Performing Gender: A Spectacle of Powerism

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Male, female, non-binary, transgender, marginalized, domination, inequality, socio-economic status, political rights, legal rights, protection… The list of words that could easily come up in the discussion of gender goes on. There are a multitude of dimensions through which we could contemplate the notion of gender, such as biological, physical, psychological, social, political, cultural, economic, et cetera. To produce a focused investigation and in-depth analysis, in this essay, I will venture into the performed social dimension of gender, and proposes an overarching understanding of power dynamics, alienation, domination, and subordination that manifest in this bio-social spectacle. To do so, I will first explain my concept of powerism, and, with reference to Judith Butler's gender theory, establish the performed nature of gender as a window into the constructed nature of gender power dynamics. Next, I will interweave the concept of spectacle into the performance of gender, demonstrating how individual performances policed by gender politics ramify collectively and become a social spectacle. I will subsequently connect this spectacle to the manifestation of powerism, projecting the overarching nature of social marginalization and discrimination in the realm of gender. In essence, I postulate that gender, performing and being performed in various socio-cultural landscapes, is an ostensible and intricate spectacle of powerism that demands critical deliberation. I propose a dialectical relation between individually performed gender and the social spectacle of such, where gender-based culture of domination and subordination drives individual performances that in turn perpetuate the collective spectacle of powerism, and argue for the significance of this discourse as a fresh analytic tool to understand oppression and unequal power as well as a source of new rhetoric to acknowledge and address the psychological and social burden that vulnerable identity groups suffer from.

To set the ground for this paper, I propose **powerism** as an underlying theoretical lens through which social discriminations and ostracization are understood. Powersim, as I define it, is the unequal and unjust attribution of power to morally irrelevant social categories, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and age. This idea is derived from my attempt to understand the central tenet that underlies all forms of social oppression. All sorts of "isms", be racism, sexism, religious oppression/ anti-Semitism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, or ableism, are essentially powerism. There is no hierarchy in oppression. Humans' embodied experiences and innate cognitive propensity towards sense making inevitably appropriate and create meanings for all our experiences, perceptions, and conceptions. Values and meanings might be ubiquitous, but the connotation and moral salience of such are far from black-and-white and absolute.

Positive, neutral, and negative connotations of meanings and values could be easily transposed and engineered through social, cultural, ideological, and economic institutions. A simple example is where the number six carries demonic undertone according to biblical teaching but symbolizes prosperity and fortune in Chinese numerology. Indeed, while meanings and values are rendered inevitable by the nature of human cognition and the phenomenological existence of sense making, the nature of meaning is subject to great manipulation. Through powerism, where supposedly value-neutral categorization unduly becomes positively or negatively value-laden stratification through unjust distribution of power, categories of identities become socially, politically, and morally charged words used to justify and perpetuate the unequal distribution of power. Morally neutral or irrelevant concepts become colored with debasement or extolment. For example, during the 18th, 19th and early 20th century throughout the Western world, the male-dominated political cabinet deemed women as unfit for public posts, subjugating women to a socially less significant position than men; during WWII, Adolf Hitler engineered the demonization of the Jewish race to fulfill his political agenda; during the COVID-19 Pandemic, President Donald Trump blatantly associated a biological disease with the Chinese race, the rhetoric of which has allegedly led to a surge in Anti-Asian racism across the United States. The ingredients of oppression and discrimination might interchange over time and across cultures, but the recipe---bigoted and unfair ascription of power---remains. As powerism then implies, since identity categories themselves have no social and moral salience, the difference or commonality in identities per se are actually not the source of belonging or alienation. Rather, it is the process of transposing negative social meanings and powers upon these morally irrelevant and intrinsically neutral identity categories that creates oppression and alienation. Thus, powerism directs us to interrogate whether the social, cultural, and political forces that shape people's "association process" are just or not. With powerism as a critical theoretical foundation, I will now dive into the mechanism through which gender and sexuality are performed, how such performance constitutes a collective social spectacle of powerism, and the intimate dynamic between the two.

First, imbibing Judith Butler's theoretical approach, I argue that gender and sexuality, when understood as socially constructionist and performative, divulge the need to examine the social norms and rules under which they are constructed and performed. Gender and sexuality are traditionally considered as biologically embedded. Gender is conventionally understood as the gamut of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity, and sexuality commonly perceived as sexual inclinations and predilections associated with particular sexes. Discussed in Butler's book Gender Trouble, the theory of performativity interprets and debunks many precedent theorizations of human nature and

gender characteristics, subsequently deliberating on the undertone of social constructionism that has clouded the lens through which gender, sex, sexuality, and femininity are examined (2006). Butler presents both gender and sexuality as products of enculturation and social constructs rather than natural attributes. For example, girls, attributed with a female gender, are raised to conform to culturally specific feminine demeanors and beauty standards. Demure, appropriate, graceful, and lady-like characteristics have come to define the female gender. Boy, on other hand, are raised to be bold, courageous, chivalric, and assertive, which then dominate the social definition of the male gender. Female are expected to be attracted to male, and vice versa. Individuals are raised in such a cultural milieu where they naturally take on such identity politics policed by gender and sexuality conventions. A helpful way to further discern the performativity of gender and sexuality is to imagine a society where all current gender paradigms are reversed, where we could safely hypothesize an inversion of gender reality. When such an alternative reality is logically possible, we are the confronted with a deeply constructed system of power that is artificially and often unjustly enforced upon our current gender reality. The performativity of gender thus sheds light on the manifestation of socially constructed nature of power dynamics.

To take a step further, I argue that gender perfomativety enacted by individuals collectively sheds light on a spectacle of powerism. As eloquently put by Debord in his discussion of cities as spectacles of class power, "The explosion of cities which cover the countryside with 'formless masses of urban residues' (Lewis Mumbord) is directly regulated by the imperatives of consumption" (1967/77). Here I would like to draw an analogy between Debord's city landscape of concrete and cement to the gender landscape of ideologies and conventions. A universal revelation evinced by Debord's view, where the pattern of consumption drives the formation of certain constructs on certain landscapes, such as the formless masses of urban residues on countryside, is the power of constructed social patterns in regulating specific individual performances. In the urban cities, it is the power of consumption that engineers the commercial front of the countryside. In the socio-cultural realm of gender, it is the power of conventional gender patterns and rules that engineers individuals' performance of gender. Urbanization, countryside's performance of urbanism, becomes a spectacle of power, so does gender performativity. Henri Lefebvre's argument, that "space is socially and historically produced; it is the key component of power and politics, imbued with ideology, and always in a process of becoming the means of domination" (1991), further enforces gender performativity as a spectacle of powerism. To elaborate, the question of gender performativity as a social space is essentially that "according to what rules is gender performed?" Merging both Lefebvre's and Butler's views, I propose that patriarchal worships and conventions entrenched

throughout modern history have elevated males to a dominant social position where they could have the power to imbue socio-cultural ideals, in this case gender conventions by which individuals perform their genders. For example, "ideal" females are supposed to embody beauty standards desired by men. As powerful and wealthy men select their spouses according to this standard that they construct, they send positive feedback to society that favors those who fulfill their desired norms and disadvantages those who deviate from them. With the trend of billionaires and Wall Street tycoons marrying models, countless girls choose to starve themselves simply to have a model-like physic to embody their ideal femininity. There exists a subtle yet devastating implication that to be female is to be desired by male. By constructing the norm of gender performativity, the powerful thus governs the behavior of the subordinate, subsequently allowing such gender norms to become means of further male domination. The entirety of this process neatly fits my notion of powerism, where male, female, and all other genders, which intrinsically have no moral or socio-cultural salience, are endued with unjust attribution of power---one of dominance and subjugation, one of object and subject, one of oppressor and conformer---that underlies gender inequality. Thus, performing gender illuminates the social spectacle of powerism, where putative value-neutral gender-neutral categories are turned into value-laden hierarchy.

To substantiate the understanding of gender performativity and its projected spectacle of powerism, I will now incorporate Michel Foucault's view of the mechanism of power into my analytical discourse of Butler's view. In *the History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault associates the historical development of sexuality with domination and subjugation, asserting that there exists a power dynamic that determines the rules for sexuality (2020). The power concerned here may not necessarily take the form of totalitarian or governmental control enforced upon society. Instead, it exists in every fabric of society and human interaction. Genders have an intricate web of power that has countless social, cultural, economic, political, and ideological dimensions to it rather than a singularity of total control. People's daily customs of social interaction, which are shaped by historically male-dominated political, religious, ideological, and historical forces, lay down the ground rules for gender performativity, which again functions as a form of socio-cultural power. These multiple levels of power, perpetuated and reinforced by one another, create the structure of domination held by society to produce the experience of acquiescence and suppression for those whose gender identities are associated with subpar social locations. In short, I believe that Foucault introduces a power-centric theoretical discourse that highlights the complex social mechanism through which gender performativity, overall as a spectacle of powerism, originates, develops, and propagates.

A caveat to the relation between gender performativity and the social spectacle of powerism is the dialectical nature of their dynamic. To avoid presenting my argument as reductive and deterministic, I unequivocally acknowledge the role of individual agency in shaping and driving the construction of culture, which prompts this attempt to describe a dialectical relation between individual gender performances and structural powerism. While the current landscape of gender performativity "originates, develops, and propagates" in and from a historically patriarchal social system as argued earlier, we must recognize how individuals performing genders also ultimately perpetuate the asymmetrical attribution of power to different genders. I believe Jeremy Bentham's concept of the panopticon lends great insight into the interplay between individual agency and structural power in the realm of gender performativity. While originally designed as a prison system, the panopticon has become an emblem of control and power dynamic between individual agency and institutional super-forces. The concept of the panopticon is to allow all prisoners of an institution to be observed by a single security guard, without the inmates being able to tell whether they are being watched. However, prisoners do still retain the agency to perform and behave as they will.

Now I will demonstrate how this system of control relates to the manifestation and ramification of gender performativity, especially in this era of technological and informational explosion. I argue that the primary relevance of the panopticon as a metaphor in the context of gender performativity is that the increasing visibility of private life constitutes today's public sphere where the relationship of mutual visibility becomes increasingly asymmetrical over time. As our lives are unavoidably enshrined in the many illusions created by social media, what we perceive, project, and receive becomes highly asymmetrical. For example, the glut of Instagram models and influencers contriving a façade of feminine and masculine perfection often outstrips the power of regular social media consumers' messages and embodied experiences of gender. Even when 99 out of 100 girls do not have perfectly toned bodies and gravity-defying bosoms, the spectacle of the 1%, when collectively circulated and amplified, creates a false illusion of perfection culture. As a result of the proliferation of such false spectacles, there emerges an automatic mechanism where increasingly asymmetrical exchanges of inspection occur as a seemingly natural process of virtual social interaction. As our individual access to social visibility becomes constricted by an unbalanced exchange of information, we are swept into the eye of public inspection, subjecting ourselves to normalization and conformity in the way that the panopticon is intended to shape and correct behavior. However, what's often overlooked in the discussion of the panopticon power system, what I want to bring to the forefront of the discussion, is the agency still afforded to individuals to react

to the corrective and monitory culture of the panopticon. Indeed, the gender system has created notions of right and wrong, normal and abnormal, and mainstream and ostracized, however the very notions of these dichotomous constructs stem from the opposite individual reactions to this panopticon---one of compliance, and one of rebellion---which cements the stage where gender is performed. Put differently, how individuals react to systemic norms have equal salience in shaping the positive or negative connotations of such norms. For example, blind acceptance of male-pleasing aesthetics, the pervasive adaption to male gratification in the pornographic industry through commodification of female submission and sexuality, or any guise of conformity to unequal gender norms facilitate the perpetuation of the institutional powerism associated with gender. The very connotation of "norm", a term suggestive of majority, pervasiveness, and standardization, reveals the individual behavior behind that normalizes an ideological construct, in this case gender performativity. Gender is merely a spectacle, a spectacle that individuals perform in reaction to one's expectation or defiance of the social panopticon, which eventually becomes naturalized self-regulation and a social norm. The increasing trend of gender fluidity and disruption of gender norms further exemplifies the individual agency in gender performativity. Within a restrictive system, the difficulty of challenging norms does not altogether negate the possibility of doing so. Regardless of how challenging, one still has the agency to react to oppressive norms as they will. The problem of the panopticon is not essentially the stripping of individuals of their complete agency, but the towering difficulty imposed upon individuals to react in discordance. However, in my opinion, the very difficulty of doing so is why we must. Hence, the relationship between individual gender performance and the collective spectacle of powerism is one of dialectic and mutually reinforcing rather than deterministic, reductive, or one-dimensional nature.

Lastly, I'd like to accentuate the significance of understanding gender performativity as a socio-cultural spectacle of powerism. As demonstrated by the argument so far, gender goes beyond the biological sphere and its performative nature reveals issues of power dynamics that could contribute to the public anthropological and sociological discourse of discrimination. The disempowering reality of gender restrictions and oppressions is grounded in a dominant culture that accentuates gender norms, conventional gender hierarchy, and expects genders to perform and be performed accordingly. This is essentially a culture of powerism where the embodiment of "norm" translates into visible social power without any hindrance, whereas people who embody "the otherness" of gender performance have to overcome socio-cultural challenges to assert their power. The spectacle of "powerism", the process of associating different social meanings and powers to the desirable dominant identity and the undesirable

targeted identity, ostensibly manifests in the social system that polices gender performativity. How gender roles are perceived, claimed, and experienced informs how the cycle of powerism and social categorization self-perpetuates. Hence, the interconnectedness between powerism and gender performativity provides us with a theoretical lens through which we could analyze how cultures of performed gender shape the reproduction of power, the reproduction of oppression, and the reproduction of alienation.

More importantly, since itself is a source of privilege and anxiety under the predominance of patriarchal culture, gender, we cannot fully appreciate and understand the physical and mental exhaustion that people who fall outside the norms of gender performativity experience without acknowledging the unjust deprivation of power that they suffer from. For people that fall outside the norms, the embodiment and acts of gender characteristics are often subject to public attention, discomfort, curiosity, or ridicule, which could be not only mentally exhausting but also induces great psychological harm. Gender identities and experiences are one of the most intimate dimensions of one's life. The lack of recognition and support for one's gender experiences becomes a source of disempowerment and marginalization in a culture that grants social power based on gender. Furthermore, the danger of residing in this culture of powerism rises from the tendency that people who are able to perform and embody gender norms often automatically exclude themselves from what they believe to be the "non-norms", which renders it incredibly difficult to reverse any social divide and presumed power dynamics. Once situated in a culture that grants us power and privilege, we become habituated to the norms and become blind to the non-norms that have little impact on our social capital. For those at the disadvantageous end of the power asymmetry, how they experience, embrace, and represent their sexuality inadvertently becomes a public statement. Where we draw the line between private and public experiences for people within and outside the social norm becomes a divider that creates different modes of reality --- one of privilege and one of oppression---that people constantly experience. Because of this ineluctable shift of gender from an individual trait and experience in the private sphere to a systematic problem in the public sphere, we need a discourse and the necessary vocabularies to not only acknowledge but also debunk this taxing and draining culture of unjust process of value and power attribution in our progress towards greater equality. In short, the spectacle of powersim and gender performativity not only provides a fresh theoretical and analytic tool to navigate gender inequality, oppression, and discrimination, but also creates a much-needed discourse to understand the source of subordinate identity groups' embodied suffering and psychological baggage in the culture of powerism.

In conclusion, in this essay, I have integrated Judith Butler's elucidation of gender performativity, Debord's and Henri Lefebvre's theorization of spectacle and space, Michel Foucault's concept of power, and Jeremy Bentham's design of the panopticon into a novel discourse of gender performance and powerism. By proposing the mechanism of gender performativity and attribution of power and establishing a dialectical relationship between individual agency and structural powerism, I demonstrated the significance of the spectacle of powersim as a theoretical and analytical apparatus in understanding the reproduction and perpetuation of gender performativity, gender inequality, and all guises of oppressions beyond, and as a new social discourse that we could use to acknowledge the suffering of disadvantaged identity groups, including but not limited to subordinate genders, pinpoint the root of such pain, and ultimately construct a public discourse that has the potential to challenge and overturn the current dichotomous norm of powerism.

Bibliography

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