of body, on the basis of her existential account of freedom. Her references, for example, to the specific nature of feminine eroticism, appear to attribute the female body with particular characteristics which intervene in the very lived experience of women. In so far as there is such an intervention at work in Beauvoir's account of the condition of women, the very notion that women be 'free' from their sex appears to be undermined. Beauvoir's references to feminine eroticism are problematic, therefore, precisely because they bring into question the sense in which we can be understood, as subjects, to potentially have complete control or agency over our sex. They undermine the claim that sex is itself passive in the construction of gendered identity and imply that it is in fact at some level active in that construction.

The distinction between sex and gender in Beauvoir's work therefore gets undermined by her references to the ways in which our embodiment in materially and sexually different bodies affects our capacity to control those bodies. While this distinction is undermined apparently unwittingly by Beauvoir, we have seen that it is actively rejected by many contemporary feminists. Does this active rejection similarly lead to a problem concerning agency or control? Is there a similar relation operative between embodiment and agency in contemporary accounts of sex and gender?

It is pertinent here that we look back to the rejection by Gatens and Butler of the sex/gender distinction. Both specifically reject this distinction as it is articulated by Beauvoir in her account of the condition of women. Firstly, they reject the nature/culture framework which grounds that distinction, arguing that both sex and gender should be construed wholly within the realm of 'culture'. Secondly, they reject the notion of agency or freedom which is presupposed by that distinction. That is, they reject Beauvoir's claim that the body or sex is an object of control or manipulation.

However, it is clear that there are important differences between Gatens and Butler, differences which ultimately impact upon the way in which they themselves theorise embodiment. Gatens, for example, discusses the significance of the sexed body and its intervention in the cultural construction of gender. While she in no way

2 Refer to chapter two for my discussion of the claims made by Beauvoir concerning feminine eroticism.
appeals to a fixed, *a priori*, or 'pre-social' body, she nevertheless places critical emphasis on the contribution that the nature of the body can, and frequently does, make to the process of gender construction. Indeed the reader will recall her claim that "I would suggest that some bodily experiences and events, though lacking in any fixed significance, are likely, in all social structures, to be privileged sites of significance" (Gatens 1996, 9). Functional characteristics of the body may, on Gatens' account, intervene in the sort of social significance which those characteristics take on.

In this sense, Gatens' account of sex and gender places critical emphasis on the relation *between* those categories. It draws a relation of *interdependence* between them. In contrast to Beauvoir's account of sex, it is not, for Gatens, simply a surface upon which cultural meaning is inscribed. It is not a passive object over which we have *control*. Indeed sex is itself for Gatens *active* in the process through which it is constructed as sex. As in the case of Beauvoir, we are defined by Gatens as essentially embodied creatures. However, particular attention is paid to the kind of body we embody and the various functional events which are associated with that body. While none of these experiences or events are fixed or determined in terms of the significance they hold for us, we nevertheless get in Gatens' work a rich account of how our embodiment in materially and sexually different bodies plays an important and active role in our social construction as gendered subjects. Most significantly, in contrast to Beauvoir, there is not in Gatens' work an underlying notion that we are or should be at some level 'free' of our body in order to achieve emancipation from traditional gender roles and/or a relation of equality between women and men.

The key point to make about Gatens' account of sex and gender is that although a relation of interdependence between sex and gender is drawn, and a clear cut distinction between those categories is therefore actively undermined, her emphasis on the significance of our embodiment in materially and sexually different bodies does not mean that our gendered identity is determined by our sex. Nor does it mean that we are in a position of complete control with respect to the significance which that sex holds for us. Gatens therefore provides an account of sex and gender which allows the materiality of sex to be significant in the construction of gender but nevertheless avoids the sort of dualist framework set up by Beauvoir. That is to say, she avoids an account in which sex is aligned with the realm of 'nature' and gender with that of 'culture'. In rejecting such a dualistic framework she also avoids an account of agency which assumes that sex is in some way 'free' or separate from gender.
As I have suggested, Butler's response to the sex/gender distinction is clearly different from Gatens'. While Gatens clearly retains the category of sex as a legitimate category of feminist analysis, Butler argues that gender in fact "absorbs and displaces 'sex'" (Butler 1993, 5). While on Gatens' account both categories of sex and gender remain sites or units of analysis, Butler rejects the very 'separability' of these categories. Indeed I have argued that in all significant respects for Butler, sex is gender. As such, the issue of sexual difference is understood to be more accurately an issue of gender difference. A problem, I have argued, with this reduction of sexual difference to gender difference is precisely its lack of attention to the significance of sexual difference in the construction of gender difference. It limits the endeavour to engage in critical analysis of how particular sex-based attributes come to hold privileged significance in the construction of gender.

While Butler is very actively engaged in the task of analysing how our sex is a product or effect of gender, she positively rejects the possibility that our sex might intervene in some significant way in the cultural construction of gender. The very performative framework through which Butler reconfigures the categories of sex and gender leads her to reject the sort of analysis of a relation between those categories which is undertaken by Gatens. The rejection of the very terms through which such an analysis might be undertaken ultimately impacts upon the strength of Butler's account of embodiment relative to such accounts as Gatens'. While she is clearly able to give an account of embodiment, it is nevertheless weaker than Gatens' in so far as it fails to capture, and theorise, the sense in which the actual materiality of the body may itself be active in the processes through which it is materialised.

Although I have argued here that Butler's account of embodiment fails to capture this activity of the body, it is important to point out, as I did in chapter four, that this failure on her part does not necessarily mean that her theoretical framework is actually incapable of avowing or affirming this activity. It is rather that in so far as she actually fails to do so her account of embodiment is, in terms of content, not as conceptually 'rich' as Gatens'. Her failure to theorise how the materiality of sex might be active and significant in the construction of gender stems from a desire to avoid a dualist framework in which sex is construed in terms of that which is

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3 Gatens makes the following comment in reference to theorists of a sex/gender distinction. However, I think it is equally pertinent to Butler in its critique of the way in which theorists of such a distinction reduce sexual difference to gender difference. She writes, "their accounts attempt to co-opt or trivialise feminist struggles and feminist theory, reducing sexual politics to gender difference and positing as primary the relations between gender and power, gender and discourse or gender and class - as if women's bodies and the representation and control of women's bodies were not a crucial stake in those struggles" (Gatens 1996, 17). I will return to this point in the second section of this chapter.

4 Refer to chapter four for my more detailed elaboration of these arguments.
'natural', fixed or given and is separate from or 'free' of gender. Needless to say, the value of comparing her account of sex and gender to Gatens' account of those categories is precisely to illustrate how it is possible to emphasise the significance of the materiality of the body without also claiming that that significance is fixed or determined. In Gatens' account of sex and gender, that is, we clearly see the possibility for a conceptual framework in which the materiality of the body is emphasised as an important point of reference in the construction of gendered subjects but its significance is in no way construed independently of that construction.

A critical shift has therefore taken place across the work of Beauvoir, Gatens and Butler in the frameworks through which each configure the categories of sex and gender. We have moved from, in Beauvoir's work, a framework in which those categories are distinct, where sex is a surface upon which gender is inscribed to, in Gatens', a framework in which sex and gender are interdependent categories of analysis to, in Butler's, a framework in which sex is absorbed by gender. These frameworks have a critical bearing on how rich an account of embodiment each theorist provides. In each case, it is clear that the framework through which they configure those categories can also be understood to impact upon how they theorise agency and the relation which is drawn between our embodiment and agency.

Before moving on to the impact of theories of embodiment on some of the political concerns raised in contemporary feminism, I will engage in a more specific analysis of this other important connection between the different conceptual frameworks through which sex and gender are configured and agency. It is pertinent that we think through here precisely how such a connection is made.

In my summary of the sex/gender debate in chapter three, I located the second reason for why the sex/gender distinction has been rejected in contemporary feminism in the argument that it presupposes a conception of the subject as an agent who is at some point 'free' from gender, capable of deliberately 'taking up' their gender. The movement to construe the categories of sex and gender wholly within the realm of 'culture' is, at one level, supposed to avow the sense in which we are in fact 'always already gendered'. There is no point at which the cultural construction of our gender begins. At both a theoretical and a political level it is claimed that we require a conception of agency which affirms this sense in which our identity is always in process, always situated, always constructed within 'highly gendered regulatory schemas' (Butler 1993, xi).
The connection which is drawn between accounts of sex and gender and theories of agency, as in the case of that which is drawn between such accounts and theories of embodiment, can, however, be further clarified if we look back at the shift which takes place across the work of Beauvoir and Butler.

As we have seen, Beauvoir places considerable emphasis on the agency or freedom of subjects. Indeed this agency or freedom is a central feature of her analysis of the condition of women. Women, she claims, are, like men, essentially free and have the capacity to transcend the limitations of their facticity. For Beauvoir, agency is clearly a capacity of the subject. It consists in the capacity for, amongst other things, self-determination. Included amongst those things which we have the capacity to determine for ourselves is, for Beauvoir, our gendered identity. In so far as gender is purely a social construction, it is a construction over which we have agency, both individually and collectively. We are ourselves responsible for our social construction as gendered. We have seen that the distinction Beauvoir draws between sex and gender presupposes this notion of agency in so far as it relies on the idea that gender is 'free' from sex. For precisely this reason, the collapse of this distinction in her work suggests problems for her overall account of agency or freedom. It suggests that sex intervenes at some level in the construction of gender and affects the capacity of subjects to transcend that sex. We can see, then, how the connection between the sex/gender distinction and agency is drawn at this theoretical level in Beauvoir's work.

Both Gatens and Butler reject this notion of agency in Beauvoir's account of sex and gender in so far as it relies on the idea that the body or sex is an object of control or manipulation. That is to say, they reject the notion in so far as it relies on the idea that our sex is something over which we have agency. However, we have also seen that Butler provides a further critique of the notion of agency or freedom which is employed in Beauvoir's account of sex and gender. She claims that that account wrongly presupposes a conception of the subject as at some point free from gender, with the capacity to actively and deliberately 'choose' their gender. She denies that there is such a point and therefore contests the central and indeed driving force of Beauvoir's account of the condition of women.

There are therefore two criticisms raised against the account of agency provided by Beauvoir, one referring to what it says about sex (that it is an object of manipulation and control), and the other, to what it says about the processes through which gender is constructed (that we are at some point 'free' of gender). In this sense, Beauvoir's work provides a pivotal reference point for our consideration of this
connection in contemporary accounts of sex and gender. Significantly, her work also highlights the reasons why accusations are raised against Butler's account of gender concerning the loss of a particular kind of agency. That is to say, in so far as Beauvoir's account of agency clearly grounds her claim that we can play a role in the construction of our gender, Butler's rejection of such an account appears to imply that we cannot in fact play such a role. It is in these terms that she has been taxed by critics. She appears, according to critics, to suggest that we lack the kind of agency required in order to actively contest dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies.

I have already discussed at some length how Butler defends herself against these accusations concerning agency and the kind of agency she considers to be at work in her own performative account of gender. Indeed we have seen that she does provide an account of the possibilities for transformation and change of dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies in so far as she locates such possibilities in the processes through which gender is constructed: processes of repetition, resistance and subversion. In this sense, a concept of agency is operative within the terms of her theory of performativity. That is, in so far as subjects are not wholly passive in the processes through which they are constructed, but are rather understood to participate in those processes through the activity of repetition, the possibilities for agency lie in that very activity. Opportunities for resistance to gender norms are therefore opened up in the processes through which subjects repeat and reiterate norms, repetition and reiteration which is "never quite carried out according to expectation" (Butler 1993, 231), and therefore gives rise to change and transformation in the way in which those norms are embodied by subjects.

The reason our assessment of her account of agency is difficult, however, is precisely that Butler contests the very idea, critical to those accounts of agency with which we are familiar (such as Beauvoir's), that individuals or groups of individuals are origins or 'sources' of agency. The idea that there is such an origin of agency is, she argues, fictively secured "in order to attribute accountability to a subject" (Butler 1995a, 151). Agency is not, therefore, for Butler, a capacity of the subject if such agency is construed as a sort of essential 'freedom' or 'autonomy' which a subject

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5 The reader will recall, however, that Butler does indeed think that we play a role in the construction of our gender. Moreover, she certainly does not exclude the possibility that subjects may actively seek to transform their gender. What she clearly rejects is the sense you get in Beauvoir's work that there is actually a point at which a subject is 'genderless' and from that point chooses or adopts a gender. As Butler writes, she contests the very notion of "such a wilful and instrumental subject, one who decides on its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realise that its existence is already decided by gender" (Butler 1993, x).

6 As Butler argues, "gender is ritualistically repeated, whereby the repetition occasions both the risk of failure and the congealed effect of sedimentation" (Butler 1995a, 155).
possesses and exercises independently of their situation or context. Her notion of agency is not, as it is in Beauvoir's work, located in volition. It cannot, as Butler herself emphasises "be conflated with voluntarism or individualism" (Butler 1993, 15). Rather, it is, as I have argued, located in the processes through which norms are repeated and reiterated by subjects, usually involuntarily and in group process. In this sense, I have argued that her account of agency ultimately lacks strength insofar as it provides neither an account of how individual subjects might actively and deliberately contest their social construction nor an account of precisely what makes their actions uniquely their own. Furthermore, it does not provide a strong account of the conditions which make collective agency possible.

It is clear, however, that in raising these criticisms and in pointing out these weaknesses in Butler's account of agency, we are assessing it in the light of the account which she rejects. Moreover, while her account is formulated against the backdrop of her rejection of the account of agency presupposed in Beauvoir's sex/gender distinction, it is clearly not intended to replace or 'improve' that account. Where Butler is concerned with agency only in so far as it refers to the processes through which transformation and resistance are made possible, Beauvoir is concerned with agency in so far as it refers to the control subjects have over their facticity and their identity. The performative framework through which Butler construes the categories of sex and gender does indeed lack the sort of agency which Beauvoir's framework is so dependent on. In this sense, it lacks the strengths which such an account brings to Beauvoir's account of the condition of women. However, it does not lack a concept of agency. It is rather that the concept of agency which Butler draws on is qualitatively different to that which is deployed by Beauvoir.

This juxtaposition of Beauvoir's account of agency (as control) and Butler's notion of agency (as resistance to norms) clearly serves to illustrate the two different sets of concerns regarding agency which are actually at work here. In one conception, agency is perceived as an issue about the control we have over our bodies and therefore about how we 'live' and experience our bodies. In a different conception, it is perceived as an issue about the role we play in the processes through which our gendered identity is constructed and our representation as gendered subjects. Concerns are raised in the first instance because of a general unease with the dualist framework through which agency is theorised - that is, as a capacity which subjects exercise over their bodies. In the second instance, concern is voiced

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7 Refer to chapter four for my more detailed elaboration of these arguments.
in relation to the more general issue of what makes the change and transformation of dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies possible.

These two sets of concerns are clearly different, yet they are frequently confused and conflated. The rejection of a concept of agency as control, is often understood as tantamount to a rejection of the very possibility of change and transformation. Indeed, we have seen that one of the reasons why a 'crisis' is heralded in contemporary feminist theory is precisely that, in some contemporary accounts of gender, the notion of agency as control, has been undermined. The undermining of such a notion is, however, wrongly conflated with the undermining of possibilities for change and transformation. It is not clear, therefore, whether the terms through which a 'crisis' is heralded are actually legitimate, or whether they in fact result from what is a fundamental confusion and conflation of terms.

Section Two

A crisis in contemporary feminism?

Is there a crisis in contemporary feminism? In the course of this thesis we have seen a series of political problems raised by feminist theorists which have been associated with accounts of sex and gender and issues of embodiment and agency. These problems are primarily concerned with the capacity for feminism to address the political issues of representation and agency. However, from my analysis so far it is actually not clear that the 'troubling' of sex and gender, and the correspondent rethinking of the theoretical issues of embodiment and agency, necessarily gives rise to serious problems for feminism in its capacity to address these political issues. What is clear is that there is a fundamental confusion of the terms through which these theoretical issues are addressed, and this confusion is transferred to a misleading association of problems at a political level. In this section, I therefore want to conclude this thesis by claiming that while the 'troubling' of sex and gender has some impact on our capacity to address the issues of political representation and agency, that capacity is certainly not undermined by that troubling. There is not, therefore, a serious crisis concerning these issues in contemporary feminism.

(a) Political representation

At several points in this thesis I have divided the issue of political representation into two types or forms of representation which are pertinent to the concerns raised in contemporary feminist debate. The first is that of the political representation of 'woman' as a category of identity and, specifically, as the subject of
the feminist movement. This type of representation appears to depend upon a stable category of gender. The second is that of the political representation of 'women's concerns'. This type of representation refers to that which might be sought in the political arena for specifically 'sex-based' concerns - such as, for example, in the context of issues like reproductive health care, biomedical ethics or sexual discrimination legislation. That is to say, it refers to cases in which the legal, ethical or political representation of specific issues and concerns appears to depend upon, and be legitimated through, a fixed, 'stable' or determined category of sex.

I have divided these issues of representation in this way because, as I will go on to argue, the 'troubles' which are associated with them are raised with two slightly different sets of concerns in mind. One set of concerns is raised quite specifically in relation to the content or meaning of the category of gender, the other in relation to the stability or 'fixity' of that of sex. Dividing them in this way will allow us to think more clearly about whether or not the concerns raised are ultimately connected with the frameworks through which the categories of sex and gender are configured or whether the source of 'trouble' is in fact elsewhere.

The question which must be asked here is how the rejection of the sex/gender distinction is connected with these two domains of political representation. Is there really a 'crisis of identity' in contemporary feminism because of our rejection of this distinction? Should we be worried? In order to consider these questions it is useful again to consider them in the context of the shift which takes place across the work of Beauvoir, Gatens and Butler. We have seen that 'trouble' is perceived to have arisen for these issues of political representation because of the apparent instability and malleability of contemporary accounts of sex and gender. This instability and malleability is thought to problematise the very grounds upon which 'women' can be represented as a category of identity. If the category of 'women' does not refer to a fixed or determined set or group of characteristics (such as the female sex), how can it be deployed as, for example, the representative subject of the feminist movement? What does it mean for that movement to represent 'women' if it cannot say definitively what the content of that category actually is?

To recapitulate here, this instability is perceived to have arisen at least in part as a result of the shift from a framework in which sex and gender are aligned with the realms of 'nature' and 'culture', to one in which both categories are theorised wholly within the realm of 'culture'. While on the former framework (represented in the work of Beauvoir), sex appears to be a fixed or 'given' category of identity, a 'stable' point of reference, in the latter framework (represented in the work of Gatens and Butler) it appears wholly unstable and indeed highly malleable.
Concern over the issue of the political representation of 'women' is, however, misguided, or is at least misguided in so far as serious 'trouble' is located in the instability of contemporary accounts of sex and gender. The instability of these accounts does not mean that the political representation of 'women' is no longer possible. Such instability merely serves to emphasise the sense in which 'women' do not constitute a homogenous category whose needs and concerns can be voiced at a 'universal' level. Problematising the category is therefore not tantamount to a denial that women actually exist or that there are experiences which are common to certain women in certain societies which we can talk about in a meaningful way. A conceptually rich account of the category of 'women' is possible on the basis of highly malleable notions of sex and gender, and indeed may be considerably enriched by their very instability and malleability. The shift to construe the categories of sex and gender wholly within the realm of 'culture' (and so remove them from the supposed 'fixity' or 'determinacy' of the realm of 'nature') cannot therefore be held responsible for the crisis in 'naming woman' as the subject of the feminist movement.

The source of this perceived 'crisis' can be located in what is in fact a more general concern voiced in feminism (and in contemporary political debate) over the needs to, firstly, recognise the differences between women; secondly, not 'fix' or 'universalise' the experiences of all women; and, thirdly, take into consideration the way in which gender, as a category of identity, operates in the context of many other such categories (for example, race, class and ethnicity) which are equally important components of the identity and identifications of subjects.

I do want to suggest, however, that some frameworks through which the categories of sex and gender are configured within the realm of 'culture' do appear to tell a stronger story than others about the content of the identity category of 'women'. On Gatens' account, for example, we get a strong sense of the way in which, in any given social structure, there are 'privileged sites of significance' in the processes through which subjects are constructed as gendered. While the gendered identity category of 'women' is by no means understood by Gatens to universally refer to stable or fixed sites of significance, in her account of sex and gender it is clear that the sexual difference of subjects, for example, will play a role in their construction as

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9 Indeed, as Brown rightly points out, "even the most ardent poststructuralists do not claim that women's pervasive economic subordination, lack of reproductive freedoms, or vulnerability to endemic sexual violence simply evaporates because we cannot fix or circumscribe who or what 'woman' is or what 'she' wants... When the notion of a unified or coherent subject is abandoned, we... only cease to be able to speak of woman or of women in an unproblematic way. . ." (Brown 1995, 40).
gendered\textsuperscript{10}. By comparison, in Butler's performative account of gender, we get less of a sense that the category of 'women' refers to any particular 'sites of significance' or holds any particular relation to, for example, sexual difference. The implication may be drawn that it is a category which may be 'filled' with any meaning. Although it is clearly not the case that Butler would deny that the category 'women' is meaningful in a given context, she is less concerned than Gatens to theorise precisely what that meaning is or might be. Needless to say, this does not mean that the representation or 'naming' of 'women' is actually ruled out by Butler's account.

With respect to the political representation of 'women's concerns', I want to suggest similarly, first of all, that such representation is not undermined by the instability of contemporary accounts of sex and gender and, secondly, that some frameworks do nevertheless appear better equipped than others to address the question of what might constitute those concerns. In so far as some accounts of sex and gender emphasise and theorise the relation between those categories, they appear more able to address how it is that some sex-based attributes work to the disadvantage of individuals on the political stage. On the same basis, some also appear to provide a richer account of embodiment, that is, of what it is to 'live' or experience a particular kind of body and what the effects of that embodiment might be. Such frameworks appear better equipped to address the issue of what it might mean to represent sex-based concerns at a political level. For, I want to suggest that such representation is not dependent on determining a stable or 'fixed' category of sex but, more accurately, on paying attention to the meaning or significance of sex and therefore what it means to 'live' or embody a particular kind of body in a given context.

For these reasons, the framework through which Gatens, for example, construes the categories of sex and gender provides a better means than Butler's through which to address this issue of the political representation of 'women's concerns'. The emphasis which Gatens places on the significance of our embodiment in materially and sexually different bodies (in the processes through which we are

\textsuperscript{10} I have suggested here that we get in Gatens' work a strong sense that there are 'privileged sites of significance' in the construction of gender, and that some of these sites are located in the very materiality of the body. It could be argued that the identification of such privileged sites does not avoid a sort of 'universalist' account of 'gender' in so far as it apparently maintains reference to particular sites of significance. However, in so far as Gatens maintains a framework in which 'materiality' is never independent of, but always interdependent with 'gender', she clearly avoids making the claim (implicit or otherwise) that such sites are fixed or non-negotiable. It is precisely in this sense that her framework suggests a valuable direction for feminism. That is to say, it addresses what I have identified as a central problem in feminism of wanting to avow the significance of our embodiment but, at the same time, not wanting to construe that embodiment as either arbitrary or, conversely, determinate in relation to 'gender'.

constructed as gendered) clearly allows for a strong account of what it means to live or embody a particular kind of body\(^\text{11}\). As such, it provides a very strong account of the sorts of issues which are relevant to the representation of what are in fact 'embodied concerns', that is, concerns which are raised at a legal, political and ethical level precisely because of the fact of our embodiment in materially and sexually different bodies. This is not to say, however, that Butler's account of sex and gender actually undermines the possibility of such representation. It is rather that her resistance to the notion that the materiality of the body may play a significant role in the construction of gender weakens her capacity to address concerns which are precisely about how that materiality comes to hold particular significance in the lived, 'gendered', experiences of individuals.

While both Gatens and Butler agree, therefore, that our sex only comes to hold significance through and within the realm of culture, and that the moment we appeal to that category we appeal to something which is socially constructed, Gatens is better able to say that the actual materiality of 'sex' matters in the processes through which it is socially constructed. Butler, on the other hand, consistently fails to explicitly theorise how it is that particular sites come to get constructed as significant.

The reason it is important that we have an account of sex and gender which articulates how and why the materiality of sex matters in the processes through which it is constructed as sex is illustrated well in issues raised by, for example, sexual reproduction. Here, we clearly have a case in which certain biological characteristics of females occupy particular sites of significance in the lived experience of members of a particular sex. While the nature of that significance is clearly not fixed, it is nevertheless important that we understand and theorise how, in particular social structures, this reproductive capacity of females is translated into disadvantage or inequality for women on the political stage. Why does this particular biological capacity take on such significance? Should that capacity be relevant to the legal, ethical and political status of 'women'? How should it be represented?

Butler's response to such questions is to say that sexual reproduction should not necessarily be construed as the salient feature of the female body or of what it is

\[^{11}\text{It is also important to note that although the objects of her philosophical inquiry are not, for Elizabeth Grosz, specifically issues such as agency and the subject of feminism (and so her work is not directly relevant to the concerns of this thesis), her work does, like Gatens', suggest the possibility of a theoretical perspective on sex and gender which emphasises the materiality of the body within the terms of a non-dualistic framework. See, for example, Grosz 1994.}\]
to be a woman. She is therefore reluctant to make reference to sexual reproduction as a feature of 'being female' and as basis for political representation precisely because it appears to suggest that what it is to embody a female body and to live as a woman is encapsulated by sexual reproduction. However, to claim that sexual reproduction is a privileged site of significance, as I suggest Gatens would, is not to invest it with fixed or determinate significance. It is not to claim that it is the salient feature, nor is to suggest that all females will experience their body in the same way just by virtue of its capacity (or lack thereof) for reproduction. Rather, it is to claim that it is a feature which is consistently constructed as salient, and which bears a critical relation to the needs and concerns of 'women' as embodied subjects.

(b) Agency

I have shown in what sense debate about the issue of agency has emerged, at a theoretical level, out of the distinction originally drawn by Beauvoir between sex and gender, but how has this issue emerged as a specifically feminist political concern? Have we lost, in contemporary accounts of sex and gender, an account of agency which would support such political objectives as 'emancipation' and 'equality'?

We have seen that, for Beauvoir, the idea that we can be freed, and indeed can free ourselves, from dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies is critically dependent on her notion of agency as control. Specifically, it is dependent on a dualist notion of agency as control over the body. At a political level, her vision for equality between women and men in the political sphere is dependent on the very idea that the differences between women and men can be transcended. There is nothing natural or 'given' which stands in the way of the essential equality and freedom of all individuals. As I have argued, Butler rejects this notion of agency. She clearly contests an account of subjects which locates agency in an essential freedom and which construes it in terms of an apparently 'unsituated' capacity for autonomy, as though it is not always something which is operative in the context of highly gendered ('situated') relations of power. When we assess her rejection of Beauvoir's notion of agency at a political level, it appears to imply, however, that she must also reject the possibility that women can, as Beauvoir claims, be freed from dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies. That is to say, if subjects are 'always already gendered', it appears that their gender is determined. It appears to be

12 Butler makes comments to this effect in an interview in Radical Philosophy in which she responds to questions concerning her treatment of the materiality of the body in Bodies That Matter. See Osborne & Segal 1994, 33.
completely beyond individual control. Despite Butler's direct critical engagement with Beauvoir's account of agency, however, I have claimed that two different notions of agency ultimately emerge from their work which confuse the terms through which it is assessed. In clearly distinguishing what each means by agency we find that Butler's notion of agency is qualitatively different from Beauvoir's and cannot be assessed as though it, or what it implies, is 'opposite' to Beauvoir.

On the one hand, we have in Beauvoir's work a notion of agency which is associated with capacities for control over facticity. Agency is in this case perceived as an issue which is related to dualist accounts of the sort of control we can have over our body. On the other hand, we have a notion of agency which is associated with possibilities for change and transformation in dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies. This difference in what 'agency' refers to at a theoretical level is transferred to a confusion in the concerns which are raised in response to the issue of agency at a political level.

The problem with much concern which is voiced in this debate over the issue of agency, specifically over the 'loss' of agency, is precisely that it has conflated these issues of, for example, the capacity of subjects to play a role in the construction of gendered identity with dualist accounts of agency as control. It has assumed that rejecting an account of agency as control implies that subjects do not have the capacity to play a role in their construction as gendered. It has made this into a 'specifically feminist' political issue in so far as it has associated women's emancipation from traditional roles and their equality with men with a notion of agency as control. However, what the juxtaposition of Beauvoir's work with Butler's illustrates well is precisely that the rejection of a notion of agency as control does not necessitate a rejection of agency as resistance to dominant gender paradigms and hierarchies. Possibilities for this sort of agency are not undermined by Butler's account of gender.

The dialogue between Benhabib and Butler further emphasises the sense in which issues of agency are confused in contemporary feminist debate. That is, the loss in Butler's work of an account of agency understood as control is interpreted by Benhabib as tantamount to an undermining of the very possibilities for women to change and transform their position as gendered subjects in the political sphere.

13 In existentialist terminology it is of course more accurate to say that facticity is not something over which you have control, but rather is something which is a condition of transcendence. However, we have seen in my analysis of Beauvoir's work, that, for her, it does become something over which women or society appear to have to exercise control or manipulation in order to achieve transcendence. See my arguments to this effect in chapters one and two.
Indeed, Benhabib wrongly supposes that Butler's performative account of gender actually undermines the capacities of subjects for self-reflection and self-determination. Despite Benhabib's own rejection of a sex/gender distinction and its accompanying 'desituated' notion of agency, she clearly conflates the rejection of that particular notion of agency by Butler with a wholesale rejection of the idea that subjects possess capacities for choice and self-determination. Furthermore, it is on this basis that she participates in the calling of a 'crisis' in contemporary feminism.

These different senses of agency which emerge out of accounts of sex and gender do, however, have some important implications for the political issues raised in contemporary feminism. Although it is clear that possibilities for change and transformation are not undermined by Butler's performative account of gender, her account of agency as resistance cannot, nevertheless, be easily 'patched onto' or connected with the development of, for example, strategies of resistance to power or the development of a framework in which 'specifically feminist' political goals can be established. In this sense, we may be justified in feeling some sense of concern for how an affirmative, programmatic political vision for feminism might be developed on the basis of her work, work which rejects precisely the setting up of identity-based political representation.

Butler's position is nevertheless an appealing one in so far as it locates agency in resistance rather than directly in individuals and collectives. It offers an accurate depiction of how it is that changes and modifications in gender norms actually 'occur'. Frequently, that is, 'change' in such norms is not a direct result of programmatic political objectives which are implemented by individuals and collectives, but rather is a result of a complex play of forces which combine to modify the ways in which norms are embodied, or, to use Butler's terms, 'repeated', by individuals. What is disturbing for many critics about Butler's position, however, is precisely that it de-individualises resistance and emphasises instead the processes through which resistance occurs. Less attention is therefore paid to the ways in which individuals themselves direct and will change than to how such 'direction' and 'will' is constituted or established. What this thesis has demonstrated, however, is that although there is this shift in emphasis away from the individual, positions such as Butler's do not rob the individual of capacities for self-determination, nor do they render the individual passive in the processes through which it is constructed. These issues are clearly confused by critics. Nevertheless, too little attention is paid by theorists such as Butler to two issues: firstly, to identifying the relation between the individual and the processes through which they are constructed; and, secondly, to locating points of intervention in those processes. There is a curious reluctance to
explicitly address the questions of how it is that individuals in practice resist
determination by dominant gender norms and how such norms might be actively
contested in the context of a feminist political movement. It is to these questions
which feminism must now turn.


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