

Gender theories or theories and gender? If and how gender/feminist studies have become a *new scientific field*.

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ABSTRACT

This article makes an effort to define the current status of the “themes” and “concept” of gender today within the Brazilian academic and university context. The three sets of reflections refer to: 1) placing the current state of art of gender and feminist within the Brazilian academic context into perspective; 2) a subsequent attempt at theoretical and conceptual demarcation of these studies that goes beyond a view of the latter in terms of concepts, tools and analytical constructions and focuses on their emergence as a new field in the humanities and social sciences- and even as a new epistemic field; 3) a discussion of the implications and consequences that this initiative has on the sciences, including contributions toward a feminist epistemology and the development of a multi-cultural and emancipatory science.

Keywords: gender studies, feminist studies, feminist epistemology.

For some time now within my own academic trajectory, I have devoted myself to what several authors have designated as feminist or gender “themes”. I have been asked to define, present, summarize or even explain the “concept” of gender to my students, colleagues, members of social movements, friends, media representatives and the general public. And I recognize that the task at hand has not been particularly easy. How are gender studies, sciences and feminism interconnected? Are all pieces of research and theoretical reflections that take gender into account necessarily feminist?

Particularly now that I am acting as coordinator of two institutions that are deeply connected to discussions on gender – the RedeFem (*Rede Brasileira de Estudos e Pesquisas Feministas*) and the NEPEM (*Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre a Mulher*) of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) – I have been increasingly sought after to respond to people’s questions and concerns. The purpose of this article is to define, through three distinct sets of reflections, what the status of this “concept” and these “themes” are within the current Brazilian academic context. . The three sets

of reflections refer to: 1) placing the current state of art of gender and feminist within the Brazilian academic context into perspective; 2) a subsequent attempt at theoretical and conceptual demarcation of these studies that goes beyond a view of the latter in terms of concepts, tools and analytical constructions and focuses on their emergence as a new field in the humanities and social sciences- and even as a new epistemic field; 3) a discussion of the implications and consequences that this initiative has on the sciences, including contributions toward a feminist epistemology and the development of a multi-cultural and emancipatory science..

Through these three types of reflections, all of an eminently theoretical nature, I intend to contribute to the consolidation - and fundamentally towards the empowerment of - this new *field* of knowledge which has lifted its curtains in the humanities and social sciences, while at the same time exercising an influence over numerous other disciplinary areas.

Thus, my purpose here is to discuss my concerns regarding the process through which the concept has been disseminated (leading researchers to systematic use of a wide range of theoretical approaches to gender which are often mutually incompatible) as well as to recover, from within the myriad of existing options, a critical, reflexive and radical approach to women's subordination, oppression and sub-altern status. This will be made evident my defense of the feminist and gender studies field, the site where gender studies are articulated and from which I will also defend

The article is thus organized into the following sections: first, I look at the road that led to the adoption of the "concept" of gender within the environment where women's and gender studies were developed. I then go on to discuss gender as a scientific field – *the field of gender and feminist studies* – which operates through another version/re-signification of the *universal* which will in turn be re-situated in a historical and contingent direction; in the third section the reader will encounter a brief discussion of knowledge as it has been historically rooted in Cartesian enlightenment rationalism and become the focus of intense, deep and systematic revision on the part of feminist scientists; in my conclusion, I come back to the discussion of subjecthood and women's agency/empowerment as it has unfolded from this epistemic widening. This thus suggests a scientific paradigm that is simultaneously complex, multi-cultural and emancipatory and that takes on knowledge and cognition in open, plural and multi-dimensional ways.

I

For many years, centuries in fact, women were excluded from the possibility of "doing science" and contributing to the production of scientific and/or philosophical knowledge. Religion, and then scientific organizations themselves, participated in this oppression. Robin Schott, in her discussion of the ascetic and religious origin of the university, believes there is a possible (and thinkable) continuity between religious and scientific thought and asserts:

In Germany, for example, erudition and research were carried out entirely within the university system, which was firmly rooted in ecclesiastic life. Since universities literally emerged from the church, women were also excluded from these institutions, just as they had previously been excluded from evangelical prayer. The lay conception of pure reason and disinterested knowledge which emerged within this context reflects the ascetic Christian commitment in the purification of

the soul from the pollution of the body and women's exclusion from the paths to pure reason.¹

This connection between religious ascetics and university knowledge, neither banal nor coincidental, meant that both philosophy and modern sciences were launched in an effort that excluded women from the search for truth. Women were systematically denied the right to study or receive professional training, testimony of the androcentric bias that took centuries to deconstruct and which can hardly be seen as overcome today. Near the dawn of a new century, organized women's movements, followed by feminist movements of all shades and colors inaugurated major changes which have included a shift in the very way in which knowledge is perceived.

After forcing open the doors of academic and university knowledge during the 18th and 19th centuries, it was during the mid-years of the 20th century – particularly between the 1930s and 1970s – that academic groups brought their critical perspective to the production of knowledge, generating feminist studies and women's studies. After consolidating some consistent arenas of scientific debate and bringing new inflections to a variety of disciplinary fields - beginning with the critique of the androcentric biases found within these fields, questioning them and sometimes even going on to elaborate a critique of the “fetishism of objectivity” -², feminist women in the academic field attempted to widen the scope of the human and social sciences in order to adopt a new theoretical and conceptual proposal: gender studies.

It is a known and established fact that gender, as a concept, emerged in the mid-70s³ and was instantaneously disseminated throughout the sciences as of the 1980s. It was a reformulation that was meant to distinguish and separate sex – an analytical category marked by biology and by an essentializing approach to nature anchored in the biological – from gender, a dimension that emphasizes traits of historical, social and above all, political construction that require relational analysis. Insofar as it can be considered a proposal for a system of classification, the “category” gender, in its most diffuse and disseminated form, has almost always been used in a binary (or occasionally in a three-fold) way to refer to the logic of difference between women and men, masculine and feminine and homo- and heterosexual, thus making its entrance in the second fundamental axis of this *new field* that signifies the boundaries of sexuality. Further ahead I will engage in a critical and specific discussion of dichotomies and binary oppositions within the “*gender field*”.

We know that these meanings have been questioned and discussed within the tradition of feminist thought in late modernity which, as Adriana Piscitelli has argued, has intended with the concept [of gender?? Good to specify!] to make it “possible to destabilize traditions of thought”.⁴ Among these forms of destabilization is that which seems the most relevant to me: the deconstruction of sterile binaries that sustain fixed and naturalized places for the genders.⁵ Through the significations and re-significations produced and shared through this new analytical perspective which works with class, age, racial and sexual dimensions intersectionally, gender has had a fundamental role in the human sciences toward denouncing and unmasking modern structures of colonial, economic, generational, racist and sexist oppression that have been operating for centuries throughout different spaces and times of the human reality and condition.

¹ SCHOTT, 1996, p. 109.

² SCHOTT, 1996, e Célia AMORÓS, 1997.

³ Gayle RUBIN, 1975, e Joan SCOTT, 1986.

⁴ PISCITELLI, 2002, p. 7.

⁵ Teresa DE LAURETIS, 1986, e Guacira Lopes LOURO, 1997.

The pretentious “concept” of gender was incorporated, little by little, by diverse theoretical currents in the human and social sciences (and outside them as well.) Some of these theories see it as a useful and even valuable concept, one that is able to shed light on numerous issues, yet do not see it as a central element of their concerns. Such current can be seen as operating under the rubric of “theories and gender”. Others, much more coherent in my opinion, have absorbed it in a more substantive way, giving it a pivotal and central position. These are what we refer to here as “gender theories” with a feminist orientation.

We know that feminist thought has not been constituted as a unified *corpus* of knowledge, just as we know that the concept of gender was appropriated in a very wide variety of ways by a range of disciplinary fields and their theories. Nonetheless, we should keep in mind that, while such appropriations may be more superficial or more substantive, all of them must share a common point of departure, women’s subordination to men, in order to comprehend and make relationally explicit the many vicissitudes of how such relations of domination and oppression are socially elaborated. The concept has also opened up an analytical space in which to question not only the categories of “woman” and “the feminine”, but those of “man” and “the masculine” as well, which together became the subject of intense processes of deconstruction

At the same pace as the advances that took place in the feminist movement, in an initial attempt to substitute “women’s studies” or “feminist studies” as an analytical category, gender sought to make women’s subordination explicit and to accompany the movement in the direction of a search for equality in the exercise of rights and opportunities, yet taking care to place importance on the relational aspects of such interactional dynamics. Thus, male perspectives, as well as those that would not find a place within the strict binarism of masculine and feminine or man and woman would be included.

Questioning all sorts of bases of inequality (economic, political, social, cultural, biological, historical, demographic, psychological, etc.), if on the one hand gender made discussion more inclusive, on the other, an important part of feminism, even here in Brazil,⁶ went on to criticize its de-politicizing potential, alerting us to the fragmentation and women’s disempowerment that it might promote. The risk that was foreseen involved losing sight of the oppressive political situation that women experienced, in favor of a multiplying of gender differences that might be capable of compromising a feminist agenda.

First wave feminism had made a major effort to promote questioning and reflection, seeking to deconstruct the numerous forms that patriarchal institutions and relations took on, at the heart of which strategies of male dominance were maintained and reproduced. This was done within the context of the struggle for universal suffrage. In other words, a battle was waged for the affirmation of the fundamental democratic condition of political equality between the sexes (articulated, of course, with more universal considerations). Yet in spite of the importance of this debate (which we will in fact revisit here), common sense has unfortunately retained crasser, distorting versions of discourse on this first, courageous movement. Thus, “hegemonic forces” have attempted to de-legitimate it with a number of derogatory categories referring to its women as “unloved”, “unhappy”, “foul-smelling”, “ugly” and so on

The “concept” of gender is theoretically the turning point for a distinct phase of the former that announces, to a certain extent (even though from a temporal point of view it has perhaps been tardily mobilized), second-wave feminism, which places more value on difference and on the political affirmation of differences (primarily though not

⁶ Heleieth SAFFIOTI, 1993.

exclusively those of identity) that on equality and egalitarianism. During the second wave, stakes were placed on diversity or on “differences within difference”.⁷

Through this affirmation of difference, currents emerged that included even anti-feminist ones, thereby reflecting the “dangers” described above. It is important to emphasize that during the 1980s and 1990s there were a large number of what we could refer to as post-feminist or non-feminist (perhaps a moving away from feminism) manifestations, thus presenting a new institutional and political scenario that could be characterized by 1) a strong disassociation between feminist thought and movement; 2) the “professionalization” of the movement(s) through the emergence and proliferation of NGOs geared toward women and the formation of networks, whether feminist or not. According to Celi Pinto, “while feminist thought widened, the feminist movement, through NGOs, became increasingly specialized.”⁸

What I would like to place particular emphasis on here is that such “generalization”, which can be attributed to the advancement of considerations that came about even in spite of feminist thought, maintains an undeniable debt to the “category” of gender. It is up to us – and herein lies the purpose of the present text – to take a critical stance vis-a vis positions that are aligned with the impulse to abandon the direction taken by feminist critique. The “concept” of gender, although susceptible to non-feminist re-interpretations, should and will be recovered here from an emancipatory (and therefore feminist) perspective, regarding both women and the sciences themselves.

Thus, if on the one hand the total institutional disempowerment of the movement, announced by the threat of expansion of “gender studies”, has not been completed (since the “ngo-ization” of the movement has also occurred in the case of numerous other experiences and “new social movements” of all sorts)⁹, the expansion and massive dissemination of these new “studies” (which can now be accessed without necessarily partaking of feminist values or even of a women’s point of view)¹⁰ crossed disciplinary boundaries in a way that was truly surprising, in accordance with an experience (however discomfiting and inconvenient that some may have found it) of a type of “diffuse feminism”¹¹ that was capable of having its demands incorporated, this time, by a wide range of current discourses and social, political and even economic proposals (even within the ambit of the State and civil society).

Later criticisms and advancements only further revealed the wide polyphony and enormous wealth embodied within this arena of debate. Much more than a definitive and consolidated terrain of epistemological construction, reflections on the nature of “gender studies” have tended to act as an *axis that brings together intense theoretical and empirical activity, having suscitated considerable critical and reflexive space – even within other disciplinary traditions (such as demography, statistics, chemistry,*

⁷ Antônio Flávio PIERUCCI, 1999.

⁸ PINTO, 2003, p. 91.

⁹ Evelina DAGNINO, 1994; Ilse SCHEREN-WARREN, 2004.

¹⁰ It is even worth noting that in Brazil there was a relevant increase of male researchers in the area corresponding to the dissemination of the notion of gender. .

¹¹ According to Céli Pinto, “this diffuse feminism has neither militants nor organizations and is oft defended by men and women who do not identify themselves as feminists. Furthermore, it does not manifest itself as a role that is articulated with particular demands and positions regarding private and public life. Insofar as it is fragmented and does not presuppose any particular ‘doctrine’, it is a kind of discourse that moves between a wide range of arenas and pops up in both to chastise the person who relates a sexist joke or story and when the political platform of a presidential candidate demonstrates interest in public policy for the protection of women’s rights.” (PINTO, 2003, p. 93).

etc.) considered “harder” than the field of the social sciences (where the concept originally emerged).

More recently we have been able to witness that the *new field of gender*, insofar as it is well-mobilized and articulated, casts doubt on the univocal meanings of all types of binarisms, not only those referring to masculine and feminine. Thus it is able to immensely expand its analytical potential, making its own incorporation possible in areas that were for centuries impermeable to this type of critique. Obviously I do not intend to paint a rosy picture of completely successful feminist advancement. There is still much to be done. Nonetheless, it is still undeniable that the results of adopting gender as an analytical and empirical instrument have been consolidated, extending themselves even to unforeseeable areas such as physics, theology, economics, physical education, Law, politics, etc.

II

We know that gender, as a concept, has made it over the series of obstacles that we discussed earlier. I would now like to engage in some specific reflections on its importance for theoretical discussions in the field of human sciences, and where the long road stretching out behind us has led us thus far.

It seems reasonable enough to me to presuppose that, as an instrument for theoretical and analytical construction, gender today enjoys quite a privileged status. I believe this also to be the case in Brazil, where the theme is salient and well-recognized in academic discussions – yet not only within these spaces. Although different uses of the concept and various theoretical/methodological approaches are evident, theories that explicitly incorporate “gender” into their perspective and theories that flirt with or at least come close to these discussions (theories “and” gender), as we have already argued, have occupied considerable space within studies that take a mature, critical-reflexive approach.

Reflections on the ability to postulate gender as a legitimate and legitimated *field* of knowledge within the human and social sciences is the goal of the following discussion, albeit one that is not entirely new. Lia Machado has already written on this issue when she comments that Pen

Whether or not they identify as feminists: [women who are] historians, sociologists and anthropologists, as well as writers, psychoanalysts, psychologists and philosophers who, in giving centrality to this theme, recognize to some extent their participation in this “field”, share an understanding that social movements of women’s liberation introduced new perspectives and posed new questions to existing disciplinary knowledge and to science, epistemology and philosophy per sé. They thus reclaim their innovative character, vis-a-vis the established traditions of disciplinary knowledge.¹²

At this point I will make use of an important part of Pierre Bourdieu’s work in order to proceed with a definition of gender studies as a *legitimate field of scientific knowledge*. This scholar has understood how social actors as spatially positioned within particular *social fields*, how holding quantities of certain types of capital (cultural,

¹² MACHADO, 1994, p. 2.

social, economic, political, artistic, sporting, etc.) as well as each actor's *habitus*¹³ are what condition his/her position or specific positioning within this spatiality and, in the last instance, within social struggle. In Bourdieu's view, in order for the social actor to attempt to occupy space s/he must know the rules of the game within the social field and be willing to struggle (play).

The *scientific field* is understood as a space where a competitive struggle over scientific authority is played out, and where outcomes are a result of the sum of technical ability and social power. It can also be defined as the space where a monopoly over scientific competence - understood as the ability to speak and act legitimately-, is sought, in an authorized way and with an authority that has been socially conferred upon a particular agent.¹⁴

For my purposes, it is precisely the tension between gender and feminism that brings out the specificity of what I am considering as a *new scientific field*. Researchers - women but also men, 'militants' or 'orthodox' - have been the actors who are responsible for constructing a 'relative autonomy' for this new intellectual field, around a minimal consensus that I will now go on to explore.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the 'field' is an important tool for the analysis of the most diverse social systems which have the peculiarity of producing the interaction of what have been called societal structures (objectivity) and the personal/psychological (subjective) dimension of social agents. It proves useful in many arenas, as long as the latter are dynamically set up around their own goals (and therefore have their own strategies) and have been endowed with a certain degree of autonomy. When I refer here to gender as an already legitimated field of scientific discussion, I am presupposing the existence of general rules and patterns that consensually inform this field.

Thus, just as it seems to be important for Pierre Bourdieu¹⁵ not to work with something we can refer to as "universal norms", when I attempt to place gender studies in a specific place within the field of human and social sciences, I do so thinking that such norms always have a historical content. In other words, I believe in the existence of the field of gender studies, yet the latter as marked by a set of not always unified agents who have attempted to satisfy their particular research interests (whether theoretical or empirical), and it would be precisely through the processes of such a search that we would be contributing (although we do not claim to be doing this in a totally conscious way) toward producing what I would designate as a relatively distinct type of *historical or contingent* universal. I resort here to Bourdieu's own words:

[...] in particular fields, at a particular moment and for a time (that is, in a way that is not irreversible), there are agents who have interests in what is universal.. I believe it is necessary to take historicism to its upper limits, through a sort of radical doubt, in order to see what can

¹³ Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* refers to : "durable systems of production, structured structures that have a predisposition to work as structuring structures, that is, as a principle for generating and structuring practices and representatins that can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without this meaning that they are the product of obeying rules, objectively adapted to their goal within supposing a conscious recognition of ends and the express mastery of the operations needed to reach them and, in light of all the above, are collectively orchestrated without being the product of the combined action of a *maestro*" (BOURDIEU, quoted by Sergio MICELI, 1987, p. XL); "[...] a system of durable and transferable dispositions which, integrating all past experiences, always acts as a matrix for perceptions, evaluations and actions, and makes it possible to carry out an infinite variety of tasks, thanks to the analogical transferral of schemas that enable the resolution of problems problemas da mesma in the same way and tanks to the unceasing correction of the results that have been obtained, dialectically produced by the results themselves" (BOURDIEU citado por Sergio MICELI, 1987, p. XLI).

¹⁴ Ver Renato ORTIZ e Florestan FERNANDES, 1983.

¹⁵ BOURDIEU, 1986.

really be salvaged. Of course one can easily adopt universal reason from the start. But I believe that it is better to open this up, to decisively accept that reason is an historical product whose existence and persistence are products of a particular set of historical conditions and then to determine what these conditions are. Reason has a history: this does not mean that reason can be reduced to its history, but that there are historical conditions surrounding the emergence of social forms of communication that make the production of truth possible. Truth is an interplay of struggles throughout the whole field.

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This is exactly the historical and contingent sense in which I am postulating gender studies as a new scientific field, within and for the sciences. Nonetheless, I am also attempting to assert a way of understanding science, in and of itself, as a discourse about truth and scientific authorization, seen from a radically critical and reflexive perspective, in a multi-cultural direction and with an emancipatory scope. I believe that we have accumulated a wide-enough reserve of knowledge in this new multi-cultural scientific field and, furthermore, that the hegemonic methodology that these new studies have adopted (particularly through post-structuralist deconstructive techniques and the reconstruction of the subject in such a way that women's and other gender minorities' actions and fundamental role in our history come to the forefront) justifies our efforts in this regard.

If "truth is an interplay of struggle throughout the field", gender studies with a feminist slant, in dismantling a substantive part of Western epistemology and de-centering the universal reason that has historically been a product of male domination, have won their space as a legitimate field of knowledge. A truly emancipatory multi-cultural approach toward science is that which we are now trying to reconstruct. In this regard, I would like to affirm that it is critical feminist consciousness, a particular form of the reflexive existence of being (not only, but also women's) that has come to produce one among many re-arrangements, re-interpretations, resignifications of the *gender field* in such a way as to situate it within the paradoxal position of re-situating equality and difference in simultaneity and complexity. Let me go on to explain myself.

I believe that now, at the beginning of the 21st century, there is little doubt left about the need to recover a certain thematic unity that undergirds the methodological, ideological and disciplinary diversity of studies that are carried out under the rubric of gender. This *unity*, however, must be constantly recovered in its subversiveness, as *contestation (radical or partial) of conceptions* of knowledge and reality/experience that have dominated the Western intellectual tradition, at least since the 17th century. This tradition has always been accompanied by ontologies that are characteristically dualistic and binary (with hierarchical value judgements linked to polar oppositions), seeking a clear separation between the universal and the particular, culture and nature, body and mind, reason and emotion, male and female, and equality and difference, to cite just a few of the major divisions.¹⁷ Furthermore, such an epistemology is based on agonistic positions that are expressed, in a nutshell, in the unhappy choices between "this" or "that", making it impossible to postulate a more *complex* experience of simultaneousness and concomitance. Certainly, it is all that I have defined as the *field of gender and feminist studies* that can facilitate our apprehension (collective or individual) of reality in terms of a new logic and a new epistemology that makes a fertile, complex and paradoxical offering. This other epistemo-logic can now be

¹⁶ BOURDIEU, 1986, p. 45-46.

¹⁷ Alisson JAGGAR e Susan BORDO, 1997.

understood in its relation to a critical and emancipatory multi-culturalism that seeks to recover roots that enable us to dismantle knowledge that has been produced in the exclusivity of Western, Anglo-European, white, patriarchal, heteronormative and masculine frameworks, toward an assertion of pluralist science.

Joan Scott, in a recent article,¹⁸ has indicated that there is a logical and paradoxical relationship between “equality” and “difference”, “individual identity” and “collective identity”. In this regard, I am proposing her set of paradoxes as a “hard core”, so to speak, of this *new field of gender and feminism*. In the author’s words:

1. Equality is an absolute principle and a historically contingent practice.
2. Group identities define individuals and deny the full expression or perception of individuality.
3. Demands of equality involve the acceptance and rejection of the group identity that has been attributed through discrimination. Or, in other words: the terms of exclusion that provide support for this discrimination are simultaneously negated and reproduced by demands for inclusion.¹⁹

In other words, to think these questions out simultaneously, through the paradoxes that they pose, means to constantly re-situate the place of this new form of apprehending the universal/universalism: only in historical, multi-cultural emancipatory and contingent ways are we able to affirm that the thematic axes of these paradoxes can be definitively “resolved”. This is a way of thinking about the universal as something in constant and unfinished movement, in which it is precisely the tension between the different axes that fuels movement.

In this regard, whether through attempts to create theories of gender, specifically, or even through increased acceptance of gender themes by other theoretical currents, the basic effect is the same: the recent and growing recognition that the classic, instrumental Cartesian schema is inadequate, obsolete and even self-deluding. For these reasons, it requires revision. The *gender field* has been fruitfully devoted to this arduous task. Even modern science, in some regard, has attempted to recover non- Western knowledge traditions. Something along the order of *scientific borrowing*, to use Sandra Harding’s words,²⁰ or an intense process of change, has always been a part of modern scientific discourse.

Consolidated within gender and feminist debates we may find some of the most substantive alternatives to traditional approaches to knowledge, ones that have enabled us to take a qualitative leap forward. Whether through Marxist historicism, psychoanalytic theory, deconstructionist theories, new interpretations of pragmatism or discussions of “performance”, or even through the new literary canon, through recent developments in Sociology or Anthropology and the Sociology of Knowledge, a new conception of knowledge and the subject of knowledge has emerged with, referring to an individual with particular historical traits but one that is also an embodied social, collective and political agent, “interested, emotional and rational whose body, interests, emotions and motives are fundamentally constituted by a particular historical context”²¹

¹⁸ SCOTT, 2005.

¹⁹ SCOTT, 2005, p. 4, author’s emphasis.

²⁰ HARDING, 1998, p. 348.

²¹ JAGGAR e BORDO, 1997, p. 13.

Ancient and modern forms of dualisms and binarisms have well served the purpose of providing a justification for, and even reproducing, relations of domination, oppression and exploitation (including gender and many other types of relations): sensitive and easily identifiable marks in the sense of women's subordination, but not only with regard to the latter. What is at stake again in the recently-forged field of gender and feminist studies is the question of diversity and pluralism from a complex and paradoxical perspective, in direct opposition to all types of binarism. To be what one is and at the same time not be – as a construction or as a project, –and similarly to gender identities themselves - the gender field never adheres definitively to socially-constructed characterizations yet at the same time cannot completely escape them; rather, it is deeply related to them. At individual and collective levels, identities are both emancipatory and subject to ontologization and reification, in the most complex of ways; they are constitutive of subjects at the same time that they are constituted in and through them, that is, they are unconstant and open projects.

The *gender/feminist studies* field, whether affirming a movement for women's liberation or situated at the level of epistemological and scientific discussion, has contributed the “straw that broke the camel's back”: identities that come together under some unifying mark, as points of departure, as radical projects of colonizing the being, the subject (that cannot be dead, insofar as it has not yet even been born for its own radical emancipation). These re-significations and re-inscriptions are permanently open, porous, paradoxical and complex.

If the scientific field “is a game in which one must arm oneself with reason in order to win”²² and if today we may assert the existence of a ‘politics of truth’, this has only been possible thanks to the efforts of thousands of women (and a few, however worthy men) and of other scholars who are neither of Western nor hegemonic groups who have been contributing theoretically and/or empirically to truly instate “the doubt” and the permanent “tension” within Western epistemology. The goal is to bring us closer to a new, multi-cultural epistemology. The *new field of gender* is one of the few examples that forefronts the critical-reflexive existence of new actors/agents who can (and are) re-signifying the more general scientific field.

We know that the feminist/gender studies field has contributed dramatically in this regard, and its action has consistently been an attempt to defend, assert, legitimate and improve many other social universals where another rationality unfolds – a historical type of universal in which truths are sought, through the tenacious critique of the progressive universalism that is or has been at the service of colonialism, imperialism, domination, exclusion and oppression.

The *gender studies field* has shown that something which has generally been taken, in the social sciences, as a universal, is “a parroquial property of the dominant culture, and that ‘universality’ cannot be disassociated from colonialist expansion”²³. Thought and science as a corollary of these activities/actions regarding the world may make emancipatory postulations of *other universals* which, as such, do not take off from a colonialist stance. In other words, it is our challenge to make concrete proposals for rethinking universality in terms of a constitutive, constructive and always tense act of *multi-cultural translation* that takes us far beyond tradition, domination and colonization. A significant part of the work carried out under the heading of gender has directly or indirectly taken on this task.

A scientific community, in the sense used by Kuhn (in our own critique of this author), in which it figures as a distinct social organization, is not necessarily made up

²² BOURDIEU, 1986, p. 46.

²³ Judith BUTLER, 2003, p. 21.

exclusively of those who are the hegemonic actors of Western science, that is: White, middle-class, heterosexual Anglo-European males. Non-Western knowledge production does not need to be seen as “non-scientific” or even “primitive” and can be recognized as rich sources of knowledge and information.

This then refers to a deep re-ordering that is not only theoretical and political but also epistemological, philosophical and scientific and gestures toward a science that is based on a universal, porous, open, multi-cultural and contingent perspective. I intend to discuss this turning point in the following section.

III

From the first and second sets of debates discussed above comes the feminist observation and critique of the rationalist, representationalist and Cartesian Western conceptions that have oriented knowledge (particular that of the scientific variety) and dominated Western tradition at least since the 17th century. Such conceptions can be considered inadequate, tendentious and deeply andro- and ethnocentric. The emergence of something along the lines of a “feminist epistemology” concentrates its critical attack on binary and hierarchy-creating rationalist traditions, contrasting them with the recognition of emerging relational processes of simultaneity, complexity, multiplicity, pluralism and diversity. In other words, feminist epistemology seems to have been one of the first forms of scientific knowledge production to question the hegemonic position of knowledge produced within the Western, bourgeois framework.

It was also with the help of feminist critique that the (still very recent) attempt to place the bases of rationality (and also – as it is important to mention – the assertion of the existence of another public sphere, different from the liberal one, re-invented and alternative, precisely insofar as it is pluralist and multi-dimensional) at another level, distinct from the classic Cartesian, liberal, Western and representational model – emerged. We can summarize its major elements as:²⁴ a) an emphasis on “metaphysical realism” which claims that reality has an objective structure, independent and unaffected by human behavior and attempts to signify it; b) an objectivism, in which the structure of reality is initially accessible to human understanding and comprehension; c) an “epistemological and methodological individualism” through which human beings take up the task of acquiring knowledge of the world as solitary individuals rather than as socially-constituted members of historically-changing groups; d) an emphasis on a “rationalist bias”, in which the major human faculty for acquisition of knowledge of reality is reason (rationalism), which sometimes works in concert with certain senses (empiricism); e) priority placed on the “axiomatic neutrality” of the sciences, reason and sense taken as working universally and independently of culture, class, race and gender etc., and according to which different situations and contingencies, rather than alternative views of reality, are impediments to a hegemonic viewpoint that overestimates the value of a “neutral” and “objective” view of things; f) a “fundamentalist” approach, referring to the systematic way in which knowledge should be constructed, from the simplest components, considered certain, fixed and free of doubt, to the most complex.

In a diametrically-opposed strategy yet preserving the capacity (and even the necessity) of science, but from a multi-cultural and emancipatory perspective, a part of contemporary feminism has devoted itself to the arduous (yet little recognized) task of revising this epistemic perspective, in hopes of providing the bases for and disseminating a new one. Grounded, as we have seen, on a centralizing perspective, and

²⁴ JAGGAR e BORDO, 1997, p. 9.

of regularities and foreseeability and of certainties, modern Western epistemology has been under criticism (coming even from currents that are quite distant from feminism, such as theorists of complexity and the theory of chaos in quantum physics, etc.) that defends a view of science that places priority on the perspective of difference, of alternatives, fluctuations, decentralizations and uncertainties that, in turn, are configured through constructive aspects and processes of opening and change.

Feminist epistemology has sought to give a central place within current discussions to the notion that a science that is constructed in Western patterns is only one of many possible discourses on truth/reality, which (like all others) is eminently a socially-constructed and constructing process. This is how “the degree to which a form of understanding prevails or is sustained in time does not depend exclusively on the empirical validity of the case in point, but also on a set of social processes that incorporate *communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric*²⁵ and the marks of gender²⁶”. If it seems quite hard to admit to the various dimensions of bias in hegemonic, liberal, Western science, it is at least easier to recognize that “not only are the costs and benefits of the modern sciences distributed unequally in such a way as to benefit the elites of the West and other parts of the world; scientific practices themselves are also effectively distorted to make this unequal distribution invisible to those who benefit from them”²⁷.

In this way, feminism makes a critical addition to knowledge and to scientific rationality, in direct confrontation to the Western assertion that there is a homogenous, stable or one-dimensional level based on the univocal character of the senses (one word, one meaning) and on the dual relations of rationality, the concentration and critical, multicultural, emancipatory and reflexive recognition of intersecting and multi-dimensional configurations of knowledge that even without completely denying dichotomous, dialectical or antinomic polarizations, re-situates the latter within the plane of complex, diverse and even contradictory densities. In this way, many of the different traditional distinctions (subject/object, science/philosophy, masculine/feminine, reason/emotion, culture/nature, public/private, man/woman, among others) come to be seen as social constructions that are carried out by a specific scientific-cultural society that is historically located and in need of urgent questioning.

This is how it has become possible for different systems of knowledge corresponding to different historical origins to be sustained (even by those who are not Western and not male) as complex scientific fields. In critical opposition to the order, to the process of organization/socialization of culture and of linearity, new scientific revisions²⁸ including those offered by feminist scientists²⁹ have proposed to renew an emphasis on the growing recognition of the constructive role of disorder, self-organization, uncertainty and non-linearity. A systematic set of theories are under construction that attempt to explore, for example, the notion that chaos can lead to order; revisions of new states of matter that emerge at quite a distance from points of equilibrium are underway and order itself comes to be seen not as a totalizing condition but as a “duplication of symmetries that allows for asymmetry and the unforeseeable.”³⁰

²⁵ Mary GERGEN, 1988, citada por Dora SCHNITMAN, 1996, p. 11, itálicos meus.

²⁶ Mary GERGEN, 1988; Sandra HARDING, 1986; e Evelyn KELLER, 1985, citadas por SCHNITMAN, 1996, p. 11, itálicos meus.

²⁷ HARDING, 1986, p. 356, tradução minha.

²⁸ Tomas KUHN, 1970; Richard BERNSTEIN, 1988; Ilya PRIGOGINE e Isabelle STENGERS, 1979; Bruno LATOUR, 1987; Gilles DELEUZE e Félix GUATTARI, 1991; Edgar MORIN, 1977, 1985, 1987 e 1991.

²⁹ GERGEN, 1988; HARDING, 1986; e KELLER, 1985.

³⁰ Benoit MANDELBROT, 1983.

Thus, the “new” epistemology that emerges within this scientific paradigm (from here on in, necessarily plural) – that of complexity -, to which feminists have been making a substantive contribution, comes to recognize the inevitably unforeseeable nature of today’s (and yesterday’s) complex systems, questioning the centrality of the notion of a sole origin and of permanence/stability, as well as the mystique of the much maligned “neutrality” of science. In place of “metaphysical realism” we now have the assertion of uncertainty, of the flow and multiplication of contingent and historically- situated points of view. In place of “objectivism” we now have the affirmation of critical reflexivity, a form of thought that is constituted in the act, related and relational, constructed and constructing, going beyond “methodological individualism” to the affirmation of a perspective that is multidimensional and, often, multicultural and emancipatory, focusing on processes that are dependent on interdisciplinary networks and multiple agents, on conversation, on heterogeneity and on dialogics. In place of the “rationalist bias” there is an affirmation of science as one among many discourses on truth in the world; sciences, in plural, that must be constantly revised to re-incorporate other ethical and aesthetic dimensions of multiple, complex knowledge with the necessary inclusion of greater participation and social pluralism, multicultural if possible. In place of “axiomatic neutrality”, there is an affirmation of contingency and objectivity that only becomes possible through (con)centration on critical perception of the plurality of senses and meanings that compose all individuals who enunciate truth pretensions in a complex way (including and especially scientists). Finally, in contrast to “fundamentalism”, there is now an emphasis on pluralism, on the emancipatory multiculturalism of the sciences, approaching knowledge with caution, diversity, complexity and the multiplicity of ethical-aesthetic styles as alternatives, remaining open, in their own re-signification and fundamentally concerned with the consequences of their acts.

The contribution coming from the *feminist gender studies field* refers to declaration of the infinite human (and therefore equally male and female, as it is always worthwhile to point out) ability to interpellate, to permanently re-situate and re-signify the contents and forms of that which presents itself in a contingently universal form, sciences in permanent unfolding, in the slippage of hierarchical norms, in the constant problematizing of hierarchies and subordinations, in the sharp critique of oppressions of all sorts, in short, *in and through multi-cultural transgression as method*. By this I refer to an emancipatory and permanent *epistemology of transgression* of canon and tradition. The *feminist gender studies field* is one field of late, radical modernity that from my perspective would well fulfill this role of always moving beyond, always de-traditionalizing. This moving beyond, nonetheless, must be responsible, careful and consistent: it does not include the field of post-modern or post-structuralist relativism – the field where “anything goes” (although many important women scholars who engage in the kind of critique I have presented here have their origins and loyalties within the latter) – but rather refers to a radicalized modernity which seeks responsible social emancipation which must, as a matter of fact, be seen as a fundamental goal of science.

Here it is worthwhile to recover the position of “situated criticism”³¹, “radicalized” and “interactive”³² that belongs to the *feminist and gender studies field*, a de-traditionalizing re-situating and reinvention of the universal/universalism, which restores its contingent and historical nature, in search of an emancipatory project that must be individual/particular, collective/general, Western/Eastern, and male/female at the same time.. This contingent universalism maintains ties to an emancipated multi-

³¹ Nancy FRASER e Linda NICHOLSON, 1990.

³² Seyla BENHABIB, 1988 e 1992.

cultural perspective, with regard to all that can be critically emancipated at present, today, at this time, and always leaving what such emancipation may come to be tomorrow as an open-ended issue. Although this implies that there is no definitive point of arrival, I emphasize the need for a point of departure: normative and critical-reflexive clarification regarding even its own historical premises, those that belong to the culture to which it refers and which it interpellates. In this manner, all rules are constantly suspect and open to questioning, with sights set on the production of social justice and emancipation. In this globally interconnected world, viscerally inhabited by multiple cultures that have definitively lost their innocence with regard to the possibility of remaining isolated, everything that concerns knowledge and rights, such as women and gender, will remain open to permanent international debate (and this, against all fundamentalist premisses and justifications, of whatever sort). Now, in order to conclude the present text, let us look at the implications that such epistemological revision has for the *field of gender* itself.

IV

The feminist and women's movement, in its various forms and in many countries, including Brazil, have left an undeniable legacy for civilization in the societies in which they have flourished and multiplied. The reformulations that have been underway, concerning most pressing issues for Brazilian society such as discussions on the feminization of poverty, universalization of quality primary and middle school education, access to critical perspectives within the universities, unjust and persistent forms of discrimination regarding domestic violence and the labor market, access to the widest range of gender-sensitive public policies (particularly within the realms of health, security and social protection) – to mention only a few of the most relevant – emerge today reflecting an undeniable feminist influence.

The adoption of a perspective that places value on proposals coming from the *gender field* seeks, in a substantive and consistent way, to move forward on women's agency/empowerment and subjecthood, and on the discussion regarding the sciences and the development of their multi-cultural and emancipatory version that reflects the widening of epistemic scope, as discussed above. It has also proposed moving beyond the paralyzing confrontation between "objectivists" (moderns) and "relativists" (post-moderns) within scientific debate, in favor of a radicalized modernity with emancipatory ambitions. As we have seen, on the objectivist side we encounter an affirmation of knowledge guided exclusively by universal, ahistorical standards of neutrality and the basic conditions for equality, in which objectivity is confounded with neutrality; on the other hand, relativists/difference theorists defend the impossibility of objective and universal knowledge about the world, accepting no meta-narratives and nor seams to hold fragments together. Rather, they attempting to demonstrate that the only possible position is a radical relativistic one which exalts the incommensurable and impermanent nature of knowledge that is produced differentially, in a particular time and space. The present proposal to place the *gender and feminist studies field* and its version of the sciences in a multi-cultural and emancipatory engagement poses a historical and contingent universal that raises the possibility of commensurability as well as an alternative notion of cognition that is critical and goes beyond the limitations of the positions discussed above.

We know that among the most fiercely-argued debates we encounter the paradoxical issues that make up the already mentioned "hard nucleus" of this *new field*. Among them what stands out, inevitably, is theme of the political/identity affirmation of

equality and/or difference in terms of a logic of public policy that can be re-situated, for example, within the famous debate on universalization vs. targets for policies.

What we are trying to make progress on here is the confirmation that this movement – for example, at one moment, focus on the particular, at another, on the universal – is the constituted and constituting material of the very route that political and scientific exercise take in the direction of women's demands and the gains that have been made within the *feminist/gender field*. In some moments, historically and contingently, it has been necessary to put forth demands and claims for equality (logics of universalizing action and intervention regarding family, for example); in other moments, demands and claims for the affirmation of differences (logics of intervention focused more specifically on women within families) are strategic and feasible. It is important to emphasize that this process is unappealably open to debate.

The proposal for action from a *new gender and feminist field* of action may be situated within a proposal on knowledge and science in which what is valued is a way of thinking and its consequences rather than a description of the world, a perspective that does not see knowledge as a neutral representation of an external ontological world. In other words: knowing and recognizing that (scientific) knowledge is capable of intervening and acting on the world, that it has consequences in the world, and that it is action in the world, I then propose the theoretical, epistemological and political sustenance of the *gender and feminist field* as belonging to the order of a historical and contingent universal that operates dynamically and paradoxically in the constant and responsible search for an *unfolding of gender* that in turn folds into the radicalized affirmation of the *unfolding of science*.

This process of *how gender unfolds*, as it institutes the gender/feminist field, is the condition that makes it possible for women to become actors, agents, those who move on to a subject (rather than subjected) position, as well as for other identity groups that are equally oppressed. As feminist theory is an intellectual endeavor that has basically emerged from a political impulse – the visibility and actual empowerment of women –, it now moves ahead with the proposal of *gender as a field* that is concerned with re-founding science itself, making it possible for women (and other genders) enunciations that place us – both stably and unstably – within the position of subject, although also, at another moment, to be again displaced.

In this way, we attempt to propose that the gender field, founded on a multi-cultural, emancipatory epistemology of complexity, of paradox and simultaneity, operates through subjects and agencies that are transitory and multiple, sometimes transitive and never meta-subjects constructed through meta-narratives – while always referring to embodied selves, gendered and engendered, racialized and ethnicized, stratified, politicized, etc., in their search for a socially-responsible emancipatory project.

For many centuries the sciences, and in particular the natural and physical sciences, created for themselves an illusion that scientific knowledge was not produced by persons/scientists (constructed) but rather by the very things/objects (discovered, empirically revealed). Now that we are aware of their evident and flagrant process of construction and signification and mutual interconnectedness, it is up to us to ask about what we want to continue to construct and to signify. Is it possible for science to be reflexive and to participate in the arduous political and social task of reconstructing more equal, symmetrical, responsible and democratic scenarios of human interaction and sociability, in terms of gender, race, generation, etc. ?

There is still much to be done in this regard. We now understand that all relations between people and between people and institutions (such as the State) are

always relations that involve power, including the power to reconstruct oneself. Thus, eminently political, these relations locate women's action center-stage, whether as women or feminists, in promoting and maintaining a new emancipatory science and a new sustainable development based on this knowledge and this science (and not in spite of them).

Furthermore, to demystify the "neutrality" of science would be just as important as denouncing the supposedly "neutral" action of the Brazilian state/government (as well as any State), and these are the gains that have been sought by the gender/feminist field. Governments have systematically adopted policies that have the power to intervene directly and immediately in people's (and particularly, women's) lives, yet unfortunately, these "intentions" are not always clearly presented.

We know that the relations between institutions (such as the State) and persons that provide services to women, to persons of color, etc., are relations that involve power. Eminently political, therefore, these relationships established between women users and Black users (not to mention the complex juxtaposition of the two) of social policies and the Brazilian state reveal the crucial role of female, racialized actors, whether as women, mothers, feminists, or black men and black women in the promotion and maintenance of the sustainable development of families themselves.

Throughout this entire process we should also give salience to participation of groups organized to raise consciousness among and mobilize men, which have been systematically and in a de-traditionalizing way attempting to discuss, problematize and include these groups (even those belonging to the poorest sectors of society) in discussions on their effective, critical participation in such phenomena as the sexual and reproductive lives of their families, emphasizing and disseminating the topics of responsible paternity, shared family planning, non-violence in relationships with women and children, etc. . These interventions from a *masculine feminism* have alerted us to the degree of complexity and the paradoxes that we must value and defend: we need, more and more and always, feminist men, men who are able to displace themselves and whom are capable of de-constructing traditional positions attributed to males and to the sciences that have been constructed on "neutral" and Western bases, in our struggle to re-invent ties that are more symmetrical, emancipatory and democratic within the field of permanent interaction of gender and the field of a science that has been renewed through emancipatory inter-culturality.

The feminist and gender field, as I have attempted to demonstrate, has become effective and consolidated through a number of initiatives. Therefore, has everything been completed? Of course not. There is still very much to be done. Good intentions, as well as proposals that are noble and sympathetic to the gender and feminist cause and to the desire to re-situate scientific "truths" are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the real progress in dealing with gender asymmetries and inequalities and social inequalities as a whole.

It is a known fact that feminist and gender scholarship have offered us substantive theoretical tools and methodological reflections that have been responsible for the training of several generations of academic thinkers and intellectuals. I believe that the strong progress in the institutionalization of this new *field*, in addition to making it more visible and reinforcing its consolidation, can contribute concretely to many revisions and re-elaborations of questions that are central to Political Science, Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, Social Communication, etc. that we have not yet had enough time to perceive. The space has been won and must be definitively consolidated, maintained and even widened. Yet, looking back, it seems undeniable to

me that those who, like I myself, have been a part of this process have more to celebrate than to regret.

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