

Gender in Theory and in Practice

by Camille Robcis

The *Encyclopédie critique du genre* edited by Juliette Rennes offers so much more than a general overview of studies about gender : it examines how gender has reinvented the study of traditional social sciences and raised new issues. Going far beyond the controversies, the notion of gender reveals the extent of its critical force.

*Reviewed: Juliette Rennes (dir.), *Encyclopédie critique du genre. Corps, sexualité, rapports sociaux*, La Découverte, 2016*

The first thing to say about the *Encyclopédie critique du genre* is that it is an incredibly impressive and exciting book. Impressive by its sheer volume: 740 pages, 70 entries, 8 editors, and 80 contributors from 15 disciplines. If the simple thought of coordinating so many authors is already daunting, the editors' careful choice of entries, the multiple cross-references, the extensive bibliography, and the underlying thematic and methodological coherence is truly dazzling. It is also exciting because two decades ago, such a work would have been unimaginable in the French academic sphere. We can recall, for instance, in the late 1990s, Frédéric Martel's diatribe against gay and lesbian studies which he perceived as an example of the "dubious communitarianism" imported from the United States that was taking over French academic life.¹ Or we might remember, around the same time, Mona Ozouf's warning against a "maximalist" interpretation of gender, gender as "a pure relation of power, where everything is historically and socially constructed." This, she argued, was an American definition deriving from radical feminism, a notion that was "almost untranslatable into French."² Around these years, authors such as Elisabeth Badinter, Sylviane Agacinski, and Alain Finkielkraut regularly praised the "French exception" of happy heterosexual relations, its commitment to *mixité*, seduction, and civility which, they contended, made France

¹ Frédéric Martel, *Le rose et le noir: les homosexuels en France depuis 1968* (Paris: Seuil, 1996) / *The Pink and the Black. Homosexuals in France since 1968*, Stanford University Press, 2000 Frédéric Martel, "Dans la solitude des bibliothèques gay," *Le Monde*, 27/06/1997.

² Mona Ozouf, "Le Compte des jours," *Le Débat*, no. 87 (1995): 124.

impermeable to the theoretical and political aggression of gender.³ And yet, twenty years later, here we are, with this *Encyclopédie critique du genre* written mainly by French scholars who, for the most part, have solid institutional affiliations with the major universities and research centers in France. Reading and citing American or foreign sources is no longer considered an act of national treason, but rather an invitation to dialogue. For this new generation, gender is no longer a marginalized or embattled concept. Rather, it lies at the center of some of the most politically and intellectually stimulating research across a wide range of disciplines – and that is really exciting.

Gender as a System

The *Encyclopédie critique du genre* was masterfully coordinated by the sociologist Juliette Rennes with the help of an editorial team consisting of two political scientists, Catherine Achin and Alexandre Jaunait; an anthropologist, Gianfranco Rebutini; a demographer, Armelle Andro; a linguist, Luca Greco, and two other sociologists, Laure Bereni and Rose-Marie Lagrave. As they explain in their introduction, the editors chose to structure the various entries of the encyclopedia along three axes: the body, sexuality, and social relations. These are recurring themes in the book, three domains that are traversed by gender, but also three vectors through which we can examine the specific operations of gender more closely. Indeed, one of the most interesting contributions of this book is its commitment to constantly think together object of study and method. This is one of the ways in which I understand the adjective “critical” in the title. Gender, just like the body, sexuality, and social relations, is never a simple entity that can be apprehended objectively once and for all, but rather a mode of analysis, a method, an evolving lens through which we can read social reality. Thus, the book’s overall message is not so much that gender is political – we know this already – but more poignantly, that all of these other entries are. In some cases, this statement is obvious (for example, for “Filiation,” “Hetero / Homo,” “Queer,” “Race,” or “Trans”); in other cases, much less so (like “Weight,” “Sport,” “Height,” “Voice,” “Dance,” or “Animal”).

As the various contributors make clear, gender refers less to a final product than to the process through which certain entities (certain bodies, certain behaviors, for example) come to be constructed and perceived as different. In other words, there is no prior to gender, no untainted or pure nature unaffected by power. As the editors put it in their introduction, in the section on the body: “Le genre n’est plus conçu comme une ‘signification sociale’ qui s’ajouterait à des différences naturelles toujours déjà là, mais comme le système même qui façonne notre perception du corps comme féminin ou masculin” (17) [“Gender is no longer considered a ‘social meaning’ which would be superimposed on natural differences that have always existed, but as the very system that shapes our perception of the body as either

³ Sylviane Agacinski, *Politique des sexes: précédé de mise au point sur la mixité* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), Elisabeth Badinter, *L’Un est l’autre: des relations entre hommes et femmes* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1986).

feminine or masculine”]. Gender is thus not an abstract theoretical paradigm superimposed onto social reality (as many of its detractors claim) but rather a concept that emerges organically from these detailed empirical studies firmly grounded in the social sciences. Whether the entries are based on ethnographic material, interviews, archives, or textual and visual analysis, they all adhere to this vision of critique, questioning and historicizing any given idea, especially the ones that seem most natural, inevitable, self-evident, or universal. Not surprisingly, the figure of Michel Foucault, who perfected this art of critical history and who turned to genealogy to think through the history of the present, looms large in the pages of the *Encyclopédie*.

A Political Tool

The authors’ critical endeavor, however, is not only evident in the specific objects of study: it also guides the book’s methodology, which is explicitly intersectional and multidimensional. Thus, race and class are in constant conversation with gender, but the authors also mobilize less common tools of analysis such as physical appearance, age, health, ability, sexual orientation, or religious practices (21). The point is to show how domination functions differently when one of these variables changes. To give one example, the entry on “Care” shifts when the author, Francesca Scrinzi, introduces racism, globalization, and disability as three factors that have radically transformed the understanding of care as a more feminine form of relational engagement. The premise here is that power constantly evolves, transforms itself, and hides under new forms. In this sense, critique, like gender, cannot be a pre-given theoretical framework but rather, it is a form of constant self-interrogation. This is an especially welcome reminder in the field of gender studies, which, for a long time, remained blind to race, class, and these other forms of domination, and which too often still assumes that women are, by default, white, Western, heterosexual, reproductive, and abled (22). As the *Encyclopédie*’s editors write, the project’s overall goal is to map the “flesh of social relations” - “flesh” not only as body, skin, and sexuality but also as the observable, the empirical; “social relations” as the ever-shifting structural asymmetries of our social world (24-25).

In his 2005 preface to the French translation of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, fifteen years after it was published in English, Eric Fassin commented on this French “lag” in the study of gender. As Fassin suggested, Butler’s text and her theorization of gender suddenly appeared necessary to think through the various debates that were raging in France at the time, from sexual violence, same-sex unions, to reproductive technologies. *Gender Trouble*, Fassin contended, could shed light on our “sexual present” [*actualité sexuelle*], a present that

was increasingly “troubled.”⁴ It is interesting in this context to notice that the *Encyclopédie critique du genre* was published three years after the massive street demonstrations against the *mariage pour tous*, the 2013 law opening marriage and adoption to same-sex couples. Gender featured prominently in the rhetoric of the protestors who referred to gender as both the origin and the outcome of gay marriage. As one banner of the *Manif pour tous* put it, “Mariage pour tous = théorie du genre pour tous.” On the one hand, opponents to the law argued that gay marriage activists were inspired by a “theory of gender” that had become prominent in politics and in education. On the other hand, they warned that gay marriage would lead to the generalization of this “theory of gender” throughout society, to the legalization of reproductive technologies [PMA] and of surrogacy [GPA], and ultimately to the destruction of the family, of society, and of man.⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, these debates about gender were really debates about the nation and social reproduction, debates that opposed the defenders of a heterosexual, white, and Catholic France against those fighting for democratization and greater equality.⁶ In this context, it is difficult not to read the *Encyclopédie critique du genre* as an activist book: not polemical, but activist, in the sense that it argues for the ethical and political importance of scholarship. With this fascinating book, Juliette Rennes and her team have shown us that gender can still help us think through our present, constantly learn and re-learn, and fight for more openness, more discussion, and ultimately more democracy, in the academy but also in the public sphere more generally.

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⁴ Judith Butler, *Trouble dans le genre: pour un féminisme de la subversion* (préface d'Éric Fassin; traduit de l'anglais par Cynthia Kraus) (Paris: La Découverte, 2005). / *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge, 1990.

⁵ See for example the cover of the book by Béatrice Bourges, Aude Mirkovic, and Elizabeth Montfort, *De la théorie du genre au mariage de même sexe: L'effet dominos* (Paris: Peuple Libre, 2013).

⁶ Camille Robcis, *La loi de la parenté la famille, les experts et la République* (traduit de l'anglais par Ninon Vinsonneau) (Paris: Éditions Fahrenheit, 2016). / *The Law of Kinship. Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France*, Cornell University Press, 2013. See also Bruno Perreau, *Queer theory: the French Response* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016).