

# Foucault Studies

© Jonathan Zeyl 2009

ISSN: 1832-5203

*Foucault Studies*, No 7, pp. 142-143, September 2009

---

## REVIEW

**Ellen K. Feder, *Family Bonds: Genealogies of Race and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ISBN: 978-0195314755**

Ellen K. Feder's book, *Family Bonds: Genealogies of Race and Gender*, creatively and insightfully applies a Foucauldian analysis of power to explain the differences between the production of gender and the production of race in America in the second half of the twentieth century. With an examination of (i) the construction of Levittown, a post-World War II suburban housing development, (ii) the emergence of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the 1970s, and (iii) the Violence Initiative in the 1990s, Feder investigates three separate ways in which the production of gender and race intersect by focusing on the family as the critical site for the production of difference. The originality of Feder's work is evidenced in the way she applies a Foucauldian analysis of power to understand the production of difference of race and gender: gender, Feder argues, can be understood as a function of "disciplinary" power operating within the family, whereas race can be understood as a function of "regulatory" or biopower operating from outside the family. Beginning in chapter 1 with a well-written exegesis of Foucault's methodology, Feder applies his archaeological and genealogical method to her own genealogies of race, gender and the family.

In chapter 2 Feder documents the production of a "new whiteness" (26) that emerged alongside the development of Levittown, New York. Feder turns to Levittown to tell her story about the intersection of race and gender because Levittown, she notes, "provides a rich example of the way in which state or regulatory power is deployed to create a new community, what would become the prototypical suburb." (26) This prototypical suburb maintained the homogeneity of ethnic identities from previous ethnic enclaves entrenched in the cities. African Americans, however, were excluded from this community because their presence, it was rightly assumed, would depreciate its property values. After telling her story about the production of racism, Feder refocuses her lens and shows how this story intersects with the production of gender by showing how such suburbs also created the impetus for women's "return" to the home. To tell this story about the operation of power within the family she turns to Bentham's famous panopticon model that informs Foucault's analysis of power and shows how housewives, whose role it was to supervise children, cook, and clean, became continually subject to the gaze of

neighbors and thus internalized the community's expectations into the raising of the family. Though each story about the production of gender and race involves the other story, Feder shows how these situations nevertheless resist a narrative union because of the differences of the means of their production of power.

In chapter 3 Feder tells a different story about the production of power. Turning to the treatment of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the 1970s, Feder chronicles how this story "reveals the distinctively disciplinary enforcement of gender difference in everyday life, as well as the ways that the family is implicated in that enforcement." (47) This story reveals how gender roles are invisibly reinforced in the family by way of showing how the diagnosis of professionals implied the belief in a natural gendered response on the part of children and a natural gendered way to rear a child. Of all of her stories, however, this one seems to resist a story on the production of race, (67) an omission that proves for Feder how discursive formations can make it possible for relevant factors such as race or ethnicity to appear inconsequential.

Turning more explicitly to the production of race in chapter 4, Feder examines more concretely the development of biopower – that is, power that creates "biological" distinctions within a valued hierarchy (71) – by writing about the government-funded Violence Initiative that researched supposedly genetic and biological links to the surge in violence in America in the 1990s. This project, couched in scientific language, demonstrates for Feder how knowledge and power cannot be separated, as one begins to see how racism and the collective grouping of dangerous individuals depend on these concepts. While this is a story about racism, Feder finishes the chapter by refocusing her lens on the family and shows how the role of mothers of dangerous individuals intersects in this story which is explicitly, though not exclusively, about race.

Feder's stories convincingly support her overarching claim that the production of gender and race "resist[s] a certain narrative union." (87) In discussing the discursive strategies of gender and race in the final chapter, Feder remarks that discourse both limits our thinking and makes our thinking possible, thereby pointing out why such a narrative union between race and gender is so difficult to conceive. With that said, however, Feder notes that by highlighting the peculiar limitations of the external regulative function of race and the internal disciplinary function of gender in the family, one can begin to develop a new strategy, a new starting point, for telling how the family functions in the production of both race and gender. Feder's remarkable ability to clearly apply Foucault's method to the above stories, combined with the complexity and depth with which she tells her stories, will undoubtedly encourage others to construct narratives about the intersection between race and gender.

Jonathan Zeyl, Professor of Philosophy, Humber College, Toronto, Canada