

Jemima Repo. *The Biopolitics of Gender*. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016. x, 218 pp. (\$49.95 hardcover).

The Biopolitics of Gender offers a skillful adaptation of Michel Foucault's analytical approach to render the invisible visible and lay bare those deceptively benign actions and policies of governments exercising power. Building on Foucault's analysis of government and sexual orientation, Jemima Repo identifies *gender* as the major component of the "biopolitical" apparatus, the purpose being to "disrupt feminist gender theory" and offer a critical reexamination of the origins, usage, and effects of the sex/gender, nature/culture construction that has promoted gender as a social construction, distinguishable from biological sex. The latter is commonly understood as more concrete and "natural" whereas gender is dynamic. Repo argues that the dominant gender discourse contributed to the (ab)use of the theory of gender, primarily by neoliberal governments hoping to increase a fertile workforce. This economization of people's bodies and actions is accomplished with the pretext of gender equality. The book details how academics, especially early feminists and demographers, inadvertently provided the parameters through which governments reinforced rather than challenged the traditional sex binary.

The chapters masterfully excavate the work of Foucault not just on biopolitics, but apply his work in entirety. Through this Foucauldian approach to understanding gender as a function of biopolitics, this book is most certainly unparalleled. With that, those unfamiliar with his work might require some background reading to better appreciate and accept a few basic premises. The first of which is that gender, as a significant arm of biopolitical power, is currently expressed through the language of feminist-borne gender theory. This power is primarily a top-down process, flowing from the government apparatus to the people. Western industrialized countries, the focus of Repo's analysis, are characterized by a neoliberalism that has significantly, and mostly negatively, impacted populations. Despite what appears to be heavy for the Foucault novice, the introduction nonetheless develops a well-articulated conceptual framework. The ultimate purpose of these greater state (mis)applications of "gender" is to manage the sexuality and reproductive rights of human bodies.

Before outlining the chapter-by-chapter analysis, a question encountered throughout the book is why would other feminisms, particularly the insights of Black feminism demonstrating the inseparability of race and gender, receive little to no mention. Repo, like Foucault, views race and eugenics as part of the biopolitical process, but does not fully explore this intersectionality. While this oversight may be dismissed as a purposeful omission because, it could be said, that the intention was never to confer a complete account of history. Indeed, this is Foucauldian — Repo herself writes that gender's evolution can be viewed through many genealogical lenses.

Former contributions by psychiatrists, psychologists, and sexologists, provide the scaffolding to current treatments of gender as a social construct. To trace the effects of the gender discourse on macro-level political processes, Chapters 1 and 2 present a detailed overview of the term's psychiatric genesis. John Money's (1950's) efforts to define *psychological sex* as key to "treating" individuals possessing ambiguous sex markers lays the ground-work for Chapter 2 (beginning with Francis Galton, a notable proponent of eugenics), presenting the

work of Robert Stoller, originator of the modern sex/gender dichotomy. These two chapters support the argument that gender was largely a product of heteronormative and sexist albeit well-meaning psychiatrists. An oft-forgotten phenomenon, and key to Repo's analysis, is that the word, and concept, did not exist until the 1960's.

Repo's concerns of the state of "gender theory" is detailed in Chapter 3 in which she addresses the work, and subsequent (mis)interpretation, of major (Anglo-American) feminists from the late 1950s, starting with the work of Simone de Beauvoir, to the 1970's work of Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna. Other notables are Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Ann Oakley, Gayle Rubin, and Nancy Chodorow. Repo weaves a narrative in which feminist work, while solidifying the concept of gender as derivative of culture, rested on a shaky theory by using and thus reinforcing the work of early psychiatrists and sexologists. One such example is the discussion of Millett's *Sexual Politics*, one of feminism's defining works demonstrating the political dimension of gender. Yet Millett, like many of the feminists identified in this chapter, is critiqued for (unwittingly) contributing to the binary and the conflation of sex with gender. The result being that they provide the intellectual foundation for government control over individual reproduction rights. This was due in part due to early feminists' reliance on the work that they purported to critique.

At this point the reader might notice the omission of "other" more current influential feminist work, especially those entailing issues affecting transgender communities. Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl* should be credited for developing much of the language, important to biopolitical analyses, used to describe gender and sexual relations in a patriarchal *and* heteronormative context. Another omission is one of the principle architects of gender as a social construction, Judith Lorber. These examples seem especially relevant given the fixation of early psychiatrists on non-conforming gender identities and the dialectical components of Repo's analysis. Notably missing is discussion of the "rape as power" movement, occurring in the same time-period as Repo's analytical focus. This is troubling given that it was and, continues to be, a defining, central, and ever-salient feature of feminist thought and activism. The book is generally defensive of Foucault's gender omissions, but on this point, may have benefitted from a more critical reading of Foucault's unwillingness to consider rape as a gendered act of state violence—arguably a Foucauldian proposition.

Chapter 4 presents a compelling linkage between academia and reproductive policies by examining the influence of demographers and feminist demographers, particularly in the 1980's and 1990's. Chapter 5 then connects the resulting conceptional meanings of gender to neoliberal policies by concentrating on the "gender equity policies" of the European Union. These types of policies were labeled as progressive and "fair" given the deceptive language of gender theory. In many ways, gender replaced sex and increased the regulation of human bodies.

Chapter 6 concludes with a warning to academics, especially feminists, to avoid becoming hopelessly enmeshed in the reproduction of biopolitical forces via their reliance on earlier feminist discourse. As Repo stated in the introduction, the book was not "the definitive geology of gender—merely a genealogy" (p. 23). Given the book's fearless critique of one of the most basic tenets of modern feminism, it is not "merely" one of many. The importance of the questions raised, and careful attention paid to government gender deployments, renders this

book invaluable to a vast inter-disciplinary audience. It cautions against accepting macro-level political efforts as non-normative and “equal.” More academics, especially in the humanities and social sciences, should consider the utility of the biopolitical framework. Repo’s work may be one of many methodological approaches, but is arguably one of the most robust and powerful in its theoretical breadth and substance.

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