
Book Review

Gender and Institutions: Welfare, Work and Citizenship. Moira Gatens and Alison Mackinnon, Eds., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, 214 pp., \$64.95 (hardcover)

With few exceptions, research in feminist theory has often treated institutions as an afterthought. This book is a welcome departure from this trend. It is an interdisciplinary collection of articles that are products of Australian social scientists' Reshaping Australian Institutions project. While the focus of the book is ostensibly Australia, the articles provide a broad approach to institutional analysis which will appeal to social scientists in many countries and disciplines.

The book develops a feminist institutionalist approach to sex roles and social institutions. Social institutions are defined as stable recurrent patterns of behavior that coordinate and constrain the behavior of individuals through the generation of expectations for norms of behavior (p. 3). Feminist institutionalists use the institution of gender norms as an analytical framework; gender norms govern and define sex roles, much like other social institutions develop constraints on individual behaviors. Though the authors here follow new institutionalists in highlighting the individual agency of social actors and in seeking strategies for institutional change, they differ widely on issues of gender, producing divergent views on the social order in general. Whereas new institutionalists tend to analyze institutions in isolation from each other, feminist institutionalists consider all institutions to be interconnected with and interpenetrated by other institutions. Thus, inequalities in one institution permeate other institutions, with gendered patterns of social interaction founded in the family being reinforced by norms in education, the workplace, and the law. This view of the interconnected nature of institutions leads to an emphasis on the value of relational and associative analysis rather than the individualistic rational choice analysis that typifies new institutionalism.

Moira Gatens' introductory article on "Embodiment and Sexual Difference" draws a clear line between new institutionalism modeled on rational choice and feminist institutionalism. Gatens criticizes new institutionalism

for its assumption that family and gender norms are natural, exogenous, and neutral, which prevents them from becoming objects of scientific research. Instead, gender norms and the family are core institutions upon which other institutions are based, and are key to understanding other social institutions and power imbalances between men and women because “every social actor is sexed in a way that *determines* the differential normative constraints under which she or he acts. Furthermore, these norms *strongly predispose* sexed actors to form sex-specific tastes and preferences” (p. 4, emphases in the original).

Gender norms are a fundamental institution in that they define individuals’ (sexed) identity upon which other institutional norms are built, and thus perpetuate sex inequalities throughout other institutions.

The theoretical positions articulated by Gatens are supported with more concrete examples in the first section of the book, *Beyond the Male Breadwinner*. The articles in this section demonstrate how gender norms connect the family, labor market, and welfare state, and use these examples to illustrate the limitations of the individual welfare state model idealized by many feminists in Australia and other Western countries. Although they agree that the transition of the welfare state from a male breadwinner to an individual model is desirable in many ways, they warn that this change alone will not solve problems related with gender inequality as long as the gender norms that govern the family and the labor market, and thus the foundations of the welfare state, remain unaltered.

Section II, *Triumphs and Failures of Institutional Design: Reshaping the Workplace*, is both the strongest and most prescriptive section of the book. Its three articles examine sexual harassment, work, and affirmative action legislation, respectively. Carol Bacchi’s chapter on sexual harassment is exceptional. Bacchi proposes that we recognize that institutions are peopled: “who people are, their background, their race, their gender, within organisations makes a difference to the values associated with those organisations,” (p. 78) Thus, “those designing institutional responses to diagnosed ‘problems’ shape responses which fit their understanding of the nature of the problem, and this in turn is shaped by their gender and by their willingness or lack of willingness to rethink seriously the nature of the institution” (p. 85).

By recognizing the values of people within institutions, policy can better address the institutional sources of harassment (such as a continued unwillingness to allow women access to previously male domains, like academic research) rather than just treating its symptoms. Using this view of institutions as peopled, the next two articles consider the role of narrative in perpetuating gendered institutions and the need to address the psychological stakes of changing institutions, both in legislation and beyond. All three articles in

Section II point to the need for affirmative policies for change rather than punitive ones. Unfortunately, the section is weak in terms of defining what an institution is.

The third section, *Reshaping Citizenship: Class, Race and Nation*, emphasizes the importance of discourse in perpetuating gendered institutions. Its loosely connected articles examine how a focus on gender can change the conceptions and prerogatives of citizenship. Contrary to its title, it does not address race and class well. The highlight of Section III is Alison Mackinnon's article on the connection between gender, population, and nationalism. Mackinnon explores how narratives about the need to "maintain" population act to reinforce women's role as a mother and servant, here in service to the state. Violating state-perpetuated norms of childrearing is not simply an affront to gender, but constitutes a rejection of patriotic imperatives. Leonere Coltheart considers institutional change, using examples of changes in the definition of what constitutes public and private realms (and thus public and private institutions and institutional norms). She demonstrates that institutions considered to be part of the "social, civil" (and not political) realm can use the fact that they are not officially part of the "political" agenda to dodge accountability for their actions.

Despite this book's overall strength, its concluding article is highly disappointing, espousing a utopian vision of "we can all just get along if we tried" as a prescription for changing institutions. Ironically, this shortcoming highlights where new institutionalists' focus on rational choice might contribute to feminist institutionalism: in thinking of how incentives are necessary for those privileged to yield power to others. Moreover, none of the articles in the book deal directly with the question tantalizingly raised in the Introduction and Part I: what should we do in order to change the gender norms in the institution of the family, the key source of power imbalance between men and women? As a result, it avoids sensitive, yet critical issues in public policy, such as what can government do or not do about gender relationships in the family, and what should feminist activists collectively or individually do in order to change traditional gender norms in private relationships?

The book falls short on several other fronts as well. The book makes no mention of issues facing sexual minorities, such as institutional oppression against gays and lesbians. Furthermore, race and class are largely missing from individual articles, save for repeated obligatory comments by the authors that their perspectives do not encompass the views or experiences of women of different classes and colors. This recognition alone cannot compensate for the book's exclusive focus on White, middle-class, heterosexual women, where even Mackinnon's article on racist population policy examines only how racist discourse relates to White's women's experiences,

leaving out its influence on the minority women's lives. The book largely fails to recognize that gender-specific cultural norms may differ by race and class and that the same gender norms may have different meanings to and influences on women depending on the social contexts in which they are located.

Despite these limitations, this book provides a strong theoretical foundation for feminist institutionalism by showing the centrality of gender norms and the interconnectedness of social institutions. It covers multiple topics without deviating from its central theme, and its contents are portable beyond Australia. Its skillful coverage of broad areas ranging from the family, the labor market, and the welfare state to sexual harassment, affirmative action, and political activism will make it appealing for courses at both the advanced undergraduate and graduate levels, and provides a solid foundation for future research. Overall, the book is a great introduction to thinking about gender in institutions, and will be valuable for scholars of many different fields and levels.

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