

Jemima Repo

*The Biopolitics of Gender*

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Despite critiques of Michel Foucault's work that allege a failure to address gender and women's experience, scholars have for decades recognized the feminist politics of his work both in content and methodology. But although much writing has diversely undertaken Foucauldian genealogy as feminist methodology, rarely has it been used to examine the foundational tenets of Western feminism itself. Enter Jemima Repo's *The Biopolitics of Gender*.

Extending Foucault's work on sexuality as an apparatus of biopolitical governance during the Victorian era (Foucault 1981), Repo undertakes a genealogy of gender as it arose in the latter half of the twentieth century. She questions gender as a category of analysis long harnessed by feminists to name and struggle against patriarchal forms of power that uphold gendered and sexualized forms of oppression through Western modernity and its reaches. Repo is not questioning the value or necessity of feminist movements and their addressing of gendered inequalities through history, but her genealogy calls into question the possible complicities liberal feminism has enacted by upholding and reaffirming gender as a category for understanding human experience. Repo also proclaims a methodological inheritance from Judith Butler's work in *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1999), though whereas Butler sought to critically destabilize the category of "woman" as the political subject of feminism, Repo endeavors to agitate the idea of gender as a "major object and analytical tool of contemporary Western feminism" (158) that has been naturalized as a discursive and historical fact in science, politics, and government.

According to Repo, much of the post-Foucauldian scholarship of recent decades has absented sexuality from the theorization of biopolitics and its productive and reproductive functions. This tendency, she notes, has often inclined theorists to reduce biopolitics to its thanatopolitical function--that of the politics of and over death--and its attendant metaphysics of exclusion, particularly via race as it "justifies the death-function, enacted so that sexuality can target the privileged population with the life-function" (15). If via the apparatuses of state racism, the death-function under the liberal state produces systemic vulnerabilities for nonwhite subjects, and sexuality is deployed to

take advantage of such vulnerabilities in the service of reproducing the population's most hegemonically desirable forms of life.

The genealogy Foucault undertakes in his *History of Sexuality* underlies Repo's treatment of gender as a fragment of the assemblage potentiating biopower's life-function under neoliberal capitalism. Her work elucidates the legacies of power/knowledge inherited in the present, through the specific site of gender, its conditions of possibility, and its uses over the last several decades. She illuminates gender's bioeconomic utility through its specific invention, positioning, and deployment as a technology for the establishment of the bourgeois, nuclear family as the primary site of cultivation of the economically productive and self-regulating individual under capitalism.

Repo documents the shift from the early twentieth-century organization of knowledge through the eugenics-based sciences that upheld totalitarian regimes, to the postwar sociological and psychological theories of social order developed under liberal democracy, through which modern gender discourse was constructed and utilized. Much as Foucault names the Victorian-era emergence of sexological discourses as a key moment in articulating the conditions of possibility for sexuality to arise as an apparatus deployed in the conduct of conduct, Repo situates the birth of modern gender in the 1955 work of Johns Hopkins University psychiatrist and sexologist John Money.

In chapter 1, "The Birth of Gender: Social Control, Hermaphroditism, and the New Postwar Sexual Apparatus," we find that key to Money's behaviorist conclusions about psychosexual differentiation were his studies with intersex children, from which he concluded that "psychological sex" was not biologically inherent, but a postnatal, cognitive learning process. This work resulted in the (re)invention of *gender* as a term distinct from *sex*--through which "the access points of power to the body" (24) were expanded and multiplied. Surgery on intersex children to "correct" ambiguous genitalia was justified as necessary for proper socialization as a "mentally stable sexed subject" (34) in society; resistance to surgery on the part of children in the clinic was pathologized. Money's work catalyzed gender's constitution as a domain of power/knowledge extending to various disciplinary fields. Meanwhile, the nuclear family emerged in the postwar era as an ideal model actively promoted by a whole array of experts from psychology to medicine, education, and politics. As a newly pivotal institution in the structural functionalist theories of the time, it was engendered as the primary panoptic "point of contact between individual behavioral conformity and social order" (37), placing the responsibility of "gender role imprinting processes" on parents.

Chapter 2, "The Sex/Gender Split, Transsexualism, and the Psychoanalytic Engineering of Capitalist Life," illustrates how in the 1960s, physician and psychiatrist Robert Stoller solidified the Western notion of gender and sex as mutually exclusive categories, designating sex as purely biological, and gender as a cultural category. Stoller also coined the term *gender identity*. The biological/cultural split extended the "cultural" as an instrument of governance, with the effect of upholding bourgeois democratic values in a post-fascist time. Stoller's work with adult transsexuals and transvestites was the main site of his knowledge-production and psychiatric intervention.

Psychoanalysis in the postwar era, Repo tells us, "institutionalized White, bourgeois standards of the healthy mind, body, and behavior where the middle-class housewife was placed at the root of the path to democracy" (59). The goal of psychoanalytic work, and the key to happiness, was for the patient to adapt the inner self to the external world. For Stoller, gender identity as a concept problematized the male transsexual subject and was a point of intervention to manifest self-disciplining coercion technologies within the psyche. Transsexual patients' mothers were treated as patients themselves, as the mother of the nuclear family was seen as a significant figure in the nurturing of democratic systems, responsible for rearing properly gendered individuals whose gender deviance rendered them dangerously subject to "the spell of totalitarian ideologies, . . . [and] radical political movements that could destabilize the social fabric" (61). The aims of Stoller's Gender Research Identity Clinic were to "fix" the character structure of male children by establishing "conventional male roles to prevent the development of homosexual, transvestite, and transsexual personality" (67).

Repo's genealogy then turns, in chapter 3, "Feminist Deployments of Gender," to 1970s Anglo-American feminist appropriations of the "sex/gender assemblage," which incorporated gender beyond its previous uses in psychiatry, and expanded it into a widely applicable social theory, thereby reversing "the power strategies" and expanding "the domain of the gender apparatus in a way that would provide the operational circuitry for the biopolitics of gender thereafter" (99-100). In other words, feminist theorists across disciplines effectively took up theorizing about gender in order to refute hegemonic patriarchal formations of knowledge that resulted in social and political gender inequality, but did so by "redeploying disciplinary apparatuses as weapons of resistance" (77), claiming the epistemic authority of scientific discourses of gender that had been established through the 1950s and 60s. Many feminists found the biology/culture split a key argument, as it opened space for them to "deploy gender as an apparatus of power that contested the idea that women's oppression was based in biology" (90). But although they sought to refute biological determinism and essentialism by reinforcing the sex/gender divide, feminist theorists failed to understand that "the introduction of the split between nature and culture is itself a part of the process of regulating industrial capitalist life" (103) and the notions of sexual dimorphism and gendered divisions of labor it relies on. Further, it universalized the white bourgeoisie as the primary site of intervention for establishing social order and emancipation, thereby installing an order of truth based on raced, classed, gendered, and sexed notions of normalcy and deviancy that had come out of the psychological and medical sciences.

In the next two chapters, "The Demographic Problematization of Gender" and "Gender Equality as Neoliberal Governmentality," Repo takes on demographic science in its convergences with feminist theory, particularly in the context of knowledge-production and policy surrounding fertility in the 1980s. She then analyzes gender equality as a mode of neoliberal governmentality in the European Union (EU) in the 1990s and 2000s. Postwar demographic science shifted from the neo-Malthusian and eugenics logics of the twentieth century, and "discovered" gender as a structural issue affecting fertility rates, "creating a need to territorialize other points of entry into the life-creating capacities of

the body" (129). As gender was integrated into rationalities of population governance, it became a central concern "as a biopolitical technology [that] could revitalize the effectiveness of the life function of sex by expanding and intensifying the terrains of its regulation" (129).

As highly industrialized Western societies faced a decline in fertility rates due to the increase in women pursuing employment outside the home, demographers sought to limit the reproduction of poor, working-class, and racialized others of the Global South through programs of "family planning." The demographic sciences inserted neoliberal rationalities of *homo economicus* into the discursive and material terrains of modern gender, with reproduction newly conceived as a process subject to economic logic. Subsequently, the sexual division of labor was depoliticized, portrayed not as a "product of power but of the decisions of autonomous, competitive, and self-governing individuals" (123), marking the emergence of neoliberalism as the new dominant mode of governmentality (125).

Gender equality policy in the EU the last twenty years reflects this shift in modes of governance and governmentality. Repo examines some of these policies, their incentives and arguments, their specific deployments of gender, and their manipulation of interests, which ultimately underwrite and prioritize the extraction of surplus value from the population. This has, in more recent years, included the incorporation of theories of migrant labor, men's labor in the reproductive family enterprise, as well as theories of family diversity that have expanded definitions of the "family nucleus": an assimilative move to eviscerate any threats the non-normative family unit might pose to the biopolitical order (151-52). Repo exposes gender equality in the EU as a "contextually supple technology for the regulation of difference" (153), and a "prominent example of how gender has become a fundamental apparatus for the measurement, regulation, and optimization of ethnic European populations" (157).

In her concluding chapter, "Feminism and Biopolitics: Complicities and Countermovements," Repo rearticulates the concerns raised by her genealogical endeavor, insisting on the need for "feminists to weigh the conditions that make possible the politics that they enact by summoning the discourse" of gender (159). This, for Repo, requires accounting for the capitalist rationalities organizing sexual politics and everyday life in the present, particularly as the rise of feminism in its mainstream forms has imbricated the discourse of gender with neoliberal forms of governmentality and capitalist ethos that are detrimental to women's (and, I would add, not *only women's*, but *all*) lives. Repo's critique calls for a reassessment of feminist discourse and practices given the acknowledgment of feminism's historical and current entanglements with biopolitics. She invites the reader to push against the ambit of the (bio)political imagination, to reconsider feminist strategy, and reinvigorate critiques of political economy that have been largely excised from present-day liberal feminist thought (161-63).

Repo insists that her aim in undertaking this work is not to repudiate gender, but she also takes seriously the implications of gender's embeddedness in normalizing and

disciplinary techniques of social regulation: a positioning that counters other vibrant and possible forms of political life. Her final textual analysis, of Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* (Solanas 2004), furnishes a radical reading of Solanas's work as one that embraces resistance as a "direct engagement of the un/working body with the normalizing apparatuses of power involved in the production of docile bodies" (173)--rebellious against capitalist mandates as a condemnation of biopolitical modernity, particularly in its applications to reproductive life. And Solanas does so, according to Repo, without ever speaking about "gender"--proving unquestionably that "gender is therefore not an essential tool for feminist critique" (177). More pressing to feminism's aims, Repo suggests, is a "renewal of strategies and tactics of power underpinning feminist theory and activism" (177).

I align here with Repo's urgency toward a revitalization of feminist thought and its labors, but I question the use of Solanas's text to prove that gender as a term is unnecessary to invoke, particularly because in speaking about the term *gender* itself, it is not simply about accounting for a single word, but the entire matrix of references that comes with it. By my own assessment, Solanas's work and its grievances are thoroughly permeated by gender, its connotations, its configurations of power and violence, precisely corroborating Repo's larger contention that gender as a concept is profoundly imbricated in the biopolitical order. Repo never employs the term "post-gender," but I wonder whether this is what she is authorizing in her claims about Solanas's piece, and it is, for me, the one place in the book that possibly does a disservice to the clarity of her political aims.

That said, the text is deeply strengthened by Repo's obviously rigorous immersion in Foucault's oeuvre as well as feminist historiography. Her engagement with Foucault's scholarship in conjunction with other primary and secondary sources pays homage to the ongoing relevance of his work. It also exemplifies the kind of feminist historiography that can result from taking seriously Foucault's methodological experiments as "historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying . . ." (Foucault, 1984/2007, 113). Critique, for Repo, as for Foucault, is not a gesture of rejection, but a reflection upon a limit, "seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom" (114).

Further, Repo's work enacts solidarity with queer and postcolonial feminisms, and feminisms of color, as its genealogy further opens space for a decentering of a white, (neo)liberal, bourgeois notion of gender as the organizing principle for feminist movement and its identity-formations. One hopes the labor it undertakes will be seen by liberal feminists as an act of alliance in holding their particular thread of feminist politics accountable -- to its own conditions of possibility, to the dispersed and complex effects of liberal deployments of the sex/gender assemblage, and to what weight is borne beneath its ever-changing surfaces.

What Repo ultimately exposes is liberal feminism's reactive reversal of a hierarchy of subject-positions as it took up previously patriarchal, structural-functionalist, and biological-determinist articulations of gender as a naturalized category for social

organization, and produced gender anew as a cultural and therefore mutable aspect of human experience. A work of critique as emancipatory knowledge-production, this book carves out new openings that must be returned to, expanded upon, deliberated, as we carry on the always precarious work of our entanglements, strategic contingencies, the patient labor of our diverse and unsettled inquiries in the name of unempty dreams.

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