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## Gender and Power – Introduction

“Power” means the ability *to have things done*. “Soft” power means persuading/cajoling/tempting/seducing the prospective doers to do them. “Hard” power means forcing/compelling them to do. The stake of all and any power struggle, whether deploying soft or hard arms, is the gaining or defending the already acquired ability to decide *which things are to be done*. On that latter point, adversaries in the power struggle are of different mind. They struggle because their selection of things that needs to be done differ.

The ability to decide what kind of things are to be done and which ones should be avoided or undone is called “politics.” In the last account, power struggle is a struggle for access to politics: for political rights – for genuine political rights, that is for the rights complemented with the capacity of deploying them. Such capacity demands possession of resources, which the use and effective application of possessed rights requires. There is quite a long list of such resources – starting from the ability to articulate and to voice own preferences, through the ability to make them heard where they need to be heard and listened to by those to whom they have been addressed, and up to the bargaining or fighting assets – that is the means of causing one’s own preferences to prevail over those of one’s adversaries. Power struggle are a common, indeed ubiquitous phenomenon in the life of society because the preferences, derived as a rule from individual or group interests or from what individuals and/or groups believe such interests to be, tend to become and remain differentiated and all too often at loggerheads with each other. Sometimes diverse interests are believed, rightly or wrongly, to be mutually irreconcilable. Power struggle is bound to remain a common occurrence as long as human interests or their group-related images stay in conflict.

We can read in the Wikipedia, believed to excel in fast updating of whatever passes currently for authoritative opinion, that “gender is a range of physical, mental, and behavioral characteristics distinguishing between masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, the term may refer to biological sex (i.e. the state of being male, female or intersex), social roles (as in gender roles), or gender identity.” A closer scrutiny would reveal though that the ostensible authority of the quoted above definition is conditional on certain tacitly accepted assumptions that in their turn have been bestowed a well-nigh axiomatic status by overt though more often surreptitious and covert work already accomplished by hard and soft varieties of power.

The fact that one concept may encompass in a common and seldom challenged opinion features as distinct and above all as heterogeneous as biological differences between the two sexes of the human species and the roles assigned to them in the social division of labour and social assignment of identities is the sediment of that work of powers. Comprising biological and cultural features in one notion, treating them as attributes/aspects of the same entity, endorses an accomplishment of powers bent on “naturalizing the cultural”: that is, depicting the historical product of human choices as the no-appeal-allowed verdict of nature – as if the link was primordial and immune to manipulation. In other words, as if the social distribution of rights and duties, assets and liabilities followed the distinctions pre-designed and pre-determined by nature (nature being in this case a synonym of “staying beyond human power”).

But the differentiation of social standings does not follow nature-produced distinctions. In the building of social order (another name for a social hierarchy of privileges and deprivations) nature-produced distinctions are used at the utmost as building blocks or reference points for a mechanism of creating and putting in operation an altogether different set of *social* distinctions only loosely related to their alleged natural causes and in no way determined by them. Claude Levi-Strauss, the great 20<sup>th</sup> Century anthropologist, pinpointed the human-made (invented by humans and by humans imposed on human reality) prohibition of incest – norm that used blood bonds to segregate women into eligible and non-eligible for sexual intercourse – as a hypothetical starting, but also pattern-setting point of such procedure; a procedure millennia-old yet still very much in use in the current introductions and promotions of cultural norms. Investigation of the role of power in the creation of gen-

der-related diversification of socially ascribed human roles, behavioral patterns and identities is by no means limited in its eye-opening potential to the practitioners of the specialist gender studies. It may, if properly conducted, offer an invaluable insight into the power-driven mechanisms omnipresent in the production and reproduction of all and any manifestations of human diversity, divisions and multi-dimensional inequality.