

GENDER IS AN ORGANON

by *Alice B. Kehoe*

Abstract. Gender is a social construct. Technically, it is a grammatical structuring category that may refer to sex, as is typical of Indo-European languages, or to another set of features such as animate versus inanimate, as is typical of Algonkian languages. Gender in language forces speakers of the language to be continually conscious of application of the category, and they tend to project the categorization into their experience of the world and collocate observations under these broad categories. Western science has been developed by speakers of Indo-European languages employing male/female (and sometimes neuter) genders, and in a cultural tradition that at least since the time of Classical Greece has collocated *male* with active, creative, rational, and public (political)/dominant (Olympian), and *female* with passive, irrational/emotional, and private (nonpolitical)/subordinate. Religion and science—organons for rendering existential experience intelligible—have always been used by the dominant class as instruments of power, and therefore in Western cultures have been entangled with legitimization of a congeries of concepts collocated with male gender. This paper illustrates the social construction of this congeries by contrasting it with non-Western usages and valuations.

Keywords: Gender; social categories; classical Greece; Plains Indians.

An organon, says the dictionary, is an instrument of thought, a system of logic. Gender is an organon: it is a classification system instrumental in thinking. Gender is a feature of language, not of the natural world; it is a social construct. Indo-European languages, including English, partition the world into sets of three—the magic

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number—and one of these general sets is: masculine, feminine, neuter. Other languages may construct other categories, for example, partitioning the world into animate and inanimate (as do the Algonkian languages of North America), or they may lack any obligatory gender categorization. When gender is a feature of a language, its system of logic must be learned very early, and learned as a child first explores its world. Thus it becomes pervasive, its categories an inevitable and obvious part of the world. Gender becomes insidious.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 64) uses the word *doxa* (the Greek root in “orthodox”) to refer to a society’s schema of cognitive principles and classifications as these correspond to its social structure. He suggests that people tend to perceive their social orders and values as “natural” because there is usually a close fit between the projection of categories and values onto the “natural world” and those conceived as fitting the social world. Instead of realizing that they have learned to project social classifications onto “nature,” people validate their categories by insisting that they are inherent in “nature.” When Irish immigrants were systematically excluded from all but menial jobs, it was “obvious” that all the Micks and Mollys were “naturally” incapable of the “Anglo-Saxon” virtues of sobriety, sustained disciplined work, delicacy of feeling, and rational thinking. Bourdieu describes *doxa* as an instrument for reproduction of the status quo, since even the disadvantaged will not be likely to try to change society if they believe its structure is rooted in a natural order.

Gender is one form, or aspect, of *doxa* in societies that incorporate gender in their language. The Indo-European speaker learns that nouns *are* masculine, feminine, or neuter—not that they are *classified* rather arbitrarily under this tripartite system of male, female, or lacking sexuality, but that it is inherent in the being of every object to exist as male or female or lacking sexuality. In Blackfoot, an Algonkian language, the existence of every substantive phenomenon is either as animate or inanimate; sexuality may be one of several attributes but not an attribute of privileged recognition. Native speakers of Blackfoot, even if they are fluent in English, find the constant requirement to remember to match masculine pronoun to masculine noun and feminine or neuter pronoun to feminine or neuter noun a nuisance when speaking English. It is as if an English speaker had to match pronouns to nouns according to whether the referent was round or rectangular or elongated. Indo-European languages’ preoccupation with nothing the sex of a referent does not reflect an overwhelming feature of all substantives but it reflects the

social importance of the classifications man, woman, and neuter. The overwhelming use of the categories in assigning persons and objects to their social roles makes the system an organon, an instrument of thinking, a logic.

SEX AND GENDER

Sex is a biological characteristic of a very large number of organisms, plant as well as animal. Gender is a societal construct. Humans maintain a tension between biological and social imperatives, to borrow Malinowski's (1961, 44) term. No human society can ignore the fact that heterosexual copulation is the only means to reproduction and continuation. But copulation alone will not raise a new generation of humans, so societies must institutionalize child care. Therefore they recognize what we technically call genitor and genitrix, and pater and mater. The biological parent, genitor or genitrix, need not be the social parent (pater or mater). Evans-Pritchard (1951, 122) reported of the Nuer in the Sudan: "The person in whose name [a woman] was married with cattle [i.e., a 'proper wedding'] is the pater of her children whether he begat them or not, was dead or alive at the time of her marriage and the birth of her children, or is a man or a woman."

Barren women among the Nuer occasionally properly marry another woman in order to get children: the wife conceives by a man she takes as lover, and the legal husband (the barren woman) is said to be the father (pater) of her children, with all the rights and responsibilities the role enjoins.

Other societies exhibit another twist on the distinction between genitor and pater. Both Australian aborigines and orthodox Christians aver belief that a spirit may be the agent conceiving a child. The Australian aborigines believe that sexual intercourse is necessary to open the vaginal passage for the spirit, but they do not concede that the man is actually the genitor, although he will probably be expected to be the child's pater. We may compare the reluctance, in some societies, to equate genitor and/or pater exclusively with man with the convention in Indo-European languages that nouns are classified masculine, feminine, or neuter, sometimes regardless of the sex of the referent (e.g., the biological sex of a plant, or the lack of sexuality of artifacts, does not determine noun gender).

MAN AND WOMAN IN BLACKFOOT CULTURE

The Blackfoot, a people of the northwestern Plains of North America, illuminate—by contrast—the arbitrary and pervasive use of

“sexual” gender in Indo-European thinking. Making distinctions according to “sex” is neither obligatory in their language nor highly important in Blackfoot culture. Blackfoot know that men beget babies by copulating with women, but that is no mystery. Mystery lies in the universe, vitalized by the Almighty, beyond human ken. The Almighty is spiritual power; it has no physical shape, no sexuality, no conceivable image, although it manifests itself in all manner of forms perceived by humans. Every animate being—classed in the animate gender in language—partakes of spiritual power, of the Almighty. There is no pantheon for the Blackfoot, no anthropomorphic God. There is a mythic figure, Napi (“Old Man” or “Dawn-of-Time Man”), an impulsive, foolish fellow whose adventures left landmarks in Blackfoot territory, but Napi is anything but godlike. Instead, he typifies male adult humans.

Humans are of course included in the animate gender. Every animal species is a “people,” a community or ethnic group, each with its customary housing, food, language, social behavior, and power. Humans are one “people,” not superior to other species or closer to the Almighty. Among any people, human or nonhuman, some individuals are gifted with more power than others to live in the manner of their people. Women are more gifted than men because women are born with the capacity to reproduce, not only babies but the appurtenances of the home. Men, and many women, seek the gift of greater power than they were born with, by going forth alone to cry out to be pitied. They fast, and go without clothing to be more obviously pitiable, and if they are fortunate, their prayers are answered by a manifestation of power, promising to help them achieve their desires. So a Blackfoot who wants to know the source of someone’s power will ask, “By whom were you pitied?”

Blackfoot believe men have to struggle more than women to achieve a satisfying life. Women work hard physically, constructing and maintaining their homes and families, but their skills come naturally. Women in myths are capable, sensible people, although a few become evil by giving in to lust. Men, on the other hand, are always at risk of failing—in the hunt, in war, in love, in leadership. Their self-esteem is precarious. Men in myths act foolishly or are heroes only through the pitying intercession of a powerful spiritual being. Blackfoot men tend to dress and act more flamboyantly than women, but that flamboyance is a sign of their basic insecurity, like an insecure child seeking attention.

Corralling bison was the basis of life for the Blackfoot until the herds disappeared in the 1880s. Men did the heavy labor of building corrals, and young men acted as scouts, locating herds and luring

them into the corrals, from as much as twenty miles away, by singing a magical song that sounds like the bleating of a calf (bison herds are principally cows). To the Blackfoot, the song was efficacious in conjunction with other songs and prayers recited by leaders within the camp while the scout was out, and the whole set of songs was a ritual that was given to a woman searching for food for her family during a famine. A small, curiously shaped rock called to her and, over four days, taught her how to bring in herds to nourish the people. When the woman returned to camp, her husband suspected her of an affair, but soon he and the others in the community realized that this virtuous woman had been blessed with the secret of prosperity. This is typical of the myths recounting the bestowal of the major Blackfoot rituals: a virtuous woman as the intermediary through whom the community gains access to Power.

The Sun Dance, the most important Blackfoot ritual, must be led by a woman, called the Holy Woman, with women attendants, assisted by men auxiliaries. The Holy Woman's costume has items referring to heroines who have brought the people those tokens and the spiritual power they symbolize. It is striking how plain the Holy Woman's elkskin dress is: her worth is a woman's greatest ornament; she needs no other. Foolish Napi couldn't see that when, at the beginning of time, he led his fellow men in hope of being invited to enjoy the civilized homes of women.

The women's chief told them: Over there near the corral are the men sitting in sight. All these women were cutting meat. Their chief did not take off the clothes she was cutting the meat with. They were told by her: I shall go up there first. I shall take my choice. When I come back, you will go up one by one. Now we will take husbands. Then she started up. Then she went up to all these men. She asked them: Which is your chief? The men said: This one here, Wolf-robe [Napi]. She told him: Now we will take you for husbands. And then she walked up to that Wolf-robe. She caught him. Then she started to pull him up. Then he pulled back. Then she let him loose. He did not like her clothes (Uhlenbeck 1912, 168).

The chief of the women went back to her lodge and changed into dress clothes. Now that even a simpleton could see how "fine-looking" she was, Napi "jumped up" and tried to intersect her, but she chose another, and instructed her fellows to ignore Wolf-robe.

Wolf-robe was standing up alone. He was told by that chief-woman: Turn into a pine-tree, right there where you stand. He got angry. He commenced to knock down that buffalo-coral. And then he turned into a pine-tree. And

now till this day that buffalo-corral is still there [near Cayley, Alberta], just as he knocked it down. And he himself there turned into a pine-tree. [And he is mad yet, because he is always caving down the bank (Wissler and Duvall 1908, 22).] In that way, all these men and all these women came to be together (Uhlenbeck 1912, 169).

COMPARISON WITH OTHER PLAINS INDIANS

Only the Blackfoot, of all the Plains peoples, place the success of their Sun Dance under the leadership of women. In the other tribes, men are the Sun Dance makers. Women serve as intermediaries between the Power and men in other tribes' myths and most rituals, other than the Sun Dance. Women are the custodians of the sets of holy symbols known as medicine bundles, and during ceremonies invoking the blessing of the spirits behind the symbols, women must unwrap, then rewrap, the bundles, handing the objects in them to the men leading songs and prayers. This looks like a subordinate role with the woman sitting modestly behind the men, but it is an example of the principle taught by the Blackfoot Chief of the Women: the skilled, hard-working woman does not need extraneous ornaments or obsequious respect to mark her worth.

The sedentary farming peoples of the Plains had more highly structured societies than the nomadic Blackfoot. Mandan and Hidatsa, in North Dakota, refer to the earth as a great sod lodge, like their dwellings. The great sod lodge belongs to Old Woman Who Never Dies, Grandmother Earth. Her husband is the serpent, the Great Underwater One, whose lashing tail roils the waters during storms. Her dog is a grizzly bear. During the winter, Old Woman Who Never Dies shelters the Corn Maidens in her lodge, keeping them warm and sending them to the fields in the spring for the Mandan women to nurture (a holy task, as symbolized by the women ritually cleansing themselves with sweet sage upon leaving the fields). The Mandan and Hidatsa depended upon bison as well as corn. After some bison cows left one of their little daughters to be fostered by the Mandan women, the cows came back each year (in a ritual) to see whether their child was well—in the ritual she was impersonated by a little human girl—and in this way the Mandan women maintained rapport with the bison women, who allowed themselves to be slaughtered to help the Mandan people. Many Holy Women spirits hovered around the Mandan towns, to be impersonated by Mandan women dancing and blessing the people in ceremonies. Men were ritually aligned with bison bulls, and successful older men passed on their spiritual power, the power of bison bulls, to younger men upon request. The medium of this transfer of power was the younger man's

wife, who actually or symbolically copulated with the “grandfather” and then lay with her husband.

The nomadic Lakota (Sioux), whose language is distantly related to Mandan and Hidatsa, have somewhat simpler religious organizations but retain the intermediary position of women between The Power and men. The Lakotas’ famous myth of the White Bison Woman tells of two young men on the prairie who see a beautiful woman, alone, in the distance. One of the men is excited by the opportunity to seize and rape this unprotected woman. His companion tries to deter him, reminding him it is wrong to fail to respect women, but the bad young man grabs at the beautiful woman as she approaches, and before his friend’s horrified eyes the would-be rapist disintegrates into a cremated heap of ashes. The woman then tells the good young man that she has come to bring knowledge of power to his people. He escorts her to the camp, then runs ahead to alert the people to prepare a welcome. After imparting spiritual knowledge, the woman walks away from the camp, and as she nears the horizon, the watching people see her change into a white bison heifer.

In all these Plains Indian societies, woman appeared to European observers (as to Napi) as drudges. Even the wives of leading men performed household tasks. Coming from a culture in which leisured, elaborately dressed ladies were a sign of high status, Europeans saw Plains Indian women as no more than servants and interpreted the men, sitting at leisure when in camp, as their masters. (A better understanding would have come from the model of separate spheres advocated by the nineteenth-century American reformer Catherine Beecher, who urged that women maintain their homes through intelligent deployment of skills—domestic science—and serve as exemplars and teachers of morality, while men work away from home.) Among Plains Indians, women could go on hunts or war parties if they wished, and a few made a full-time career of leading raids and battles, refusing marriage. Most Indian women preferred to gain respect, and possibly fame, through skill in the womanly arts. One who did excellent work would be paid by others to perform her skill in their behalf, or to teach them. She would recount her exploits in her craft as men recounted their war and hunting exploits, and people would greet her thus: “Grandmother, we are happy to look upon one whose hands were always busy curing fine skins” (Wissler 1938, 290)—or whatever her specialty.

Contrary to the generalization attributed to Lévi-Strauss (1969, 338), women among the Plains Indians were *not* equated with rawness and nature. Men were.

COMPARISON WITH WESTERN CULTURE

Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. is the *locus classicus* for Western ideas on the nature of men and women (Keuls 1985; Zeitlin 1984). Zeitlin (1984, 181) collocated these ideas:

Culture	Nature
male: Olympian; free will; father; law; intention; three (odd numbers); center; Greek; city; future; young; order; rules; above; head/phallos; active; creativity; reason; light; life; clarity; intellect; positive.	female: chthonic; fate; mother; ritual; act; two (even numbers); frontier; barbarian; house; past; old; chaos; unruly; below; belly/womb. passive; fertility; unreason; sexuality; passion; dark; death; obscurity; senses; negative.

Peristiany (1966, 9) states what is accepted by most scholars as a truism: Classical culture has persisted around the Mediterranean; insofar as Classical culture has influenced Northern and overseas Europe, Zeitlin's collocations of contrast are seen frequently in Western literature. The equation man : woman :: culture : nature is but one expression of this Western theme, a theme that Lévi-Strauss (in his massive tetralogy *Mythologiques*) shows is neither universal nor static. His conclusion (in his fourth volume) is that women are the mediatrices between polarities (Lévi-Strauss 1971, 557), a conclusion anticipated in his 1949 study (English trans. 1969) of marital exchanges.

Athenians in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. were militaristic and ambitious to be imperialistic. Their "natural world" was full of conflict between aggressive males, who also raped and killed females. Young Athenian men were required to engage in competitive athletics, to be initiated into the military forces, to submit to older men's tutelage (accompanied by homosexual usage), to separate themselves from women. Upper-class women were secluded in their homes, denied formal education or athletics, kept at the sedentary, tedious task of carding, spinning, and weaving wool. Men needed sexual relations with women to produce sons for the state, but otherwise were taught that it is unnatural for men to remain in the company of women. Working-class and slave women were little differentiated from poor and slave men, both sexes being primarily workers. Because everyone "knew" (had learned from infancy) that Athenian freeborn male citizens were "naturally" different, physically and mentally, from women and from slaves and barbarians, none of the oppressed groups attempted a serious, well-planned

revolution. They might form a mob in anger at extreme injustice, or stage protests, but their hope was only for modification of the upper-class men's "natural" rule. Socrates' "heresies" included pleasant relationships with women, and his pupil Plato advocated (in Book 5 of *The Republic*) unprecedented education and opportunities for women not much different from the proposals in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Women* two millennia later (Keuls 1985, 402).

What we have is what Lewis Feuer (1975, 17) terms "ideology . . . a myth written in the language of philosophy and science." Blackfoot ideology taught that women are "naturally" strong, gifted with homemaking skills and quite capable of maintaining camp life without male assistance. Blackfoot society, of small nomadic bands dependent on scattered bison herds, had too little surplus to keep a class of leisured ladies, and their mode of production frequently left women in camp without able-bodied men. Mandan and Hidatsa sedentary agricultural villages permitted greater class differences between men and women but, also incapable of much surplus production, no ideology secluding women from public life or subordinating them to men. Given the importance of the women's corn fields in maintaining the towns that male-dominated bison hunts could not alone support, Mandan and Hidatsa ideology needed to project a "natural world," imaged as the great earth lodge of Old Woman Who Never Dies.

GENDER BIAS AND SCIENCE

That the "natural world" continues to be a projection of ideology has been shown by such studies as Evelyn Fox Keller's *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* (the unconventional geneticist) and Brian Easlea's *Fathering the Unthinkable: Masculinity, Scientists and the Nuclear Arms Race*. There is a correspondence between Western science and imperialist social policy supported by military force—a correspondence vouchsafed in the relationship between Aristotle and his protégé Alexander (Keuls 1985, 405–6)—and in the work of Lord Chancellor Sir Francis Bacon, in whose time England inaugurated her American colonization. Bacon, often called the Father of Modern Science, claimed that "truth is the daughter of time," adding the curious conceit that Time had been born, like Athena, from a father (*Temporis partus masculus* or "masculine birth of time"). This son from a male immaculate conception was to conjoin himself with "things themselves," from which union would issue "a blessed race of Heroes or Supermen" (quoted and discussed in Reiss 1982, 219–20). Bacon equated science with the achievement of power and dominion, seen as masculine traits.

That same ideology was presented to contemporary Americans by the respected sociologist Bernard Barber in his *Science and the Social Order*: "It is of the essence of the human condition that man lives not in a compliant but in a resistant environment, which he must constantly make an effort to control if he cannot wholly master it" (Barber 1952, 7). Behind Barber's worldview is the traditional Judaeo-Christian position summarized by a leader of the radical Christian Right as God's "cultural mandate," that is, Genesis 1:27-28 and 2:15: "God said that man is to subdue the earth and have dominion over it; that as viceregent of God he is to rule the world for God's sake" (Kennedy 1982, 55). The Plains Indians would consider these statements blasphemous and suicidal—for them, humans (never "man") live only by respectful cooperation with the nonhuman peoples of our world. Barbara McClintock's "feeling for the organism," ridiculed by male colleagues, conforms to this alternative doxa.

All branches of Western science reflect their "masculine birth." The world is politicized and political relationships (authority, control, hierarchy, organization) are read into the "natural world" and "human nature" by scientists. Much of William Wimsatt's critiques of biological science (e.g., 1982, esp. p. 315) explore the premises underlying scientists' privileging simplification, regularity, and prediction—aspects of dominion over the research object. Levins and Lewontin (1982 and 1985) take cognizance of "the social demands that . . . inform our planned interaction with nature" and urge attention to "interdependence and relatively autonomy" (1982, 137), a dialectical research strategy that, like McClintock's receptivity toward her observational data, displaces the scientist from "his" superordinate position vis-à-vis the research object.

The antiimperialist rhetoric that came into vogue in the 1960s as the overt empires released their colonies, allowed "muted groups" (Ardener 1975) to speak, if not necessarily to prevail. As we would expect, changes in ideology in the political realm quickly found reflection in changed views about "nature," a new doxa. Donna Haraway (1989) contrasts primatologists' obsession with documenting male dominance to the post '60s emphasis on female primates' strategies. Along with the shift in research foci came a striking shift in the gender of leading researchers, from a science dominated by men to one in which almost all the frequently cited contributors are women. Since the rationale for studying primates, especially simians, is usually the search for fundamental primate/human "nature," primatology is particularly sensitive to ideological shifts.

Feminist critiques (Keller and Haraway), Marxist critiques

(Levins and Lewontin), and disarmament critiques (Easlea) have exposed heretofore unacknowledged or unseen biases in the postulates and programs of science. In each case, the doxa incorporated stereotypes regularly and, as a rule, subconsciously collocated with Indo-European gender contrasts. Pulling the stereotypes into public scrutiny can rectify the ill-founded theories built from biased assumptions. Will this cleanse science of error? The anthropologist can only point out that every society constructs its doxa: obsolete biases will wither with the social phenomena that engendered them, but the discovery of truth is not likely to be within human capability.

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