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## Review of *When Sex Became Gender*, by Shira Tarrant.

Mary Jo Deegan

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, maryjodeegan@yahoo.com

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#### BOOK REVIEW

*When Sex Became Gender*. By Shira Tarrant. New York:  
Routledge, 2006, 285 pp., \$100.00 (cloth), \$32.95 (paper).

Shira Tarrant's book, *When Sex Became Gender*, analyzes the intellectual work of five women between the first and second waves of feminism (i.e., between 1920 and 1965). Tarrant specifically "confronts the bonds of ideology" surrounding feminist theory that were created in the cold war years in the United States, Britain, and France. She does so in an in-depth examination of five women who wrote about women's social location: Margaret Mead, the anthropologist who studied sex roles and socialization; Mirra Komarovsky, the functionalist sociologist who interrogated sex roles, paid labor, and marriage; Viola Klein, the sociologist and sociology of knowledge theorist and sex role analyst, who also worked with Alva Myrdal, the Swedish sociologist and Nobelist; Simone de Beauvoir, the existential feminist who wrote the ground-breaking *The Second Sex*; and the social constructionist Ruth Herschberger, who wrote on the gendered ideology surrounding biological science and language.

Tarrant argues that these five scholars were part of the ideological transition from believing that women exhibited "sex" characteristics that were both biological and social in origin to adopting "gender" as a social category and ideology influencing and sometimes defining appropriate behavior for people considered to be women and men.

Many scholars have documented the lives and works of female intellectuals during the past two centuries, but it is vital to have more

analyses of this labor. Tarrant's study of five such scholars supports this effort, but the unevenness in her analyses mars the book's usefulness and readability. Her chapters on Mead and de Beauvoir cover very little new ground and often focus on the reception of their work by others, especially by Betty Friedan. Friedan, a popular writer, was a key figure in the transition to the second wave of feminism but neither a painstaking intellectual nor colleague. Tarrant's examinations of Komarovsky and Klein (and Myrdal as Klein's co-author and colleague), in contrast, break new ground and are well worth reading.

Herschberger is not, in my view, a feminist theorist, nor are her writings in one volume, *Adam's Rib*, comparable to the contributions of the other four women. Since Tarrant does not have a set of criteria for her selection of these five women, I do not know why Tarrant emphasizes Herschberger to such a degree. Many women worked during these years and produced vital intellectual insights, but they are not visible in Tarrant's work; I do not know why they were not selected. The chapters on Komarovsky and Klein are well written and reflective, but the chapters on the other three women are less complex and less compelling.

Finally, women intellectuals have been working for centuries on elaborating and discussing the differences between biological, social, political, and economic factors shaping women's lives. Scholars studying these women have not been limited by the "first and second wave" language, although perhaps textbook writers over-rely on this simplification of ideas and actions. Many other women intellectuals writing before and after World War I and after women won the right to vote in 1920—such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Roberts Coolidge, Katharine Bement Davis, and Jessie Taft—discovered that sex and gender were two separate social categories. As a group, they started writing in the 1890s and some of them lived until the 1960s.

The "cold war intellectuals" discussed by Tarrant built on the work of their predecessors, but the earlier women and their ideas are absent usually from the writings of both the scholars from the interwar years and this contemporary book by Tarrant. As scholars, we must bring greater inclusiveness and depth to our studies of women's intellectual work and its interaction with historical locations and ideologies.

Mary Jo Deegan  
*University of Nebraska–Lincoln*