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TRANSFORMING THE DEBATE ON SEXUAL INEQUALITY

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the question of biological sex difference has been the focal point of virtually all American discussions of sexual inequality. It was at issue when the first American feminists were fighting to get women the most basic rights of citizenship and again when the second major wave of feminists swept onto the scene—and has been part of the discussion ever since. The interest in sexual difference is now so integrated into American culture that it is evident in almost any collection of magazines at the local supermarket. Modern science and modern feminism both feed this popular interest—science because of its emphasis on sociobiology and prenatal hormones, and feminism because of its celebration of the distinctively female vision of an interconnected world.

Implicit in this focus on sexual difference is the assumption that how the sexes *really* differ is a question of scientific and political urgency. At the end of Chapter 2, I argued, in contrast, that the question is scientifically misguided. In this chapter, I carry that argument a step further, suggesting that the focus on sexual difference is politically misguided as well. Specifically, I argue that if people in this androcentric, gender-polarizing, and biologically essentialist culture are ever to understand why sexual equality would necessarily require a radical restructuring of social institutions, the cultural debate about sexual inequality must be reframed so that it addresses not male-female differ-

ence but how androcentric social institutions transform male-female difference into female disadvantage.

Three assumptions from the theoretical analysis of this book lead directly to this transformation in the cultural debate. First, the existence of at least a subset of sexual differences, like women's capacity for childbearing, is taken as axiomatic. Second, the question of sexual difference is seen as much less central to the matter of female inequality than the question of how the social context interacts with whatever sexual differences may exist. Finally, the social context is itself seen as having two separable—if related—aspects: androcentrism, which every feminist must be committed to eradicating, and gender polarization, whose eradication is more controversial.

THE CONUNDRUM OF DIFFERENCE

Stated in its most dichotomous form, the question that has plagued the debate on female inequality for 150 years is whether women and men are fundamentally the same or fundamentally different. This recurring question of sexual difference has prevented even feminists from achieving consensus on social policy because besides being inherently irresolvable itself, it has generated yet another set of apparently irresolvable dichotomies. These second-order dichotomies are revealed in answers to the following three questions: (1) What is the cause of female inequality? (2) What is the best strategy for ending female inequality? and (3) What is the meaning, or definition, of female equality?

In the current cultural debate, female inequality is typically attributed to one or the other of two causal factors, which need not be treated as mutually exclusive but usually are. Either women are being denied access to economic and political resources by policies and practices that intentionally discriminate against even those women whose situation is most similar to men's, in which case the consensus is that the government must step in to remedy the situation; or, alternatively, women's biological, psychological, and historical differences from men—especially their psychological conflict between career and family—lead them to make choices that are inconsistent with building the kind of career that would enable them to attain those economic and political resources, in which case there is no one to blame for female inequality and hence no consensus about any need for remediation.¹

Surprising as it may seem at first glance, recent economic studies have demonstrated that women as a group are as economically disadvantaged in U.S. society today as they were in 1960, with only the subgroup of young, white, unmarried, and well-educated women showing any substantial economic progress and with everyone else so segregated into the lowest-paid occupations and part-time work that overall, women as a group still earn a mere 65 percent or so of what men earn.² Although this persistent female inequality after thirty years of antidiscrimination law is frequently taken as evidence that discrimination against women is not nearly so important a cause of female inequality as female choice, I think this persistent female inequality is instead a testimony to the inadequacy of the understanding of how discrimination against women actually works.

Ever since the Supreme Court ruled in *Muller v. Oregon* (1908) that protective legislation could be used to compensate women for their "disadvantage in the struggle for subsistence," two opposing strategies for ending female inequality have been at the center of the debate on gender policy. Gender neutrality, also known as gender blindness, mandates that no distinctions of any sort ever be made on the basis of sex; and special protection for women, also known as sensitivity to sexual difference, mandates that special provision be made in the workplace to compensate women for their biological and historical role as the caregivers for children.

The gender-neutral approach to sexual equality was popular during the 1960s and early 1970s, as indicated not only by the Supreme Court's willingness in *Reed v. Reed* to finally declare explicit discrimination against women to be unconstitutional but also by the willingness of almost all feminists of the day to enthusiastically support the passage of that most gender-blind of all feminist proposals, the equal rights amendment. The gender-neutral approach was so popular because it was consistent with three important facts that feminists were just then managing to bring to the attention of the general public: (1) discrimination on the basis of sex had long denied women the equal protection under the law that should have been guaranteed to all citizens by the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; (2) protective legislation designed over the years to benefit women in the workplace had done more to hurt them economically than to help them; and (3) women are as inherently intelligent, responsible, and capable of sup-

porting themselves, if given the opportunity to do so, as men—not inherently inferior, as legislators and judges traditionally represented them to be.

By the late 1970s and 1980s, however, champions of equal rights increasingly realized that gender neutrality so deemphasized the differences in the life situations of women and men that as a strategy, it was helping only those few women who were similarly situated to men while doing little, if anything, to help those many women who were locked into low-paying jobs by their gendered life situations as wives and mothers. Not only that, but when applied mindlessly and formulaically in divorce settlements, gender neutrality was actually harming differently situated women by falsely presupposing them to have as much earning potential—and hence as little need for alimony—as their husbands (Weitzman, 1985). Concentrating on this very large group of differently situated women highlighted the shortcomings of gender neutrality and thereby brought special protection back to center stage.

This time around, the advocates of special protection supported, not the kind of special limits for women that were at issue in *Muller v. Oregon*, but, instead, special benefits for women. Specifically, they proposed work-related policies designed to make it possible for women to be both highly paid workers and responsible primary parents, policies such as mandatory insurance coverage for pregnancy leave and a guaranteed return to one's job at the end of such a leave, paid days off for mothers of sick children, and even subsidized childcare. Although demands for these kinds of sex-specific arrangements in the workplace would have been beyond imagining in the difference-blind heyday of the equal rights amendment, they were not all that exceptional in an era when virtually all minority groups were vigorously asserting the values of pluralism and sensitivity to difference—including even physically disabled people, who were at last beginning to get the special access to the mainstream of American life that they need.

In the 1990s, a great deal of support for these kinds of special benefits remains, as does a great deal of resistance to them. The support comes primarily from those feminists who see gender neutrality as having failed and, worse, as having required women to virtually become men to make it in the world of paid employment. The resistance comes from other feminists and from nonfeminists.

The feminist resisters think special protection homogenizes women too much and reinforces the old sexist stereotype that women as a group are inherently incapable of competing successfully with men until and unless special provisions compensate them for their special needs. The nonfeminist resisters, on the other hand, see no justification for making special arrangements to help a group whose economic and political disadvantages derive not from discrimination but from their own decision to invest time and energy in their children, rather than in their careers. As these nonfeminist resisters see it, to prevent employers from doing harm to women through outright discrimination makes sense, but to mandate that employers make special arrangements to help women in a marketplace that is not discriminatory does not.

But as controversial as special protection for a woman's biological and historical role as mother has been since the Supreme Court first upheld it in 1908, yet another form of special protection has become equally controversial since the 1960s. I refer here to the special protection against subtle and indirect discrimination that is embodied in the twin policies of comparable worth and preferential hiring. Comparable worth would move beyond the mandate that women and men doing the same work be paid equal wages to mandate equal wages for women and men doing different work that is of comparable value. Preferential hiring would move beyond simply prohibiting discrimination against women to mandate that an individual woman be hired over an individual man with similar qualifications and that goals and timetables be set for the hiring of a certain percentage of women by a certain time. Setting goals could, in turn, foster the use of quotas to reserve positions exclusively for women.

From the point of view of proponents, comparable worth and preferential hiring are necessary because discrimination against women often targets not women per se but anyone and everyone with the kinds of jobs or job histories that women as a group are much more likely to have than men as a group. From the point of view of opponents of these policies, preferential hiring unfairly deprives innocent males of equal opportunity by violating the almost sacred principle of gender neutrality, and comparable worth violates yet another sacred American principle—the right of employers to set wages in accordance with the free market.³

Just as those who emphasize discrimination as the cause of women's inequality, and gender neutrality as the cure, presuppose male-female similarity, then, so those who emphasize female choice as the cause of women's inequality, and special benefits as the cure, presuppose male-female difference. This dichotomy between similarity and difference shows up again in the two opposing definitions of female equality, with one group envisioning that women and men will come to play exactly the same roles both at home and at work and the other group envisioning that women will come to have exactly the same level of economic well-being, or equity, as men, despite continuing to play their traditionally different roles as homemakers and mothers.

Not surprisingly, the sameness conception of female equality was popular during the era when discrimination, gender neutrality, and the equal rights amendment dominated the feminist discourse and the concept of psychological androgyny was being celebrated as well. As feminists then saw it, the only effective way to end the sexist stereotyping of women and the discrimination against women that stereotyping inevitably produces was to abolish gender distinctions once and for all—that is, to move at last toward an androgynous future, where women and men would have not only the same level of economic and political power but the same rights, the same responsibilities, and even the same roles.

Although initially, only antifeminists like Phyllis Schlafly opposed this definition of equality as sameness, on the grounds that it demeaned and destroyed the woman's role within the home, in time a great many feminists came to have that view as well. Defining female equality as sameness to men, they argued, was tantamount to saying that a woman's historical role and the values that it represents are of no intrinsic value.

So yes, the argument continued, women are inherently as competent as men are—there is no disagreement about that—but women are also inherently different from men in a special way having to do with their biological capacity for childbearing; and because of that difference, any worthwhile definition of equality must preserve the woman's biological and historical role as mother and give that role as much cultural value as has traditionally been given to male roles. In other words, the feminist goal should not be to facilitate women's acting exactly like men in order to earn what men earn; rather, women should

be able to earn what men earn while still preserving their distinctive concern with the welfare of their own and other children.

After more than a century of dichotomies that relate to the single question of whether women are basically the same as men or basically different from men, feminists have recently begun to concentrate on yet another dichotomy. It is best captured by the following question: Are women of different races, classes, religions, sexual preferences, ethnicities, and perhaps even nationalities sufficiently similar to one another in their needs, goals, and experiences to constitute the kind of a political interest group that could possibly be served by any single program of social change, or are women of different groups so inherently different from one another that there can be little or no common cause among them and hence no possibility of a common feminist solution to their female inequality?⁴

These female-female differences notwithstanding, the historian Estelle Freedman eloquently defends the continuing validity of the feminist struggle: "In a historical moment when the category 'woman' continues to predict limited access to material resources, greater vulnerability to physical and psychological abuse, and underrepresentation in politics, . . . we must avoid the tendency to assume both a false unity across genders and a greater disunity within our gender than in fact exists" (1990, p. 261). Put somewhat differently, if feminists are to keep from getting mired in yet another set of impasse-producing dichotomies, they must not allow their newfound appreciation for the differences among women to undermine the longstanding feminist project of creating a social world in which the category of woman is no longer synonymous with the category of inequality.⁵

With that said, however, the question remains: How can feminists construct the kind of discussion about gender policy that would enable a male-dominated society like the United States to finally create such a social world? How, in other words, can Americans transcend all the irresolvable dichotomies that have plagued even feminist discussions of female inequality for 150 years? My answer is that those dichotomies can be transcended—and a consensus on gender policy can be forged—if a certain level of male-female difference is accepted as axiomatic, and the starting point for the discussion is thereby shifted from difference per se to the society's situating of women in a social structure so androcentric that it not only transforms male-female difference into female disadvantage; it also disguises a male standard as gender neutrality.⁶

**TOWARD GENDER NEUTRALITY:
ERADICATING ANDROCENTRISM**

In 1984, the feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon exposed the legal myth of gender neutrality as no other writer before her had done. Although she never actually used the term *androcentrism*, her basic argument was all but identical to the one in this book: although males and females differ from one another in many biological and historical characteristics, what is ultimately responsible for every aspect of female inequality, from the wage gap to the rape rate, is not male-female difference but a social world so organized from a male perspective that men's special needs are automatically taken care of while women's special needs are either treated as special cases or left unmet.

Consider, for example, the Supreme Court decisions on disability insurance coverage, discussed in Chapter 3. Although the biological differences here are indisputable, the biological differences themselves were not the reason that pregnancy was excluded from insurance coverage while prostatectomies and circumcisions were included. The reason was a vision of gender neutrality so distorted by androcentrism that the male body was automatically taken as the standard, hence nothing seemed amiss when, in the name of equal protection, total and complete insurance coverage was granted for every one of a man's special needs but not for every one of a woman's.

Consider, for another example, the recent critique of the legal definition of self-defense, which holds that a defendant can be found innocent of homicide only if he or she perceived imminent danger of great bodily harm or death and responded to that danger with only as much force as was necessary to defend against it. That definition always seemed to have nothing whatsoever to do with gender, but it no longer seems quite so gender neutral now that feminist legal scholars like Elizabeth Schneider (1980) and Phyllis Crocker (1985) have pointed out how much better it fits with a scenario involving two men in an isolated episode of sudden violence than with a scenario involving a woman being battered, first in relatively minor ways and then with escalating intensity over the years, by a man who is not only bigger and stronger than she is but from whom she cannot get police protection because he is her husband. The aha experience here comes with the realization that if this woman and this situation had been anywhere near the center of the (male) policymakers' consciousness when they

drafted the supposedly neutral definition of self-defense, they might not have placed so much emphasis on the defendant's being in imminent danger at the particular instant when the ultimate act of self-defense is finally made.

Insurance and self-defense do not provide the only contexts in which the male difference from women is "affirmatively compensated" (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 36) by American society while the female difference from men is treated as an intrinsic barrier to sexual equality. To quote MacKinnon:

Virtually every quality that distinguishes men from women is . . . affirmatively compensated in this society. Men's physiology defines most sports, their needs define auto and health insurance coverage, their socially designed biographies define workplace expectations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define quality in scholarship, their experiences and obsessions define merit, their objectification of life defines art, their military service defines citizenship, their presence defines family, their inability to get along with each other—their wars and rulerships—defines history, their image defines god, and their genitals define sex. For each of their differences from women, what amounts to an affirmative action plan is in effect, otherwise known as the structure and values of American society. (1987, p. 36)

Of all the androcentric institutions on MacKinnon's list that are typically considered gender neutral, perhaps none is more directly responsible for denying women their rightful share of economic and political resources in the United States than the structure of the work world. Many Americans may think that world of work is as gender neutral as it needs to be now that explicit discrimination against women has been made illegal, but it is, in fact, so thoroughly organized around a male worker with a wife at home to take care of the needs of the household—including childcare—that it transforms what is intrinsically just a male-female difference into a massive female disadvantage.

Imagine how differently the whole social world would be organized if there were no men around (reproduction would be handled somehow), and hence most of the workers in the workforce—including those at the highest levels of government and industry—were either pregnant or responsible for childcare during at least a certain

portion of their adult lives. In this context, working would so obviously need to coordinate with birthing and parenting that institutions facilitating that coordination would be taken for granted. There would be paid pregnancy leave, paid days off to tend to sick children, paid childcare, and a match—rather than a mismatch—between the hours of the work day and the hours of the school day. There would probably also be a completely different definition of a prototypical work life, with the norm being, not a continuous forty hours or more per week from adulthood to old age, but a transition from less than forty hours per week when the children were young to forty hours or more per week when the children were older.

The lesson of this alternative reality should be clear. Women's biological and historical role as mothers does not limit their access to economic and political resources. What limits access is an androcentric social world that provides but one institutionalized mechanism for coordinating work in the paid labor force with the responsibilities of being a parent: having a wife at home to take care of the children.

This institutional void affects different groups of women in different ways. Among mothers who work full-time when their children are young, for example, all but the wealthiest must endure the never-ending strain of struggling on their own to find decent and affordable childcare—which in the United States is neither decent nor affordable but all too often passes as such. They must also get up before dawn every weekday morning to take their youngest children to that childcare so that they can get themselves to work on time. All the while, they worry about whether their older children will get into any trouble during their several unsupervised hours before and after school and hope against hope that no school holidays will be declared that week and that none of the children comes down with a fever, because then they will have to leave a child at home alone all day or stay home from work. As if that were not enough to drive them to distraction, they also have to live every single day of their lives with the certain knowledge that—given the sorry state of childcare in the United States—their children are almost certainly not receiving the tender loving care or thoughtful and attentive supervision that they themselves would provide if only they could afford to stay at home while their children are young.

Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that women married to men with high earnings potential frequently make the decision to help maximize their husband's earnings—by, for example, supporting him

through medical school before the children are born—so that, instead of having to coordinate paid work and family, they can stay home, at least until the children are in school, and, after that, limit the kinds of jobs they take to those that coordinate well with their children's school schedules. This seemingly rational arrangement may work fine financially for as long as the couple stays married, but if and when they get divorced, as couples often do in the United States, then every bit of the earnings potential that the couple has invested in during the years of their marriage will be embodied in the husband, and the wife will be left with no more ability to support herself on her own than she had when she entered the marriage.

The lives of two remaining groups of women in American society are also affected in dramatically different ways by the absence of institutional supports for coordinating work and family. The first group consists of all those highly career-oriented women who see no way to make it to the top of their fields except by remaining childless. This sacrifice is not ever required of men who make it to the top. In sharp contrast, the second group consists of all those single mothers on welfare, who are culturally stigmatized for their failure to have a male breadwinner in their home when, instead, they should be offered whatever institutional supports would enable them to carry out their dual responsibility as parent and provider.⁷

This emphasis on the need for institutional supports to coordinate paid work and family may seem like just another example of special pleading on behalf of women. Not at all. It is a call for Americans to recognize that their social institutions do not reflect the needs and experiences of both women and men but instead reflect the needs and experiences of men. It is a call for Americans to reconstruct their social institutions to be so inclusive of both male and female experience that neither sex is automatically advantaged or disadvantaged by the social structure.

Pregnancy is the paradigmatic aspect of female experience that must be taken into account institutionally if the concept of gender neutrality as the inclusion of both sexes' experience is to have any real meaning. Pregnancy has this special status for two reasons. First, only women can experience it, and it has sufficient impact on a woman's physical condition that if it is not taken into account institutionally, it automatically advantages men as a group and disadvantages women

as a group. Second, although institutionally ignoring pregnancy has often been justified on the grounds that pregnancy disadvantages only those individual women who *elect* to become pregnant, pregnancy is not nearly so elective a condition for the individual woman as this argument implies. Even more important, pregnancy is not an elective condition for the society as a whole; hence the state has a special interest in keeping it an attractive option for even those women who could choose to prevent themselves from ever becoming pregnant.

Almost as paradigmatic of female experience as pregnancy—or childbearing—is the day-to-day responsibility of childcaring. Here, however, the issue is not simply one of providing the institutional supports that would make it as possible for mothers to be paid workers as for fathers to be paid workers. Also at issue is the redefinition of the meaning of work itself so that just as much value is given to the raising of the next generation as to the producing of whatever is currently counted in the gross national product. Such a shift in the androcentric values of the culture would imply that professional childcare should be paid at a much higher rate than it is now and that full-time parenting when children are young should be regarded as much the same kind of personal career sacrifice for the good of the society as serving in the armed forces—in which case the women who do it should be paid for their efforts and should also be helped in their transition into the “civilian” economy with some kind of an analogue to the GI bill.

This inclusive model of gender neutrality has important implications not only for the differences between women and men but also for the differences among women that have recently threatened the idea of a common feminist solution to female inequality. Yes, this model concedes, women of different races, classes, sexual preferences, and so forth, do, to a certain extent, have different needs and different experiences, but those female-female differences should no more be treated as intractable obstacles to a common feminist solution than male-female differences should be treated as intractable obstacles to female equality. The critical issue is not whether female-female differences exist; they clearly do. The critical issue is whether feminist analyses and proposals are framed in sufficiently inclusive a way to deal with the several different ways that androcentric social structures systematically disadvantage different groups of women.

One example of this kind of inclusiveness appears in my own ad-

vocacy of subsidized childcare for women (and men) who work outside the home and in the proposed analogue to the GI bill for women (and men) who parent on a full-time basis. Examples of inclusiveness on other important dimensions of female-female difference might be (1) advocating not only that homemakers have a share of their husband's career assets at the time of divorce but also that the fringe benefits available to the spouses of married heterosexuals be available as well to the partners of sexual minorities and (2) advocating that not only abortion rights and birth control but also prenatal and postnatal care be made accessible to women of all social classes.

Implicit in this analysis of how androcentric institutions transform difference into disadvantage are three fundamental lessons from earlier chapters of this book, all having to do with the importance of the environmental context in which the person is situated.

The first lesson, which comes directly from the chapter on biological essentialism, is that as powerful and deterministic as biology may appear, its impact depends in every single instance on the environment with which it interacts. The aspect of this biological contextualism that I wanted to emphasize earlier was the ability of cultural invention to liberate the human organism from what had once seemed its intrinsic biological limitations, hence my interest in such technological innovations as antibiotics, refrigeration, birth control, and baby formula. In this chapter, what I want to emphasize, in contrast, is not the power of cultural invention to liberate, but the power of cultural invention to discriminate—specifically, the power of a male-centered social structure to interact with biology in a way that “naturally” and automatically produces female disadvantage and male advantage.

In my lectures on college campuses, I find that a particular analogy brings this interaction into bold relief. The analogy plays on another one of my nonprivileged attributes, not my femaleness this time, but my shortness. (I happen to be only four feet nine inches tall.) Imagine a community of short people like myself. Given the argument sometimes made in U.S. society that short people cannot be firefighters because they are neither tall enough nor strong enough to do the job, the question arises: Would all the houses in this community of short people eventually burn down? Well, yes, if we short people had to use the heavy ladders and hoses designed by and for tall people. But no, if we (being as smart as short people are) could instead construct lighter

ladders and hoses that both tall and short people could use. The moral here should be obvious: shortness isn't the problem; the problem lies in forcing short people to function in a tall-centered social structure.

The second lesson, which comes directly from the chapter on the construction of the individual, is that, as important as it is to eradicate all forms of explicit discrimination against women, a democratic society like the United States constrains its citizens, women in particular, not primarily by coercive confinement but by the provision of social institutions that invisibly and automatically smooth the way toward whatever the historically preprogrammed options—or the conventionally standard behaviors—are for a particular group in a particular time and place. The importance of this institutional smoothing can readily be seen in the changing pattern of behavior that is now occurring in communities like my own Ithaca, New York, where new laws, and new facilitating institutions, have recently been put into place with respect to something as central to daily life as recycling garbage. Before these recycling programs, most community residents never entertained the thought of recycling garbage even for a moment; and the few recycling pioneers could do little with their own recyclable material other than what was then institutionalized as the default behavior—namely, tossing it into the garbage can and having it driven to the local landfill by the weekly garbage collectors.

Now that recycling is mandated by law and facilitated by recycling pickups and ever-increasing varieties of recyclable material, the default behavior of community members alters almost daily. Recycling may not yet be so accepted that a whole new generation never even considers tossing recyclable material away, but neither is recycling any longer so difficult to manage that only a few committed individuals will trouble to do it. Similarly, if women are ever to have their rightful share of the economic and political resources of the United States, social institutions must be built that make it as easy for *any* woman to be a responsible parent and a well-paid worker as it finally is in Ithaca, New York, for anyone and everyone to recycle.

The third lesson in this analysis of how androcentric institutions transform difference into disadvantage comes directly from the chapter on androcentrism. It is that as gender neutral as American institutions may appear now that explicit discrimination against women has been made illegal, in fact, androcentrism so saturates the whole society

that even institutions that do not discriminate against women explicitly—like the laws of self-defense—must be treated as inherently suspect.

At the beginning of this chapter, the suggestion was made that the cultural debate about sexual inequality has been bogged down in irresolvable issues that all derive in one way or another from the focus on sexual difference. It should now be clear that by reframing the debate around androcentrism, those issues can be transcended.

Consider, first, the debate over whether women's economic and political disadvantage derives from sex discrimination or from the personal choices that women make themselves. With a shift in focus, these two alternatives no longer seem to be mutually exclusive. Rather, one of the main ways that sex discrimination operates in U.S. society is by forcing women to make their life choices in a social world so androcentric that it provides few institutional mechanisms for coordinating work in the paid labor force with the responsibilities of being a parent. Situating employed mothers in an institutional vacuum has left each woman to piece together her own arrangements for coordinating paid work and family; in addition, it has all but guaranteed that most women's advances in the labor market come at a formidable emotional cost to the individual. The irony here, unfortunately, is that because the culture has so little understanding of how systemic discrimination against women proceeds, it frequently misattributes this cost, not to androcentric institutions, but to the "fallout of feminism" (*Newsweek*, March 31, 1986, p. 58).⁸

Consider, next, the debate over whether the best strategy for ending women's inequality is gender neutrality or special protection. With a shift in focus, these two strategies no longer seem to be in opposition. Instead, current institutions are so thoroughly organized from an androcentric perspective that the only way for them to even begin to approximate gender neutrality is for society to finally begin giving as complete a package of special benefits to women as it has always given to men and men alone. Given how broad and deep these special benefits for men have always been, moreover, it follows that *in the interest of neutrality alone*, the special benefits for women would also have to be broad and deep, including not just insurance coverage for female medical conditions but such things as subsidized childcare, comparable-worth earnings for traditionally female jobs, and even the preferential hiring of those with traditionally female job histories.

To people who don't yet understand that androcentric social institutions constitute an invisible privileging of both males and male experience, these suggestions are bound to seem wrongheaded. They are, after all, based on a concept of group rights, not individual rights. But to define gender justice purely in terms of individual rights only makes sense *after* the playing field that men are always talking about has finally been made so level that both women and men have inclusive group rights. Now, men and men alone have group rights.

As noted in Chapter 1, the androcentric social world was built by rich, white, heterosexual men in particular, not by men in general. Accordingly, most apparently neutral institutions hide discrimination against poor people, people of color, and sexual minorities, as well as discrimination against women. Many examples of hidden discrimination against sexual minorities have been provided in this book, including the extension of an employee's health insurance and other fringe benefits only to those domestic partners who are legally recognized as husbands or wives. Hidden discrimination against the poor disproportionately affects people of color; two examples are the funding of public schools through local property taxes and the providing of health insurance through jobs—and only certain jobs at that. Although none of these policies explicitly mentions race, class, or sexual preference, they fit so much better with the experience of the nonpoor, the white, and the heterosexual that—no matter how neutral they look—they still systematically discriminate against poor people, people of color, and gay men and lesbians; they still systematically give group rights to rich people, white people, and heterosexual people.⁹

Consider, finally, the debate over whether sexual equality should be defined in terms of equality or sameness—in terms of whether women should play exactly the same social roles as men or whether they should have exactly the same level of economic and political power as men while they continue to play their traditionally different roles as wives and mothers. With a shift in focus, whether women and men play the same roles or different roles is not itself the issue. Rather, the issue is whether androcentric institutions turn any role differences between women and men into a package of economic and political disadvantages for women as a group; and *that*, social institutions must be prevented from doing as soon as possible. Whether the role differences between women and men should themselves be abolished is thus an entirely separable issue, and one to be considered below.

TOWARD UTOPIA: ERADICATING GENDER POLARIZATION

Up to this point, I have tried to lay the groundwork for a feminist consensus on gender policy by reframing the debate around the androcentrism of social institutions. Now, however, I want to move beyond androcentrism to gender polarization and advocate a vision of utopia in which gender polarization, like androcentrism, has been so completely dismantled that—except in narrowly biological contexts like reproduction—the distinction between male and female no longer organizes either the culture or the psyche. This particular utopia is controversial because it challenges the fundamental belief in the differing psychological and sexual nature of males and females, and it is also inconsistent with what is arguably the dominant voice in contemporary American feminist thought—the woman-centered voice, discussed earlier.

Gender polarization is the organizing of social life around the male-female distinction, the forging of a cultural connection between sex and virtually every other aspect of human experience, including modes of dress, social roles, and even ways of expressing emotion and experiencing sexual desire. Accordingly, to dismantle gender polarization requires severing all these culturally constructed connections and cutting back the male-female distinction to a narrow—if critically important—relevance having primarily to do with the biology of reproduction. With complete gender depolarization, the biology of sex would become “a minimal presence” in human social life (Connell, 1987, p. 289). In other words, the totality of human experience would no longer be divided into cultural categories on the basis of gender, so people of different sexes would no longer be culturally identified with different clothes, different social roles, different personalities, or different sexual and affectional partners any more than people with different-colored eyes or different-sized feet are now.

This absence of gender-based scripts should not be taken to mean that males and females would merely be freer to be masculine, feminine, or androgynous, heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, than they are now. Rather, the distinction between male and female would no longer be the dimension around which the culture is organized, which means, in turn, that the very concepts of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny, heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality, would

be as absent from the cultural consciousness as the concepts of a "hetero-eye-colored" eroticism, a "homo-eye-colored" eroticism, and a "bi-eye-colored" eroticism are now.¹⁰

Although feminists as a whole may not yet have committed themselves to eradicating gender polarization, two separate critiques of gender polarization underlie my own commitment to eradicating it from both the culture and the psyche. The first derives from a broad humanistic concern with the way that gender polarization prevents men and women alike from developing their full potential as human beings, the second from a specifically feminist concern with the foundation that gender polarization provides for androcentrism.

According to the humanistic critique, which was popular among androgyny theorists like myself during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the division of human experience into the masculine and the feminine restricts human potential in at least three related ways.

First, gender polarization homogenizes women and men, rather than allowing either the diversity that naturally exists within each sex or the overlap that naturally exists between the two sexes to flower in social and psychological life. Besides being inconsistent with the diversity of human nature, this homogenization is inconsistent with the American value of freedom to transcend the arbitrary boundaries of ascribed characteristics like sex, race, and caste.

Second, gender polarization dichotomizes not only people but also ways of relating to the world into masculine and feminine types, thereby leaving undefined and unconceptualized not only the androgynous kinds of people who were once the focus of so much feminist attention but also the androgynous ways of relating to the world that so often seem to capture the essence of the human condition. Take, for example, the gender-polarizing dichotomy between male autonomy and female connectedness. Although all human beings everywhere are simultaneously and inextricably separate and autonomous selves, as well as fully interconnected and interdependent members of a human community, no concept in a gender-polarizing culture reflects this two-sided fact about the human condition. Take, for another example, the gender-polarizing dichotomy between male rationality and female emotionality. Although the human psyche is simultaneously and inextricably both rational and emotional, once again, no concept in a gender-polarizing culture reflects this fact.

Finally, gender polarization so dramatically expands the meaning

of what it is to be male or female that a paradoxical cultural concept is thereby created: the idea of being a "real" man or woman, as opposed to a merely biological man or woman. This paradoxical concept, in turn, makes both men and women vulnerable to the feeling that their maleness or femaleness cannot be taken for granted but must instead be worked at, accomplished, and protected from loss through misbehavior. The culture has developed no comparable concept of a "real" human being, which is why people have no comparable sense of insecurity about whether they are walking or playing or eating or thinking or having sex in a way that is adequately human; they simply go about the business of doing whatever they have each been biologically enabled to do.

The essence of the humanistic objection to gender polarization is thus that it turns men and women into gender caricatures and thereby denies them the fullest measure of their human possibilities. In contrast, the essence of the specifically feminist objection to gender polarization is that it aids and abets the social reproduction of male power by providing the fundamental division between masculine and feminine upon which androcentrism is built. This antifeminist aspect of gender polarization manifests itself at three levels: the institutional, the psychological, and the ideological.

At the institutional level, gender polarization aids and abets the social reproduction of male power by dichotomizing the social world into the masculine domain of paid employment and the feminine domain of home and childcare, thereby sustaining a gender-based division of labor and obscuring the need for any institutional mechanisms—like paid childcare—that would enable any one individual to easily participate in both domains. Such coordinating mechanisms will continue to be seen as unnecessary as long as gender polarization ensures that different people—that is, men and women—do different things; and the absence of such coordinating mechanisms will continue to promote sexual hierarchy by denying women access to economic and political power.

At the psychological level, gender polarization aids and abets the social reproduction of male power by dichotomizing identity and personality into masculine and feminine categories, thereby providing a concept of *psychological* masculinity and femininity to which the culture can readily assimilate its androcentric conceptions of power and powerlessness. This unholy alliance of androcentrism and gender polariza-

tion predisposes men to construct identities around dominance and women to construct identities around deference; it also enables those who deviate from these mutually exclusive identities to be defined, by both the culture and themselves, as pathological.

And finally, at the ideological level, gender polarization aids and abets the social reproduction of male power by prompting the cultural discourse to misrepresent even the most blatant examples of sexual inequality as nothing more or less than sexual difference. Put somewhat differently, gender polarization enables religion, science, law, the media, and so on, to rationalize the sexual status quo in a way that automatically renders the lens of androcentrism invisible. The sexual status quo is not made to seem rational by gender polarization alone, of course; the lens of biological essentialism further rationalizes the sexual status quo by defining difference itself as biologically natural.

In addition to the humanist and feminist arguments against gender polarization, there is an overarching moral argument that fuses the antihumanist and antifeminist aspects of gender polarization. The essence of this moral argument is that by polarizing human values and human experiences into the masculine and the feminine, gender polarization not only helps to keep the culture in the grip of males themselves; it also keeps the culture in the grip of highly polarized masculine values. The moral problem here is that these highly polarized masculine values so emphasize making war over keeping the peace, taking risks over giving care, and even mastering nature over harmonizing with nature that when allowed to dominate societal and even global decision making, they create the danger that humans will destroy not just each other in massive numbers but the planet.

The one good thing about the thoroughness with which gender polarization is embedded in androcentric institutions is that institutional changes designed to eradicate androcentrism will necessarily challenge gender polarization as well. Consider the suggestion made earlier, for example, that society provide institutional ways to coordinate work and family. In addition to challenging androcentrism, this institutional change would begin to break down the boundary between the masculine world of paid employment and the feminine world of home and childcare; it would also begin to challenge the polarization of identity and personality by giving women experience with power and status, and men experience with nurturance and service to others. Although other kinds of institutional changes would deal more directly

with gender polarization, my own view is that—apart from the critical issue of ending all forms of discrimination against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals—the most effective way to begin dismantling gender polarization is to dismantle androcentrism.

Ultimately, gender depolarization would require even more than the *social* revolution involved in rearranging social institutions and re-framing cultural discourses. Gender depolarization would also require a *psychological* revolution in our most personal sense of who and what we are as males and females, a profound alteration in our feelings about the meaning of our biological sex and its relation to our psyche and our sexuality.

Simply put, this psychological revolution would have us all begin to view the biological fact of being male or female in much the same way that we now view the biological fact of being *human*. Rather than seeing our sex as so authentically who we are that it needs to be elaborated, or so tenuous that it needs to be bolstered, or so limiting that it needs to be traded in for another model, we would instead view our sex as so completely given by nature, so capable of exerting its influence automatically, and so limited in its sphere of influence to those domains where it really does matter biologically, that it could be safely tucked away in the backs of our minds and left to its own devices. In other words, biological sex would no longer be at the core of individual identity and sexuality.