

The *Gender* of **power**

edited by
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The Gender of Power

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The Gender of Power

Preface

In this volume, the subject of the 'battle of the sexes', which has enjoyed such popularity in the fine arts throughout the ages, will be given some scholarly attention. The relationship between gender and power has always been a central concern of feminist scholarship. It has not proved an easy relationship to come to terms with, however. The conceptualization of both gender and power, as well as how they are related, often gives rise to more questions than answers. For example, are gender relations so specific that a specific theory on gender is required in order to explain them? And, if this is so, what are those special features which distinguish gender relations from other relations of power between dominant and subordinate groups? Given that relations between men and women are integrally connected with power, perhaps they may best be tackled within the already long and venerable tradition of theories on power. After all, if social theory can provide promising insights on power, should we not be able to put it to use for our own feminist ends? Would it not be possible to adapt existing power theories to the special features of gender relations, perhaps after some critical feminist deconstruction? Or, should we be devoting our energies toward developing our own theories of power? What if the mainstream power theories themselves are so irrevocably gendered that only a feminist perspective on power will do? We feel that questions like these are at the heart of the newly emerging discipline of women's studies. Not only do they touch on the *raison d'être* of the field, but they raise the

problem of the relationship between feminist theory and social theory, traditional and critical alike.

These questions will be addressed in the essays in this volume. The essays were originally written for a symposium, 'The Gender of Power', held at the University of Leiden in the winter of 1987. They provide an overview of the various ways in which the relationship between gender and power is tackled by Dutch feminist scholars. They attempt to clarify some of the conceptual problems inherent in the relationship between gender and power while, at the same time, remaining firmly grounded in the study of gender relations in various contexts of everyday life.

The authors in this volume come from different disciplines and theoretical perspectives and have approached the conceptualization of power and gender in a variety of ways, depending on the practical and theoretical problems encountered in the course of their own particular inquiries. It is our hope that we will not only generate debate among other feminist scholars about the necessity of dealing more explicitly with power in our theories on gender, but that we will have provided some useful guidelines for women's studies research on gender relations as well.

Finally, a few words of thanks are in order. We are indebted to Els Postel-Coster and Joyce Outshoorn for becoming the first professors of women's studies at the University of Leiden, thereby providing us with an excuse for this project. Dini Vos put countless hours into organizing the conference upon which this book is based and, generally, helping to get things started. Lutgart Delvaux provided support and encouragement midway through the project. Special thanks go to Rosemary Gunn for preliminary editing and to Nelly Steffens for the final product. And, finally, we would like to express our appreciation to Karen Phillips, who never stopped believing that we would have the power to finish this book.

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Contents

Preface	vii
About the Authors	ix
Introduction	1
JANTINE OLDERSMA AND KATHY DAVIS	
PART ONE: THREE DIMENSIONS OF POWER	
1 Power and Love: Conflicting Conceptual Schemata	21
JOAN MEYER	
2 Gender, Power and Feminist Theory	42
AAFKE KOMTER	
PART TWO: POWER, STRUCTURE AND AGENCY	
3 Critical Sociology and Gender Relations	65
KATHY DAVIS	
4 Engendered Structure: Giddens and the Conceptualization of Gender	87
JOAN WOLFFENSPERGER	
PART THREE: SITES OF GENDERED POWER	
5 Gender, Property and Power: <i>Mahr</i> and Marriage in a Palestinian Village	111
ANNELIES MOORS	

vi CONTENTS

6	Sovereign and Disciplinary Power: a Foucaultian Analysis of the Chilean Women's Movement	129
	RIET DELSING	
7	Bourdieu, Power and Resistance: Gender Transformation in Sri Lanka	154
	CARLA RISSEEUW	
	Bibliography	180
	Index	195

Introduction

JANTINE OLDERSMA AND KATHY DAVIS

Within feminist scholarship, the notion that there is a connection between gender and power is a familiar one. Gender inequality is, after all, a pervasive feature in much of social life. It is the familiar thread that not only meanders through most of our everyday practices, but crosses national boundaries and moves backward and forward through time. Despite the variety of forms gender inequality takes and has taken in the past, it remains something that can be perceived in various otherwise highly dissimilar settings and cultures.

The relationship between gender and power has been treated as a given within feminist scholarship of the past two decades. The precise nature of this relationship, however, remains shadowy. Despite the centrality of both concepts for feminists, constructing theories which can satisfactorily account for how they are connected has proved particularly troublesome.

In this volume, we have collected together essays dealing with the ways in which theories of power might be applied to gender relations or, to be more precise, with how gender relations can be conceptualized as power relations in the first place. Before embarking on a more detailed examination of some of the issues raised by the authors in this volume concerning the study of power relations between the sexes, a brief historical sketch may be helpful to put the relationship between power and gender into perspective.

Feminist scholarship and gender

It is opportune, perhaps today even mandatory, that we develop a more relevant psychology and philosophy of power relationships beyond the simple conceptual framework provided by our traditional formal politics. Indeed, it may be imperative that we give some attention to defining a theory of politics which treats power relationships on grounds less conventional than those to which we are accustomed. (Millet 1969: 24)

This plea for a more inclusive theory of power was made by Kate Millett in 1969 and with it came her pioneering introduction of the notion of 'sexual politics'. The second wave of the feminist movement was already in full swing in the worldwide context of women's growing dissatisfaction with their subordinate social position. Sexual differences were no longer accepted as natural or biological and, consequently, part of the god-given order of things. Instead, they were viewed as the result of relations involving domination and subordination. 'Sexual politics' provided the conceptual banner under which relations between the sexes could be defined as a political issue and feminists could unite, entering the political arena thus defined to do battle against female subordination in all walks of social life.

In the wake of the second wave, feminist scholars began to make their laborious way into academia, struggling to get their concerns included in the university curriculum and research programs. 'Sexual politics' was at the top of the agenda for most of these early scholars as well. Their interest arose, in part, as a result of their own position as underpaid and under-represented members of the academic community and as a response to the androcentric biases which they were discovering within their own disciplines. As feminists, however, they were also committed to explaining how and why relations between the sexes came

to involve male domination and female subordination and, more to the point, how this unfortunate state of affairs might be altered.

Before feminist scholars could get on with this task, they found themselves having to deal with an all-too-familiar stumbling block. First, gender inequality had to be established for the non-believers as a problem: something that existed and, therefore, could be studied. Just as their activist sisters were faced with having to establish that women were a political group, sharing common problems, interests, and a (more or less) common view of how to ameliorate them (de Vries 1987), academic women had to establish their concerns as topics, meriting scientific attention within the hallowed halls of science. Thus, before investigating how asymmetrical gender relations were being produced and reproduced in the context of women's everyday lives, early feminists had first to convince the predominantly male gatekeepers of academic resources that there was, indeed, something to study.

Since the (male) academic community had historically displayed the tendency to treat relations between the sexes as part of the 'natural order', that is, as normal and, therefore, intrinsically unproblematic, the umbilical cord between biology and asymmetries in relations between the sexes had to be severed, (as was optimistically hoped) once and for all. To this end, the sex/gender distinction was formulated (Oakley 1972).

Drawing upon evidence provided by transsexuals or persons whose biological sex was open to dispute, Oakley demonstrated that sexual identity was not determined strictly by anatomy, but was primarily a social and cultural construction. The relativity of biological sex was further underlined by anthropological findings on gender distinctions. They showed that differences between the sexes existed in every culture. However, gender identity not only varied greatly from one culture to the next, but the forms it took tended to be contradictory as well (Chodorow 1971;

Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). For example, the feminine ideal in one culture might be physical strength and material self-sufficiency, whereas in another, femininity resided precisely in women's proclivity toward weakness and dependency. It became clear that sexual difference was not the biological bedrock it had been cracked up to be. It seemed instead to be little more than an arbitrary hodge-podge of social and cultural constructions.

By introducing gender as a theoretical construct, it became possible for the first time to transfer relations between the sexes from biology to society. At the same time, the locus of sexual asymmetries shifted from nature to social relations. If it was not woman's anatomical destiny to be weak, victimized and poor, then the culprit had to be sought elsewhere. By establishing sexual difference as a social or cultural product, the path was opened toward locating relations between the sexes with other socially structured relations of power. The subordination of women could no longer be explained (away) by her biology, but had entered the realm of the social and, more to the point, the political: as power relations, gender asymmetries were socially produced and reproduced and, therefore, subject to transformation. In short, gender as a theoretical construct was instrumental in the emergence of feminist scholarship. It enabled feminists to establish a whole range of issues which had previously been unthinkable, let alone meriting serious scholarly attention.

The concept of gender

The concept of gender has since moved from its original function in establishing the distinction between biology and society to the position of undisputed central theoretical construct within the field of feminist scholarship. A substantial portion of feminist theory construction has gone into developing theories of gender, elaborating gender

as the 'fundamental organizing principle' for explaining divisions in women's and men's experiences (Rubin 1975; Coward 1983a; Harding and Hintikka 1983; Hartsock 1983; Harding 1986; Scott 1986, 1988; de Lauretis 1987). Gender is central for understanding sexual dichotomies, behavioral differences between the sexes, sexual identity, sexual divisions in social activities and the symbolic representation of masculinity and femininity (Hagemann-White 1989).

These developments in feminist theory have certainly broadened our understanding of sexual difference as a many-splendored phenomenon, sporting multiple layers of meaning and numerous levels of abstraction. Ironically, however, the very complexity and multiplicity of the phenomenon set limits on the use of gender as theoretical category. In particular, as soon as we turn to our original problem of what makes gender relations hierarchically structured, we begin to run into trouble.

To begin with, gender is a descriptive rather than an explanatory concept. As such, it is, and continues to be, useful for uncovering differences in male and female experiences, social positions, behavior or whatever. It provides a way of pinpointing potential problem areas and showing where further study is required. Gender differences, in and of themselves, however, do not indicate why relations between women and men so regularly seem to involve domination and subordination. Nor does gender account for the dynamics of these relations; how they come to be produced, reproduced and transformed in the various contexts of everyday life. Abandoning the automatic link between gender and power may have been instrumental for women's studies in order to gain respectability as a new discipline. However, it also threatens to take the sting out of a feminist critique of power asymmetries in relations between the sexes (Outshoorn 1989). Recent attempts to reconnect power and gender by redefining gender as a 'primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Scott

1986: 1069) as well as difference are a step in the right direction. However, they mark what should be the beginning of an empirical and theoretical investigation into gender relations rather than its conclusion. We are still left with the task of having to proceed from gender differences to power and it is precisely this relationship which remains cloudy and inadequately conceptualized within feminist scholarship (Davis 1988b).

A second and more serious problem with gender as a theoretical construct is that it seems to imply that relations between the sexes are in some way specific or different from other relations between subordinate and dominant groups. This specificity has been situated in various areas: in women's social position as the providers of domestic services, both on a paid and unpaid basis (Hartmann 1979a), in women's reproductive capacity (O'Brien 1981) or in female sexuality (Hartsock 1983). Unfortunately, relations involving domination and subordination tend to be unequal in more than one way. Power is conflated (Davis 1988b), making it difficult to sort out what is happening as a result of gendered structures and what needs to be attributed to the social class, ethnic background or nationality of the participants. When we investigate gender relations in daily life, we generally discover that all of these structured forms of domination are 'continually being redefined in the process of ongoing political and ideological struggles; they are never static' (Fee 1986: 53). Asymmetrical power relations rarely allow themselves to be tidily taken apart and given a single source of causality, be it gender or some other form of hierarchy.

In short, gender may have accomplished what it set out to do; namely, establishing relations between the sexes as a problem requiring further investigation. However, it may not be the most useful concept for investigating what makes these relations asymmetrical or how these asymmetries are produced, reproduced and transformed in social life.

Social theory of power

The difficulties inherent in the gender concept may account for recent trends in feminist scholarship to take another look at the problem of power. If theories of gender do not lead us unproblematically to our goal of uncovering and explaining the various faces and forms of male domination and female subordination, what about power? After all, power as a theoretical construct does tend to take asymmetrical relations and the ways that they are produced, reproduced and transformed as its object. Unlike gender, however, power is not a new concept, but has a long history behind it. We could even say that the notion of power is as old as (social) science itself, and certainly one of the mainstays of scientific debate since the turn of the century.

Take, for example, Weber's celebrated definition of power which served as a starting point for social theories on power. Power is 'the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others' (Weber 1978: 926). Similar conceptions of power can be found in theorists as diverse as Hobbes and, more recently, Russell and the early writings of Dahl (Davis 1988b). According to this definition, if A can make B do something which B would not be likely to do when left to his/her own devices, power has been exercised. Power is linked to the purposive action of individuals. Exercising power seems to be inherently asymmetrical.

Simple as this conception of power seemed, it immediately raised a host of serious problems. For example, if power is inevitably tied to action or intention, how are we to explain the situation which emerges when A manages to convince B that he or she wants to do A's bidding? Does this mean that power has not been exercised? Or, must we include more covert, semi-intentional forms in our arsenal of power plays? Another problem is presented by those unfortunate situations where the opportunities for action