



Feminist Theory

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Book reviews

Lucy Nicholas *Queer post-gender ethics: The shape of selves to come*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 230 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-32161-9, £47.99 (ebook), £63.00 (hbk), £60.00 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Clara Bradbury-Rance, *University of Manchester, UK*

In *Queer Post-Gender Ethics*, Lucy Nicholas puts forward a bold and imaginative argument for an ethics of sexual subjectivity that moves beyond gender and what is argued to be its inevitable (and inevitably oppressive) tendency towards binary opposition. The book begins by discussing how the categories of sex and gender are facing dismantlement in contexts including not only grass-roots activism, but also legal documentation, school systems, and Facebook. The book also participates in this process through the universal use of neutral pronouns that eradicate gender from the text itself. Yet these are radical instances in the context of bigenderism's resilience, outlined convincingly and coherently in Chapter 1, and its violent implications (not only, though certainly most acutely) for intersex and trans people.

Eradication of the categories of sex and gender is the book's central, forceful ambition. Nicholas suggests that we might only really analyse gender once its absence becomes imaginable. This is precisely what Nicholas argues existing theories of radical gender have failed to achieve. While the book situates itself within the queer project, Nicholas's 'promiscuous methodology' (p. 11) accommodates the intersection of queer theory with politics, philosophy, sociology and biology.

While Nicholas draws a sometimes inflexible distinction between academic and non-academic thought, the book's programme brings the two together to forge a theoretically sophisticated argument that is capable of producing social change, a discursive account of gender that can imagine its *posting*, a methodology that combines 'the deconstructive diagnostic and the reconstructive ethical and political' (p. 4, see: Benhabib, 1985). A surprising exception to this model is Nicholas's approach to existing scholarship, which is at times dismissed too easily in discreet categories of thought ('the' liberal feminists; 'the' queer theorists).

What Nicholas offers is a positive vision of post-gender *potential*, though it is not a strictly utopian project. While for instance citing Muñoz's (2009) opposition

to queer theory's antisocial thesis, Nicholas consistently emphasises a contrasting approach that is 'workable' (p. 7), which I understand to mean both theoretical and rooted in real life. This methodology is presented as *androgynous*, moving that term beyond its typically gendered etymological rooting and towards a new kind of dual thinking.

The first three chapters anticipate this 'mode of thought' (p. 7) by establishing the current approach to sex/gender in the academy and beyond, surveying existing ethics of gender and the self that cling stubbornly to 'a normative ideal' (p. 83), and setting out the argument for gender's eradication rather than expansion. If the opening chapters present and deconstruct what Nicholas calls 'the problem', the second half of the book offers its promised 'reconstructive' solution (p. 16). The final two chapters promise that which Sedgwick lamented was so rare, the ability to advocate 'nondualistic' thinking *as well as* to 'transmit how to go about it' (2003: 1). Pedagogy is the form of transmission here, in an expansive use of the term that encompasses 'the ideal of a nurturing, not compelled or coercing, relation between learning partners' (p. 167). Nicholas's examples include sex education in traditional schools and in community 'Free Skools', gender-neutral parenting and finally, drawing together the book's many threads, the ethics of consensual sexual relationships.

Potentiality is what Nicholas finally advocates over identity. Yet the book still commits to the possibility of 'coming to subjecthood' (p. 158). Nicholas criticises liberal feminism for continuing 'to idealise atomised, pre-existing selves in the political sphere' (p. 63). At times in the book, I wonder whether what becomes idealised in turn are the pre-figured 'selves to come' of the title.

To what extent is non-gender bound to entail non-identity, and is the latter, if indeed possible, really the 'happy limbo' that Foucault (1980: p. xiii) suggests? How should a positive ethics align itself with the 'deconstructive impulse' (p. 2) that rejects the identity categories around which so much progressive politics has gathered? These are the questions that Nicholas acknowledges in the conclusion as continuing concerns. However, if the book begins by hoping to champion 'queer bonds' (p. 4), the final chapters do allow for these bonds through different models of queer community that, having moved beyond gender identity, allow for new forms of communitarian sexual and social ethics.

References

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