

Gendered Institutions

From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions

JOAN ACKER
University of Oregon

Gender has become, in the last twenty years, part of the everyday language of social science, largely as a consequence of the feminist movement and the accompanying intellectual efforts to better understand the systematic and widespread subordination of women and their domination by men. Although the term is widely used, there is no common understanding of its meaning, even among feminist scholars (Butler 1990). In sociology, feminists began with one view of gender, which has been gradually broadened and changed, although the newer view has not totally displaced the older one. To argue that there are two views of gender within sociology is, of course, to oversimplify a complex discussion containing a number of different positions and overlapping viewpoints. However, casting these positions into two views is, I believe, helpful in highlighting the emergence of a new way of thinking about central institutional processes in our society.

In the earlier usage, *gender* is another word for sex or for women; the study of gender is the study of women, sex roles, or both. Gender, in this view, is an area or a field, but one that is peripheral to the central concerns of sociology, of interest primarily to specialists. In the newer usage, gender is theorized as a basic principle of social structure and cultural interpretation (e.g., Scott 1986; Acker 1988). Rather than being a specialized area within an accepted domain, gender is the patterning of difference and domination through distinctions between women and men that is integral to many societal processes. This way of theorizing gender criticizes and challenges existing frameworks, arguing that women and gender roles cannot just be added to existing theory and that theories that are silent about gender are fundamentally flawed. This more radical view of gender is part of the ongoing development of feminist theory and method; hence the elaboration of gender is

still in process. In this essay I explore these different definitions of gender and what it means to talk about gendered institutions.

Gender was first employed to emphasize the social and relational nature of differences between women and men in contrast to biological differences between the sexes. Sex was nature and gender was nurture. In the language of sociology, gender roles replaced sex roles, as gender represented more accurately than sex the social construction of identities and roles dividing societies into women and men. Sex and gender were interdependent, but clearly distinguished. Gender was social, thus variable and subject to change, while sex represented the essential and unchanging physical differences in human reproduction. An implicit causal link existed between sex and gender.

Positing a clear distinction and a causal link between sex and gender was a useful tactic for those feminist sociologists who took a biosocial view of gender (e.g., Rossi 1984) and saw gendered behavior as at least in part physiologically determined. Although the contribution of physiological differences to social behavior is not settled, for me and others, this distinction between sex and gender became problematic. Variations in actions and feelings among both men and women, as well as similarities between women and men, seemed too great to allow tracing behavior to biological differences.

Another problem had to do with the meaning of *sex*. *Sex* signifies differences between female and male bodies, such as external genitalia, hormonal production, ovaries and sperm. These differences define the binary categories male and female and serve as signs that persons belong to one or the other. Although the categories are seen as natural, thus prior to social intervention in the form of gender, the identification of certain physical characteristics as the basis for categorizing people and the assignment of

individuals to such categories is an evaluative social process. In everyday life, the assignment to a category is usually made on the presumption of biological difference based on observable dress and behavior, as West and Zimmerman (1987) point out. Social understandings about gender difference thus enter into sex categorization. Sex derives its meaning from gender: sex collapses into gender. This is not to argue that sex, sexuality, and the body are unimportant, but that they are experienced, become comprehensible, through social practices and processes; they are constituted through gender and, at the same time, help constitute gender.

The disappearance of the clear distinction between sex and gender also erases or at least attenuates the implicit causal link between the two. The problems in distinguishing between gender and sex, although not completely resolved, are one indication of the complexities that emerged as feminists tried to deal theoretically with the previously unexamined processes of the subordination of women.

The notion of gender (or sex) as a characteristic of individuals or as a social category, which is related to the idea of gender as role and/or identity, was easily adapted to conventional models of investigation in which theories were tested through examining the relationships between variables. Gender can be used as an independent variable. For example, researchers studying wage determination add the worker's gender, or the proportion female in various occupations, as a variable to a list of other variables thought to determine the outcome—wages. Alternatively, populations are often divided into two groups, female and male, which are then compared on an aspect of gender roles—for example, the distribution of time spent on household responsibilities.

Research in this tradition is valuable as documentation of such things as differences in the social conditions of women and men, in the distribution of work between them, in their access to rewards and protections. But it is necessary to go beyond gender as category, social role, or identity in order to understand how gender differentiation and women's disadvantage are produced. For example, the processes creating and maintaining sex segregation are complex and vary with time and place (e.g., Cockburn 1985), having as much to do with employers' calculations of their

advantage and their exploitation of gender differences as with male workers' collective creation of their identities as men and workers or female workers' identification with their domestic roles. Methodological implications follow from this sort of conceptualization; qualitative and historical studies are necessary to comprehend concrete practices and processes.

Other complexities have contributed to the emerging understanding of gender. Cross-cultural and historical studies, as well as the work of women of color (e.g., hooks 1984), critical of the universalizing and essentializing tendencies in the writing of white, middle-class feminists, have illuminated the diversity and historical-cultural specificity of women's experiences and gender relations, as well as the impossibility of accounting for the situations of minority women in a role/identity perspective. Class experiences also, quite obviously, contribute to differences between women as well as to differences in relations between women and men, while the gender division of labor affects the way that class processes function (Crompton and Mann 1986). In addition, lesbian feminists pointed to the heterosexual assumptions embedded in the notion of gender roles. Focusing on roles and identities tended toward creating normative models that proved to be much too narrow to accommodate the diversity of women's experiences. Moreover, questions about power and domination could not be adequately addressed from within a sex-role perspective (Stacey and Thorne 1985).

Early efforts to resolve the conceptual problem of multiple diversities and forms of oppression involved positing different dimensions of domination—race, class, gender, ethnicity, for example, although the list could go on to sexual orientation, disability, and age. The idea of forms or dimensions of domination calls attention to differences and complexity but does not solve the problem of putting them together in a coherent account of individual experience or social process. These dimensions of domination or discrimination are neither obviously discrete nor structurally analogous. Class relations do not function in the same way as gender relations; race relations are still another matter. Yet all of these come together in cross-cutting ways for particular individuals and at particular historical moments (Andersen and Collins 1992).

Some way of capturing the force of gender within these complexities was needed.

Feminist empirical work added still other complexities (e.g., Bose and Spitze 1987; Reskin and Roos 1990). An enormous research literature, produced since the beginning of the 1970s, shows that gender divisions and patterns of power, while extremely diverse, exist wherever one looks. Gender is ubiquitous, as the wide-ranging subject matter of the books reviewed here indicates. Again, gender roles and identities provided too narrow a frame.

In the emerging conceptualization, gender stands for the pervasive ordering of human activities, practices, and social structures in terms of differentiations between women and men. These activities and practices always have symbolic significance, and, as Joan Scott (1986) points out, gender is a pervasive symbol of power. In this approach, gender is a process, not a characteristic of persons, although, of course, the assignment of persons to gender categories is a central aspect of the process. Gender does not exist in a set of relations that are distinct from other relations, such as those of class or race, but as part of the processes that also constitute class and race, as well as other lines of demarcation and domination. Sexuality and the creation of sexual meanings are complexly implicated in these processes.

The term "gendered institutions" means that gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life. Taken as more or less functioning wholes, the institutional structures of the United States and other societies are organized along lines of gender. The law, politics, religion, the academy, the state, and the economy, areas covered in the reviews below, are institutions historically developed by men, currently dominated by men, and symbolically interpreted from the standpoint of men in leading positions, both in the present and historically. These institutions have been defined by the absence of women. The only institution in which women have had a central, defining, although subordinate, role is the family. In spite of many changes bringing women into all institutions, and the reclaiming of women's history that shows their earlier important participation, males still dominate the central institutions.

In my view, this fundamental divide can be conceptualized, for our type of society, as a differentiation between production and reproduction, which is also an organization of gender. The terms "production" and "reproduction" have been interpreted in a number of different ways. I use them to denote, in a general sense, the division between the daily and intergenerational reproduction of people and the production of material goods, or commodities, in capitalist societies. The transfer of many reproductive tasks from unpaid work to paid work only shifts the location of this labor but does not affect the gender divide. In industrial capitalist societies, production is privileged over reproduction. Business and industry are seen as essential and the source of well-being and wealth, while children, child care, elder care, and education are viewed as secondary and wealth consuming. Although "the family" is idealized, reproduction, the domain of female responsibility, is relatively invisible and devalued unless it fails to function, when it may become the focus of criticism. However, reproduction is absolutely essential to the functioning of all institutions, which must have an adequate supply of members in order to exist. Moreover, institutional structures would have quite different forms if reproduction were not cordoned off in a separate sphere. They would have to organize within their boundaries childbirth, sexual activities, sleeping, eating, and other daily maintenance activities.

The divide between reproduction and production constitutes the gendered understructure of society's institutions. This divide is perpetuated in institutional processes that, except for the family and certain "total institutions," are organized on the assumption that reproduction takes place elsewhere and that responsibility for reproduction is also located elsewhere. To investigate the creation and re-creation of the gender understructure, I think it is necessary to look at organizational practices, the sites of concrete institutional functioning (Acker 1992). Processes and practices of different types can be analytically distinguished, although they are inherently connected elements in ongoing social life. Some are obvious and open; others are deeply embedded and invisible.

First in a list of gendered processes, which are at the same time class and race processes,

are the overt decisions and procedures that control, segregate, exclude, and construct hierarchies based on gender, and often race. Sometimes these are quite conscious practices that exclude women or minorities or include them in segregated roles, but they may also ostensibly have nothing to do with gender. Violence or implied violence is often involved (MacKinnon 1983). For example, political and legal practices still protect men who sexually harass or even rape women.

The construction of images, symbols, and ideologies that justify, explain, and give legitimacy to institutions is a second gendered process. Images of what Connell (1987) calls hegemonic masculinity pervade many institutional areas, including the military, business, academia, and politics. The leader and the successful organization itself are often portrayed as aggressive, goal oriented, competitive, efficient, but rarely as supportive, kind, and caring. This gendered reality is obscured, however, in the ways that institutions, other than the family, are conceptualized and theorized in gender-neutral terms. Understanding how the appearance of gender neutrality is maintained in the face of overwhelming evidence of gendered structures is an important part of analyzing gendered institutions. One conceptual mechanism is the positing of an abstract, general human being, individual, or worker who apparently has no gender. On closer examination, that individual almost always has the social characteristics of men, but that fact is not noted (e.g., Pateman 1988; Smith 1987). Analyses of general institutional processes often become analyses of those carried out by and affecting men. Such feminist critiques of knowledge reveal an organization of gender that is much less obvious than the more blatant images of masculinity, but one that supports and gives depth to those images.

A third analytic view focuses on processes of interaction. Interaction between individuals and groups is the medium for much institutional functioning, for decision making and image production. Here, people replicate gender; they "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) as they do the ordinary work of the institution.

Fourth are the internal processes in which individuals engage as they construct personas that are appropriately gendered for the institutional setting. Gender identity, in the sense of

knowing which gender category to place oneself in, is not necessarily an adequate guide. What are appropriate female or male demeanor and behavior may be very different in politics than in religious institutions, for example. Gender is an ongoing accomplishment (West and Zimmerman 1987) that also contributes to the maintenance of other aspects of gendered institutional processes. Proper gendered personas also vary by class, racial, and ethnic location.

Seeing social institutions as gendered provides a critical perspective for sociology, in which the relevant question becomes not why are women excluded but to what extent have the overall institutional structure, and the character of particular institutional areas, been formed by and through gender? Would there be a military establishment, a state as we know it, or a capitalist economy if gender were not an organizing principle? How are men's interests and masculinity of certain kinds intertwined in the creation and maintenance of particular institutions, and how have the subordination and exclusion of women been built into ordinary institutional functioning? The books reviewed here, in their diverse ways, contribute to the ongoing project of mapping the gendered history of institutions and charting their gendered patterns.

References

- Acker, Joan. 1988. "Class, Gender, and the Relations of Distribution." *Signs* 13:473-97.
- . 1992. "Gendering Organizational Theory." In *Gendering Organizational Theory*, edited by Albert J. Mills and Peta Tancred. London: Sage.
- Andersen, Margaret L. and Patricia Hill Collins. 1992. *Race Class, and Gender*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Bose, Christine and Glenna Spitze, eds. 1987. *Ingredients for Women's Employment Policy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Cockburn, Cynthia. 1985. *Machinery of Dominance*. London: Pluto Press.
- Connell, R. W. 1987. *Gender and Power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Crompton, Rosemary and Michael Mann. 1986. *Gender and Stratification*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- hooks, bell. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press.
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. 1983. "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence." *Signs* 8:635-58.
- Pateman, Carole. 1988. *The Sexual Contract*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

- Reskin, Barbara F. and Patricia A. Roos. 1990. *Job Queues, Gender Queues: Explaining Women's Inroads into Male Occupations*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Rossi, Alice. 1984. "Gender and Parenthood." *American Sociological Review* 49:1-19.
- Scott, Joan. 1986. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *American Historical Review* 91:1053-75.
- Smith, Dorothy E. 1987. *The Everyday World as Problematic*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Stacey, Judith and Barrie Thorne. 1985. "The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology." *Social Problems* 32:301-16.
- West, Candace and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* 1:125-51.

Does Women's Participation Matter?

JILL QUADAGNO
Florida State University

Women, the State, and Welfare, edited by **Linda Gordon**. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990. 311 pp. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-299-12664-1.

Engendering Democracy, by **Anne Phillips**. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991. 183 pp. \$28.50 cloth. ISBN: 0-271-00783-4. \$13.95 paper. ISBN: 0-271-00784-2.

In the late summer of 1989 I sat in the conference room of an elegant hotel overlooking the Norwegian fjords. Delighted to be in this enchanted setting, I listened as the gathering of prominent, predominantly male welfare state theorists pummeled the feckless heretic Peter Baldwin for daring to suggest that the postwar Swedish welfare state was created by middle-class reformers, not by a unified working-class movement. Feeling somewhat like an anthropologist happening upon an exotic male-bonding ritual, I scanned the room to see whether anyone else wondered why everyone was so worked up over these remote events. My eyes fell upon Robin Stryker, one of the few other women in the room (and the only other American woman present). Robin and I were there, I suspected, because the previous year Frances Fox Piven had made a fuss about why so few women were invited to a conference devoted to the subject of poverty and inequality. So here we were. Yet did our presence matter?

That subject, of women's representation, is a central theme of Anne Phillips's timely book *Engendering Democracy*, which explores the intersection between feminist and democratic theory. At odds with traditional democratic theory, which presumes a nongendered, abstract citizenship, Phillips contends that genuine equality between men and

women can only be reached by acknowledging gender differences. Yet for Phillips such acknowledgment is merely a necessary, though transitional, phase toward a society in which gender becomes irrelevant.

For the transition to a gender-irrelevant society to occur, women must first become full participants in political life, a goal that has been achieved rather remarkably in the Scandinavian countries but not even approximated in other Western nations such as the United States, where only 2 senators and 28 out of 435 members of the House of Representatives are women. What kind of democracy is this?

Certainly, it is a democracy in which women are underrepresented in national politics. But does accepting the objective that women should be represented mean accepting the argument that political leaders should "mirror" those they represent? If it does (and what other conclusion can one draw), then how do we reach this goal? Here Phillips vacillates. On the one hand, quotas (the only mechanism for implementing group representation) work. The Scandinavian countries provide the example par excellence of how to move women into elected offices through a quota system. Quotas make Phillips uneasy, however, because they contradict fundamental principles of representation. Nor is Phillips ready to abandon the traditional wisdom of democratic theory, that elected officials repre-