

BOOK REVIEW

Sex Is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity. By Paisley Currah. New York: New York University Press, 2022. 256 pp. \$28.00 (cloth). ISBN: 9780814717103.

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Paisley Currah's *Sex Is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity* offers a nuanced analysis of the evolution of transgender legislation through the lens of feminist political theory and ethnographic narrative. The writing is accessible to undergraduate and graduate students, offering an in-depth chronological path through the forest of gender and sexuality policy in the state of New York. As anti-transgender legislation is on the rise, this book offers a rich, robust way to understand the complex relationship between governmentality, sexuality, and freedom. Considering that a greater percentage of my students are now identifying as gender nonbinary and queer, I found this book incredibly helpful for teaching students the history of how and where the critiques of the heteropatriarchal sex/gender system were codified and resisted. In each chapter, Currah uses detailed examples to show how the women's rights movement and the transgender rights movement have advanced—and regressed—in their attempts to dislodge the meaning of sex/gender classification for citizenship.

The title of the book, *Sex Is as Sex Does*, reveals Currah's Deleuzian theoretical orientation to the underlying question: "What is sex to the state?" Pulling from Margot Canaday and Gilles Deleuze on the idea that the actions define the concepts in question, Currah tracks what the state "does" in terms of decisions about the application of sex definition by the state. "My method centers on these events, rather than on the institutions from which they issue: I do not look at courts, but at decisions. Not at department of motor vehicles, but at application of their policies to individuals. Not at legislatures, but at their enactments of sex. Not at prisons and jails, but at their practices of sex segregation" (90). Currah asks readers to think beyond the political deployment of transgender rights in highly visible policy domains such as girls' sports and bathrooms, and instead to focus on policy issues that marginalize and harm all populations but place a heavier toll on transgender populations. Currah argues that issues such as income inequality, prison abolition, universal health care, and accessible education are the central transgender rights policy issues that deserve attention.

One of the most important contributions of the book is the link between feminists' fight for gender equality and the pro-transgender rights fight for gender liberation. Currah's argument strengthens the bridge between these two positions, which are typically framed in opposition by conservative media. Currah gives readers numerous points of evidence on how removing the value of sex classification by the state is a device to remove the power of patriarchy in U.S. legal systems. Currah offers a theoretical way to reimagine how and why the state deploys sex/gender taxonomies, linking feminist and transgender rights arguments in a clear, astute manner. *Sex Is as Sex Does* shows that sex is a taxonomy of patriarchy to mark bodies as outside the hegemonic male upon which the liberal state is built. Transgender rights arguments are fundamentally asking the state to loosen that heteropatriarchal grip on the normative kinship model. As feminist Catherine MacKinnon (2023) recently argued in *Signs*, the depth of the anti-transgender anger is touching the depth of misogyny, as both are invested in preserving a rigid, fixed gender hierarchical structure.

The text is theoretically rich and empirically grounded, and excellent for teaching. I assigned the first chapter of Currah's book, "If Sex Is Not a Biological Phenomenon," in my Gender and Sexuality in U.S. Politics class. The text is particularly helpful for students who are well-versed in stating their gender pronouns but may need a more contextual understanding of the long theoretical and political debate surrounding the meaning of sex, gender, and sexuality. On page 42, Currah provides a detailed table that shows four different positions on (1) what sex is, (2) sex reclassification, and (3) who holds these positions. For example, more gender-radical trans advocates argue that sex is an effect of gender norms and that F/M/X classification for all should be ended. This contrasts with the mainstream transgender advocates, who argue that sex is gender identity: male, female, or nonbinary and the recognition of F/M/X is a declaration of gender identity. This distinction is helpful since transgender activists are often collapsed into one position. As in any social movement, not all activists agree on direction.

In sum, I found this book positive, engaging, and generative despite the persistent hostile resistance to transgender rights that the text addresses. Currah does not abandon the state but rather engages it as an academic and as an activist. As anti-transgender activists lobby the federal and state governments across the United States, Currah's book serves as an excellent resource to comprehend exactly how and why the state has written sex/gender into law. The book reveals how the women's rights movement and the transgender rights movement are both invested in dislodging these sex/gender shackles on citizenship and freedom. Rather than succumb to the recent partisan baiting that pits transgender rights *against* women's rights (Levin 2020), Currah carefully and methodologically illustrates how these two general positions are inextricably linked in their goal to remove the weight of sex/gender on U.S. citizenship. Feminisms and the movements to advance transgender rights have more overlap in their shared commitment to challenge patriarchy and essentialist sex/gender roles than the recent conservative political frames would like the average voter to understand.

Moving forward, gender galaxies may be the next theoretical framework to help us think about the meaning, performing, and future of sex/gender. At least, this is what Currah encourages us to do upon completion of this thought-provoking, rich text. While asking readers to open their imaginative boundaries surrounding the concept of sex/gender, Currah does not discount the lived utility of these bounded gender identity forms that construct new citizen-subjects. Upon completion of the text, I concluded that if “sex is as sex does,” than we—as feminist activists, academics, citizens, and state actors—are the doers, and we must continue to be engaged with the state if we want to achieve sex/gender liberation for all.

References

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