

Book reviews

Jude Browne, *The Future of Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 298 pp.

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After more than forty years from the second wave of the feminist movement, the public debate reflects on its present and future. In taking stock of this experience, feminist thought and gender theorists suggest that the movement has changed our way of thinking and expressing ourselves. This was favoured by a complex process of redefinition of identities – feminine and masculine – supported by the constant self-reflective practice on interpersonal relations, in particular intimate relations in which the care of oneself and others plays a key role in recognition processes. The most evident consequence of this process was a redefinition of individual and collective aspirations. Moreover, thanks to the movement people started to think more and more that these changes had to affect the collective cultural, social and political organization. For this to happen the traditional hierarchy of sexes pervading the society had to be subverted. This ambitious project was grounded on the idea that femininity and masculinity were basically social constructs whose definition was based on the biological difference and on the “natural” specificities associated to them. The relational dynamics between the two sexes determined their respective expectations, resulting in the gender-based distribution of work and the social expectations attributed to men and women. Removing this state of things altogether was an unavoidable objective whose scope had the taste of a cultural revolution for its actors.

It is hard to say what the actual scope of this revolution was, although it cannot be denied that this complex individual and collective experience is tangible in the socially-shared idea of gender. Gender was at the same time an ontological category, an exercise of individual and collective identity construction and a political practice oriented towards changing social, private and public institutions. But is this still the case? Is gender still the focus around which revolves the difference between men and women? The possible answers are numerous and conflicting.

These questions find interesting and controversial answers in the volume edited by Jude Browne. There are eleven contributors, including Nancy Fraser, Valerie Bryson, Ingrid Robeyns, Simon Baron-Cohen, Terrell Carver, Susan Hurley, Tony Lawson, Juliet Mitchell, Catherine Hakim, Rosemary Compton, and Jude Browne. As the editor tallies it, the represented fields are “evolutionary psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, socio-economics, socio-legal studies, social theory, [and] political theory” [p. 3].

The contributors provide articulate, original arguments on the future of gender. Very interestingly, alongside a harsh criticism of the feminist thought of the past, every contribution also offers new cues for reflection and research. This is encouraging, first and foremost because it acknowledges the fundamental role played by feminist thought in defining the (individual and collective) cultural pathways of the past forty years. On top of this, the essays show an extraordinary methodological accuracy. The contributors and the editor of the volume skilfully combine different methodologies. Besides, the contributors reference each other’s arguments, thus putting up an accurate internal debate. Their

major endeavour finds its reward in the consistency of the work as a whole, supported by an uncommon rigour of the exposition.

The book is comprised of three parts. The first part – “Reorienting the feminist imagination” – is a network of possible research pathways based on the key elements of the feminist movement. The first essay is by Nancy Fraser, who views the future of feminist thought in its ability to synthesize the two souls that characterized the first two phases of its life: in the first phase the movement claimed the equality of men and women through the idea of justice as redistribution; in the second phase it affirmed the idea of justice as recognition. The third phase is mainly focused on combining redistribution and recognition in a perspective of re-conceptualization that must be of a transnational nature. This is in fact where the public political debate takes place. Feminist thought must therefore become aware of this and start working in this direction in order to achieve its political goals. The second contribution is by Valerie Bryson who censures the hegemony of the Liberal movement which saw equal rights as the solution to the problem of gender inequality. The author argues that this is an utterly androcentric view. She confronts it with the “patriarchy,” which in her opinion is a category that describes the relationship between genders more realistically. The idea of patriarchy developed by Marxists appears to be the only feasible way to achieve “gender equality,” especially in the light of the failure of Liberal thought. Of course the author is not so naïve as to suggest a utopia. Her idea of patriarchy is reinterpreted and translated into an analytical category and a political practice which highlights that individuals, by way of mere “common sense,” are widely aware of the fact that people’s achievements are not the result of their skills or good fortunes, but conceal a radical gender inequality. It is by bringing this awareness into the public arena that the patriarchal system can be subverted and a true social justice can be pursued.

The first part ends with the essay by Ingrid Robeyns who proposes an interpretation of gender justice based on Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach. The basic idea is that the freedom of individuals lies in the actual possibility to achieve one’s aspirations. Some reconversion factors in particular make it possible to turn the individuals’ resources into desired capabilities. Gender is one of the most important of these factors, as it is closely related to rules and social institutions. The latter reinforce gender inequalities by making women’s social position increasingly weaker compared to men’s. Gender-based differences are especially prone to becoming socially-built inequalities. The project of a just society is only possible if gender becomes one of the principles on which policies are based. The argument is engaging, in spite of a certain naivety when it refers to the concrete practices to follow in trying and implement this social equality project.

The second part of the volume – “Variations on the theme of gender” – is undoubtedly the most intriguing and controversial part, since it shifts the focus from gender to sex. All the contributions included in this part agree on the assumption that gender inequalities relate in different ways to natural differences. This does not entail inequality in itself, but the evacuation of this evidence – which took on undeniable connotations – is currently translated into an absolute heuristic and ontological inability of the category of gender. The first contribution is by Simon Baron-Cohen, who points out that although on average male and female brains do show some differences, these say nothing about individuals. Only in some cases can individual characteristics fit into what are considered

to be the typical characteristics of a sex. The author draws on several scientific studies to suggest that there are differences between male and female brains and that on average they can give rise to aptitudes of different kinds. These are not decisive, though. Much of what the individuals are and do depend on the relational contexts in which they live. This is an original essay that highlights biological differences and by doing so gets to the heart of feminist thought, in particular that part of it which thwarted certain essentialist theses. Baron-Cohen's argument is definitely not an essentialist one, but maybe there is something mystifying to it.

Susan Hurley's thesis goes in the same direction. The contributor puts forward the feminist argument whereby polygamy is one of the many possible patterns existing in nature in terms of reproductive possibilities. Monogamy is the result of an antropocentric conception of sex which rhetorically justifies its social stability to the point of making it appear as an innate characteristic of the human race. Starting from the observation of the behaviour of some animal species, Hurley's article argues that polygamy might not be so harmful and dangerous for women. There might be some form of feminine "sisterhood" accepting polygamy if this entailed the presence of a partner showing a greater willingness to take care of the children. Besides provoking readers with her argument, Hurley's essay has the merit of challenging one of the social institutions that more than any other had a role in the persistence of a sex-based distribution of work and on the asymmetry in the distribution of care work.

The third essay is by Terrell Carver. This is particularly noteworthy because it claims the end of gender as an ontological category. In the wake of post-modernist arguments, Carver asserts that the coming-out of transgender identities, assisted reproduction techniques and other biotechnologies bring out the inadequacy of gender as an ontological category. This trend is also highlighted by the countless legal and regulatory evidence which is favouring its recognition according to completely different criteria to those included in the mainstream definition of gender. The stable binary formulation of sexuality that gender has paradoxically contributed to reinforce is limitative compared to these complex sexual identification processes. Terrell Carver's contribution raises important unsolved issues and sets a challenge that can no longer be ignored.

Tony Lawson's contribution also argues the urgency of reviewing gender category. However, the author appears more moderate since he urges not to forget that gender has acknowledged that a significant part of individual identities is a social construct. Although post-modernist criticism on the actual ontological capacities of gender cannot be ignored, giving up this important achievement is probably hazardous. Probably its scope ought to be extended in different directions. In particular, it could be used to fight discriminations resting on the biological features of sex. From this viewpoint, gender must be suited to its typically political purposes and it cannot be re-defined without redefining its relation with sex.

This part is closed by Juliet Mitchell's contribution, who connects the feminist movement with the second demographic transition hypothesis. The conceptualization of gender produced by feminism evacuated the reproductive dimension and determined the separation of sexual intercourse from reproduction. This trend could be implemented in order to enhance the establishment of a new demographic order whose focus is no longer birth but care. If this should happen the distinction between biological and sexu-

al parenthood would cease to exist, just like the relationship between heterosexuality, reproduction and care. This contribution is intriguing and provocative, even though it appears a bit less clear and convincing in its initial arguments, especially when it proposes this political project as a veritable historical development of the world.

The third part of the book – “Gender and political practice” – deals with political practices. Catherine Hakim’s contribution starts from her well-known preference theory through which the author explains the difference existing between men and women in terms of paid and unpaid work. These synthesize different lifestyles in which the individuals choose some social roles instead of others. If we accept this point of view then it seems misleading to use salary as a measure of gender inequality, but above all the “family-friendly” policies supported by feminists appear to be inadequate, since they are based on the assumption that it is the behavioural differences of women on the labour market that determine the asymmetrical sex-based distribution of work. In contemporary societies this argument appears as an unjustified *a priori*. It is not suitable for the societies that have gone through dramatic social transformations and offer women new institutional and normative contexts. On their part, individuals respond by continuously adapting their individual lifestyles. Women differentiated their preferences, which are expressed in patterns consisting of different combinations of paid and family work. Gender is therefore a redundant category when it comes to explaining the inequalities between men and women on the labour market. The argument suggested by Hakim is very well constructed but it may be considered as a valid interpretation model only for the countries indicated by the author herself (USA, UK and the Netherlands). In these societies larger groups of individuals have changed their behaviours expressing new gender identities through which they have redefined their (public and private) social roles. It must not be forgotten, though, that these are long and complex social processes and that social changes are only visible, in aggregated terms, when the new trends in terms of laws and values involve the vast majority of the societies. Moreover, it is worth considering the processes of institutionalization of behaviours and the effect they can have on the other institutional components of the society, especially in contemporary societies.

Rosemary Crompton’s contribution is focused on one of these components. The author underlines that welfare systems and the implementation of certain types of social policies affect women’s behaviours, and shows all her reservations on the suitability of the transnational dimension in resolving gender inequalities. Crompton expects that in the implementation stage transnational policies are governed by individual States, which may affect their efficacy. Crompton’s judgment is harsh. Neoliberal policies – which often draw on theories such as the preference theory – must be assessed with caution, as they are hardly compatible with the needs of individuals as workers and family members in any modern State.

Finally, Jude Browne’s essay points out that the legislation against gender discrimination and in favour of an equal treatment of male and female workers has reinforced some gender stereotypes. According to the author, constantly confronting the productive and reproductive roles of individuals with the need to overcome treatment inequalities has legitimized the current sex-based distribution of work. These regulatory frameworks and the principles on which they are based give rise to a number of role expectations that no longer correspond to the actual social capabilities of men and women. With regard

to this, the essay lacks the consideration of other social stratification factors identifying many other minorities e.g. racial, ethnic and religious. This is probably the jarring note in the whole contribution.

All in all, *The Future of Gender* is a very interesting work, primarily because it emphasizes that feminist thought expresses extremely different positions. These suggest not only an intellectual exercise but mainly alternative social and political practices based on the belief that gender has got a future indeed! The answers on how to achieve this are divergent and *The Future of Gender* appears to us as an extraordinary kaleidoscope of opportunities.

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