

## **An unmonstrous family? Omissions in Kathleen Stock's history of gender identity theory**

**Monstrous families.** I fear that in her 2021 book *Material Girls*, Kathleen Stock caved in to a pressure: “Don’t present an unholy family of contributors in history of gender identity theory.” Here I note some omitted contributors. Before that, I quote Michel Foucault feeling the pressure: “it was argued that I had created monstrous families by bringing together names as disparate as Buffon and Linnaeus or in placing Cuvier next to Darwin in defiance of the most readily observable family resemblances and natural ties. This objection also seems inappropriate...”

**The under-determinism thesis.** The thesis that scientific theories are under-determined is the thesis that, for any scientific theory, there can be a rival scientific theory which copes equally well with the evidence. The thesis is influential in both “continental” European philosophy (and biology?) and analytic philosophy, through Quine. Stock was trained in the latter tradition. She presents a question asked of her, “Hasn’t she read *the literature?*” (2021: 8), and that along with her history reinforces the misleading impression of two intellectual traditions, each going their separate way. But both influence gender identity theory, leading to the thesis being applied to the number of sexes. Stock does not explicitly capture this general thesis application (2021: 19, 67).

**Third gender classifications.** In the 1960s, there was an explosion of interest in classification systems. This was largely owing to the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism. Thus we get interest in fictional Chinese encyclopedias, classificatory systems from earlier times, and classificatory systems across contemporary cultures. Later anthropological fieldwork introduced many academics to cultures with a concept sometimes described as that of a third gender, sometimes of a third sex (hijras, Gilbert Herdt’s Sambia). The most glaring omission in her brief history of moments in gender identity theory’s rapid “onset” is no reference to that introduction. (Also it challenges Stock’s portrait of a generational divide amongst females, 2021: 7. Some migrants to the UK will not be shocked: “I learnt about these issues elsewhere.”)

**An awkward relationship.** In the mid-1980s, Marilyn Strathern argued that feminist research cannot bring about a theoretical revolution in social and cultural anthropology. To illustrate her point, she envisaged a dialogue between a literary anthropologist and a radical feminist. They can only mock each other, in this sense at least: each targets an essential premise of the other’s project, making the other feel uncomfortable, but the project is valuable enough to continue. (Edward 2020. It is like mocking economic assumptions, when economics requires idealization.) Replace the literary anthropologist with a pro-trans-rights figure, label the radical feminist as a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF), and accept the mockery point, and you get the current situation in some circles. Explosive new event or slight rebrand for wider audiences?

### **References**

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- Strathern, M. 1987. An Awkward Relationship: the Case of Feminism and Anthropology. *Signs* 12: 276-292.