

BOOK REVIEW

## Gender Theory in Troubled Times

Kathleen Lennon and Rachel Alsop, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020 (ISBN: 978-0-745-68301-0)

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What started as a second edition of *Theorizing Gender: An Introduction* (co-authored by Annette Fitzsimons and Rosalind Minsky) instead became this self-conscious address on the metaphysics of sex and gender. The title of the book is telling. We are indeed doing gender theory in troubled times, and these troubled times are not separable from gender theory as it has developed over the decades.

Just what is so very troubling? The authors observe, “there has been a resurgence of a very visible gender essentialism in everyday life” (6). It can be found in feminist communities that police the boundaries of the concept “Woman” (13), which has led to the so-called “TERF Wars” (see Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020). But Kathleen Lennon and Rachel Alsop also highlight that this metaphysical presumption underscores (among other ideological commitments) the rise of right-wing populism and new nationalisms—social orientations that typically endorse restricting the reproductive rights of those who gestate and reject the legitimacy of queer communities. Significantly, as the authors note, “in recent years these movements have launched attacks on gender theory itself” (6).

With these contextual factors in place, it becomes clear that this book is an intervention in public discourse as much as an academic introduction to some of the most compelling developments of gender theory. The aim of this book is to argue against gender essentialism *and* to provide a convincing metaphysics that gives adequate emphasis to the body’s role in ego-formation—that is, to affirm that bodily differences make a difference to the subjects we become without conceding that bodily difference *determines* the kind of subject we are (20).

Lennon and Alsop highlight that “those who adopt gender essentialist positions most commonly anchor them in biology” (22). Appropriately, this is the focus of chapter 1. There the authors focus on evolutionary psychiatry and differences of male and female brains, noting that evolutionary psychiatry has been roundly criticized for question-begging, meanwhile research shows that “brains reflect the lives they have lived, not just the sex of their owners” (29). But what of the sex/gender distinction wherein *gender* refers to masculine and feminine styles of behavior and *sex* concerns the traits of the body: its hormones, genes, and morphology? The authors argue that *sex itself* is culturally constructed (31). There is no reason, beyond the social, that sex must be categorized into a dimorphic binary, for “several distinct biological markers of maleness and femaleness—visible morphology, hormones and chromosomes—are not always found together” (33).

For all this, “we cannot ignore the contribution which nature itself makes to the terms in which we make sense of it” (39). The fact of the matter is different bodies have different capacities, and those capacities can be more or less significant in the ongoing (re)production of human life. Still, bodies never exist nor act outside of material circumstances, technological possibilities, and systems of meaning (or imaginaries). In other words, “there is no clear boundary between what is natural and what is constructed” (41). The implication is that we have good reason to reject the sex/gender distinction—and that reason is that the binary gives the misleading impression that the sexed body is a *mere* natural occurrence upon which gender is overlaid.

In chapter 2 the authors turn to identity: how it is that we come to be the specific selves we are, selves who often understand themselves fundamentally as men, women, or nonbinary. Psychoanalysis still proves a useful theoretical tool to that end. In particular, the authors home in on Freud’s claim that “the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego” (47). Our identity is tied to our morphology not only as we perceive (through) it, but also in our recognition of others understanding us as selves through this very same morphology. Turning to Lacan, we find that it is not the *mere* reception of our morphology by others that (partly) constitutes our ego; rather, there is an already established, multifaceted system of meaning and order—the Symbolic—into which we are thrust at birth and through which we must come to recognize ourselves. Like other feminist theorists, the authors deny that this is a *stable* and *coherent* system of order, arguing that the symbolic and imaginary aspects of life are always unsteady and open to change.

On the question of sexual difference, the authors acknowledge that bodily capacities certainly contribute to one’s sense of self, but remind the reader that it’s not like “we can somehow disentangle nature and culture and identify what contributions are made from each side” (65). They also note that an overemphasis on sexual difference without mention of other social-identity anchorages means “the assumption is often made that all women are subject to the same oppressive imaginary and symbolic structures,” which is, of course, false (66). *Who* can be seen as *what* type of person may shift from time and place, making some features of our morphology more significant than others. We are more able to attune our awareness to this fact when we take stock of other social categories.

In chapter 3, the authors “move from looking at gender as a feature of subjectivity to considering it as structuring the material, social and economic worlds we inhabit” (71). These objective features include “the state of the land, the weather, what resources the land offers us, the technologies we have,” as well as the structures of society that condition the distribution of labor and resources (71). Developing out of critiques of Marxism, feminist arguments stress that it is not just patterns in the distribution of power and resources between bourgeoisie and proletariat that make for oppression, but also the distribution of power and resources between men and women.

It is significant to pay attention to patriarchy as a system that reproduces patterns of experiences, for some who police the border of Woman do not claim biologically based necessary and sufficient conditions; rather, those conditions are predicated on the facts of the material world: those gendered women are subject to power exercised by men. A person who has at one time been gendered a man, therefore, does not share (fully) in the experiences of which cisgender womanhood consists. However, again, the authors insist, following Raewyn Connell, that gender is “always dynamic and historically produced” (89). In other words, when our material conditions change—be they formal and informal institutional changes, developments in technology and medicine, alternative

understandings of the place or importance of body parts, and so forth—we should expect our conceptual boundaries and material commonalities will change too.

Chapter 4, which focuses primarily on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, is a case study illustrating a feminist metaphysics of gender that speaks to the interlacing of a subjective sense of self, cultural conditioning (or habituated behavior), and the dominant cultural imaginary to produce widely shared, seemingly natural gender categories. Beauvoir is perhaps best known for two claims: "she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other"; and, "One is not born, but rather becomes [a] woman" (100, 96). On the first claim, Beauvoir shows how society—both myth and matter—is built to accommodate the interests and lived experiences of Man. Woman is an afterthought and always defined by what she lacks in comparison to him. Part of the injustice of this state of being is the improper recognition it offers women—not only is her *being* misconstrued, she is also evaluated as other, lack, inferior, less. On the second claim, Beauvoir's point is that being a woman is just to be ever *becoming* woman. Becoming woman, in Beauvoir's time, took, among other things, one's having certain biological traits, being subjected to specific roles in economic and social structures, and habitual bodily training under the guise of meaning-generating, identity-conferring myths (for example, coming to see oneself as the object of a subject's gaze). All this, however, with the acknowledgment that "the situation of women was historically contingent and could be changed" (103).

Beauvoir's text intimates, but does not fully flesh out, the need for intersectional theorizing to fully comprehend gender identity. This is the focus of chapter 5. "Intersectionality" has become a bit of a buzzword in gender theory (and beyond), but as a process it gets at two fundamentally important things: first, "the necessary interwovenness of systems of power and privilege," and second, "the inter-articulation of our categories of social identification" (149), categories such as Woman. Take Sojourner Truth, whose *Ain't I a Woman?* speech has been hailed as a proto-intersectional intervention (130)—her experiences of being a woman are not only inter-articulated with racial identity at the level of subjective experience, they are also the result of several systems of power and privilege interoperating (not only gender and race, but also empire and capitalism). This is significant, given the authors' aim in this book, for intersectionality tells against gender essentialism—there simply is no universally shared trait or experience that could constitute the identity "Woman."

As chapter 5 can be seen as an elaboration on Beauvoir's "objective conditions" productive of gender identity (the material world, and all of the interoperating systems this world involves), chapter 6 can be seen as an elaboration of the *enactment* of gender identity through the body (for Beauvoir, that enactment is described as habit). Turning to Judith Butler and her influential works, this chapter centers on enactment as *performativity*. Per this account, "it is not that there exists an originary difference between men and women to which we then attach distinct social roles. Rather, such everyday practices are what *make* such differences. They both institute and maintain our binary gendered categories" (152, original emphasis).

We all reiterate already established social scripts pertaining to gender—but since we are always performing womanhood (or manhood, or nonbinariness), *what* norms and meanings those scripts contain adapt and shift over time. When these shifts "take on a meaning which undermines or subverts the dominant norms," a queering of meaning has occurred (160). In addition to performativity, the authors also home in on *precarity* in Butler's later work. On precarity, Butler "stresses the vulnerability . . . of everyone's subjectivity, formed as it is by public systems of meaning which are themselves

precarious and criss-crossed by differences” (158). From this, we can see how recognition remains central in one’s development and maintenance of a self. Who we are (the *I*) is not shaped from the inside alone, but always from the perception of the self-as-seen-by-others in a material, historico-contextualized environment.

However, the authors still maintain that Butler does not pay enough attention to the “bruteness of bodily facts” (169), writing that “if we are interested in theorizing the body we . . . need a way of thinking about the body which both recognizes its weightiness (in a way that Butler seems to ignore) and accommodates the socially mediated nature of our experience of it” (170). Thus, taking chapters 4–6 together, it becomes clear that when it comes to gender and the problem of oppression, we need material changes both at the individual level and the level of structural, material practices, in addition to changes to the meanings of male and female (and intersex) bodies, to relieve gender oppression.

The final chapter brings us to the point of making sense of our gendered selves. This is about *the self* trying to understand itself in its own existence. More concretely, the ontology of gender these authors have offered—an ontology informed by but not reducible to the biological body—is trans inclusive. Fundamentally, this chapter considers the ways in which trans and nonbinary genders rouse meaning in a way that can be read as an invitation to negotiate intelligible subjectivities and find possible alternative modes of sociability *beyond* the (cis-het-) man/woman dichotomy (198). The authors tell us that, on their account, the body is expressive: “Our bodies are read, by ourselves and others, as *expressing our social positionality*. If they express a position we are not [yet] able to occupy, then we feel the need to change them, so that they facilitate the social interactions with which we can find our feet” (192). Because we (all of us) are always in processes of reiterating gender, of *becoming* men, women, and nonbinary, what one “needs” to physically change to receive social recognition in that position where one feels most at home may no longer “need” to be changed to be so recognized later or elsewhere.

So, the authors conclude, there is no “truth” about gender (or, if there is, that truth is: gender is not essential). This ontology can be extremely useful for helping each of us understand who we are as individuals in contextual relation to multiple others. However, not only does this ontology threaten the security of gender essentialism for those who endorse it, it produces “meaning-vertigo” for these groups (see Lopes 2019). This disorienting experience of meaning-vertigo, which is a consequence of challenges to the very meaning of gender and the sexed body, has led us to these present troubling times, to what we might call a “battle of the imaginations” (see Churcher and Gatens 2019).

I am all too aware that gender naturalism is a dogged folk ontology. We need to do a lot of unlearning. But the alternate ontology of gender the authors present here is substantial enough to enable people to see the world anew; it reduces this seismic gap in the world of meaning. The authors have given us—through a synthesis of decades of feminist theory—an alternative image of gender in a crisis of meaning. I am hopeful that these new narratives on gender can and will resonate with people who are cisgender, and that we will continue remaking the meanings of gender identities until we can say that no-one is oppressed on the basis of gender.

This is an especially urgent project in the present, where we find, in New South Wales, for example, a recently proposed bill with an explicit objective “to prohibit the teaching of the ideology of gender fluidity to children in schools.”<sup>1</sup> Or, in Tasmania, where an ostensibly feminist group has distributed flyers stating: “Sex is not gender”; “Sex is a biological fact”; “Transgender law reforms have nothing to do

with LGB rights”; and Gender Registration by means of statutory declaration, rather than an automatic sex classification at birth, “will adversely affect the sex-based rights of women and girls,” among other things.<sup>2</sup> This book addresses each of these concerns with the nuance it deserves, making it a remarkably useful text for students, scholars, activists, and an interested general public alike.

## Notes

**1** See *Education Legislation Amendment (Parental Rights) Bill 2020* (NSW), Explanatory Note, overview point (b).

**2** Women Speak Tasmania distributed these flyers when the Tasmanian parliament was considering legislation that has allowed trans and nonbinary individuals to change or remove their gender designator on their birth certificates via statutory declaration.

## References

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