

The Question of 'Nature': What has Social Constructionism to offer Feminist Theory?

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The question of 'nature' is of particular importance for feminist theorizing as feminists have long come to realise that it is often upon this 'concept' that the givenness of sexual differences and, consequently, the inferiority of 'women', is assumed'. It is against biological determinism that feminists have developed their most powerful theories and critiques of dominant categorisations of 'women' (see, for example, de Beauvoir, 1989²; Rich, 1981). Particularly, both 'second wave feminists' generally, and eco-feminists specifically, tended to criticise dominant conceptualisations of women as 'naturally' inferior and assert the political importance of reclaiming 'nature', 'the natural' and 'the feminine' from the grip of exploitative scientific patriarchalism (in Kemp and Squires, 1997: 469). However, whereas the question of nature remains extremely important to today's feminists, post-structuralist feminists have since re-evaluated the latter manoeuvre arguing that it is inadequate, not even desirable, insofar as, paradoxically, it ends

up reinforcing exactly these constructed differences between 'men' and 'women', 'culture' and 'nature', which they refuse on the basis of their sexualising, racialising and universalising effects (see Butler, 1993; Alcoff in Tong and Tuana, 1995; Flax in Nicholson, 1990). Instead, they are more concerned with problematising 'nature' by asserting the social and cultural constructedness of the category 'women'. According to post-structural feminists, it is only by acknowledging the constructedness of 'nature', consequently of 'women' (and 'men'), that 'spaces for more plural forms of self-identification' can be created (in Kemp and Squires, 1997: 469).

To the extent that social constructionism problematises 'nature' as given, it offers feminists ways of criticising dominant conceptions of being as based on false foundational claims about the nature of both 'women' and 'men'. Contrary to the idea of 'nature' as given social constructionism³ suggests that 'nature' is a contingent social

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- 1 To oppose the idea that women are naturally inferior to men, in 1976 Simon de Beauvoir asserts 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (de Beauvoir, 1988: 295).
- 2 Although, de Beauvoir's implicit but also, at times, explicit rejection of 'the body' is seen by most feminists as problematic insofar as it accepts and thus reinforces a split – an impossible split – between the mind and the body, which ultimately may prove counter-productive for 'women' (in Price and Shildrick, 1999: 4; but see also Butler, 1993: 4).
- 3 Social constructionism is not easily definable. It encompasses an array of theoretical positions (from symbolic interactionism to postmodernism), whose aims and objectives are very complex and different (see, for instance, Berger & Luckmann, 1966, Goffman, 1954, Foucault, 1979; Derrida, 1974 among many others). However, the one thing that associates them is that they all share a common 'epistemological scepticism' about the nature of 'facts'. And it is this 'epistemological scepticism' against meta-narratives of 'reason', 'progress' and 'truth' which has proved very valuable for feminists.

and cultural construct that should not be taken for granted. This is not to say that feminists accept social constructionism uncritically; yet, increasingly they make use of it not just to explain 'women' but also the oppression of other 'bodies that matter' (see, for example, Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Spivak, 1988).

Nevertheless, as this paper will show, despite these important contributions to the question of 'nature' and of the individual as socially and culturally constructed, this approach raises a difficult question: how is it possible to talk about 'nature' without re-inscribing it into 'culture' precisely under the guise of their radical separation or difference (see Kirby, 1997; Wilson, 1998; Irigaray, 1985; Weed and Schor, 1994; but also and again Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Spivak, 1988)?

As Michelle Barrett notes, '[i]n the past ten years we have seen an extensive 'turn to culture' in feminism (Barret in Kemp & Squires, 1997: 112). The 'turn to culture' has meant that increasingly feminists have moved away from conceptualisations of 'women' as a unified 'natural' category and come to perceive it as a differentiated social construct. Particularly by bringing the question of 'difference' to the forefront, 'second wave' feminists have shown that 'women's situation of oppression is not reducible to women's 'biology' or 'nature' (see, for example, de Beauvoir, 1989; Firestone, 1970; Rich, 1979; Irigaray, 1985; Cixous, 1987) because as for 'other oppressed bodies' (see Butler, 1993) 'women's oppression is related to questions

of 'culture', 'knowledge', 'language' and 'power' (see, for example, Harding, 1991; Pateman, 1989; hooks, 1992; Spivak, 1988; Haraway, 1990; Grosz, 1994; Braidotti, 1994). This, however, is not to suggest that feminists have lost sight of questions of 'nature'; on the contrary. Nevertheless, it is through 'culture' that 'nature' and what are presumed 'natural' phenomena, such as the body, sex, reproduction, biology and hormones, to cite only a few examples, are increasingly being explained within feminism.

In her book *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archeology of Sex Hormones*, for instance, Nelly Oudshoorn looks at scientific knowledge and, in line with Thomas Laqueur⁴, she suggests that scientists are actively constructing rather than discovering reality and that 'the naturalistic reality of the body as such does not exist' (Oudshoorn in Harrison and Hood-Williams, 2002: 133). Her contribution to the question of 'nature' consists in challenging the idea that there is such a thing as a 'natural body' by showing how scientific knowledge constructs rather than explains the 'natural' facts that it is presumed to discover. Specifically, drawing on Foucault, she describes the archeology of sex hormones in terms of a process of sexualisation in which sex hormones are created as 'material products' to 'transform and sexualize the world we live in' (Oudshoorn in Harrison and Hood-Williams, 2002: 127). Thus, for example, she explains that while early research on 'sex hormones' was firmly focussed on the gonads (or reproductive sex glands) and androgen was

deemed a specifically male hormone and estrogen a specifically female one, with the advance in organic chemistry and the development of experimental techniques, scientists began to conceptualize hormones differently. Hormones began to be conceptualized as 'catalysts: chemical substances, sexually unspecific in origin and function, exerting manifold activities, instead of being primarily sex agents' (Oudshoorn, 1994: 36). At this point, investigation into sex hormones became more sophisticated and not only were androgens and estrogens found together (e.g. the presence of 'female' hormones was found in the urine of stallions) but it also became apparent that they were close chemical cousins and that testosterone could be converted to estrogen (Oudshoorn, 1994). However, Oudshoorn argues that 'although scientists abandoned the concept of sexual specificity, the terminology was not adjusted to this change in conceptualization [...] the names male and female sex hormones have been kept in current use, both inside and outside the scientific community' (Oudshoorn, 1994: 12, 36). This, she says, demonstrates how scientific knowledge is bound by what she calls a 'disciplinary style' (a term which she takes from Foucault, 1999) that constructs phenomena as 'natural' in order to legitimate its premises and findings even when they are contradictory and 'messy' (see also Fausto-Sterling in Harrison and Hood-Williams, 2002: 125). In other words, according to this view, 'the matter' that is presumed and awaiting the work of science is in reality constructed (materialized) by science itself (see also Barad in Rosengarten, [n. d.]: 5, 7)

Moreover, in opposition to the idea that the biological body exists independently of

representations of it, Judith Butler develops Foucauldian insights further to create a sophisticated theory of the body's materiality as performatively constituted by the regulatory norms of 'sex' (Butler in Harrison and Hood-Williams, 2002). More specifically, against Freud's notion of identification as the resolution of the Oedipal complex, she writes:

'Because the solution of the Oedipal dilemma can be either positive or negative, the prohibition of the opposite-sexed other can either lead to an identification with the sex of the parent lost or a refusal of identification...'
(Butler, 1990: 134).

In other words, 'the refusal of identification' is also part of the process of 'materialization' through which identities develop. Consequently, Butler suggests that although identification enables certain sexed subjects to emerge, 'in the demand that identification be reiterated persists the possibility, the threat, that it will fail to repeat' (Butler, 1993: 102). Thus, she contends, the process of 'materialization' through which both 'men' and 'women' develop their identities is not completely successful and cannot be regarded as universal (Butler, 1993: 2). Specifically, it is through the refusal of identification (or 'disidentification') that what she calls 'abject others' develop; 'bodies' who do not seem to count but who are nonetheless necessary to the creation of the heterosexual subject (Butler, 1993: 3-4). As Grosz says, for Butler identity is performed or produced through action and not simply, as psychoanalysis suggests, through identification (see Butler in Grosz, not dated). This is why Butler argues that it is not possible to talk about 'matter' and/or 'sex' as

4 In his book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Laqueur (1990) develops a powerful argument about scientific explanation of the body as socially contingent with the aim to unsettle biologicist arguments about the differences between women and men. In her book *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archeology of Sex Hormones*, Oudshoorn also questions scientific knowledge and the naturalistic view of the body that it produces.

if they were *a priori* essential categories from which 'bodies' develop because they are part of these disciplinary processes and, thus, deeply implicated in them. These categories, she states, are not naturally given phenomena, whose reality can be somehow separated from the cultural strictures of 'gender performance' but regulatory constructs/norms, whose 'materiality' can only 'be re-thought as an effect of power' (Butler in Harrison and Hood-Williams, 2002: 192). 'Sexual difference', says Butler, 'is never simply a function of material difference' because 'sex is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized' (Butler, 1993: 1). Put differently, for Butler, 'sex' works to materialize one's body's sex and it does so following a 'heterosexual imperative', which, as she shows, is in no way 'absolute'. Thus, Butler argues, what individuals signify is not ontologically given and/or 'natural' and 'to return to matter to ground claims about sexual difference' is problematic because 'matter is not prior to discourse' but 'is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality' (Butler in Burke, Schor and Whitford, 1994: 143). She claims, 'there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body' (Butler, 1993: 10); consequently, the question is not whether to re-claim and/or rescue 'materiality' from the grip of patriarchy but:

'...why "materiality" has become a sign of irreducibility, that is, how is it that the materiality of sex is understood as that which only bears cultural constructions and, therefore, cannot be a construction? [...] And what kinds of constructions are foreclosed through the figuring of this site as outside or beneath construction itself?' (Butler, 1993: 28).

Her intention is not to deny the existence of 'matter' [and she, in fact, acknowledges the possibility of an array of "immaterialities" that pertain to the body (see Butler, 1993: 66)] but to analyse and problematise the 'process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call "matter"' (Butler, 1993: 9). According to Butler, 'only if matter can be rescued from its location as both prior and passive with regard to the notion of production', for feminists it will be possible to displace 'the hierarchical economy of the nature/culture opposition and the sexualizing and racialising agenda that it informs' (quoted in Kirby, 1997: 101). She is aware that this is not an easy task because to dislodge 'matter' itself is not just to render any foundational conceptions of being obsolete but also to displace any notions of 'femininity' as essentialising. However, she regards this manoeuvre as indispensable to the destabilisation of hegemonic oppressive norms and practices (Butler, 1993: 30-32). She states:

'To call a presupposition [materiality] into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims' (Butler, 1993: 30).

In other words, according to Butler, it is only by freeing 'materiality' from its metaphysical lodgings that it becomes possible not only to contest/deconstruct 'natural/biological' taken for granted sexual categories, which reproduce and reinforce existing relations of

domination, but also to open them up to new possibilities for 'resignification' (Butler, 1993: 30). For her, in fact, it is not enough to challenge the radical exclusion of 'women' from hegemonic cultural formations as if the category 'woman' was a 'natural' and universal one. Rather the category itself and the normative conditions that produce it, including 'race' and 'class' as well as 'sex', need to be displaced if feminists want to deprive 'hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to essentialist accounts of gender identity' (Butler in Nicholson, 1990: 325, 338). As she says, "[s]ex" is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms' (Butler, 1993: 107); thus, only by questioning the naturalness of sex itself, can feminists move towards understanding how certain bodies come to matter, while 'initiating new possibilities, new ways for bodies to matter' (Butler, 1993: 30).

However, as this paper will demonstrate, although Butler's theory illuminates the problems of elaborating a 'universal philosophy' based on a fixed and immutable conception of the individual, it is not without difficulties. Following Butler's question, '[f]or whom is *outness* a historically available and affordable option?' (Butler, 1993: 227, italics added), for instance, it may seem plausible to ask: what about those 'bodies' that do not resist 'identification' and are inexorably constrained within specific, 'material', 'sexual', 'racial' and 'class' boundaries?

Moreover, what about those bodies that do not have the 'cultural' and 'economic' capital to engage in the politics of representation?⁵

According to Kirby, 'acknowledging that identity is always problematic does not mean that we can remove ourselves from the politics of identifying practices' (Kirby, 1997: 172). If on the one hand, the idea of the natural as given is very difficult (impossible) to sustain, on the other, as Kirby suggests, the implicit attempt of Butler's theory to explain 'matter' or 'nature' through 'discourse', is also problematic insofar as it risks privileging 'the ideational' over 'the material', 'the cultural' over 'the natural' and, thus, reinstalling just these 'identities and sexualized hierarchies between ideality and matter, culture and nature, and mind and body', which it was one of her main aims to displace (Kirby, 1997: 107). According to Kirby, this is because Butler's theory is limited to a linguistic or discursive account which fails to tackle 'the in-itself of matter', 'the materiality of matter' (Kirby, 1997: 108). In Butler's account 'matter' is accounted for as that which exceeds representation; thus, in Kirby's words, it is rendered unspeakable and unthinkable by the same tokens that qualified it as 'that which matters' (Kirby, 1997: 108). Consequently, Kirby challenges Butler's assertion that 'to return to matter requires that we return to matter as a sign' (see Butler, 1993: 49) 'by putting the sign itself into question'⁶ and by exploring identity at

5 Although this essay is not concerned with exploring the limits of a politics centered on re-signifying practices in relation to 'material economic inequalities', the question seems mandatory. For an analysis of these limits see, for instance, Fraser, 1998/2000; Hennessey, 1993/1999; O'Sullivan, 1994; Benhabib, 1995; Klein, 2000.

6 Kirby puts the sign into question by exploring Saussure's idea that the sign is arbitrary. Particularly, she says that, although Saussure tries dispensing with the referent through the notion of arbitrariness (Saussure, 1974: 67), the ambiguities in his texts show that the referent is not so easily dispensable. According to Kirby, Saussure's concept of language as a differential system without positive terms implies that the concept of arbitrariness cannot simply be located between two separate terms; it is also within each term. Hence, for Kirby, the body is as mutable and articulate as culture (Kirby in Mutman, 1999).

'the atomic level of its constitution' (Kirby, 1997: 128). According to Kirby, the paradox of the sign's identity (that it is dependent upon 'différance'; see Derrida, 1974) is symptomatic of the paradox of identity generally. And the process of *différance* outlined by Derrida afflicts everything, including the body (Kirby, 1997: 53-56). Therefore she suggests that feminists cannot dismiss discourse on 'sociobiology, cognitive studies, and artificial intelligence' on the basis that they are essentialising and 'politically offensive' (see Spivak in Kirby, 1997: 160) because 'the body as the scene of writing' (an image which again she takes from Derrida, 1974) is 'an inscribing of all essentialisms, even of the politically offensive' (Kirby, 1997: 160). Oppression, according to Kirby, may actually craft and shape the materiality of the body through, for example, starvation, torture, long hours of low paid and exploited labour (see Kirby but also Cheah Pheng' in Threadgold, 2003). Consequently, although Kirby would agree with Butler that the body is not 'natural' and/or 'essential' 'as opposed to culturally inscribed', she refuses to see 'essentialism' as intrinsically untenable. Instead, she sees essentialism not merely as prohibitive but also as enabling on the basis that the body is "'natural" and/or "essential" because indistinguishable from "culture"' (Kirby in Deutscher, 1997, italics added). According to Kirby, in fact, 'nature' is not outside culture but it is an active 'telling substance', whose materiality needs to be acknowledged and 'heard' (Kirby: 1997: 127). And she suggests that the way to confront

the nature/language opposition is not simply to problematise 'nature as that which always bears the traces of discourse', but to conceptualise nature as 'articulate' (Kirby 1997: 72, 90). She, therefore, employs Derrida's insights that 'there is no outside of text' (Derrida, 1984: 158) in an original way to argue that 'nature' is not just a scene of cultural inscription, it 'both writes and is written' (Kirby, 1997: 61). In other words, if it is the case that objects are influenced by culture so, for Kirby, is 'culture' influenced by 'materiality' (Kirby, 1997: 56). Although Kirby's account of 'matter' as 'the scene of writing' is not immune to criticism⁹, it raises important questions about the politics of 'representation' and its relation to 'the biological facts of the body's existence' (Kirby, 1997: 70).

According to feminists, such as Stone, moreover, the question of 'nature' cannot be fully grasped from a constructionist approach because this ignores how women's 'lived corporeal existence' is in fact devalued (see Stone, 2004: 13; but also see Schor and Weed, 1994; Grosz, 1998; Wilson, 1997/8). From Stone's perspective:

'Precisely because the way we inhabit our bodies is always culturally mediated, the cultural devaluation of femininity and feminized corporality adversely affects women's actual inhabitation of their bodies and their power for practical engagements with the world' (Stone, 2004: 13).

7 Particularly, Cheah Pheng questions the practice of 're-signification' asking whether it constitutes an adequate model of agency in a 'neo-colonialist space' where the very matter of the body 'bears the instituted traces of the spacing and timing of imperialism' (Pheng Cheah in Threadgold, 2003).

8 Although Kirby poses some important questions regarding form, matter and their 'accepted' separability, it is unclear whether her own approach successfully answers such questions. In particular, her strong reliance on deconstruction seems to circumscribe her own theoretical approach to certain type of resources, while foreclosing other possibilities which possibly could have enhanced her understanding of the nature/mind dichotomy (Reynolds, 2000).

Thus, following Irigaray, Stone suggests that feminists can not proceed in their claims as if there were no differences between 'the sexes' because in reality 'men' and 'women' are different and only represented as 'the same' to accommodate a phallogocentric discourse⁹ (Stone, 2004). Furthermore, as Grosz explains:

'If women cannot be characterized in any general way, if all there is to femininity is socially produced, how can feminism be taken seriously? What justifies the assumption that women are oppressed as a sex?' (Grosz, 1998)

An argument being made here for feminists not to refuse all forms of 'essentialism' because this could simply mean the end of feminist politics itself (which would then only appear as another form of negative essentialism) (in Schor and Weed, 1994: xiii). Consequently, as previously noted (see paragraph above on Kirby), attempts have been made not only to try to re-conceptualize 'essentialism' (see again Stone, 2004; Fuss, 1989; Schor and Weed, 1994; but also Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism', 1984/5: 184) but also to find productive (although in no way 'absolute') points of connections between social constructionism on the one hand, and biology and scientific

studies/theories, on the other (see Wilson, 1997/8, Rosengarten, 2004)¹⁰.

More specifically, Elisabeth Wilson challenges the idea that the study of sexuality needs to be separated from the neurosciences (as in certain forms of social constructionism) because this separation risks leaving questions of scientific authority unchallenged, failing to acknowledge the 'phallogocentric economy' reproduced within it (Wilson, 1998). According to Wilson, if on the one hand, 'scientific' claims such as that of Simon le Vay 'that homosexual and heterosexual identities have a neurobiological substrate' constitute neurocognitive matter as 'self-present and originary' (Wilson, 1998: 202-3), on the other, conceptualisations of the body in purely constructionist terms effect a 'displacement of biological presence', which is ultimately counter-productive for feminism (Wilson, 1998: 203). For her, therefore, feminists should not do away with questions of scientific authority but they should deal with them, 'not simply at those sites where it takes women as objects, but also in the neutral zones, in those places where feminism appears to have no place and no political purchase' (Wilson, 1998: 18-19). For Wilson, this means engaging with the domain of 'the biological' itself as a site of complexity and eccentricity (see Wilson's re-

9 Although, not every feminist would necessarily agree with Stone's suggestion that every type of 'political essentialism' is inherently unstable and, thus, that there is a need for a return to ontology or 'realist essentialism' (Stone, 2004).

10 In fact, it seems fair to point out that it would be mistaken to think about Butler's theory as 'absolutely' opposed to that of theorists such as Kirby or Wilson (see Kirby above and paragraphs on Wilson below). Many points of connections can be found between these theorists. In 'Bodies that Matter' Butler explicitly rejects the idea that 'sexuality' can be made or unmade at will (Butler, 1993: 94). Her performative understanding of discursive practices can be seen as an attempt to challenge the 'unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of power in determining our ontologies' (in Barad, 2003). Moreover, both Wilson and Kirby acknowledge and make use of certain social constructionist insights to develop their theories. However, by making their differences explicit, this essay hopes showing the limits of post-structural approaches in their engagement with 'the biological', while opening possibilities for 'different' understandings of 'nature', 'the natural' and consequently of 'sexual difference' than that conceived within strictly constructivist terms; although it acknowledges that there is no 'original outside' to which 'we' can return.

evaluation of Freud's analysis of male hysteria, 2004). It means complicating 'an easy division between the political and the material stasis of "this neurological body" and the political and material malleability of "the cultural body"' (Wilson, 1998: 203).

In the introduction to her latest book, *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the neurological body*, for example, Wilson looks at the hysterical body to argue that, although Freud's idea of 'conversion hysteria' has proved very productive for feminism, it has come at the expenses of the 'bio-logic' (Wilson, 2004: 4). In particular, she says that 'the preference for analyses of ideational contortion at the expenses of biological conversion suggests that the question of the body has yet to be posed as comprehensively as it could be' (Wilson, 2004: 5). Consequently, 'the particularities of the muscles, nerves and organs in their hysterical state have remained under-examined' within feminist theorizing (Wilson, 2004: 4). This is why she suggests that 'rather than disregarding Freud at those moments where he invokes biology, we may be better served by a consideration of the data he lays before us' (Wilson, 2004: 12). Even though she recognizes that the biological is not a neutral domain, she believes that perhaps feminists have dismissed it too quickly (Wilson, 2004). Thus, for instance, she points out that 'hysterics do indeed suffer from reminiscences' as firstly exposed by Freud and Breuer, but that symptoms, such as blindness, physical pain and incessant cough, which deeply affect the body, are also caused by hysteria and cannot be simply disregarded (Wilson, 2004: 5). For her, feminists 'can be deeply and happily complicit with biological explanation' and 'more affectionately involved with

neurobiological data' without necessarily accepting the dominant conceptualization of nature/matter as biologically determined (Wilson, 2004: 13, 14). She says, '[t]his preference for neurological analysis' does not want to diminish other feminist cultural, social, linguistic, literary and historical analyses but open possibilities that do not foreclose those aspects of 'biology', which could enhance rather than underplay feminist understandings of the body (Wilson, 2004: 8).

Particularly, according to Wilson, feminists need research about 'the nature of cognition itself' because it is there that the 'disembodied nature of "thinking" itself' appears more clearly (Wilson, 1996; 1998: 19). In other words, it is there that 'nature' and/or 'the corporeal' loses all its 'power' and becomes completely disavowed. Thus, in "'Loving the Computer Cognition", Embodiment and the Influencing Machine', she analyses Alan Turing's (1950) Test on computing machinery and intelligence and, by employing Irigaray's notion of morphology, she shows that his idea of cognition is premised on 'the expulsion of the corporeal' and it is achieved at the expense of 'the body'. More specifically, for Wilson, Turing's notion of cognition is produced by 'the containment of the corporeal to the feminine, and its subsequent displacement' (Wilson, 1996). The Turing Test consists in testing a number of men and women in relation to 'the thinking capacity' of a computer to see if the machine is really capable of thinking. If the interrogator is unable to distinguish the machine's answers from the answers of the man, then this particular machine is said to have passed the Turing Test. The machine whose answer is indistinguishable from that of the man is the

machine that thinks (Wilson, 1996, 1998: 109). However, as Wilson shows, Turing's model of 'cognition' is clearly achieved through a complete annihilation and denigration of 'the body'. As an example, she points out that '[t]he Turing test is conducted via written or couriered information between the players: there is no bodily, visual or aural contact between the participants' as if the body was an unimportant and unnecessary obstacle to the end result of the test (Wilson, 1996, 1998: 109). It is as if for Turing, in complete accordance to Descartes' maxim, '*Cogito ergo sum*' (see Descartes, 1642/1971), 'to think' requires the complete disavowing of the body. However, Wilson asks, what are the hidden desires that inform this economy of thought? Is knowledge 'neutral' as Turing would have us believe? Or is the neutrality of knowledge achieved at the expense of 'the body' and/or of 'nature'?

Clearly, for Wilson, knowledge is not neutral. Instead, for her, 'cognition as neutral or dispassionate computation' is a myth produced 'according to the demands of a male imaginary and morphology', which respects only 'containment, fixity and certitude' (Wilson, 1996). She says, 'cognition is the projection of the masculine desire to be free of the body'; 'it is simply a reinstatement of the Cartesian desire for the kernel of man to be pure intellectuality' (Wilson, 1996). Thus, taking up but also radically expanding Irigaray's challenge about the impossibility of separating 'the body' from 'the mind' on the basis that this separation 'enables the reproduction of the phallogocentric privileging of male representations of subjectivity' (and, consequently, of 'femininity') (Irigaray quoted in Pateman and Grosz, 1986: 136), Wilson proposes a 'connectionist model', in which

individual units function internally to propagate and transform activity in the network and, as such, have no representational status. Within this model, rules are not stored in a central nervous system but are implicit in the structure of the network. Knowledge is distributed rather than local, and not locatable, either cognitively or anatomically (in Hollway, 2000). According to Wilson, connectionism offers modalities for breaching the separation between 'the mind' and 'the body' because it shows that the brain's functions and consciousness are far more complex than can be explained by reductive notions of biological determinism and genetic programming. It shows that 'cognitive patterns are established differently in the course of individual histories' (Scott, 2001). It is via connectionism that, 'the embodiment of the psyche is enacted not through present cortical traces, but through the deferral and difference of a material trace that is nowhere locatable' (Wilson, 1998: 162). Her goal, however, is not to substitute Turing's notion of cognition with a purely 'feminine' one because, according to Wilson, 'there is no natural or pre-discursive psychical fluidity to which our formulations could return'. Rather, she wants 'to disrupt the containment and certainty of this (supposed) neutral cognition' (Wilson, 1996) in order to produce knowledge of the body as interacting with and also exceeding the possibilities of the physical parameters within which it operates (Wilson, 1998). Ultimately, for Wilson, the aim of feminism is to develop a theory of 'mind and body' that takes into account developments within the natural sciences rather than disregarding them *a priori* (Wilson, 1998). In her view:

'Critiques premised on a primary oppositional relation to the sciences or premised on anti-biologism, anti-essentialism, or anti-utilitarianism are losing their critical and political purpose – not necessarily because they are wholly mistaken, but because they have relied on, and reauthorized, a separation between the inside and the outside, the static and the changeable, the natural and the political, the chromosomal and the cultural' (Wilson, 1998: 200).

Hence, paradoxically, feminists accepting these premises risk naturalizing 'material processes', which they should instead be exploring (Rosengarten, 2004). As an alternative, Wilson proposes a body that is produced 'by contingent impressions (radically individualized) which mix sensory responses and unconscious fantasies (registered neurologically) in ways that make nonsense both of genetic determinism and mind/body separations' (Wilson quoted in Scott, 2001). Although, given restrictions of space, a full assessment of her proposition is not possible within this paper, without doubt Wilson provides important theoretical insights to the question of 'nature' from a different perspective than that put forward within strictly social constructionist terms. On the one hand, she questions the idea that the domain of politics is the public as opposed to the private by strongly suggesting not only that 'the private is political'¹¹ but that 'the natural' is also political and worth consideration (Hird, 2004; see also Butler in Benhabib, 1995); while, on the other, she puts into question the idea that identity is

simply socially and linguistically constructed by proposing a theory of 'the body' as indistinguishable from 'the mind'. For Wilson, in fact, the idea of the mind as separable from the body is a 'masculinist' one; one that presumes a certain kind of embodiment, which 'fits with certain masculinist presumptions about psychological functioning' (Wilson, 1996).

In conclusion, social constructionism offers feminists means to challenge the idea that women are inferior to men due to their natural characteristics (an idea held by almost every Western philosopher prior to feminism). In particular, the idea that identities are socially and linguistically constructed enables a critique of dominant hegemonic conceptions of 'heterosexuality', 'sex', 'gender' and 'race' as 'natural' and/or 'essential'. Their 'essentiality' is displaced and the cultural process of symbolisation through which these concepts are naturalised is problematized enabling a different conception of identity as performed or produced through action. According to this view, we are not natural givens but produced by signifying practices and ideologies, discourses motivated or determined by power, and our identities are contingent politico-cultural and historical constructions. However, despite these important theoretical contributions to the question of identity, what this paper demonstrates is that attempting to re-construct 'nature' from the point of view of discourse risks reinforcing the nature/culture dichotomy which it was one of the main aims of post-structuralist theory to displace. If on the one hand, by

'essentialising' 'nature', 'the natural' and 'the feminine', feminists cannot fully explain the limitations of the subject/object dichotomy for other oppressed bodies but, paradoxically, seem to rely on it for their claim of objectivity, on the other, an emphasis on 'culture' risks leaving 'the naturalness' of 'the body', its morphology, 'flesh', desires and history, unquestioned. Particularly, according to authors such as Wilson, it is those aspects of 'biology' that are most 'physical' and/or 'carnal' which are often under-theorized within contemporary feminist theorizing. To emphasize 'the biological' and/or 'the natural', however, is not a *return* to a pre-feminist understanding of the naturalness of 'sex' (and 'the body') as opposed to 'gender' (and 'culture'). Rather, it may be seen as an effort toward 'alternative' conceptions of 'matter' that take into account, but also interrogate, both developments within the social and the natural sciences in the awareness that to simply re-inscribe it into the cultural 'is the monist, or logocentric, gesture par excellence' (Grosz quoted in Wilson, 1998: 66). Ultimately, in fact, 'nature' and/or 'matter' are not outside of culture nor are they simply 'cultural', but they are sites of considerable complexity, whose understanding is neither self-evident nor uncomplicated and should be 'included' in the problematic of identity.

11 The idea that the 'personal and/or private is political' was first elaborated by 'second wave' feminists during the 1960s and 70s and it enabled feminists to enter issues of political contestation, such as domestic violence, domestic labour, abortion to name just a few, which were hitherto believed to lie outside of politics.

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