

Unlearning Gender

Boglárka Kiss

Repo, Jemima. *The Biopolitics of Gender*. Oxford: OUP, 2016. 218 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-025691-3. Hbk. Npr.

The concept of gender has been aligned with dominant theories of feminism in the past forty years to such a fundamental extent that gender not only seems to be the central concept of feminist criticism, but also appears to be synonymous with it. Interrogating the relevance of gender from a feminist platform could appear counter-productive given the rebranding of “feminism” as “gender studies” in university classrooms, as well as the positioning of the sex/gender split as the central tenet and premise of contemporary feminist social critique in academic discourse. In such a context, the question posed in the “Conclusion” of Jemima Repo’s work, whether gender is an “indispensable discourse for feminist theory and politics” (159), might seem considerably provocative. Indeed, Repo positions *The Biopolitics of Gender* as a critical intervention into feminist theory. In her study, the author sets out to place the idea of gender under scrutiny asking whether gender is necessarily the liberating, subversive concept as it has been heralded.

To unlearn gender, Repo develops a genealogical analysis to investigate the contexts in which the concept became thinkable and “to uncover the technologies of knowledge and power that deploy and maintain it, through what strategies, and with what effects” (5). Repo’s focus on power, regimes of truth, as well as her genealogical methodology clearly place *The Biopolitics of Gender* in a Foucauldian tradition of critical inquiry. Apart from this objective, a fundamental aim of *The Biopolitics of Gender* is to extend Foucault’s biopolitical account of sexuality and to examine gender as the biopolitical tool of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Repo uses key Foucauldian ideas, such as neoliberal governmentality and the docile body to “examine the conditions of possibility for the emergence, expansion, intensification, transformation, and destruction of discourses” (9) pertaining to gender. Due to this genealogical approach, *The Biopolitics of Gender* traces intellectual and political trends that made the increasing significance of gender possible in each area of study: sexology, feminist theory, and policy making. In the first chapters of the study we learn how the behaviorism and structural functionalism of the 1930s and 1940s gave rise to an interest in the different roles men and women assume in the nuclear family, which was

addressed by psychology and sexology in the 1950s. Similarly, later chapters delineate how gender became an area of central importance in EU policy making after having been addressed as a central factor in relation to fertility rates within the context of demographic science.

Repo's central claim is that, much like sexuality in the nineteenth century, the contemporary discourse of gender functions as an apparatus of biopower. She contends that the notion of gender was not developed by feminist thinkers to critique patriarchal social organizations but was "invented as a mechanism for normalizing, disciplining and governing sex" (2) within the context of intersex subjects undergoing sex assignment surgeries. Repo shows that the renowned professor of medical psychology and pediatrics, John Money devised the idea of gender as a psychosocial aspect of sex, which was used to "pin down" the otherwise ambiguous sexual identity of intersex patients and deployed as an incentive to complete surgery which normalized the ambivalent sex of hermaphroditic children. Repo argues that such surgeries reframe the intersex body as a docile body which conforms to the hegemonic socio-political dictates of the dominant social order. According to her analysis, what was at stake in sex assignment surgeries was not the psychological/emotional well-being of intersex patients but the maintenance of the conventional ideology of the postwar nuclear family. By creating docile bodies of unambiguous sex and socializing them into "different-sex desiring subjects who would reproduce capital and population," sex assignment surgeries functioned "to uphold the Western capitalist social, political, and economic order" (3). Since it was the concept of gender, denoting a person's psychological sense of being of a certain sex, which made such sex assignment surgeries possible, gender was "instrumental to sedimenting Western postwar capitalism through the management of sex" (2-3). It is in this way that gender became a biopolitical tool which was utilized to govern life.

Tracing the emergence of gender as an ultimately disciplinary tool in Money's clinic in the 1950s has significant repercussions with regards to the feminist deployment of gender. As such, the third chapter of the monograph asks "to what extent . . . feminism . . . bec[a]me entangled in the disciplinary biopolitics of gender" (75). Especially pertinent to Repo's study is the extent to which gender is entrenched in the structure of the Western nuclear family. Repo asks whether the concept of gender can address the struggles of women in the non-Western world—a concern which has been addressed by feminist theorists from minority social groups. The analysis contends that "feminist gender theory was modelled on a certain raced and classed biopolitics of sex

in postwar America” (76), which entails that feminist theory has the capacity to reproduce and perpetuate racial and class inequalities embedded within the structure of Western capitalism. What is more, the context in which the concept emerged also means that gender is tied to biopolitical technologies, which implies that “feminists also reproduced the sexual truths and knowable subjects of the sexological context from which they derived the idea” (77). The fundamental paradox at the heart of this phenomenon is that to achieve their aim of frustrating the idea of biological essentialism, feminist thinkers utilized a term that has been deployed to reinforce the very idea of the exclusivity of two opposing sexes. As a result, Repo claims, “gender became further ingrained as an apparatus of sex, not only in multiple academic fields but eventually also in the imaginary of the broader public” (78).

In the chapter tracing feminist discourses in which the concept of gender gained particular purchase, *The Biopolitics of Gender* offers an illuminating and useful account of the emergence of gender theory within feminist criticism. Although there is a tendency to assign the introduction of the idea of gender in feminism to Simone de Beauvoir, Repo calls our attention to the fact that Beauvoir never used the term and that it was subsequently projected onto her ideas. Repo provides a detailed analysis of how gender gained increasingly significant and central ground within feminist theory through the reading of key texts from the 1970s, such as Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*, Ann Oakley’s *Sex, Gender and Society*, and Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.” As Repo claims, the most significant problem with a feminist critique of socio-political systems, which hinges on the sex/gender divide, is that “the introduction of a split between nature and culture is itself a part of the process of regulating industrial capitalist life” (102). This means that by appropriating gender, feminist criticism reaffirms a form of power which aims to govern and discipline the life of its subjects.

Besides sexology and feminist theory, Repo investigates discourses of demography and policy that comprise a third realm in which gender is drawn upon. The central argument of the chapters focusing on demographic science and policy making positions probes gender as a “locus of power and point of intervention for optimizing the reproduction of human populations” (106). Statistics and demography are classic Foucauldian examples of political and scientific practices that govern life. By analyzing the ideas of the most significant postwar demographers, such as Kingsley Davis and Gary S. Becker, Repo shows how gender becomes a useful concept in managing women’s fertility to ensure the maintenance and development of the

population. In such discourses, as well as in feminist demography, gender became a crucial concept due to its capacity to address phenomena such as the sexual division of labor or women's employment opportunities, which were seen as issues directly correlated to fertility rates.

Since "demographic science in the 1980s discovered gender as a structural problem that affected fertility rates" (129), and at the same time proposed that the structure of the postwar economy and the welfare state were unsustainable given the declining fertility rates characteristic of European countries, gender entered the realm of policy making. Accordingly, chapter 5 of *The Biopolitics of Gender* focuses on how gender is deployed in the policy-making practices of the European Union. Repo's most significant contention here is that policies informed by gender mainstreaming have not been devised to further human rights or support the fight for social justice. Instead, gender-related policies co-opt the notion of gender in order to ensure that women are able to partake in both the production and reproduction of capital through participating in the labor market, as well as becoming mothers. As such, although it is tempting to see the EU's policies as progressive ones enhancing human rights, they ultimately function as tools of neoliberal governmentality disciplining and managing life.

The Biopolitics of Gender is an illuminating and important study, which reconfigures many taken-for-granted assumptions about the notion of gender and its role in feminist theory as well as politics. It is essential reading not only for feminist scholars, but also for those engaged in the task of critiquing neoliberal power structures.

University of Debrecen / University of Exeter