

Book Review

BONNIE FOX, When Couples become Parents: The Creation of Gender in the Transition to Parenthood. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 334 p., index.

Parenthood, and particularly heterosexual nuclear-family parenthood, is not a particularly “hot” topic in sociology or gender studies these days, but Bonnie Fox’s book suggests that it should be. However, the low-key tenor of her writing may mislead readers to miss the significance of her work. Her meticulous research and detailed analysis explores if, how, and why having children genders couples. What is particularly significant, in my view, is that Fox’s analysis shows tremendous variation in gender relations within her fairly homogeneous sample of couples.

Fox’s first accomplishment is conceptual. She provides an excellent example of how to take up gender as a social relation. Arguing against the “doing-gender” approach, she situates gender relations and gendered agency within social structure. Her analysis shows how couple’s differences in material resources and relationship dynamics influence parents’ differently gendered lives. Questions about couples’ financial, domestic, and childcare arrangements, how they care for one another, use social support, and spend leisure time provide the basis for an argument that “parenthood creates gender more thoroughly than any other experience in people’s lives” (p. 6).

While Fox begins by analyzing women’s experiences of birthing and mothering as gendered labor, her subsequent chapters provide a more relational account of parenting that keeps men equally in mind. Complementing and extending studies of fatherhood, such as Andrea Doucet’s recent well-received analysis, Fox’s work shows how different parenting arrangements are co-constituted with gendered divisions of labor, gender difference, and gender inequities. Fox also explores how couple relationships both affect and are affected by parenting. With her lens trained on a broad terrain that includes parenting tasks as well as the “thinking about” and planning involved in parenting, family making, and other aspects of household life, Fox’s analysis expands the ground for studies of parenthood, family, and conjugal relations. She questions the veracity of household time studies that examine gendered divisions of labor and do not account for the necessary work involved in thinking, planning, and organizing. Indeed, Fox handles the central issue of time particularly adeptly. She also shows how parenting work, gender, and “homemaking” become intertwined in many households. This relation calls out for an analysis of

the spatial dimension, to include facets of Fox's study such as the perception that what happens in the privatized space of home does not count as work, which is unfortunately absent here.

Fox's second accomplishment is the analytic depth provided by her multi-interview longitudinal methodology. Following in the tradition of Meg Luxton, Fox and members of her research team interviewed women and men in couples, both separately and together, at regular intervals from late pregnancy until two years after the birth of their first baby. This method not only provided thick data, it revealed gendered variations within specific couple relations as they evolved over time and in response to changing circumstances. The method allowed Fox to analyze the fluidity of gendering processes, and to notice when and how specific kinds of gender relations developed.

Fox's third accomplishment is in the significance of her findings. For the 40 couples who participated in this study, responding to the demands of contemporary privatized child-rearing arrangements required a shift in their "economies of care" and divisions of labor. These shifts often had negative implications for gender equity. However, when couples were able to take up child rearing as a common project, shared care beyond the nuclear family, and had higher levels of emotional and economic security, gender equity was supported. My interest went into high gear as I thought through just some of the implications of this study for gender theory, sociology of work, sociology of families, and social policy. If people in couples become gendered through parenting—and gendered in a wide variety of somewhat fluctuating patterns—what are the gender effects for their children? Although feminist theory tends to perceive the heterosexual nuclear family as a site where gender inequity is inevitably reproduced, is it also a site where, with some reworking and support for coparenting and employment, gender equity can emerge? Further, what light does this study of heterosexual relations shed on our understandings of sexuality, where heterosexuality is often the unexamined normative foil for alternative visions?

Strangely, given Fox's past work and my admiration of it, my one major quibble with Fox is about her handling of the category of social class. In her other work, Fox is authoritative on issues of class. But in operationalizing the concept as a descriptor in this case, Fox leaves room for the reader to draw some empirically unsupportable conclusions. Fox shows us that "intensive mothering"—an anxious child-focused maternal hovering—was an expectation, an achievement, and a problem for many middle-class mothers. Her middle-class couples also had extended families that "gave them significant amounts of money and generous help" (p. 22). Many had mothers who gave "such frequent and thorough-going support . . . that it rivaled the support given by partners" (p. 92). This support that looked to me like "intensive mothering" of adult children, is mostly cast by Fox as a positive factor in supporting gender equity for the couples. This

is problematic in my view, particularly as the gender position of maternal grandmothers in taking on this support work was not considered.

Contrasting sharply with this depiction of middle-class relations, Fox writes that working-class couples “were more likely to be coping with psychological problems, due to abusive parents or at least dysfunctional families of origin” (p. 283), and did not have family support in most cases. The working-class mothers were also much less likely to be doing intensive mothering. Taken together, these descriptions of classed parenting appear to suggest that intensive mothering, family support, and “function” are co-constituted middle-class achievements, while working-class families without intensive mothering are rife with “family dysfunction,” a term I acknowledge I find offensive after my years of social work practice. This suggestion, which is not made but rather inferred, is problematic and troubling. Many studies of child abuse, spousal assault, substance abuse, and other indicators of what is often called “family dysfunction” have shown that class, as described by Fox, are not highly correlated with these social problems. That said, my concern with Fox’s handling of class did not quell my interest, but raised it. Class analysis is absent from many contemporary accounts of family matters and gender studies. Fox’s struggle to operationalize the concept is a bold attempt to address this troubling absence.

Fox’s book is a significant contribution. Her well-delineated chapters will make excellent readings for course curricula that take up parenthood, gender formation, work/life balance issues, equity, and social policy. But even more usefully, this book should stir reconsiderations of contemporary family formation in relation to the reproduction of gender and class inequities. It deserves a thorough read.

SUSAN BRAEDLEY, Carleton University