

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Harriet Bradley**, *Gender: Key Concepts*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2007, 240 pp. \$29.99 paper (978-0-7456-2377-1), \$77.99 hardcover (978-0-7456-2376-4)

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Geared toward undergraduate students, Harriet Bradley's *Gender* provides a comprehensive introduction to the concept of gender, exploring the ways it has been theoretically developed, studied, and debated within the academy, as well as how it is experienced and understood in everyday social relations. The first three chapters examine the uses and meanings of gender over the last 40 years and offer an accessible account of how modern and postmodern feminist perspectives have influenced studies of and ideas about gender. In the rest of the book, Bradley shows how these theoretical perspectives play out in our daily relations, interactions, and exchanges. She highlights the myriad ways that gender is constructed, performed, enacted, and limited in contrast to theories that situate it as a fixed, stable, or inherent quality. Bradley's discussions are theoretically rich, yet easy to follow for those less familiar with gender studies, as key concepts are italicized, clearly defined, and thoroughly discussed. The combination of empirical research and personal narratives throughout the book superbly illustrates both how gender is conceptually understood and how it is lived and experienced in the everyday world.

Bradley ontologically posits gender as a social construct used to categorize humans in terms of "masculine" and "feminine" traits in order to make sense of (presumed) sexual difference in human behaviour. Because gender is a social construct, the meanings associated with it are not fixed but vary over time and from culture to culture. At the same time, gender is not merely an abstract social construction but also, as Bradley explains, a political force bound up in power relations between men and women — the personal is indeed political.

Bradley's sociological analysis of gender combines elements of modernism and postmodernism. On the one hand, her approach is unabashedly influenced by Marxist theory: gender relations, she contends, are best grasped through the study of class relations, that is, of the relational and everyday productive, reproductive, and consuming processes of gender. It is in these relations that most, if not all, women are subjected to male authority and the threat of violence at home or work, pressured to have children, and constrained in access to public space. On the other

hand, Bradley incorporates a postmodern approach into her analysis to reveal how power and discourse shape one's social field of action, regulating "what is possible to be" for the human subject and guiding her or him into a particular (normalized or gendered) social order. In addition, she introduces the notion of intersectionality to signal how experiences of gender are furthermore affected by the multiple and various intersections of social identities such as race, age, and sexual identity, underscoring the fact that the experiences of "women" are not homogenous. In the end, Bradley cautions against privileging any particular intersection and instead encourages the reader to examine the different logics at play for each. However, she also explains that for a "politically useful gender analysis," one must explore the regularities and patterns of intersection. In these ways, Bradley's insightful introduction to gender promotes a "new political economy of gender" maintaining a focus on lived experience while also considering the impact of power, discourse, and intersectionality.

Several elements make this book distinctive and especially valuable to students. First, in an effort to further illuminate the political economical forces driving gender differences and inequality, Bradley explains how discourses of masculinity, femininity, and heteronormativity direct and normalize gender relations in production (in the workplace), reproduction (sexuality, human reproduction, and parenthood), and leisure and consumption. These discursive forces, Bradley contends, have a profound effect on how one experiences and understands her or his own gender identity. In this way, Bradley endeavours to cultivate the reader's sociological imagination by emphasizing the *social* influences on and social significance of *individual* or *personal* experiences of gender. Second, vignettes situated between the main chapters illustrate the ways gender is lived out in people's everyday lives. Some are personal stories of individuals, while others exemplify predicaments and possibilities which individuals may encounter in their gendered lives. These vignettes offer the reader the opportunity to pause and reflect on *stories* of gender in between the heavier theoretical and empirical chapters, underscoring the proposition that the personal is political.

Overall, *Gender* provides a reasonably balanced account of the theoretical debates surrounding issues and understandings of gender. However, I found the discussion on the role of transgender and transsexuality theories in gender studies rather terse. Bradley situates transsexuality within Judith Butler's notion of "performativity" and considers drag and cross-dressing as particularly subversive acts that challenge the idea of a natural "heterosexual matrix." But the upsurge of transsexual narratives and literature in the 1990s — focusing on legal rights and

social justice, critiques of essentialism, and alternative theories of identity — has contributed much more to studies and theories of gender than Bradley suggests.

I was also disappointed that the reader is not encouraged to ask that old question of modernist feminism, “what is to be done?” An intriguing discussion on gendered utopias is intended to entice the reader to “think otherwise,” and consider “what solutions have been posed to” gender oppression, subordination, and violence against women. But why leap to utopias for these solutions without thinking about, for example, the ethics of gender or other ways of acting or being? Are processes of gender so rigid that we could not effectively alter or change these ways of thinking, acting, and being? Bradley points out that it is difficult to escape the trappings and ubiquity of gender: “true” she says, “it is easier nowadays to choose *not* to be a housewife or a mother. But once the choice is to have children is made, the old processes of gendering set in once again” (p. 136). Is the decision to have children always or necessarily a gendering moment? Is there no possibility for moving beyond or transgressing gender, no possibility of “*doing* otherwise” in everyday, practical ways?

Despite several waves of feminisms since the 19th century, gender inequality persists. Bradley rightly argues critical analyses of gender will be needed for as long as gendered relations are hierarchical. The political economy of gender she expounds in this book reveals the structural and discursive powers which perpetuate and exploit gender; it calls for persistent interrogation of these powers in order to expose the socially constructed and taken-for-granted assumptions about the existence and meanings of “woman” and “man” in society today. Notwithstanding my minor criticisms, Bradley’s *Gender* is a rich, intelligible sociological introduction to gender.

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