WHY GENDER?

Why is a focus on gender so important for interpreting the world in which we live? Sixteen world-famous scholars have been brought together to address this question from their respective fields: Political Theory, Philosophy, Medical Anthropology, Law, Geography, Islamic Studies, Cultural Studies, Philosophy of Science, Literature, Psychoanalysis, History of Art, Education and Economics. The resulting volume covers an extraordinary array of contexts, ranging from rethinking trans* bodies, to traumatized tribal communities, to sexualized violence, to assisted reproductive technologies, to the implications of epigenetics for understanding gender, and yet they are all connected by their focus on the importance of gender as a category of analysis. The publication of this volume celebrates the anniversary of the launch of the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Cambridge, and features contributions from the Diane Middlebrook and Carl Djerassi Visiting Professors to the University.

Jude Browne is the Jessica and Peter Frankopan Director of the University of Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies, Head of the Department of Politics and International Studies, and Fellow of Social and Political Sciences, King’s College, University of Cambridge.
WHY GENDER?

Edited by

Jude Browne

University of Cambridge
From all the contributors to this book, we dedicate it to the next generation . . .
And from me personally,
to Etta & Martha.
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Contributors

Bina Agarwal Professor of Development Economics and Environment at the Global Development Institute at the University of Manchester.

Akbar Ahmed The Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University.

Sara Ahmed Feminist Writer and Independent Scholar.

Seyla Benhabib The Eugene Meyer Professor of Political Science and Professor of Philosophy at Yale University.

Rosi Braidotti Distinguished University Professor, the Centre for Humanities at Utrecht University.

Jude Browne The Jessica and Peter Frankopan Director of the University of Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies and Fellow of King’s College, University of Cambridge.

Judith Butler The Maxine Elliot Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley.

John Dupré Professor of Philosophy of Science and Director of the ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society (Egenis) at the University of Exeter.

Nancy Fraser The Henry A. and Louise Loeb Professor of Political and Social Science and Professor of Philosophy at The New School for Social Research.

Jack Halberstam Professor of Department of English and Comparative Literature and the Institute for Research on Women, Gender and Sexuality at the University of Columbia.

Sandra G. Harding Distinguished Research Professor of Education and Gender Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.
LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Patricia Hill Collins Distinguished University Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Maryland.

Marcia C. Inhorn The William K. Lanman Jr. Professor of Anthropology and International Affairs at Yale University.

Cindi Katz Professor of Geography in Environmental Psychology and Women’s Studies at the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York (CUNY).

Catharine A. MacKinnon The Elizabeth A. Long Professor of Law at the University of Michigan and long-term James Barr Ames Visiting Professor of Law at Harvard University.

Juliet Mitchell Emeritus Professor of Gender Studies, Fellow of Jesus College, University of Cambridge and Founder Director of UCCGS

Mignon Nixon Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at University College London.

Jacqueline Rose Professor of Humanities and Director of the Birkbeck Institute of Humanities at the University of London.
A Prefatory Note

I need to start with a simple observation: this extraordinary and excellent collection demonstrates how complex and difficult is the subject at hand – gender. Each of these sixteen intellectually brilliant, world-renowned scholars have held (or are very soon to take up) the Diane Middlebrook and Carl Djerassi Visiting Professorship in the University of Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies. Two things: first, it is a very special Chair endowed by two remarkable people – Diane, an extraordinary author, literary scholar and feminist, and Carl, an eminent scientist, novelist and playwright, whose development of the contraceptive pill in the late 1950s has changed hundreds of millions of women’s lives. Together they were wonderfully participant and supportive of the Centre’s activities. Second, the Chair is held in turn by each visiting scholar, yet here in this book is a conversation between them on the question of why gender is important for understanding the world we live in, as though they were all together at the same time. This is the result of their expertise and the unifying nature of the subject. Outstandingly edited by Professor Jude Browne, the Jessica and Peter Frankopan Director of the Centre for Gender Studies, we have not only first-rate, fascinating, individual and powerfully different essays but a united euphony of voices. The result is profound: it is its diverse and collective profundity that we must celebrate – and read!

When, after nearly ten years of hard informal work, we established the Centre for Gender Studies, ‘Women’s Studies’ alone was on the academic agenda, and it had been a time of unmitigated backlash against feminism, prompting us to regroup and rethink. However we are gendered, transgendered or ungendered, we will always need the longest revolution. Feminism is a process of uneven gains and losses. Gender is
everyone who wants to join. The Centre’s original aim of arguing how completely gender everywhere ‘queers’ the world has come of age with this book. But ‘everyone and everywhere’ is not diffuse, quite the opposite; by claiming it as fundamentally a ‘category of analysis’, the book demonstrates how scholastic rigour comes first and foremost and is always at a premium. Yet there must always be a creative contradiction in play: to become, unbecome and re-become, the thrust of what ‘gender’ means, like the feminism which coined its popularity, must always work against the grain.

There is here also a political aesthetic. A book which opens and continues with highly original analyses of the gender concept to both endorse it and use it to challenge received wisdoms concludes with a paean to Yoko Ono’s project for peace and love. Bed Peace is reexamined in the last chapter of the book to combat the old chestnut of how women’s and gender struggles must wait till a ‘more important’ fight is won. This proposition, tediously repeated in every liberation struggle, should never again see the light of day once the implication of these essays sinks in; just as there is no ‘before’ women’s oppression, so too is there nowhere in time or place which is not gendered and in need of ‘ungendering’.

Juliet Mitchell
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Enormous thanks to all the Diane Middlebrook and Carl Djerassi Visiting Professors at the University of Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies of the past and near future. It has been a great pleasure to collaborate with you all.

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Finally, I’d like to warmly acknowledge Diane Middlebrook, Carl Djerassi and their family for supporting such an extraordinary Visiting Chair at Cambridge, to David and Primrose Bell and finally, to Jessica and Peter Frankopan whose support to Gender Studies at Cambridge across the years has been vital.

Professor Jude Browne
The Jessica and Peter Frankopan Director,
University of Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies