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Book Review: Gender Studies: Terms and Debates

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Gender Studies: Terms and Debates. Ann Cranny-Francis et al. 2003. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, xii + 276 pp. \$29.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Meihua Liu¹

Books written or edited by Ann Cranny-Francis, either collaboratively or independently, such as *Feminine/Masculine and Representation* (with Terry Threadgold, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, 1991) and *Engendered Fictions: Analyzing Gender in the Production and Reception of Texts* (New South Wales University Press, 1992), often approach their subjects both as an academic practice and as features of our everyday life. Although the books focus on how texts and audiences interact with each other, lay readers don't have many difficulties understanding the terms used to get a clear picture of what is discussed.

Gender Studies: Terms and Debates is no exception. As the authors claim in the Preface, the book explores "the ways in which we think about gender—how binaristic understandings of femininity and masculinity shape the ways we perceive gender, and how the assumption of heterosexuality determines the ways we constitute that femininity and masculinity" (ix). The following is a brief account of how they achieve this goal.

The book is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter 1, the authors introduce various terms such as gender, sex and sexuality, which are closely related to gender studies, and demonstrate how the history of these terms reveals the complexity of sexing and gendering practices in society. Next, they examine the ways in which people think about gender, drawing on the works of theorists from a wide range of disciplines including psychoanalysis, philosophy, history and critical theory.

In Chapters 3 and 4, the authors present how ways of thinking about gender have guided the ways people have of reading and seeing gender in the texts of society, which cover novels, films and television programs as well as newspapers, street fashions and everyday conversations. Chapter 3 focuses on reading and people's ways of engaging with cultural products and practices and generating meaning from them, while Chapter 4 targets issues related to seeing, including critical notions of representation and stereotyping.

In Chapter 5, the authors are concerned with the issue of embodiment, an important focus of recent critical writing. The next chapter explores the ways in which the social fabric is woven into the gendered ways people live by looking closely at the intersection between the social, the public and the private—a crucial nexus for gender studies—while the final chapter presents a brief conclusion.

The most noteworthy strength of this book is that it provides an accessible and interdisciplinary introduction to current debates on gender, exploring the major theorists whose works have inspired feminist analysis in gender studies. By clarifying the concepts of gender analysis, and by demonstrating ways of working with these concepts, the authors involve the readers directly in the reading process and leave them feeling empowered. Their accessible introductions to the work of major theorists, as well as their location of gendering practices in everyday life help to give difficult concepts a context and make the discussion comprehensible even to lay readers.

The book is also neatly structured. The concepts of gender and sex are expounded in the first chapter, and then run throughout the book: in ways of talking, thinking, reading,

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seeing, being and living. Many terms such as 'subject', 'heterosexuality', 'gay' and 'identity' are also discussed in Chapter 1, and are further used in later chapters to analyze gender representations in different aspects of everyday life. This integration of the terms into text analyses throughout the book reinforces not only its cohesion and coherence but its readability. The recurrence of the issues in subsequent chapters enables them to be presented from several different perspectives, and leads readers on the path to an easy understanding of complex issues.

Most of the chapters begin with a brief historical account of a particular topic, while all chapters end with reading materials recommended for further research, as well as questions to facilitate understanding and thinking. Such a structure helps readers to learn more about how gender is represented in multiple texts in society and how the representations evolve throughout history and inspires their further interest in these areas of research.

In spite of these virtues, certain limitations exist in this book. Although the book presents the representations of gender and sex in various social texts from interdisciplinary perspectives, it fails to establish a link between these representations and the perceptions of ordinary people. For example, while the book takes advantage of theories proposed by people from different disciplines to explore gender studies in various aspects of daily life, it does not investigate how terms such as gender, sex, subject, and identity are perceived and interpreted through the eyes of ordinary people.

In addition, with a single focus on representations of gender and sex in *Western* society, the book neglects perceptions of these issues in other, non-Western cultures. In Eastern societies, changes have also occurred with regard to the notions of gender, sex, gay, identity and subject in recent decades. Both Western and Eastern cultures have incorporated new meanings into the concepts of gender and sex. Both have also accepted such fairly new concepts such as homosexual, gay, and lesbian, and realized that people may have multiple identities that are situationally dependent. Nevertheless, differences do exist in the understanding of these notions among people of divergent cultures (Afshar, 1991). Taking this into consideration, an account of gender studies should better incorporate theories and practices from different cultures. However, given the virtues of the book, the above-mentioned flaws do not obscure its usefulness as a reference and a textbook.

As traditional views of men and women and their roles in society change, images of gender and sex are radically changing in many parts of the world. The case is the same with the concepts of subject and identity. All of these changes have been embodied in various lines of art such as films, novels, poems, and television and radio programs. They are also embodied in various aspects of ordinary people's life, a fact that has caught the attention of researchers of different disciplines such as linguistics, psychology and sociology. As a more recently emerging discipline, gender studies has a great potential for further elaboration within individual disciplines or on an interdisciplinary basis.

References

Afshar, H. (Ed.). 1991. *Women, Development and Survival in the Third World*. NY: Longman Press.