

Harriet Bradley
Gender

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"Gender has many strengths, including the balance between theoretical and empirical arguments, the discussion of a wide range of theoretical views, and the focus on how gender is lived in individual lives. [...] I have a number of other concerns with the text, however."

Harriet Bradley's *Gender* is part of a series published by Polity called *Key Concepts*, all of which are textbooks exploring central concepts in the social sciences. Though this book is written from a sociological perspective (Bradley is an emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Bristol), it could certainly be used in courses in philosophy; it provides both theoretical arguments and empirical, sociological research, which I find to be a helpful approach for discussing feminist and gender issues.

The main purpose of the book is to explain the ways that the concept of gender has been used in the social sciences, and the major debates about it (1), but by the end Bradley notes that she has also emphasized "the centrality and pervasiveness of gendered relations in contemporary societies and thus the continued need for a critical exploration of gender, both theoretically and empirically" (195). The first half of *Gender* is focused on theoretical issues. Chapter 1 discusses the concept of gender itself, some history of how it has been used, and the sex/gender distinction (as well as criticisms of it by theorists such as Judith Butler). Bradley provides her own definition of gender in this chapter: "the varied and complex arrangements determining how women and men live, and a way of thinking which divides people up into two (or sometimes more) social categories" (16). She emphasizes that gender has both material aspects (real sets of social relations) and symbolic, discursive ones (ways of thinking and speaking) (16, 197). The material aspects of gender are taken up in the second half of the book. Chapter 2 looks at "modernist" theories of gender, such as Marxist, radical and liberal feminism, as well as some theories of masculinity, including that of Raewyn Connell. Chapter 3 considers "postmodern" views of gender and their theoretical underpinnings in work by Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan, including psychoanalytic feminism, Judith Butler's views on gender and performativity, and work by Angela McRobbie.

Chapters 4-6 discuss the material side of gender, looking at "gender relations in action" in production, reproduction, and consumption (4)--some of the numerous areas in which gender is produced through social and institutional structures and practices. In these chapters Bradley provides a good deal of empirical data to show how gendered divisions, constraints, and oppressions still remain prevalent in contemporary Western societies (much of her data comes from research in the UK). In the chapter on production, Bradley discusses how there are still gendered divisions in types of work--jobs that remain mostly either male- or female-dominated--as well as pay inequities along gendered lines, higher numbers of women in part-time work (often because they are taking care of children), and a high degree of sexual harassment in the workplace. In the reproduction chapter she talks about the "domestic division of labour" (130)--how men and women do different work in the home and family--as well as dominant discourses of "ideal" motherhood and sexual norms for men and women (including heteronormativity). The chapter on consumption deals with gendered shopping practices, differences in how men and women spend their leisure time, discourses of the "housewife" and her connections to consumerism, and how ideal body images for both men and women affect consumption.

Between the chapters Bradley includes vignettes meant to show how gender affects individuals' lives, how "gender is lived experience" (6). Some of these provide stories of real people, including some from Bradley's own life, whereas others present narratives describing the lives and choices of fictional people, showing what it might be like to live in particular situations--such as a being a young man who ends up, for complicated reasons, involved in drug use and criminality, working at a series of dead-end, unskilled jobs, and fathering several children whom he cannot adequately support (59-60). Bradley's own views on gender are clear throughout the text. For example, although she argues that theories she labels "postmodernist" in chapter 3 provided a needed corrective to feminist discussions that had not taken enough account of difference and complexity, there is now "a need to swing back towards a search for commonalities and generalizations" (200). She points out how too great a focus on difference could lead us to neglect "the broader dimensions of gender and the patterns of gender disadvantage which spread across the different social groupings" (78). For example, all women, she states, face threats of sexual and/or domestic violence (78), and constraints due to pregnancy and bearing children are quite common as well (among those women who have such experiences) (188). Bradley notes that there is no common identity for all women, and each individual has multiple identities, but that we can and should choose to foreground one part of our identity as a political act at times, for the purposes of collective action (91, 97).

Gender has many strengths, including the balance between theoretical and empirical arguments, the discussion of a wide range of theoretical views, and the focus on how gender is lived in individual lives. I also very much appreciate that Bradley discusses concerns about the effects of gendering on both men and women, though I don't think she does enough here to emphasize the problems with dividing up humanity into two "sexes," as if this were an unproblematic and clear binary. To be fair, I think she speaks of "men" and "women" in large part as a political strategy, as noted above. I have a number of other concerns with the text, however.

First, although there is a pretty good balance between discussions of how institutions, practices, and discourses of gender affect both men and women, in some places there is much more emphasis on how these affect women, and further consideration of how they affect men would be useful. For example, Bradley discusses many feminist theories in the two chapters on theory, but only one having to do with masculinity (that of Raewyn Connell). I suggest that at least one other theorist of gender and its impact on men would have been helpful in one of these chapters. This would have provided balance in what is ostensibly a book about gender rather than one focused mostly on feminism. In addition, though there is a good deal of discussion of discourses of motherhood in the reproduction chapter, there is very little on fatherhood. Finally, in the consumption chapter Bradley talks about ideal body images for men and women, but the research provided focuses almost entirely on how these affect women. She cites one source that suggests men might, in some cases, be even more body-conscious than women (Simpson 2012), but then states that she would "treat this claim with some skepticism" without explaining why (171). Bradley notes that "the suffering of men is often overlooked when discussing gender inequality" (145), and although she has done a largely good job of discussing the impact of gendering processes on men, it could use further emphasis in a few places.

There is also hardly any discussion of the experiences of transgender or transsexual persons in regard to gender relations, nor of intersex persons. The only place in the book that comes close to discussing such experiences is when Bradley considers Judith Butler's arguments about the performativity of gender in *Gender Trouble* (21-22, 80-81). However, some of Bradley's points there could be interpreted in highly problematic ways. She states that Butler sees "non-heterosexuals--lesbians, bisexuals, transvestites, transsexuals--as occupying a 'third space'" from which transgression of current ways of doing sex and gender is possible (80). But to say that "transvestites" and "transsexuals" are "non-heterosexual" is to conflate sexual orientation with gender expression and physiological characteristics, which is one of the things that Butler's work precisely questions. Butler does argue that current understandings of sex and gender are closely tied to heterosexuality (Butler 1999, 23-24), but that such ties can and should be undone.

Perhaps Bradley meant that under the dominant, heteronormative understanding of sex and gender, the category "non-heterosexual" could include transsexual persons and those who engage in cross-dressing; but without that caveat, it could sound as if she is both misreading Butler and supporting heteronormative assumptions.

Similarly, when discussing how we might come to question strict binary divisions between men and women, masculinity and femininity, Bradley states that some people "choose to disalign their gender and their sexuality from their genital and bodily characteristics (transvestites, gays and lesbians)" (22). This implies that (a) gays and lesbians always disalign their gender from their bodily characteristics, because (b) a correct alignment of sexuality to bodily characteristics would require heterosexuality, and (c) once again, people who cross-dress have also disaligned their sexuality from their bodily characteristics (which I think is supposed to mean they are non-heterosexual)--none of which, of course, must be the case. To be fair, Bradley clarifies in the next paragraph that "[i]n contemporary Western societies gender identities are so deeply imbued with heterosexual meanings as to be virtually indistinguishable" (22), thus suggesting that the disalignments noted above could be considered such only from the perspective of heteronormativity. But this should be clarified in the previous paragraph, since otherwise it suggests that these really are just disalignments.

Overall, this text could be significantly improved with a more sustained and careful treatment of sex and gender in queer theory, going beyond the brief discussions here of Butler's work as well as just one sentence on that of Cranny-Francis et al. (2003) and Sandy Stone (1996). Not only would a major theoretical literature about sex and gender be better represented, but the possible interpretations of her points as problematic, suggested above, might thereby be avoided.

Finally, I have concerns about some of the critiques Bradley gives of what she calls "postmodern" or "poststructuralist" theories, including that of Butler. As noted above, Bradley states that according to Butler, "non-heterosexuals" are best placed to transgress current sex and gender norms, but she goes on to say that some critics of Butler's work have pointed out that "adopting a non-heterosexual identity does not necessarily involve challenge to ideas of femininity and masculinity" (81). Bradley cites as examples of non-heterosexual identities that don't challenge traditional gender ideals lesbians who take on butch and femme roles, and "transvestites and transsexuals" who adopt "a very traditional presentation of themselves as women" (81). The problem here (besides once again uncritically placing "transvestites and transsexuals" into a "non-heterosexual" category) is that this misses a main part of Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble*. Butler argues instead that it is through performing such norms in nontraditional ways that their constructedness can be revealed. For example, in the case of lesbians and butch/femme identities: "The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original" (Butler 1999, 41; see also 156-58). Butler says that drag (which I do not find her connecting with non-heterosexual identities in *Gender Trouble*, except insofar as both can, in different ways--and not always--reveal the constructedness of sex and gender), rather than presenting "a unified picture of 'woman,'" reveals distinctions among the sex, gender, and gender performance of the performer, and thereby the constructed nature of their unity in any circumstance (175). In drag, "we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity" (175). Thus Bradley's criticism here misses the crucial point that certain performances of sex and gender norms can reveal the very performative nature of those norms themselves.

In addition, Bradley's discussions of Foucault in some parts of the book too quickly accept some criticisms of his work that don't grapple with some of its complexities. For example, she describes Foucault's view of social relations as "pessimistic, almost nihilistic," because he "elaborated a vision of extraordinarily powerful systems of domination, orchestrated by the state, . . . in which we were all to some extent complicit" (67). One problem with this statement is the suggestion that power relations are controlled from a central source such as the state. As Jana Sawicki explains

well in an early article, Foucault focuses on the multiple, heterogeneous, and continually changing relations of power at the micro-level rather than the macro-level such as the state, because the latter are dependent, in complex ways, on the former (Sawicki 1986, 28; see also Foucault 1980b, 99; Foucault 1990, 94). Thus it does not make sense to suggest there is a single source from which power emanates. The other problem is that Bradley too quickly dismisses Foucault's work as pessimistic because it suggests we are trapped in all-encompassing webs of power without much hope of resistance. Such interpretations have been somewhat common, including among feminist critics such as Nancy Hartsock (1990). But there has been a good deal of literature countering that interpretation as well, including work by Foucault himself (for example, Sawicki 1986; Foucault 1996; Allen 2007). To be sure, this issue could still be debated, but Bradley's discussion suggests that Foucault's work is simply pessimistic and no more needs to be said. At least pointing to some literature that questions this interpretation would be helpful.

Bradley also criticizes Foucault's view of power because it "fails to answer two important questions for those interested in gendered power: who holds power; and in whose interests is it exercised?" (204). She considers that his writings suggest it is "held by experts and operates on behalf of the nation-state," but then rightly notes that Foucault rejects such a claim (204). In even asking the two questions above, Bradley misses some of the main points of Foucault's view of power, including that it is not something "held," as a possession, and especially not by any particular group(s) who are generally dominant over others. Instead of being a thing that can be held, power is a relation between individuals (Foucault 1990, 94), and power relations are distributed throughout the social body such that one cannot say one group "has" power while another does not (Foucault 1980a, 187). It also means that the questions Bradley asks are problematic, since the answer can only be that many, many people are involved in many, many different power relations that are complex and continually changing. This is not to say that we cannot find larger patterns in which some groups tend to be able to exercise more power than others, but rather that the situation is much more complicated than simply asking "who has power" and what interests it serves. Foucault himself rejected precisely these two kinds of questions in a lecture from 1976 (Foucault 1980b, 97). Though I realize there is not space to thoroughly examine Foucault's view of power in this short text, the basis upon which Bradley rejects it is problematic. Again, at least pointing to some more nuanced discussions of Foucault's view of power would help (for example, Allen 1999; Allen 2007; Kelly 2009).

Thus, although *Gender* has some significant strengths, if I were to assign it in a course I was teaching, I would need to counter some of the misreadings and lack of nuance in regard to some of Bradley's interpretations of other theorists' work.

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