

Introduction

THIS BOOK offers an analysis of the conceptual efficacy of ‘gender’, both as a mode of analysis and as a basis for envisioning the emancipatory transformation of society. It should be pointed out at once, however, that whilst its title suggests that ‘gender’ has a future, not all the volume’s contributors are persuaded that this is the case.

Today, the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ are deployed indiscriminately – or, to be more precise, ‘gender’ is increasingly being used to cover both terms. It is, then, worth re-establishing the traditional difference between the two concepts. As proselytized from the late 1960s, ‘sex’ is deemed a category of analysis which relates to the identification of an individual by biological endowments and functions. ‘Gender’ is concerned with the ascription of social characteristics such as ‘womanly’, ‘manly’, ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’, all of which can be seen as culturally variable and not necessarily associated with the sex of an individual. Whilst this distinction is admittedly rough around the edges, its general acceptance since the 1970s has heralded a rare, albeit minimal, consensus across mainstream academia: that the concept of sex is inadequate for the description of social identities. Previously, ‘sex’ invoked an analysis of men and women based upon an a priori set of assumptions about how each sex behaves. In an attempt to overcome what was seen as cultural bias, the term ‘gender’ was introduced as a way of classifying individuals socially rather than just biologically. The ramifications of this ostensibly obvious point have been profound and have remained the object of fierce intellectual and ideological conflict.

Post-modern theories of subjectivity and identity have attacked early theorizing and interpretations of ‘gender’ for relying on a binary account of either ‘male’ or ‘female’. Instead, the post-modernists sought to destabilize the notion of gender by insisting upon a spectrum of fluid identities. This view has in turn been hugely

complicated by the development of radical new technologies in sex reassignment and reproduction techniques. Moreover, in a related attack on the universalizing claims of the gender binary, many have criticized the concept for its homogenization of female experience pitted against a singular understanding of oppression, discrimination and patriarchy. Such descriptions and analyses of gender have largely been generated by white, liberal, relatively wealthy women whose range of experience is inadequate to appreciate the multiple faces of subjugation. Consequently there have been many challenges to the imposition of predominantly western norms on a wide variety of multicultural, racial, ethnic, religious and socio-economic groups and their various social relations, roles, living conditions, beliefs and practices.

However, these principally cultural analyses, which quickly embraced methodologies from across the social sciences and humanities, have themselves recently been challenged by what we might term a reinvigoration of ‘the biology of gender’. New theories from the natural sciences and the field of evolutionary psychology are emerging to confront the standard late twentieth-century view of how ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ relate, demanding instead that we revisit the possibility that ‘gendered behaviour’ is biologically derived.

At the core of ‘gender analysis’ is a concern with unjust inequalities between men and women. One only needs to scan the mission statements of major international bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union to find ‘gender equality’ stated as a principal political objective. Of course, enormous progress has been made regarding the situation of women who profit from the highly sophisticated legal and political structures of western democracies. Under the individualist liberal doctrine of equal rights, men and women alike are, in principle at least, protected from prejudicial treatment. However, whilst the fruits of this hegemonic construction have been hailed by some as emancipatory, to others they serve to obfuscate patterns of injustice and group discrimination. Even within such progressive environments, substantive equality remains elusive in everyday life as men and women fail to enjoy equal rights and privileges in practice: unrelenting pay gaps between men and women in employment; persistent institutional stereotyping and bigotry; the under-representation of women in decision-making and authoritative positions; the difficulties faced in seeking to

reconcile professional and family responsibilities. All these, as features of modern society, show that a multitude of systemic inequalities and injustices between men and women remain deeply entrenched.

In the advent of new technological, methodological, theoretical and social advances then, we return to vital questions for gender analysis. One primary challenge is to decide whether any innate differences between men and women should be accepted as legitimately causing naturally unequal social outcomes. If so, should these outcomes be celebrated or compensated for through social engineering? If, however, various differences between the sexes are considered negligible and not justifying substantially different social outcomes for each, then we are faced with what must be institutional prejudices and discriminatory traditions as the causes of inequality, and ought to orientate our political practices accordingly.

To what degree does 'gender' in fact relate to sex? How useful is the concept of 'gender' in social analysis? How does 'gender' feature in shifts in familial structures and demography? How should we conceive of 'gender' in terms of contemporary inequality and injustice? What is 'gender's' function in the design and pursuit of political objectives? These are the essential questions to which ten thinkers, who together span the disciplines of evolutionary psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, socio-economics, socio-legal studies, social theory, political theory and political philosophy, apply themselves and offer their interventions.

Structure of the book

Part I of the book, 'Reorienting the feminist imagination', contains three essays, by Nancy Fraser, Valerie Bryson and Ingrid Robeyns, which consider the failings of previous feminist imaginations and consequently offer quite contrasting future theoretical orientations for the pursuit of 'gender justice'. The authors in Part II, 'Variations on the theme of gender', Simon Baron-Cohen, Susan Hurley, Terrell Carver, Tony Lawson and Juliet Mitchell, offer provocative and conflicting perspectives on the challenges which face traditional understandings of 'sex' and 'gender'. Finally, Part III, 'Gender and political practice', consists of essays by Catherine Hakim, Rosemary Crompton and Jude Browne, who examine the various implications

for public policy of different understandings of ‘gender’ and offer some radically divergent views on why men and women experience such dissimilar social outcomes.

Part I: Reorienting the feminist imagination

The book begins with Nancy Fraser’s assertion that there has been a ‘major shift in the geography of feminist energies’. Her claim that the cutting edge of gender analysis has migrated from the USA to Europe has considerable implications for how we conceive of the whole topic and how we might reinvent some of the core elements of feminism in order to secure ‘gender equality’ and justice in the contemporary age of globalization. Fraser introduces us to a new ‘practical mapping’ for how to proceed. In setting the context, she divides the post-war feminist imaginations into three major phases. The first is that of the New Social Movements of the 1960s in which feminism joined the various collectives of marginalized social categories demanding inclusion in the egalitarian objectives of welfare stateism. The second is that of identity politics, pioneered in the USA, which dominated the intellectual hub of feminism for two decades from the end of the 1980s. The final phase, to which Fraser commits her own allegiance and designs of future ‘gender justice’, is that of ‘trans-national politics’, which emerged post 9/11. This phase, she argues, is the only possible site of substantive progress in that it has the actual capacity to transcend and overturn habitual biases within modern territorial state traditions entrenched in gendered stereotypes and unaccommodating historical legacies. Throughout the chapter, Fraser charts how feminists turned away from redistribution-centred economic reform, which she identifies as an ‘indispensable dimension of a feminist politics’, and instead concentrated on recognition and identity politics. This approach waned, however, in the shadow of increasing capitalistic atomization, continued economic retrenchment policies and a revival of conservative family values (as typified in the recent spread of evangelicalism in the USA). According to Fraser, only a vision which encompasses the renovation and synthesizing of both redistribution and recognition together with a new form of representation at the trans-national level can provide the necessary mechanisms and objectives for ‘gender justice’ in what she terms the contemporary ‘post-socialist’ order.

Valerie Bryson's chapter provides a critique of hegemonic western liberal movements which, she argues, have firmly cast individual equal rights as the response to issues of inequality. Claiming such rights as fundamentally androcentric, she insists that nothing less than a resuscitation of specific elements of radical feminism, in particular the concept of 'patriarchy', can provide an effective view of present-day gender relations. Bryson suggests that this approach, in combination with a return to socialist and Marxist analyses of societal relations, is, albeit unsavoury to some, the only route to securing 'gender equality'. If we are to take equality as a serious and genuine societal goal, she argues, we must accept that current liberal strategies will unequivocally fail to secure the necessary steps towards it. Bryson recognizes that the concept of patriarchy has become rather unfashionable, but in reconceptualizing it, not as a conscious collective project on the part of men to subordinate women, but rather as a descriptive device which enables an accurate explanation of the status quo, she reintroduces 'patriarchy' to the centre stage of 'gender equality analysis'. She describes how the largely unchallenged focus on liberal rights discourse has obscured patriarchy and the discriminatory repercussions it harbours. Without conceiving of liberal societal workings through the lens of patriarchy, she asserts that we cannot help but be seduced by the idea that any unequal outcomes apparent between the sexes are a consequence of choice, merit or luck. Inevitably then, we are likely to conclude that such outcomes, set against a backdrop of equal rights, must be justified. This doctrine is what Bryson refers to with irony as 'common sense', which she asserts is by far the dominant thinking in liberal democracies. In a Marxist vein, Bryson argues that 'common sense' renders people incapable of recognizing societal inequality and discrimination which are not in fact, as 'common sense' would lead us to believe, merely a sequence of unfortunate individual experiences, but are rather instantiations of systematic 'gender injustice'. Bryson not only calls for an alternative analysis of 'gender equality' through a reinterpreted notion of patriarchy, but also demands that certain activities which cause gendered divisions, such as responsibility for domestic work, be redefined as social responsibilities and not purely as the consequences of private choices. Despite emphasizing widespread policies of welfare state retrenchment and the common demise of socialist objectives, she concludes by explaining

how such a redefinition is not beyond our current and plausible political reach.

Ingrid Robeyns presents an innovative account of ‘gender justice’, based on Amartya Sen’s capability approach. The capability approach is one which prescribes that individuals should be free to pursue certain ‘functionings’ – this means that one has the freedom to be and to do something one has good reason to consider worth ‘being’ and ‘doing’. Capabilities then are the full sets of functionings one identifies as being the composite parts of the life one has good reason to consider living. As a metric of well-being the capability approach is an equal-opportunity-based approach which is able to focus on the individual in a way that is particular to needs and preferences rather than assuming ‘well-being’ by extraneous or aggregate measures such as household income, for example, which may not be distributed satisfactorily between individual inhabitants. Similarly, a simple comparison of men’s and women’s pay does not, in and of itself, tell us anything about an individual’s real freedom to live satisfactorily.

Sen’s ‘conversion factors’ are social, personal and environmental factors which affect the way in which one is able to convert one’s resources, such as educational degrees and professional or social skills, into desired capabilities. Robeyn identifies ‘gender’ as such a conversion factor and illustrates its relationship to social norms, stereotypes, identities and social institutions. In so doing, she argues that stereotypes and social norms reinforce gender inequalities and gendered behaviour which in turn render women’s position in society structurally weaker than men’s. In this way she describes how we should consider ‘gender’ as morally relevant when constructing political strategies to eradicate injustice.

Robeyns introduces three principles to the capability approach without the fulfilment of which, she argues, a society cannot become ‘gender just’. These principles are first, that the capability sets for men and women should be equal except for inequalities that are due to sex differences, not gender differences, and cannot be rectified by human intervention. Second, constraints on individuals’ choices from the capability set should not be structured according to ‘morally irrelevant characteristics’ such as ‘gender’. And third, ‘pay-offs’ of different options in the capability set must not be ‘gender biased’.

In applying these principles along the lines of an opportunity-based capability approach to inequality Robeyns asserts that even in

progressive democracies we are far from achieving ‘gender just’ societies, and offers a mechanism by which to proceed in the future.

Part II: Variations on the theme of gender

In the [fourth chapter](#), Simon Baron-Cohen explicates his new theory, based in evolutionary psychology, about the essential differences between the average male and female brain. Although his approach is scientific, he presents the empathizing-systemizing theory (E-S) in a highly accessible way to those outside the field of experimental psychology. Writing from the perspective that ‘the pendulum has settled sensibly in the middle of the nature–nurture debate’, Baron-Cohen emphatically denies claims of crude essentialism. Rather, his aim is to establish that behaviour and psychology are products not *only* of experience but *also* of biology. Based on psycho-physiological research on humans, he proposes that ‘the female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy and that the male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems’. The proclivity to ‘empathize’ describes the ability to classify another person’s emotions and to respond to them appositely (brain type E). ‘Systemizing’ is epitomized by the compulsion to explore systems and to deduce their laws, rules and mechanisms (brain type S). Baron-Cohen is adamant that the brain type cannot be assumed merely by the sex of an individual, as not all men possess brain type S, nor all females brain type E. The E-S theory is strictly one of averages which relies upon the premise that ‘more males than females have a brain of type S and more females than males have a brain of type E’.

Crucially however, Baron-Cohen infers from his results that unless we are prepared to administer strict interventionist policy mechanisms which would impede a form of natural selection (such as a 50 per cent quota system for each occupation) we should not expect the sex ratio in certain jobs like professional mathematician or physicist ever to be equal. This is a claim from which the social, political and philosophical interpretations of inequality, such as those related to occupational sex segregation and in particular the perennial pay gap between men and women, have long shied away. Within the context of this volume, Baron-Cohen attempts to carve out an analytic space in which the importance of biology in creating different drives in the

average male and female mind can be legitimately assessed and compared to other competing views.

Susan Hurley considers how we might address ‘gender justice’ by turning to the tensions between evolutionary psychology and mainstream feminism. She offers a rare feminist reading of standard views in evolutionary psychology for the purpose of investigating how they might be of use for understanding the nature of sex and consequently the construction of ‘gender’.

Particularly in light of dramatic increases in marital instability over recent decades, Hurley asks whether contemporary western familial structures and social policies are currently constructed along the right lines. Hurley claims that feminists, preoccupied with the political deconstruction of patriarchal social orderings, should turn to ‘nature’ as a source of inspiration for devising innovative policies which would genuinely serve gender equality and justice. In her article she highlights research in the field of evolutionary psychology which shows how the human pattern of social monogamy is extremely rare and unstable in nature and how, in order for it to survive, it must be culturally constructed and supported. Nature, on the other hand, provides a great variety of alternative stable reproductive patterns from which, Hurley argues, feminists can learn a great deal. On contemplating how monogamy enforces sexual equality among materially unequal men in societies that are so inegalitarian in other respects, Hurley questions the widespread institutional endorsement of the monogamous model and calls for a reconsideration of present and future societal ideals. In particular, she asks whether unconventional familial structures might be better suited to our present-day circumstances which have been marked by dramatic increases in marital instability. Her argument has radical implications for policy design; for example, a move towards a polygamous society might herald the separation of the social institution of childrearing from private sexual relations. Ultimately, Hurley argues that evolutionary psychology is not necessarily an enemy of feminism, in the way suggested by a traditional opposition between sex as nature and gender as nurture, and that we should seek to embrace some of its insights in order best to navigate some of the revolutionary social changes of the new century.

Terrell Carver’s chapter focuses on the ways in which pioneering scientific developments impact on the future of gender as a category of analysis. Along post-modernist lines, he argues that the emergence

of trans-sexual technologies and trans-gender identities has become profoundly troublesome, if not fatal, for the concept of 'gender' altogether.

Carver suggests that, in all modern societies, the standard ethical discourse presupposes and reproduces a particular conception of the individual (the ethical subject) which is essentially deficient. He argues that binary or stable concepts of sexuality, or purported biological certainties about the relationship between individuals and reproduction, or even 'normal' embodiments of the male and female, cannot be assumed. In particular, he asserts, 'gender' can only offer a crude bifurcation of individuals which consequently encourages an all too easy 'slide between masculine and the humanly "normal"' in social and institutional settings. Consequently, Carver argues that there must be a philosophical and legal reconceptualization of the human subject which is able to appreciate a full range of 'complex gradations' and 'hybridities' concerning the self.

His central claim is that the theory and practice of trans-sexuality, together with the technologies of assisted reproduction (including donor and surrogacy combinations) and the politics of same-sex marriage and of 'non-singular individuals', mark an important stage in the deconstruction and resignifying of the human as the ethical subject. 'Physical singularity', for example, should not be assumed of the ethical subject when she is a gestating mother-to-be and the 'heteronormative' model of the ethical subject is but a distant legacy of past legal, political and social practices. Accordingly, Carver argues that the concept of gender is in trouble as it is a central feature of the insufficient traditional frameworks which underpin current conceptualizations of the human subject and one which we might do well to consider obsolete if we are to bring ethical discourses up to speed. Although traditional conceptualizations have permitted some exceptions in the past, it is Carver's claim that these very exceptions are increasingly proving to be the *rule*, and producing significant changes in everyday practice. Numerous individuals and groups have begun to bring forward legal cases, engage in political campaigns and use liberal rights-governed frameworks and democratic institutions to challenge traditional understandings of the self. Carver maps these challenges through an analytical approach to historical and contemporary theorizations and attempts to create a counterpoint between current instabilities in 'fixing' the human person and examples of practical

conceptualizations that re-create the ethical subject in increasingly diverse ways.

Tony Lawson sees the commonplace use of 'gender' as highly problematic and, particularly in the wake of post-modernist critiques, he seeks to salvage the concept both as a category of analysis and as a basis for the progressive transformation of society. He suggests that feminists need to engage far more than they have done in a systematic ontological understanding of the concept as the first step on the way to a more coherent and effective prescription of political practice. His principal argument is that we must develop a conception of gender that, on the one hand, absorbs the fact that we are all different and that our experiences and identities are historically, culturally and socially contextual, but that, on the other, is able to act as an emancipatory device which can facilitate the need to organize collectively. Whilst Lawson supports the post-modernist critique of early 'gender theorizing', he maintains that the critique itself obviates the potential for recognizing systematic forces of societal discrimination such as the fact that 'biological females are very often dominated or oppressed by males, and in ways that have little if anything to do with sexual as opposed to social differences'. Drawing on the philosophical insights of 'critical realism', Lawson argues for a conception of gender as a feature of social structure ('something that is irreducible to human practices or experiences'). 'Gender', then, should be regarded as a social system whereby *social* discriminations are made between individuals based on their identified biological sex. Once we have grasped this crucial insight, he argues, it is possible to retain gender as a useful category of analysis, and to see that the project of combating gender discrimination is itself a project of wholesale social transformation. In so doing, he seeks to provide a new way of looking at the relationship between gender and sex.

Juliet Mitchell examines the hypothesis that the rise of second-wave feminism both reflected and spearheaded an aspect of demographic transition to non-replacement populations. She asserts a very different distinction between the terms 'sex' and 'gender' by considering the tension between the formation of 'sexual difference' to enable reproduction and what she calls the 'engendering of gender' in lateral relations which are indifferent to procreation.

In contextualizing this distinction, Mitchell shows how, with the achievements of feminism as a political vanguard and a demographic