

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.

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*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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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

A PREFATORY NOTE

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 paeon 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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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.

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