

Cyborgs

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In *A Cyborg Manifesto* Donna Haraway shows that a multitude of old dichotomies are, as a matter of fact, outdated, and she attempts to create a new — political and theoretical — perspective. In order to do so, she presents us with the cyborg, a hybrid between man and machine. And as she once stated in an interview: "Partly, the cyborg is a joke. Nowadays you can't write a manifesto for communists, but for cyborgs, you can. But on the other hand, it is a serious joke."

Haraway uses a great variety of sources, ranging from science fiction and ethnography to treatises on computer industry, feminist classics, psycho-analysis and labour relations. Her essay was not an easy read. Yet she managed to intrigue quite a lot of people, and soon "cyborgs" became a buzzword in feminist theories. More and more scientific articles referred to her cyborgs and to the political irony that she advocated. In a practical sense however, nothing much came of it. Most publications deal with its impact for the study of philosophy of science, of methodology, or with its implications as to the history of science — in short, the debates focused on science criticism. Very interesting, but not really something that relates to one's daily life or that can be brought to bear upon political and social debates. For precisely that reason, I thought it was rather painful to observe how feminist theorists on the one hand stressed the importance and the actuality of the cyborg, but on the other hand ignored or refused to show how it related to ongoing social debates.

In that respect, this cyborg theory unfortunately became a mechanism of exclusion. It made those who didn't understand what it was all about look slightly retarded, out of fashion at the least. At the same time, none of those in the know made an effort to make this cyborg understandable or used it as a strategic weapon to disrupt modern debates or to give them an inspiring spin [which made those not in the know wonder what the fuss was all about, anyway]. Such a pity. And all that while cyborgs are rather apt at disrupting, spinning, assembling and disassembling. For that reason, I translated Haraway's essay into Dutch and wrote an extensive introduction, trying to situate her in many debates and attempting to show the spin-offs of her approach — in my interpretation, that is.

Haraway explains why a number of dichotomies have lost their meaning and are no longer effective tools: the split between nature and culture, man and animal, man and machines, body and mind, male and female, black and white, self and not self. [Strangely enough, she fails to mention heterosexuality and homosexuality.] Or rather, she states that such opposing categories have been a fiction all along. If there is any discernible border between items on each part of the boundary, it has always been a vague and changing one.

She does not imply that such dichotomies are therefore meaningless, mere figments of the imagination. No, they are fabrications, the subject of endless political, scientific and cultural debate. They cause ways of thinking and of living, they raise questions and answers, they shape policy, political strategies, scientific theory, relationships, norms, values and laws. Many, if not all ideological debates relate to those dichotomies, and every liberation movement we have had since the sixties has based itself upon the attempt to fight a specific dichotomy.

The categories on either side of a dichotomy are always antagonistic, binary and — now, this is funny — they presuppose each other. Neither of them can stand on their own. [A body without a mind is a stiff, a mind without a body is superstition.] Such binary oppositions form

closed, self-reproducing systems where one presupposes, or constructs, the other. "Nature" is such a category. "Nature" isn't doing too well, these days, everybody knows that, and therefore she needs to be protected and shielded and saved. But perhaps this division nature/culture is not a good one to begin with; if there was ever an untainted nature, not influenced by culture, it was tainted from the moment when man-like creatures started to roam the earth. [But hey — aren't men part of nature? We didn't arrive from outer space, did we? So were we indeed the ones who tainted her? But if we are a part of nature, then how could we ?]

What we nowadays consider to be "nature" is a carefully tended Disney park, with trash cans along its paths. "Nature" is a jungle scene in a Marlboro ad. "Nature" is a computer enhanced photograph of a microbe under a microscope. "Nature" is imported US ladybirds, to be used in Dutch greenhouses, where they are needed to eat the greenfly. "Nature" is a breeding program in zoos, developed to prevent species from extinction.

"Nature" and "culture" interfere with each other, and change one another. When governments noticed that the phosphates in washing powders stimulated the growth of algae to such an extent that other river inhabitants were dying because of lack of oxygen, endless deliberations ensued how washing powder producers could -reduce the amount of phosphates in their product. Currently, almost every washing powder is phosphate-free — but the ecosystems of rivers had meanwhile adapted so well to high phosphate levels, that it transpired that reducing the level of phosphate disrupted the balance [yet again] and caused a great many problems. [This brings to mind the hilarious image of addicted rivers.] And by the way, a recent survey of vegetation in Amsterdam showed that there was more variety and more rare species in Amsterdam than in those regions marked as "natural". Nature's not what it used to be, I don't need to tell you that.

Now the really big trouble with dichotomies is that they're hierarchical. It's mind over matter, culture over nature, male over female — there is always one dominant category. And — and that is the bitterest part — the dominant one is always the starting point, the touchstone, the norm. It needs no explanation; it is the opposing, non-dominant one that needs description and that deviates from the rule. One never has to explain why one is male, white, heterosexual, healthy and Western; that is the prerogative of power. It is power's privilege not to be questioned; power resides in what is regarded as being obvious.

Liberation movements try to get rid of these normative normalities and fight the supposed neutrality of the dichotomy: they point out how easily one ranks A higher than A-. Usually, their aim is to achieve balance. Gays should have the same rights as heterosexuals, black people are no less than white, man should not be given preference over women, man should not consider nature as something which can be pillaged, and animals have rights, too. Liberation movements, in short, want their fair share and demand to be put on a more equal footing.

And this is where things go wrong, says Haraway. Because dichotomies tend to be reproduced, even by those who fight them, precisely because using and living this dichotomy has distorted both categories. As a matter of fact, it might not even be helpful to keep thinking of "two sides" that need to be "balanced" or "rearranged". The definitions of what each "side" amounts to, and what is and what is not comprised in it, are severely influenced by the fact that this dichotomy has been constructed; we thereafter tend to believe that there must "thus" be a constituting difference, and all we have to do is find it and pin it down. Perhaps, instead

of fixating on that difference or on either pole of the dichotomy, we would do better to squint, and look away.

What constitutes a woman?

Dichotomies deal with essential, all-encompassing statements about both their poles. They claim to refer to core characteristics, and force a choice. You can't belong to both poles. Women are by definition not male, machines will always be unnatural, artificial intelligence lacks the creativity and spirit that is natural to the human brain and queers are definitely different from heterosexuals, perhaps even from birth. It's just a matter of finding the exact location of the inherent difference.

Is it biology that makes women different? No, feminists stated, and showed how women were treated differently in many respects on the basis of their body: one was not born a woman, one was made a woman. It seemed therefore useful to make a distinction between sex [the biological "material"] and gender [the complex mix of psychological experiences and cultural notions that, in relation with social structures distinguish between masculine and feminine capacities, behaviour and roles]. Gender — masculinity and femininity — is the set of interpretations and structures we superpose upon sex [male and female].

But wait — in this line of reasoning, nature is put in opposition to culture. It presents nature as unchanging, and culture as changeable, malleable and makeable. Why were "nature" and "sex" considered to be passive categories, and bracketed out of historical and cultural change? Moreover, this reasoning also suggested an untraceable something, a real [biological] core that all women had in common, something that might be discovered under all those extra layers of meaning that had become attached to it.

Research indeed showed that "sex" and "biology" were less simple categories than many people had assumed. It was pointed out that the various disciplines of the exact sciences do not at all agree on the question what, physically speaking, constitutes a woman. The grounds on which it is decided that [parts of] bodies are male or female is rather arbitrary. Endocrinologists, anatomists and geneticist use different criteria [and fight over them] and often these criteria simply don't match. The anatomical, endocrine and genetic differences between two women are as great as those between a man and a woman[1]. So why lump them together as a sex? Wouldn't it be more useful to think of a continuum, with male at one end of the spectrum and female at the other, with a wide range in between?

It would appear that feminist theory had only swapped the original problem, "the body is destiny," for "socialisation is destiny." Because sexual difference — the definition, the inscription, the presentation and the shape of the difference between male and female — indeed fluctuates so much that it could present itself in various forms in various cultures, times and contexts, but a constructed difference of some kind seemed to be discernible literally everywhere. Constructing differences — i.e. gender — seemed a universal trait.

The fearful question was asked — were not feminist researchers reproducing that difference themselves, by their meticulous studies of representation of gender [for instance, between bread-winning women and bread-earning man, between female housekeepers and male housekeepers, between male managers and female managers]? And isn't it true that those that seek, shall find? Were those differences found always caused by gender differences? An essential postulate was formulated or found every time, though time and time again it seemed untraceable — a fleeting entity that reworked biological material into social identities and that dressed bodies in gender differences. Something that caused women to identify as "other" than men, something that persuaded or forced them to incorporate "femininity".

But it was either have your cake or eat it. Either "the woman" did not exist, or she was theoretically and practically preceded by her own image. Sex and gender had become recursive terminologies.

It was on this scene that Haraway's cyborg made her entry. Basically what she said was, Stop it. Don't use this theoretical "us", "women", "females". Let's not talk about categories, or rather, let's, but let's disqualify them. Let's side-step them, let's view differences anew, and let us no longer talk as if there is some essential "us" somewhere [and thus, a "them"], an unbroken identity that might be retrieved in due course. Assemble these categories, disassemble them and reassemble them. Let's find a new perspective, a being that is both male and female, man and machine, nature and culture, mind and body. [Beast during the weekends, man during the week, and hybrid every day during lunch.]

In the next instalment — that is, my lecture — I'll present you with some practical examples of what a cyborg might do, think and want.

[1] Endocrinologists can't seem to pinpoint the exact role of oestrogen and testosterone in relation to other hormones. They've also found that both men and women make both kinds of hormones, and that the only [relative] difference concerns levels and percentages; and even then one has to know how old somebody is in order to be able to decide, on the basis of their hormones, whether this person is male or female.

Geneticists "know" that the difference is located in two out of forty-six chromosomes. But often, they encounter XXY. In order to be able to maintain their definitions, they label XXY as "abnormal". Finding an "abnormal" result may be brought about by variations in measuring technique [however, finding "normal" results may be caused by the same deviations]. More and more often, scientists discover people whose genitals don't match their chromosomes.

Anatomical parts that are considered to be of prime distinguishing importance may be removed [uteruses and breasts are often surgically removed in Western countries; in Eastern countries, the labia and the clitoris are sometimes removed], but that does not change somebody's biological status and does not mean you are no longer regarded as a female.

Is the biological difference perhaps located in reproductive capacities? Sterilised men are still male, sterilised women female. Did you know that men can have breast cancer as well? And what are we to think of children that are born with a double set of genitals? And what about transsexuals? [Annemarie Mol, *Who knows what constitutes a woman. About the differences and the relations between sciences*, in *Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies* 21 [1985 no 1], pp. 10-22; Gerbrand Feenstra, *Male, female or something in between*, in *de Volkskrant*, September 3, 1994; Gerbrand Feenstra, *It's a... uh...*, in *de Volkskrant*, September 17, 1994.