

From Equal Rights to Gender Trouble

Where is gender equality headed? On the one hand, we see a roll-back worldwide, whether in the abortion ban in the U.S., the criminalization of gays and lesbians in Kenya, Uganda and other African countries, anti-queer agitation in Russia, to the complete banishment of women and girls from public life in Afghanistan. On the other hand, legal equality has been established in many countries, girls and women are on the fast track in school and university, more and more young men are taking on active fatherhood roles, and the LGBT movement has become unmistakable in the last decade.

Where does the strong and apparently increasing polarization come from, the verbal escalation that the topic causes? I myself noticed that I hardly dare to take a position here, because there are blunders lurking everywhere and I'm sure to make myself vulnerable. Nevertheless, or just because of that, I will try here to bring some light and understanding into this controversial minefield with the means of the integral map, without already offering solutions.

Sex, gender, identity and orientation in four quadrants

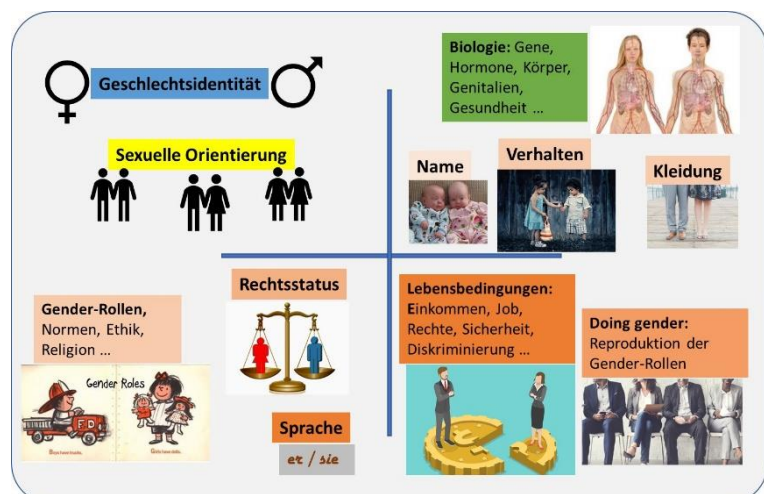
Let's start with a classification and clarification of some fundamental terms to make the field clearer. For this, the Wilberian map of the four quadrants is very helpful: inside and outside, individual and collective.

First of all, there is the biological sex: to be located physically in the right upper (RO) quadrant. This is about genes (XX or XY), hormones, sex organs, secondary sex characteristics such as body shape, size, hair growth, proportion of muscle and fat mass, but also disease dispositions, formation of the central nervous system, etc.. We see here a clear polarity of male and female (warning beforehand: this is of course a simplified view, we will come to the differentiation later).

This must be distinguished from the inner gender identity located in the left upper quadrant (LO), i.e., the awareness of the gender to which someone feels he or she belongs. Since this is an inner reality, it cannot be stated objectively from the outside, but only through the individual's self-statement.

Also LO we localize sexual orientation, i.e. hetero-, homo- or bi-sexual desire, when it comes to intimate partnership.

But how does a person know what it means to be male or female? Of course, we learn this from an early age through the gender roles, norms, stereotypes, prejudices that prevail in our society, or even more differentiated in our class, our culture. Here we are in the left lower quadrant (LU) of the collective inner consciousness. Since these cultural constructs are something fundamentally different from biological sex (RO), I use the now naturalized term "gender" for them. It indicates what is considered masculine or feminine in a given social space. (English has the clear distinction between "sex" and "gender", while the German "Geschlecht" can mean both. We have to live with this linguistic ambiguity here).



Gender norms and roles do not remain internal; they express themselves in very concrete external forms. Many languages (German included) have gender differentiation built deep into their structure, which makes it continuously embedded in our thinking and makes the effort to create gender-neutral language so difficult.

The infant's living conditions (RO) are shaped by its gender assignment from the very beginning: Shortly after birth, we receive a first name from our parents that (with a few exceptions) clearly assigns us to one gender. Early on, girls and boys begin to exhibit distinguishable behavior in many ways; the ongoing debate about how much of this is learned roles and how much is biology does not change the statistical reality. Even the clothes we are put into differ at an early age and distinguish us as boys or girls; toddler wards are dichotomous between a pink and a blue world.

The behavior shaped by gender roles continues throughout our adult lives; research speaks of "doing gender," i.e., by "reading" a counterpart as male or female and behaving slightly differently accordingly, we constantly reproduce societal gender roles. This brings us to collective behavior, i.e., the lower right quadrant (RU).

Here, of course, there are also the "hard facts" of the different living conditions of women and men. This ranges from different access to professions and positions, possibly still unequal rights, educational differences, unequal income, the share of unpaid care work, to being affected by violence, the type and frequency of illnesses and accidents, life expectancy, to name just a few central factors.

Thus, we have identified four clearly distinguishable elements: biological sex (RO), gender identity (LO), sexual orientation (LO), and gender roles (LU, but also RO and RU). Some may use other terminology for these, but this differentiation seems to me to be widely shared. This conceptual clarity may already clear up some confusion.

So we have already gained a nice clear understanding of the subject, haven't we? But this is only true until we bring the developmental stages into play as spoilers. In order not to go too deep, I will use a very simplified developmental model here: I distinguish pre-modern, modern and post-modern (and finally integral). Our model is plausible from an integrally informed perspective.

Pre-Modern

From a pre-modern perspective, however, it is pure nonsense. For one characteristic of pre-modern consciousness is that it does not yet know any differentiation of the four quadrants. The true, the beautiful and the good are unseparated, as Ken Wilber so beautifully puts it. From a conventional point of view, one's God-given physical sex clearly determines one's identity and gender roles: one is placed in the world as a man or a woman and has to fill one's place according to God-given or nature-given norms and rules. Our distinction into the quadrants dissolves into nothing, sex, identity and gender are one and the same.

Only with regard to sexual orientation, not all pre-modern societies agree. While homosexuality is condemned as a grave sin in virtually all contemporary pre-modern religious systems, historically there have been examples where homosexuality was accepted and lived out publicly, such as in the ancient Greek city-states.

For the pre-modern consciousness, the law-abiding and God-fearing fulfillment of the gender role as man or woman represents a central element of the value system; it decisively determines the order in family, community, religion, society, and thus also one's personal identity and the position one has to assume. So we can already understand that questioning it is perceived as a massive attack on the foundations of the world order.

And let's face it: this is not just a problem of conservative hardliners. If we dig deep inside ourselves and connect to our own conventional, pre-modern consciousness - when as young people we searched for right and wrong, for belonging and being an outsider - then we can gain a taste of the irritation that comes from questioning what is seemingly certain. After all, isn't it perfectly clear what is man and what is woman? Even if we can relate to this, it no longer has to guide our actions; other value systems do.

Modern



A core element of the transition to modern consciousness is that the norms and conditions of life are no longer accepted as given by God or nature, but are recognized as man-made and thus can also be changed by us humans and shaped according to our will.

In this way, numerous traditional inequalities are called into question: Abolition of slavery, civil and electoral rights, decolonization, and also: equal rights. Starting in the 19th century, the female half of the population began to stake its claim for equal rights. The so-called First Wave of Feminism demanded for women the right

to vote, full civil rights, free choice of profession, financial autonomy, equal pay, equal rights in marriage, abortion rights... This struggle has since made tremendous progress in numerous countries; just thinking about the time of my own childhood, the differences are striking. In Germany, for example, until 1977, the wife's professional activity was dependent on the husband's consent. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that there is still a great deal to be done before actual equality is achieved, especially if we look at the situation worldwide. In many countries, even elementary women's rights are not yet secured. This finds expression in the fact that the UN designates as No. 5 in its Sustainable Development Goals: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."

Mind you, this is about equal rights and opportunities for women and men; what being a man or a woman means is only questioned insofar as the old discriminatory or privileging norms are challenged. First-wave feminism often appears as women simply wanting what men have as well.



Postmodern

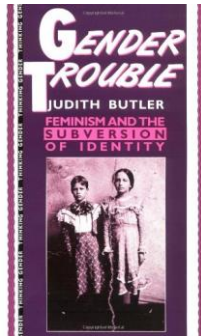


Deconstruction is a characteristic of postmodernism; many seemingly given facts are exposed as socially constructed and thus questioned as mutable. Thus, in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir exposed gender as a social construct in "The Other Sex" and consistently distinguished between biological and social gender: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one." This kicked off the Second Wave of Feminism; Women's Lib questioned identity, what it meant to be a woman, and created its own feminist culture, a new sense of self as a woman. On a much smaller scale, the men's movement also emerged, asking what it means to be a man.

In the 1990s, this developed further at the political level into the concept of gender mainstreaming, an idea often misunderstood; at its core, it means taking into account the different life situations and interests of people of all genders in all decisions at all levels of society. This goes well beyond the advancement of women and also includes



empowering men where they are disadvantaged, such as in life expectancy, active fatherhood, and breaking down toxic masculinity roles.



Judith Butler went one step further with deconstruction in 1990 with her book Gender Trouble. She asked who the subject of feminism was; when we speak in generalized terms of "women," we ignore all social, ethnic, cultural, and physical differences.

The responses to this can be called the Third Wave of Feminism. It needs an intersectional view that complicates everything. Even anatomy is not destiny, and heteronormativity and the binary concept of gender are being challenged. This is how we see the blossoming of the LGBTIQ movement in the last decades.

Understanding LGBTIQ

Let's apply our quadrant schema to "LGBTIQ" to further understand the different concepts and groups of people it refers to.

Simple are "LGB" = "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual". These refer to sexual orientation (OL), the demand is for recognition of equal rights for these minorities - in other words, continuation of the modern era's project for equal rights. Even if this seems simple in principle, it is still a long way to full implementation, even in countries like Germany that are progressive in terms of equality policy, because homophobic feelings run deep and countless traditional and customary regulations are being called into question: same-sex marriage entails far-reaching changes in parental law, inheritance law, name law, tax law, ...

The "I" for "Intersexual" brings to light the fact that biological sex does not show a perfectly clean separation of newborns into boys and girls; there is a (small) percentage of babies who are born with ambiguous sex characteristics, or who develop physically differently than expected due to heredity. These people are now advocating for the right not to be forced into binary gender, which has long been forcibly enforced with gender reassignment surgery. By acknowledging the existence of the "I", medicine and society are challenging biological binarity (RO).

"T" as in "transgender," on the other hand, starts with the inner gender identity (LO). If we define the term broadly, different tensions between identity, biological sex, and external gender role can lead to a wide range of resolution movements, from transvestitism (temporary or permanent change into the dress norms of the opposite sex), to change of name and legal status, to gender reassignment surgery. Where these dysphorias originate is still largely misunderstood; they may have existed since childhood, or they may manifest themselves later in life. But the affected people simply demand to be taken seriously in their identity, their inner reality.

Transgender as a socially more visible phenomenon challenges the long taken-for-granted belief that individual gender identity (LO) is firmly coupled to biological sex (RO) and social role (LU). It thus triggers a deep sense of insecurity among many.

Finally, "Q" as in "queer" is used on the one hand as a generic term for the entire LGBTIQ rainbow spectrum. More specifically, it refers to people who reject the norm of bisexuality. They don't want to be pigeonholed into the alternative of "man or woman" and see gender as a polarity with all transitional forms, or they reject binarity completely and define themselves as something distinct, beyond the known roles. Queer challenges the binary gender concept not only individually, but as a social norm (LU).

Multiple Gender Trouble

With these clarifications, we can slowly better understand why the topic of gender is so polarized and escalated. Here, fundamental values of the individual as well as of the social order are being negotiated. And not only between two parties, but at least three value systems: Pre-modern is already challenged by the modern demands for equality, and perceives the post-modern questionings only as decadent decay of all culture. Modern continues to fight vehemently against traditional norms for the realization of equality; however, many feminists (of the first wave) also meet queer thoughts and demands with incomprehension and fear an abandonment of feminist achievements. Finally, postmodernists can hardly understand why there is still so much patriarchal-repressive reality today and often perceive feminist equality politics as antiquated.

A few examples may serve to illustrate the wide-ranging conflict situation. In March of this year, a school principal in Florida had to resign because students were confronted with Michelangelo's statue of David in art class. The naked male body, which from a modern perspective marks the historically significant transition from the sole depiction of religious themes to a focus on the natural beauty of the human being, can only be read as pornography from a pre-modern perspective.



Samia Suluhu Hassan, the president of Tanzania, explained in a speech to students in spring why the persecution of homosexuality is intensified in her country: "These human rights have their limits...

We should not be forced to do things that do not correspond to our customs and traditions." She thus clearly names the confrontation: here modern human rights (with a claim to universal validity), there pre-modern customs and traditions. Implicit here is also an accusation of neo-colonialism, that foreign powers want to impose something on their country and their culture. However, this fails to recognize how customs and traditions change. The ban on homosexuality was first introduced and enforced in East Africa by the British colonial power; homosexual acts were still punishable in Germany, for example, until 1969. Since then, values in Western countries have evolved toward modernity, and these values dominate at the UN level. So it is not at all about a conflict between different traditions, or even about colonial powers against Africans - but about different levels of development.

In 2020, there was a controversy surrounding posts by Joanne K. Rowling. She had complained that one should no longer simply talk about "women" in the transgender debate and, from a feminist point of view, expressed fears that hard-won women's rights could be eroded as a result. As a result, she was sharply attacked in social media as a TERF = "trans-excluding radical feminist," up to and including death threats. Vladimir Putin, of all people, took up her case in 2022 as an example of how "cancel culture" was destroying Western culture (to which Rowling sharply objected). This shows how three value systems have a very different view of things.

Finally, the conflict over the (non-medically justified) circumcision of boys has been smoldering in Germany since 2012 at the latest. After the Cologne Regional Court ruled that circumcision was a bodily injury, the Bundestag legalized religiously motivated circumcision in § 1631d of the German Civil Code in the same year. Since then, some physicians and associations of those affected have been up in arms against this. Here the right to self-determination and physical integrity, which is fundamental from a modern point of view, and the pre-modern religiously obligatory commandment of the Jewish and Muslim communities in particular collide. As justified as the protection of the boys

may seem, it must be weighed against the fact that a criminal sanction of circumcision would de facto mean a ban on traditional Jewish life in Germany.

Integral view

I think the examples make it clear that there can rarely be simple solutions to these tensions. An integral view understands that there is not one timeless image of masculinity, femininity and gender relations, but that these concepts change with the evolution of developmental stages. And the earlier stages are not simply passé, but live on within us - individually and socially. It is necessary to understand them and to integrate them with their healthy parts. It remains a challenge to treat pre-modern values with respect without leaving the field to them. Finally, I am convinced that the radical queer idea of abolishing bisexuality will not be the last word. Rather, it is about playing with the polarity of male and female in a lively way.

Slightly expanded and translated form of the lecture "From Equal Rights to Gender Trouble", given at the Integral European Conference 2023 in Siófok/Hungary. Raymond Fisser is author of the book "A Whole Man. The Evolution and Future of Masculinity. An Integral Perspective" www.ein-ganzer-mann.de, worked for 5 years in the Federal Forum Men www.bundesforum-maenner.de, and is active as a board member and in various roles in the Integral Forum.

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