



Genre et rapports sociaux de sexe (Gender and Social Relations of Sex)

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Pfefferkorn, Roland: *Genre et rapports sociaux de sexe (Gender and Social Relations of Sex)*, Lausanne: Editions Page 2, 2012, 140 pp., EUR 9.50, ISBN 978-2-940189-48-9

The book provides a readable account of the development of the concept of gender within the various and opposing French feminist currents. Aside of its pedagogical value, its importance is to be found in the critical analyses of the conceptual history of gender in France and in other French-speaking European societies. The goal of the book is set as to critically confront the replacement of the specific francophone concept of *rapport sociaux de sexe* (here translated as *social relations of sex*, earlier translated as *social relations between sexes*, and *social relations of gender*) with the Anglo-Saxon concept of *gender* within French feminist studies. The problem is not defined in terms of national pride but theoretically as a critical deconstruction of conceptualizations of gender which epistemologically reduce the men and women to their biological sexes. Contrary to the prescription of the national linguistic authorities who have denounced the adoption of 'gender' via the term '*genre*', Pfefferkorn does not plead for linguistic purity, but for critical reconceptualization of *genre*.

He shows that such theorization in France had been earlier developed by researchers articulating the concept of *rapport sociaux de sexe*. It was elaborated at the same time as the elaboration of gender within Anglo-Saxon feminist circles. At that moment both had an emancipatory mission: to re/construct the sexes not simply as biosocial categories, but as classes, constituted by and within the power relations of men over women.

Over time, thanks to its polysemy, 'gender' has obtained almost universal acceptance. Its introduction in analyses of women/man relations has become internationally successful, including in France. From this perspective the book can be seen as pleading for critical sociology of the process of acculturation of gender. The arguments of the author are presented clearly and convincingly. The main thesis is that the concept of gender finds itself at home in France, assuming that it keeps the *problematic of conflict* within the focus of feminist studies and in particular of the sociology of relations between men and women. The author points out that when 'gender' entered France there was already a strong feminist movement, which had produced rich conceptual apparatus (*patriarcat, mode de production domestique, division sexuelle du travail, sexe social, sexage, classe de sexe*), of which the author emphasizes the importance of the concept of *social relations of sex*.

Theoretically, the social relations of sex are defined from a Marxian perspective. This is articulated through the concept of *rapports sociaux*, which translated into English would be *social relations*. But this French

term stands in contrast to the term *relations sociales* (as '*soziale Verhältnissen*' versus '*soziale Beziehungen*' in German). It is assumed that the two concepts operate at two different levels of social reality. The first takes into account conflicts around the question of division of labor which contribute to the creation of two social groups with antagonistic interests. It signifies dichotomous social categorization, asymmetry, exploitation, domination and alienation at material, institutional and ideal plan.

Pfefferkorn, assumes this distinction to be of crucial importance for the concept of social relations of sex and presents it by reviewing works of Danièle Kergoat, Alain Bihr, and other French sociologists. On such grounds, this concept is elaborated as coextensive and consubstantial to concepts of class and race. The social relations of sex interact with social class relations and social relations of race. Their different configurations result in specific historical constructions. The absence of this dialectic between sex, class, race, and other social relations (including generational) is presented as the main weakness of some of the examined conceptualizations of the relations between men and women by using the concept of *genre*.

Under the pressure of the culturalist anchoring of the term *genre*, some of its promoters in France have conceptualized it at the expense of the conflict dimension, emphasized by the concept of *rapport sociaux de sexe*. As a consequence, this gendered approach does not take into account the social classes to which men and women belong, and by doing that it contributes to occultation of classes. This results in complete negation of the concept of social sex and falls down into the hands of the old, pre-feminist biological reductionism.

The genesis and characteristics of the concept of social relations of sex is examined from a materialist feminist approach. The author actualizes studies accomplished by the *Groupe d'études sur la division sociale et sexuelle du travail* whose researchers have elaborated the concept of the social relations of sex in strong connection with the concept of sexual division of labor. From this perspective, it is elaborated that the lever of domination of men over women resides in the sphere of 'travail' (work/labor/production). In this direction the studies of Pascal Molinier are appraised for showing that the cornerstone of social reproduction of sexes lies in the sphere of work and not in sexuality as such. The labor has the power to produce and to modify, to construct and to reconstruct individuals and social sexes. And here 'labor' is not reduced just to its paid and formal forms, but also includes informal and unpaid domestic work.

Yet, the sphere of work is at the same time the space of emancipation. Changes in the sphere of work since the 1960s have created possibilities to exit from the domestic sphere and to enter into spheres of 'public industry'. On such grounds women construct their 'we' as a class identity.

In this way, concludes the author, it is through their collective actions, through their mobilization, and their struggles around labor issues that women can win their emancipation.

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