

May-2008

Book Review: When Sex Became Gender

Catherine R. Mintler

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mintler, Catherine R. (2008). Book Review: When Sex Became Gender. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(3), 346-349.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss3/23>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

When Sex Became Gender. Shira Tarrant. 2006. New York and London: Routledge. 285 pp. Endnotes, bibliography and index are included. \$29.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Catherine R. Mintler¹

In *When Sex Became Gender* Shira Tarrant manages an immense project of double import: she dispels the notion that feminism was dormant between World War II and the Second Wave as myth, and simultaneously uncovers, in analyses of several women theorists she argues were post-war precursors to Second Wave feminism, a trajectory of thinking that rejected essentialist sex roles and gender stereotypes and began to question and unravel the sex/gender dyad. By identifying the existence of post-war scholarship largely committed to women's issues and concerns, Tarrant presents the missing link connecting the theoretical and activist projects of First Wave and Second Wave feminism, a link that Tarrant herself admits is more rooted in theory rather than practice. The link that Tarrant uncovers occurred during a time when women writing from positions within the academy began questioning common, reductive social, political, material and sexual understandings of woman as a category of inquiry: innate sex roles, sexual stereotypes, equating sex and gender, and the essentialist notion that femininity was a biological characteristic of female sex.

Tarrant's dual purpose, as stated in her introductory chapter, is "to describe and to ascertain the connections that exist between feminist eras" in order to "avoid repeating the problem of feminist amnesia" (3, 9). She supports her decision to address five postwar women theorists—Margaret Mead, Mirra Komarovsky, Viola Klein, Simone de Beauvoir, and Ruth Herschberger—not only because their work shared common themes and concerns about women's concrete lives, as well as a radical rethinking of women's gender roles, but also because, according to Tarrant, they "gave us the vocabulary for understanding how society creates and enforces ideals of femininity and the tools for analyzing the political dimensions of sex-role ideology" (3). In the collective writing of these particular theorists, who didn't necessarily identify their work or themselves as feminist, but who associated themselves with what today would be considered feminist thinking about feminist concerns, Tarrant identifies a period of arguably feminist scholarship that not only preceded, but also influenced, the Second Wave. Tarrant does a thorough job of locating the controversial work involving sex and gender that these five women scholars pursued within the political and historical context of 1945-1960, a period largely considered one of the most ideologically and politically conservative in the twentieth-century. As she mentions in her introductory and foregrounding chapters, and subsequently elaborates upon in scholar-specific chapters, these thinkers questioned, rethought, and often contested commonly held reductive beliefs about the role of women predominant in postwar North America, Great Britain and France.

In the first two chapters of *When Sex Became Gender*, Tarrant historicizes the trajectory of revisionist thinking about gender roles, sex-role stereotyping, and the social construction of gender, within post-war and Cold War Europe and the United States, time periods in which, she argues, "the impact of conservative ideologies" did "constrain," but

¹ Catherine Mintler is a PhD Candidate in English at the University of Illinois-Chicago, and the Assistant Director of the Core Writing Program at the University of Nevada-Reno.

did not completely silence feminist thinking (12). This historicizing enables Tarrant to counter the belief that feminist theorizing was ever dormant—and to expose that belief as a political and cultural myth—by showing how the work done by Mead, Komarovsky, Klein, Beauvoir and Hershberger exposed essentialist cultural, social and scientific biases about women, and thus participated in the much larger “ideological debate about women’s proper roles in society” that occurred in the aftermath of World War II (12, 13). A key element in Tarrant’s analysis in these early chapters is her discussion of the ambivalence with which many women scholars, not only the subjects of her study, faced the question of identifying as a feminist. In the post-war era during which these women scholars worked and wrote, the label “feminist” carried negative connotations associated with myths about First Wave suffragettes and McCarthy era communist paranoia; as Tarrant explains, in addition to being stereotyped as a “manhater,” a woman identifying as a feminist might also be labeled “a madwoman, or a neurotic ingrate” (28, 29). However, Tarrant is quick to point out that, although the subjects of her study may have rejected identifying as feminists, they found other ways to identify themselves with women’s issues that could arguably be described as feminist issues (30).

In individual chapters devoted to Mead, Komarovsky, Klein, de Beauvoir and Hershberger, Tarrant complexly positions these postwar women theorists not only within the contexts of the historical time period in which they wrote, but also within the largely male-dominated academic discipline within which each worked. After opening each chapter with a thorough and rather overabundant amount of biographical detail and background information—information that will clearly benefit student readers as well as readers new to the history of feminism—Tarrant describes and analyzes each woman’s theoretical contributions to feminist scholarship, explains connections, influences, and disparities among them (as she does in the book’s conclusion), and discusses the efficacy and limits of considering each woman’s work feminist. Tarrant uncovers a seeming coincidence in her presentation of five highly educated women scholars who, even though they were born in different countries, grew up in different socio-economic circumstances, identified differently with, and occasionally subversively against, the limited social and sexual roles available to them as women, and were trained in theoretically different academic disciplines, concurrently critiqued women’s roles by rethinking sex and gender.

There are several weaknesses in *When Sex Became Gender*. In early chapters, as well as at the beginning and end of later chapters, the language is a bit repetitive. It must be remembered, however, that reiterating certain key points can be an important means of reinforcement for a project like Tarrant’s, which seeks to dispel a myth about the invisibility or non-existence of its subject matter. The places where Tarrant falls into repetition are usually locations where she emphasizes the limitations of a particular postwar woman thinker as feminist; for example, Tarrant uses both the clichéd phrase “product of her time” followed by reiterative paraphrases of that remark, when describing the limits of Margaret Mead’s contribution to ideas of gender fluidity. Tarrant’s intention in reemphasizing certain language reinforces her complex portrayal of her subjects, and situates them within the specific contexts in which they worked.

Another weakness involves how Tarrant uses Betty Friedan, whose book *The Feminine Mystique* was published during the postwar period, as a pop-cultural corollary to scholarly academic work on women and gender. Friedan was an important voice in

ongoing political and cultural debates about women's social and sexual roles in postwar American society, and, by alluding to Friedan throughout the book, Tarrant attempts to provide an idea of how non-academic women responded to scholarly work on sex and gender. Tarrant specifically notes Friedan's criticism of what she believed to be limitations in the work of Margaret Mead, Mirra Komarovsky, and Simone de Beauvoir (although Friedan did eventually recognize the importance of *The Second Sex*). However, using Friedan as a critical barometer is perplexing because it seems to unintentionally undermine Tarrant's decision to include the scholarly theorists she criticizes, rather than just provide evidence of their contributions to new thinking about sex and gender. Had Tarrant devoted an entire chapter to Friedan, or mentioned Friedan's work and critical reaction more extensively in the conclusion, she might have found a way to unify postwar feminist scholarship and pop-cultural feminist criticism by paralleling their shared concerns. This would have further supported her claim about the significance of postwar scholarship and its contributions to feminism, as well as allow her to identify postwar rethinking about sex and gender as evidence of yet another feminist wave that operated on two levels: in popular culture and in the academy.

A final weakness of *When Sex Becomes Gender* involves the lack of specific connection to Second Wave theories and theorists. While this doesn't undermine Tarrant's project, it does limit its potential usefulness for more theoretically-inclined feminist and poststructuralist-feminist audiences. Tarrant offers only a few scantily described connections between postwar thinkers and specific Second Wave feminists or theories involving sex and gender. She does make connections between Viola Klein's work and the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, but only in only a few sentences on page 143. Although she mentions that Margaret Mead "anticipated postmodern interest in moving beyond epistemological dualism and its limited choice of either-or," she does not link that claim to any specific postmodern theorists interested in gender, nor to any specific Second Wave or postmodern feminists (86). Tarrant connects Komarovsky's contributions to "gender discourse" by merely listing, but not drawing specific parallels between, her work and that of "Ti-Grace Atkinson, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millet, Valerie Solanas, Juliet Mitchell, and others..." (132). Parallels between Ruth Hersherberger and Second Wave feminist thinkers like Kate Millet, Emily Martin, Anne Fausto-Sterling and Grace Paley, are again, merely glossed over in a list at chapter's end. In the chapter on Simone de Beauvoir, Tarrant makes more specific connections between *The Second Sex* and Second Wave feminism. Tarrant mentions that Dorothy Dinnerstein acknowledged how de Beauvoir's work influenced her own, and specifically describes that influence. Tarrant also mentions that other feminist theorists, like Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millet, admit their failure to initially cite de Beauvoir's influence. Might this be an example of Tarrant's argument about the phenomenon of feminist amnesia about postwar feminism?

In choosing to include postwar women scholars who wrote from different perspectives and from within different academic disciplines, *When Sex Became Gender* is wide in its interdisciplinary scope. Because Tarrant argues that feminism didn't disappear between World War II and the Second Wave, and because she includes several scholars whose work may be little known or largely unread, her project will be of value to almost any introductory and undergraduate Women's Studies course that explores feminism from a historical or historicist perspective. Her work will also be of considerable use to

graduate students in Women's Studies Programs engaged in planning preliminary examination lists and/or dissertation bibliographies. Despite its wide interdisciplinary scope, Tarrant's project remains quite focused in outlining the trajectory of rethinking sex and gender that began to emerge in the historically male-dominated disciplines of anthropology (Mead), sociology (Komarovsky), sociology of knowledge (Klein), and philosophy (de Beauvoir), as well as in an independent feminist critique of biological sciences (Herschberger).

Overall, the connections Tarrant makes between postwar women scholars and Second Wave feminists regarding the social construction of gender and the unhinging of sex and gender would be stronger had she made more detailed excursions into the theoretical inheritance of the Second Wave; instead, with the exception of the chapter on de Beauvoir, her links to specific Second Wave feminists remain tenuous lists that can seem a bit like name-dropping. Her daunting and inspiring project, however, fills a void in feminist history and feminist scholarship; Tarrant has successfully located the feminist roots of Gender Theory's and Second Wave feminism's understanding of gender as socially constructed in a period believed to be entirely bereft of feminist thought.