

REVIEWS

BOOKS

Delusions of Gender Cordelia Fine

The “new sexism” takes many forms, all of which are said to be empowering. The response has been a rash of books challenging the claims that pole dancing and making sexist jokes are somehow liberating.

Ariel Levy’s *Female Chauvinist Pigs* described the problem and the vast lucrative industry behind all aspects of “raunch culture”, while Deborah Cameron’s *The Myth of Mars and Venus* took apart the relationship empire of John Gray’s *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. Gray highlights societal problems reflected in personal relationships and advises women that the only way they will be happy is to embrace defeat and more or less do whatever their man wants. Naturally he offers his wisdom for money.

Delusions of Gender inevitably covers some of the same ground but, in particular, also targets evolutionary psychology and its underpinning of an education system that still firmly genders courses and careers.

Attacking evolutionary psychologists is a bit like shooting fish in a barrel. Many of them peddle badly demonstrated and interpreted data to fit presuppositions. Their careers are made in right wing institutions and by newspapers that happily bolster the status quo. Whether with complicated arguments about fetal testosterone or our differently wired brains (the male brain is normal, the

female brain is different) their arguments amount to women should do the social stuff and allow men to do the science, maths, and careers with high status and therefore money.

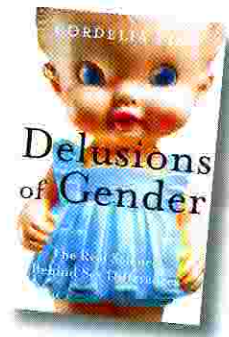
Some female evolutionary psychologists will throw us a bone: we may not be able to do science but we are intuition itself and will know what a husband is thinking before he does. So not only did evolution finish at some convenient distant point in the past but women are telepathic, or would be if we embraced our biology and stopped trying to count past a hundred. Fine’s tone is witty but the citations are detailed and the bibliography extensive.

Fine’s core argument is that a pervasive culture of sexism moulds young people to internalise gender stereotypes and discourages young women from entering particular courses at university. The most pernicious aspect of the problem is how immediately sensitive we are to priming. Told that women do less well at a particular maths test, women will do less well than

in the group which is told that men and women score the same. Fine calls this process “knowing and being” and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So I understand that women are bad at maths, and I am a woman and this directly undermines my ability to do maths. It is also not enough to suggest that these students must just stand up for themselves. Fine shows that the performance of students suppressing negative ideas about their own ability as women to do the tests also actually damages their ability to do maths.

Young women who excel at maths and science then find that the further they climb the career ladder, the fewer people like themselves there will be, with the concomitant implication that they don’t belong. What’s more, with the proviso that anecdote is not data, woman-to-man transsexuals report that they are treated with more respect at work as men and get to hear how much more competent they are than the women they “replaced”. Well, we can’t all



stop being women, yet we are expected to shrug off these mental attacks and do as well as a man in a chosen field if we are really up to it.

Fine concludes, “Our minds, society and neurosexism create difference. Together, they wire gender. But the wiring is soft, not hard...and if we only believe this it will continue to unravel.”

If only. Capitalism is endlessly inventive and can incorporate new ways of living as long as they don’t threaten profit. Unlike individual sexists, capitalism doesn’t hate women as long as they can be made to do most of society’s social care on the cheap. The financial crisis is going to exacerbate this effect, limiting women’s access to education, careers, personal development or even personal safety.

Part of the sustained critical response to the “new sexism” has been to the prevalence of domestic violence and rape, and Fine’s statistics from US campuses are enraging. As Kira Cochrane argued in the *Guardian* recently, the rise of rape-talk is a new form of denigrating even the idea that rape is a profound violent attack on both a person’s body and mind. So mainstream comedians like Jimmy Carr, a racist and misogynist, can look wide-eyed and innocent while making jokes about rape being “surprise sex”.

Our experience of the malleability of the young is also that we have seen how quickly they can move to fight for their education and social justice. This book is an entertaining weapon in that fight and will make a nice “thwok” sound bouncing off the heads of sexists.

Sarah Ensor

Delusions of Gender is published by Icon Books, £14.99



From Barbie to barbecues: gender stereotyping can be internalised

Socialist Review