

Beyond Another Gender Binary

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My use of the terms patriarchy and gender are interchangeable, as I understand gender to be an apparatus of oppression and domination that overlaps with, and is inseparable from, the apparatus of patriarchy. For more on this, I suggest the Gender Nihilist Anti-Manifesto, and Destroy Gender.

Against Femme, Against Gender, Against All Binaries

There has been a trend among the radical milieux over the last couple years to start using the term femme in place of woman. The reasons for this shift in language have varied depending on who you ask in the milieux, but the general reason behind the shift is to make ‘our’ understanding of patriarchy more inclusive to anyone who doesn’t strictly identify as a woman. Taken from the Wikipedia page for Femme,

“Femme is an identity used by women (including trans women) and nonbinary people in relation to their femininity. As a gender identity, it usually denotes an individual who is “non-binary or queer femme gender specifically and inherently addresses femmephobia and the systematic devaluation of femininity as part of their politics”. The term is used exclusively for queer people regardless of whether they identify as female.”

This replacement isn’t just semantics, it has been a change from seeing woman as the oppressed subject of patriarchy to seeing anyone femme, or feminine, as an oppressed subject of patriarchy. It’s also a shift from seeing oppression as one’s relationship to gendered violence to one’s relationship to aesthetic, femininity, behaviour, and social norms.

Before, ‘our’ understanding of patriarchy was that only women could be oppressed by patriarchy and gender(ed violence). That is, if our understanding of patriarchy never dug deep enough to understand that there are a multitude of experiences and subjectivities that cannot be fit neatly into one of two categories (oppressed and oppressor, male or female, etc). For anyone who held such ideas, moving from that crass analysis of patriarchy and the apparatus of gender toward an interpretation that includes more experiences than before is a positive shift. But, like all interpretations and theory, it falls short in its goals and in its analysis. The shift to the term femme does little, if nothing, to challenge patriarchal categorization/identification/normalization, binaries, the reproduction of patriarchy, or its economic basis, and it does not truly create a theory of oppression that is inclusive of all subjectivities/experiences.

What Does It Mean to be Femme?

Who gets to be femme? Who is *actually* oppressed? Who is femme enough to be considered oppressed? Are all women femme?

As with all theories of oppression, if there is an oppressed subject/class then there is a corresponding oppressor subject/class (such as whites oppressing non-whites and the rich/bourgeoisie oppressing the poor/proletariat). Under the previous understanding of patriarchy where women are the only class oppressed by gender, men were considered the oppressor class. With the contemporary understanding of patriarchy, femmes are the oppressed class and mascs are the oppressors. All identities are defined by who is deemed an other.

According to everydayfeminism.com, femme “is an explicitly queer title, it is a gender expression that encompasses a wide range of identities. Gay and queer cis-men, trans-men, and gender-queer folk often identify as Femme. Saying that femmes are always only women perpetuates a gendered binary that excludes lots of people.” Besides the questionable use of queer as an umbrella term, this definition of femme attempts to include the experiences of many who don’t identify as women. While it does include some femme gay/trans men and non-binary people, it does so by abandoning women who aren’t femme. Women who aren’t femme, such as butch women and closeted trans women, are cast aside, either to be ignored completely or to be labeled as ‘masculine’ and oppressors. As if butch women are to blame for the strife of femmes, as if being a femme gay man means you cannot be a proponent of patriarchal control, as if our real experiences with gender and violence are secondary to our personal style.

Neither Masc, Nor Femme, But Unique

This line of thought doesn’t stop perpetuating a “gendered binary” but reinforces it by dividing people along the lines of oppressed/femme vs. oppressor/masc, except this division isn’t based so strictly on gender and biology like the previous (and still dominant) gender binary. It divides people based upon aesthetics and behaviour instead of by biology or by self-identification. Almost anything is an improvement from biological determinism, but this shift doesn’t go far enough to stop binary thinking. Before someone in the milieu asks me what my name and pronouns are, I am assumed to be “masc” because of my facial hair and the way I dress. My personal experiences with gendered violence are only taken seriously in light of revealing myself as a trans woman. *Our theories should start from the ways we have experienced gender violence in our daily lives, not identity.* Our relationships to each other should be based upon our affinities and similarities with each other, rather than based upon the categories of lowest-common-denominator politics. Daily life is far too complicated to be reduced into two categories.

Meet the New Binary, Same as the Old Binary

A few years ago among the radical milieu, before femme was the go-to inclusive term for people oppressed by patriarchy, the term not-men was used. The theoretical failings of not-men are similar to that of the term femme. Baedan, an anti-civilization, nihilist, and anarchist journal which explores questions of gender, queerness, and domestication, elaborate on those theoretical failings. They critique the term not-men for failing to be the inclusive term it aimed to be, not going beyond binary categories, and for continuing the policing of categorization.

(tw rape)

“One recent answer to these critiques has been the introduction of the concept *not-men*. Most attempts at defining this category are extremely clumsy. At times it is used to mean not-cismen, or to explicitly say that faggots are not welcome at certain meetings. At others it simply means women plus trans people. Some feminists have even said that the category at times includes ‘emasculated men of color.’ Usually it is just postmodern shorthand for women. As with any other categories, it only functions if it has a firm border, and this border will always be policed. At every step of the way,

it is ceaselessly problematic. The least problematic definitions of it [...] are so vague as to not have any practical application. And it is always in the practical applications that these theories enact their violences. The prospect of a political body of largely cisgendered women determining which genderqueer or transfeminine individuals are *not-men* enough to participate in their groups is quite nauseating. This categorical policing mirrors all the others. ***Meet the new binary, same as the old binary.*** A way out of this dilemma may be to start from experience rather than identity. To seek out conspirators based on a shared experience of a range of gender violence. Some proponents of not-men have defined it similarly ('those who are raped,' 'those who do caring labor') but none of these experiences are limited by identity, and to accept a phenomenological or experiential framework would dispense with the utility of the category at all. If the concept is either problematic or useless then why has there been so much fancy footwork put into an attempt to save the concept? What we're really seeing is a desperate attempt to save binary categories, in a world where they've long been decomposing."

— Against the Gendered Nightmare, Baedan 2: A Queer Journal of Heresy

Whether it's man/woman, male/female, afab/amab, not-men/men, or femme/masc, all binaries require policing and exclusion to be maintained and defined. Binary categorization is just one method the apparatus of gender uses to govern. Binary categories require policing, exclusion, regulation, normalization, and hierarchy.

Not A Third Way

"Insurrection calls upon us to no longer let ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and set no glittering hopes on institutions."

— The Ego and Its Own, Max Stirner

The problems behind the femme/masc binary did not start with its introduction to the milieu, nor will they stop after some other terms are adopted in its place. I do not suggest alternatives or expansions for these categories, only their total abandonment. This can only be achieved through an insurrectional break against gender. Insurrection would be the total undermining of governance: to abandon and destroy the apparatuses of governance, to take our affairs into our own hands.

"In more real terms, it means that we have communities and spaces that aren't just safe, but dangerous to those who oppose our desires and our spaces. Not just a reading group safe space, but reclaimed territories capable of providing for the needs of the working class/women/the excluded (free from gender/gendered violence). These spaces can't simply be given to us by a higher power. Through occupations of the borderlands and sites of production, or less formal territories of resistance, such as friends who have each other's backs, we will make or take the commons back."

— Destroy Gender

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