DiGeSt

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What Are You Reading?

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2. Gender and media: Representing, producing, consuming by Krijnen, T. & Van Bauwel, S.
3. Feminism and the mastery of nature by Plumwood, V.
4. The Malthus factor. Poverty, politics and population in capitalist development by Ross, E.B.

Reviews by:
Guangxing Fu, Jasper De Cnuydt, Jana Heemeryck, Soumaya Majdoub

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Fincher, L.H. (2014). *Leftover women: The resurgence of gender inequality in China*. New York: Zed Books.

In her book *Leftover women: The resurgence of gender inequality in China*, Leta Hong Fincher explores the origins and the consequences of a hegemonic discourse on 'leftover women' and interprets it as a resurgence of gender inequality in modern China. The derogatory term 'leftover woman' or *shengnü* (剩女), as Fincher shows, is a powerful term, which is widely used in Chinese society to identify urban, educated, and working women in their late twenties or older who are still single and, for this, are stigmatized. They are facing intense pressure to marry from parents and other relatives, friends, and colleagues, which is further exacerbated by the Chinese state media, government-sponsored matchmaking events, and matchmakers. This labeling, the concomitant media campaigns, and the way these are embodied on all levels of Chinese society put young women under immense pressure to marry in order to avoid becoming 'leftover'.

In an effort to understand how the current situation developed, Fincher looks to Chinese history, tracing the socio-economic position of women. She finds striking differences between the contemporary situation and that of ancient China: during the Song dynasty, the State did support the inheritance of property by daughters even when there were also sons in the family. Furthermore, in the same period, the State provided an extraordinary range of supportive measures to guarantee women's property rights including the preservation of assets for under-aged girls as well as boys. Even in more recent times, women have been afforded more equality: after 1949, in the early years of the People's Republic of China, Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed overcoming traditional forms of gender inequality to be an important revolutionary goal. As Fincher's book shows, women's gains of the ancient and more recent past, are now rapidly being eroded under China's post-socialist reform.

As Fincher explains, these highly educated, world-wise young women genuinely believe the destructive myths perpetuated by the state media and make excessive personal and financial compromises, driven by the fear that they will otherwise never find a husband. This fear of 'leftoverness' has also affected the housing market. Fincher's research has found that many Chinese women rush into marriage without protecting their economic interests and often transfer their assets to their boyfriend or husband to buy a marital home. The practice is seen as a means of mutual support and is often encouraged by the parents of women in such a situation, even though the home tends to be registered solely in the man's name. Although some women simply do not question the custom of the man as the head of the household and sole homeowner, many others have a strong desire to register their names on the marital home deed, but they back down in the face of overwhelming social and regulatory obstacles.

Fincher conducted online surveys and interviews by using Sina Weibo (China's version of Twitter), which resulted in a sample of 283 people (151 women and 132 men) from cities across China. Additionally, she conducted formal in-depth interviews with 60 people (36 women and 24 men) who participated in the online interviews and expressed an interest in further contributing to her research. Most of her formal interviewees have a college-level education or above, with an average to above-average income, which could be considered 'middle class', and are in their mid-twenties to early thirties—the prime age for marriage and first-time urban home buying in China. The interview results led to the insight that unmarried women found the vast amount of paperwork and the complicated bureaucratic procedure for registering their name together with their partner's while purchasing their marital home to be very inconvenient. Even when a married couple have an egalitarian relationship, with the names of both husband and wife registered jointly on the property deed, China's bank regulations may still work against the woman. The mortgage loan company

views the man—the primary loan recipient—as the person who has a greater stake in the property. As a result, it is extremely complicated for both partners to transfer money to make mortgage payments, and major banks in China do not permit couples to open a joint bank account. In consequence of this, all of the receipts documenting mortgage payments recorded only the man's name, making it easier to put only the male partner's name on the official documents. While some aspects of the situation are bureaucratic in nature, others are rooted in social practices. Home ownership is a defining feature of masculinity in Chinese society, and some successful professional women allow their less professionally successful husbands to claim sole ownership of the home to help achieve this expectation. This practice, however, reinforces the prevailing patriarchal notion that the man should be the official homeowner. All of these factors on their own, or especially in combination, result in many women being excluded from China's booming housing market.

The interplay between skyrocketing home prices, a resurgence of traditional gender norms, legal setbacks to married women's property rights, declining labor force participation among women, and the media campaign against 'leftover' women and its impact on public opinion has contributed to the decline of both the social status and the material well-being of Chinese women compared to that of Chinese men. Fincher even suggests a link between women's lack of property rights and the rampant problem of intimate partner violence in China. The problem is further intensified because the authoritarian nature of China's one-party state prevents a nationwide women's rights movement from gaining traction.

Fincher's book has been of great inspiration for my research, which focuses on the history of the feminist movement in China and analyses it in a broader Chinese gender-cultural context. My research focuses specifically on a government project aimed to promote marriage between migrant workers in urban areas and 'leftover' women, the latter marketed as a demographic in need of help. Fincher's work has encouraged me to further reflect on the difficult social status faced by these marginalized groups and the important links between the 'leftover women' discourse, economic motives, and governmental propaganda behavior. The book is important for researchers in the fields of diversity and gender studies because it also encourages the consideration of the complex historical, economic, and social context associated with the status of feminism in China.

Guangxing Fu

Guangxing Fu is a Lecturer in Anthropology at Guizhou University of Finance and Economics in China. He is currently sponsored by the China Scholarship Council (CSC) and working as post-doctoral researcher affiliated with the Interculturalism, Migration and Minorities Research Centre (IMMRC) at the KU Leuven in Belgium. His research interests focus on gender studies, ethnicity and nationalism, disability and culture.

2

Krijnen, T. & Van Bauwel, S. (2015). *Gender and media: Representing, producing, consuming.* **London: Routledge.**

In their book *Gender and media: Representing, producing, consuming*, Krijnen and Van Bauwel provide insight into contemporary academic debates and discussions about the relationship between gender and media, exploring the ways in which gender intervenes in processes of representation, production, and consumption. The work provides an accessible and coherent introduction to the intersection of the fields of gender and media studies, with concepts of subjectivity, identity, and representation as central focuses, but it also addresses more invisible aspects of media such as media organisations, the power of media industries, and the ways media is consumed. Throughout their chapters, they examine gender

representations in the media to show that women are still underrepresented in comparison to men, arguing that media function as technologies of gender informing the narratives of our identities and our subjectivity. Important is that representations of gender often intersect with other axes of identity, resulting in women, men of colour, and others being represented in stereotypical ways. This promotes essentialist notions of gender and limits subject positions available to audiences.

However, through media convergence and new technologies such as social media, individuals have the opportunity to create new identities. This allows individuals to move beyond the limitations of reality, which, in a larger context, enables resistance towards normative discourses on gender. It even allows a mutual relationship between social, material, and media technologies of gender, making it possible to embody multiple gender identities in online spaces, resulting in a power shift in the relation between industry and audiences. In present day, people are able to actively engage and even create their own media, such as videos, blogs, magazines, and more, showing that it is not only the industry that determines what can be consumed at a particular moment. Krijnen and Van Bauwel's book elaborates on the notion of resistance, emphasising that many of the pleasures derived from media are actually born out of resisting a preferred reading. In an example, they explain that fans of *Twilight* who were discontented with parts of the story were able to create other interpretations in YouTube videos. In this case, the alternative storyline depicted a romantic relationship between the two main male characters, resisting the dominant storyline that presents a traditional heterosexual relationship. The term 'produser' exemplifies the blurring boundaries between producing and consuming media. Individuals are now able to choose between different readings of media or even create their own. On the whole, the book exposes the role of contemporary media and how it impacts daily lives, stimulating readers to critically analyse the production of media and the ways in which it is consumed.

Krijnen and Van Bauwel's work has proved useful for my research, which focuses on drag performers and the impact of social media on their subjectivity and identity. Recently, under influence of the popular TV show *Rupaul's Drag Race,* drag has become more visible in mainstream media and society than ever before. The book inspired me to focus not only on representations, but also to broaden my scope and focus on production and consumption. As a 'produser' of one's own media, the technologies of gender for drag performers are not only social and material. As a social technology, drag challenges the discourses and practices which perpetuate the "natural" of binary systems of gender and sexuality. The material technologies of drag consist of wigs, false eyelashes, and padding, which are instrumental in the transformation process. These two technologies, the social and the material, are already mutually implicated, but I consider media as a third technology of gender to accomplish this. New media, specifically social media, has allowed a mutual relationship between these technologies of gender and functions as a platform where individuals can embody multiple gender identities in an online space and within drag communities. My research highlights the importance of social media in understanding how it is possible to embody multiple identities, even beyond the gender binary, and explores new opportunities this type of media offers for analysing subjectivity and identity.

As a comprehensive view of the role that media plays in gender representation, production, and consumption, Krijnen and Van Bauwel's book is a useful contribution to the fields of media and gender studies for both established researchers and those seeking an introduction. It encourages readers to become aware of the effects of mediatization on our current society, urging greater awareness towards processes of representation, production, and consumption and how they are related to discussions about gender and diversity. Throughout the book they argue that the production of content and consumption of media are always interrelated and cannot be understood as isolated concepts and that attention should be placed on the intersection of media and gender. The book gives a substantial overview of the main debates but maintains a critical perspective. Acknowledging the recent development of new media and media convergence, it stimulates readers to critically reflect on their own

production and consumption. While media has already become of major importance and plays a vital role in the construction of identity and gender, the development of new media will only further shape our understanding of the relation between gender and media. Krijnen and Van Bauwel's book offers a solid base from which to assess the current state but also to consider the possibilities for the future.

Jasper De Cnuydt

Jasper De Cnuydt holds a Master of Science in Educational Sciences and a Master of Arts in Gender and Diversity from Ghent University. Jasper is a research staff member on a university-wide innovation project focused on stimulating active learning in higher education (ACTIVO-project) working at the Department of Educational Policy at Ghent University. His current research interests include drag performances, posthuman drag, and (self)representations of drag in media.

3

Plumwood, V. (2002). *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. New York: Routledge.

According to Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood, contemporary Western politics has its roots in an ancient phallocentric dualism. The concept of dualism stems from the Western philosophical tradition that proclaims reason is the highest good of humanity as it is considered the force of power behind the Enlightenment, scientific development, and industrialisation in the west. In her book *Feminism and the mastery of nature*, Plumwood elucidates the problematic nature of this Western exaltation of (patriarchal) rationality, which has engendered and continues to reproduce various forms of oppression such as sexism, colonialism, socio-economic discrimination, and the subjugation of nature. Plumwood presents ecofeminism as a significant philosophical movement, which is characterized by intersectionality.

Her ecocritical analysis exposes the intricate ways in which the structures of domination systematically exclude women, native ethnicities, and nature, but she also raises awareness that the objectification of nature and women has always been intrinsically linked. As Plumwood illustrates, according to the Western philosophical dualistic worldview, women belong to the sphere of nature, a domain permeated with irrationality and powerlessness. The natural sphere is a place where non-human entities such as animals, women, exploited slaves, or 'primitive' ethnic minorities dwell. This dualistic line of thought helps to explain how, throughout Western history, nature and women have been worshipped and feared, exploited or conquered, and tamed or altered in order to meet the expectations of men. Ultimately, Plumwood affirms that this process of subjugation has only one objective: men's 'reason' must triumph over nature's irrationality.

Plumwood's analysis reveals how capitalist industrialisation, heteronormativity, and colonialism are manmade social constructs that have been entangled with Western politics in order to preserve an anthropocentric patriarchy. Her work sheds light on the potential of intersectional thought within ecofeminism to subvert the current social and political hierarchies in a phallocentric Western society: '[w]hen four tectonic plates of liberation theory—those concerned with the oppressions of gender, race, class and nature—finally come together, the resulting tremors could shake the conceptual structures of oppression to their foundations' (1). Plumwood's intersectional approach exposes how oppression comes in many different forms and how several spheres of domination are often employed simultaneously. These insights were helpful in my own research in which I argue that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland* (1915) can be read as an ecofeminist narrative.

Throughout *Herland*, Gilman presents the validity of the interconnection between gender and nature by deconstructing the deep-rooted dualisms in Western culture. Gilman creates an ecological matriarchy in order to uncover the patriarchal and capitalist workings of a dystopian early twentieth-century American society. The story is told from a Western male viewpoint as the narrator tries to uphold his American ideals by describing the feminist utopia as a primitive antithetical world. The application of Plumwood's work allowed me to successfully argue how *Herland* illustrates patriarchy as a flawed system of domination through confronting the reader with a utopian alternative society where men, women, and nature live in harmony together. When Plumwood's intersectional approach is applied to works such as *Herland*, we are able to see how early-twentieth century works of literature remain relevant in relation to contemporary debates in ecofeminism.

Feminism and the mastery of nature offers many useful concepts to demonstrate how literature can challenge the patriarchal dualistic discourse through narrative. Plumwood motivates the reader to look at the current social and ecological issues through an intersectional ecofeminist lens. Plumwood's book is useful for researchers working in the fields of gender and diversity studies because it explains the origin of man's tendency to create systems that subjugate the 'Other', which is, in turn, defined as nature, women, and/or native minorities. Ultimately, the book encourages intersectional opposition to those systems of domination. Plumwood's concepts enable the reader to reconsider the ways in which historical and contemporary Western literature represent power relations among humans and nature. With the intention of reshaping the reader's present Western worldview, Plumwood's concepts help readers to see intersectionality as a method capable of laying bare anthropocentric dualisms in historical or contemporary literature. When one acknowledges how dualistic thinking is engrained in the Western contemporary discourse, one is able to revolt against systems of power by deliberately choosing not to consider nature, humanity, mind and body as irreconcilable.

Jana Heemeryck

Jana Heemeryck is an MA student in English Literature and Linguistics at Ghent University. She has obtained a BA degree in Secondary Education from HoGent and aspires to work as a Dutch and English teacher in the near future. Her BA research paper focussed on an ecofeminist reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland*. Her current MA dissertation discusses the literary relevance of a postcolonial ecofeminist approach to Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

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Ross, E.B. (1998). *The Malthus factor. Poverty, politics and population in capitalist development*. London: Zed Books.

In *The Malthus factor*, Eric Ross articulates a feeling of unease with how today's debates about issues such as welfare, the minimum wage, and migration continue to be influenced by pessimistic Malthusian arguments. The book first outlines the core beliefs in Malthus's theory, in particular, to defend private property and to acquit the state and wealthier segments of society from responsibility for poverty. According to Malthus, human population would, until checked, always grow in geometric proportions (in the following sequence, for example: 1, 2, 4, 8, 16), while food supply does not increase at the same rate and cannot keep up with growing populations. The result is an inevitable shortage of food, making poverty and famine inexorable.

This simple assumption still persists today as a common explanation for poverty, death, and environmental degradation and continuously feeds anxiety about overpopulation. According to many critics, the largest impact of Malthus's theory lies in providing an

enduring argument for the prevention of social and economic change and in obscuring the real roots of poverty, inequality, and environmental deterioration. Ross argues that no other ideological framework has so effectively legitimized Western interest, development theories, and strategies.

Throughout the book, it becomes clear that the intertextuality of debates about class, race, and sexual politics as they regard population growth is crucial to understanding how Malthusian discourse operates bio-politically. It draws attention to the theory's uses in eugenicist, anti-immigration, and certain environmental arguments, and considers uses to which Malthusian thinking has been put by Cold War and Green Revolution interests. Lastly, Ross's work explores some of the ways in which Malthusian thinking operates in discussions of globalisation, violent conflict, immigration, and the environment. The book concludes by noting that the rejection of Malthusianism involves systemic social change, highlighting the relevance for diversity and gender studies.

As my research focuses on the use of Malthusian arguments in migration policy, this book is of great pertinence. I argue that analyzing the components of Malthusian thinking is important in order to understand the current debate on migration. In my work, I identify and elucidate the key tenets of Malthusian thinking including anti-Enlightenment stances, the imperfectability of man, persistent scarcity of resources, and the inevitable nature of poverty and inequality. I approach these concepts from a genealogical-theoretical perspective, which offers an intensive critique of the contemporary situation using Giorgio Agamben's biopower as a notion concerning the very structure of power and how it binds itself to sovereign power. I also provide a discursive history of Malthusianism as a paradigm for the recurrent problematization of migration.

The fundamentally pessimistic arguments about population and resources, central in Malthus's population theory, have proven incorrect. Nevertheless, Malthusian concerns have an enduring presence in recent and contemporary politics and have contributed to the canon of socioeconomic theory. The daily images of refugee streams and overloaded boats in the Mediterranean Sea reinforce the fear of overpopulation and scarce resources, leading to negative feelings towards migration. This fear is translated by certain political parties into a Malthusian argument by definition: migration must be constrained in the interest of maintaining the lifestyles of the affluent.

Ross's work is a useful resource to all who are interested in the roots of inequality and the mechanisms and ideologies underlying the policies that promote this inequality. Through its examination of Malthusian theory, the book works to undercut the illusion that the poor's economic and reproductive behavior is the source of universal hardship and encourages recognition of the nature of capitalist exploitation.

Soumaya Majdoub

Soumaya Majdoub is a PhD Researcher at the Free University of Brussels (VUB). Her doctoral research project is about migration and Malthusian thinking. This research project fits in the broader interdisciplinary research project 'Cities & Newcomers' at the VUB. The focus of this project lies on the relationship between perceived population growth and pressure, (economic) development and international migrations on the one hand and the political and public discourse about migration on the other. She holds a Master's degree in Media, Democracy & Journalism (Free University of Brussels) and has a background in Communication Studies (University of Antwerp). In her Master's thesis, she analyzed the theme of political representation of minorities, the mechanisms behind the process of political recruitment and power elite formation. She has worked for a number of years as an advisor on urban issues including labor market integration, entrepreneurship, diversity and inclusion.