

Heinz-Jürgen Voß
The Intricacy of the Human Sexes

The series »Applied Sexual Science« seeks dialogue: it has an interdisciplinary outlook and particularly aims to link theory and practice. Members of the academy and of practical projects such as counseling centers and self-help organizations get into conversation with one another at eye-level. In this way, it might be possible to shorten the often lengthy transfer processes through which practical experiences have been making their belated entrance in scientific institutions. At the same time science may thus contribute to underpin and contextualize new concepts.

The series is based on a positive understanding of sexuality. The focus here is on the question of how a self-determined and appreciative approach to sex/gender and sexuality can be promoted in society. Sexuality is regarded as being embedded in social contexts: in modern bourgeois societies it is an area of life in which gender, class, and racist relations as well as ideological preconditions intersect, and often conflictually so. Simultaneously, in this area negotiations about an open and diversity-accepting development of society take place.

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The Intricacy of the Human Sexes

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Foreword to the English Translation of the 4th Edition

Socially speaking, much has happened since the first edition of *Geschlecht: Wider die Natürlichkeit* was published in 2011. Today, the conclusions drawn from forming biological theories, as outlined here, are part of the standardized toolbox of scientifically reflecting »gender« and, more specifically, »sex« as the »biological gender.« As late as 2015, Claire Ainsworth could rightly assert in her summarizing article for the biological journal »Nature« that »biologists may have been building a more nuanced view of sex, but society has yet to catch up« (Ainsworth, 2015, 219). Yet it is obvious today, that the »nuanced view« of sexual development has broken the confinements of the experts' discussions. Many contributions to popular papers weigh equally the character of the biological sex (and its resulting diversity) but also its placement within more traditionally minded segments of society. These articles from the popular press continue propagating the view of clear-cut binary sexes, true, but nevertheless do discuss the perspectives as they are suggested here. Those segments also feel bound to propose several options of compromise. Such a debate may be an opportunity for adapting a concept of »the sex« which avoids discrimination, but also one to provide for a more open scholarly forum. Following the concept of *deconstruction*, more and more perspectives may be presented or created.

A word on terminology used in this translation: the German language (in which this book was originally written) does not differentiate between the social »gender« and the biological »sex.« It is the single »*Geschlecht*.« This book before you, however, does argue that the difference between »gender« and »sex« are marginal. Both are social

constructs. Therefore, the distinction between those two English words may apply when due. The focus of the discussion is on »sex« as a social construct, not necessarily gender. Also, translations from German sources which have been previously published are noted as such. All others follow the German original.

It becomes more and more clear that sex and the relationships of the sexes must be seen in their context but also as interwoven with racism and our understanding of capital. This monograph, *The Human Sexes as Biological and Social Inventions*, has outlined the connections since the first edition by developing views on »sex« from a »materialistic«, a Marxist understanding. It has presented the factual living conditions of people in a society marked by its Capitalist structure. The following monograph, *Queer and (Anti-)Capitalism*, written by Salih Alexander Wolter and myself in 2013, follows this concept. It presents just how (and why) people are categorized in the »modern«, bourgeoisie social structure, but also what role is played by arguments of »naturalness.« By understanding the categories/power relations of »race«, class and sex as interwoven, the opportunity for new insights arise.

A substantial debate of this topic – and beyond – necessarily requires all participants to be interested in other perspectives. It requires them (us) to willingly think in interlinked and complex structures, but also to willingly question what may be perceived as self-evident. Debate depends on a respectful exchange. Some »participants« have chosen a less than respectful critical approach to the discussion. Instead they have taken the path of unsympathetic attack. Hatefulness and hate-speech have become tools for discrediting »adversarial« and especially emancipatory arguments. Therefore, it is vital to insist on a consensual culture of civil debate.

Some critical and, at times, even pointed discussion may be essential when societies re-negotiate the »right« path, as they have always done. Yet any discussion must not harm the integrity of the participants. Such a democratic, open, and accepting culture of debate deserves to be upheld, especially in these days of increasing threats from racist, nationalistic, and right-wing powers. Their aggressive style of argumentation must not leave an imprint on the democratic or even the emancipatory culture of discussion.

Current society is marked by a binary-normative concept of sex, and is especially discriminatory against trans* and inter* people, and subjects them to violence. They are even more at risk if they are *of color*. In this case, it is vital for cis-men and -women, i. e., those unquestionably accepting their sex as assigned at birth, to demonstrate solidarity.

Attack-style discussions may be countered by referring to scientific conclusions. As one example, right-wing populists and extremists currently employ the term »gender-ideology« to discredit some newer insights to sex by the disciplines of gender studies or biology. Yet, when looking closely and scientifically, employing the term of »gender-ideology« for such an attack makes little sense. In its scientific usage the term does, in fact, describe the dominant, stereotypical binary concept which the attackers seek to defend. It may be a helpful strategy to use the term »gender-ideology« in an emancipatory way as the scientifically based term for analysis. This scientific discussion of the term »ideology« as focused on the subject of sex may conclude the introductory remarks to the fourth edition. Here, too and following the intention of this monograph, »gender« and »sex« are discussed in light of their social development:

The philosopher Louis Althusser wrote in his *Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État*: »As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself [...] That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition to be outside of ideology.«¹ Only a scientific approach at least partially allows one to glimpse an ideology from the outside. Even there, this glance may (or, better, will) be limited, as ideology also affects scholars. Althusser discusses several aspects of society in a critical way in which ideology (which he understands as un-reflected action) is the primary means to govern people, while repressive means remained secondary. According to Althusser, »Schools and Churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection, etc., to >discipline< [repressively] not only their shepherds, but also their flocks« (ibid.) Yet, children are essentially integrated into the ideological structure of society in a non-repressive way. Through ideology, they are

1 Althusser, Louis (1971). »Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses«. *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. pp. 121–176. *Translated* from the French by Ben Brewster. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>

formed to *subjects* at schools, churches, etc., and thus rendered manageable and governable.

Ideology, in such a scientific-analytical sense is often absent in the current debates. It is nothing a person simply adopts and represents. Ideology always must be seen under the conditions of social relations to power and the structures of order. For this reason, Althusser refers to »ideological state apparatuses«, as ideology is the predominant form of exerting power in areas of society which the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci terms »civil society« (in order to contextualize Althusser and Gramsci, as well as their approaches: see *Queer und [Anti-]Kapitalismus* [Voß/Wolter 2013], 35 et seqq.).

According to Althusser, the areas which are primarily affected by ideology and which therefore have to be seen as »ideological state apparatuses« are religious life, school, family, the legal system, politics, unions, media, and culture as such, but also literature and sports. One of the more prominent, and clear, examples is the women's rights movement's demand to understand the private sphere as political as well. Social structures and bourgeoisie ideology are present in the private sphere, the family, such as when women are functionalized as housewives and caretaker for the children.

These and other debates are being discussed at current Feminist congresses such as the female double burden of working and having to raise the children, but also the intersectional interwovenness of gender relations with racism and class-based conditions. White women, too, profit from racial conditions and the overexploitation of the global south by the north, for instance. Following Althusser in a scientific-analytical sense, we are dealing with a *racist ideology* that limits the options for social mobility for those who are defined as »migrants« of any generation in German society.² It is also a gender-ideology which limits and defines the scope and sphere for white, bourgeoisie women – and which makes even those women appreciate their conditions as »fair« and »justified.«

Those examples are well-known, when considering books such as *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* (English as *Good Morning, My Lovely*, 1977, by

2 A note to context: as this monograph was originally written in German, references are also often stated in their German context as exemplary for other modern societies.

Maxie Wander) and the initial publication of the *Black*³ German women's movement's *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (English as *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, 1986/Engl. 1992, ed. by Katharina Oguntoye, May Ayim, Dagmar Schultz).

If gender-ideology, however, moves beyond the Patriarchal suppression of women it is rarely understood or interpreted as such. This is rather surprising as Louis Althusser, again, wrote in detail on the matter as early as 1970/71. He pointedly discussed the importance of gender-ideology, meaning the development of children to female or male subjects of the state, when writing that:

»it is certain in advance that [the child] will bear its Father's Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable. Before its birth, the child is therefore always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is >expected< once it has been conceived. [...] [T]he former subject to-be will have to >find< >its< place, i.e. >become< the sexual subject (boy or girl) which it already is in advance« (Althusser, 1970/71).

Thus gender-ideology leads to expecting every child as »girl« or »boy.« In many cases, the child's bedroom is prepared accordingly, and the first question after birth is often: »Is it a boy or a girl?« Parents may prevent the question by dressing the child in pink or bright blue – as society deems those colors as inherently defined as female or male ones. But even if parents wish to raise the child in an as gender-neutral way as possible, they are constantly confronted with expectations by the state (civil registry), and the religious, educational, family, cultural etc. ideological state apparatuses.

Although the social *character* of creating sex is apparent, the ideological structures – both within the family and society in general – have become so solidified that the *process* of creating sex is rather ignored. *Gender-ideology* is so pervasive that it has become almost impossible to question the

3 By definition, *Black* is capitalized as it refers to a marginalizing position, not to any feature which could be essentialized.

social conditions of creating sex, or the importance of sex in the modern, bourgeoisie society. Scientific understanding fails against the *ideological state apparatuses*. »Naturalness« is often used in this context.

Whether referring to »God« or »Nature«: society cherishes the ideology that the infant, the new-born child, unquestionably has a sex. Society does not seriously discuss expectations, the abstractions that go along the chromosome perspectives, the ultra-sound images and their interpretations which are based on mathematical algorithms, or reports of medical experts. Scientific insights into the matter – which Althusser described as possible through fundamental analysis – are, historically speaking, the result of feminist agents in their respective disciplines in Germany. They are more currently discussed in the institutionally rather marginalized *gender studies* (in contrast to the US, for instance, there are no institutionally organized German *gay* or *queer studies*).

Judith Butler, the feminist and queer theoretician, for instance, was met with fierce resistance when publishing the German translations of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1991) and *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of »Sex«* (1997). This, while Butler basically concludes the same as Louis Althusser did in 1970: she contextualized in her work the fundamental issues of how sex is created in society. Different from other feminist authors, but like Althusser, she also considers seemingly unquestionable, clear-cut biological certainties. Butler outlines that even the physical and psychological features are only read and interpreted by society. Thus, Butler addresses one of the pillars of the prevailing ideology then.

Enjoy this revised and up-dated edition in its English translation,

Heinz-Jürgen Voß, Hanover, March 2018/July 2021

Foreword to the 1st German Edition

Hardly any other subject leads to more uninformed discussions than that of »sex« and the matter of its »naturalness.« Participants often refer to popular literature that cites repeatedly rehashed conclusions of biological research which have long since been criticized for their lack of methodological soundness. Those researches of sex themselves begin by grouping people as »women« and »men.« Further methodological endeavors then follow this binary classification. The result is the difference between »woman« and »man.« *But how should they come to any other conclusion when proceeding that way?*

Often, and moreover, conclusions are drawn from researches dealing with no more than twenty, ten, six or even one single individual yet, they lead to far-reaching conclusions for the »female« and »male« sex. Even the emancipatory gender studies and politically interested young people far too often rely on conclusions of biology or medicine, without looking at the tasks of research, methodology, or the resulting conclusions of current research.

This book is intended to spark an informed debate and broaden the horizon: the biological-medical theories dealing with the sex are historically and currently so multifarious that it does not even touch reality when stating the simple assertion »modern« biology has never discussed anything else than dichotomic differences of the sexes« – as done following the works of Thomas Laqueur, Claudia Honegger, or Londa Schiebinger. Topics touched are not only the differences, but also sameness, of »woman« and »man«, and the woman-and-man-being of every person. Current biological and medical research arrive at so many factors which are sup-