

Book Review: Gendered Readings of Change: A Feminist Pragmatist Approach

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*In **Gendered Readings of Change**, the author attempts to develop a unique theory of change by drawing upon elements of both US philosophy and contemporary feminist thought. Fischer argues for the reconstruction of theories of change so that they are inclusive of women's experiences. By analysing select Ancient Greek and pragmatist theories, the author shows the reader how such theories can contribute to the development and evolution of feminist thought regarding change and transformation today. Fischer's work gives feminist philosophising the clout it sadly needs to be taken seriously as a methodological approach within academia, writes **Katherine Williams**.*

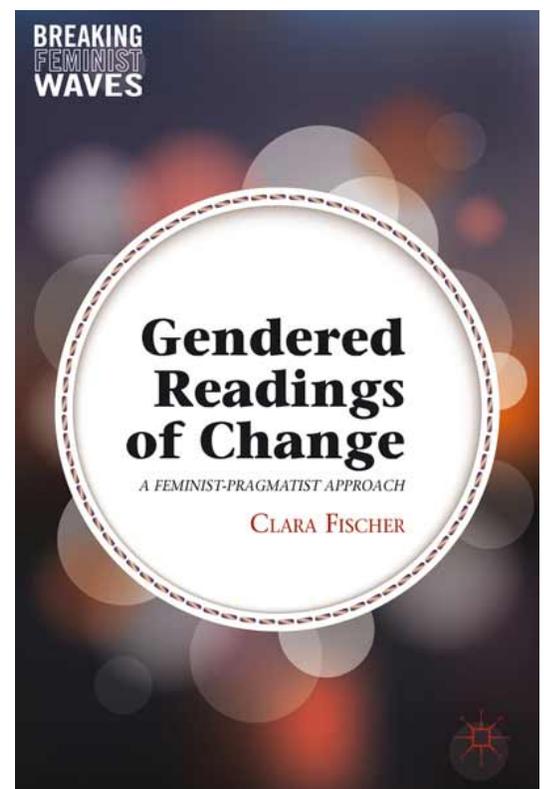
Gendered Readings of Change: A Feminist Pragmatist Approach.
Clara Fischer. Palgrave Macmillan. 2014

Gendered Readings of Change by [Clara Fischer](#), Newton International Fellow at the Gender Institute, London School of Economics, concerns itself primarily with change, and the necessity for social transformation. To do this, the author draws upon the work of US philosopher John Dewey, the leading proponent of pragmatism, a school of thought that believes that knowledge is constructed through an individual's interaction with their environment. Established theories regarding the 'true' nature of human behaviour are rejected under this view, and considered somewhat essentialised.

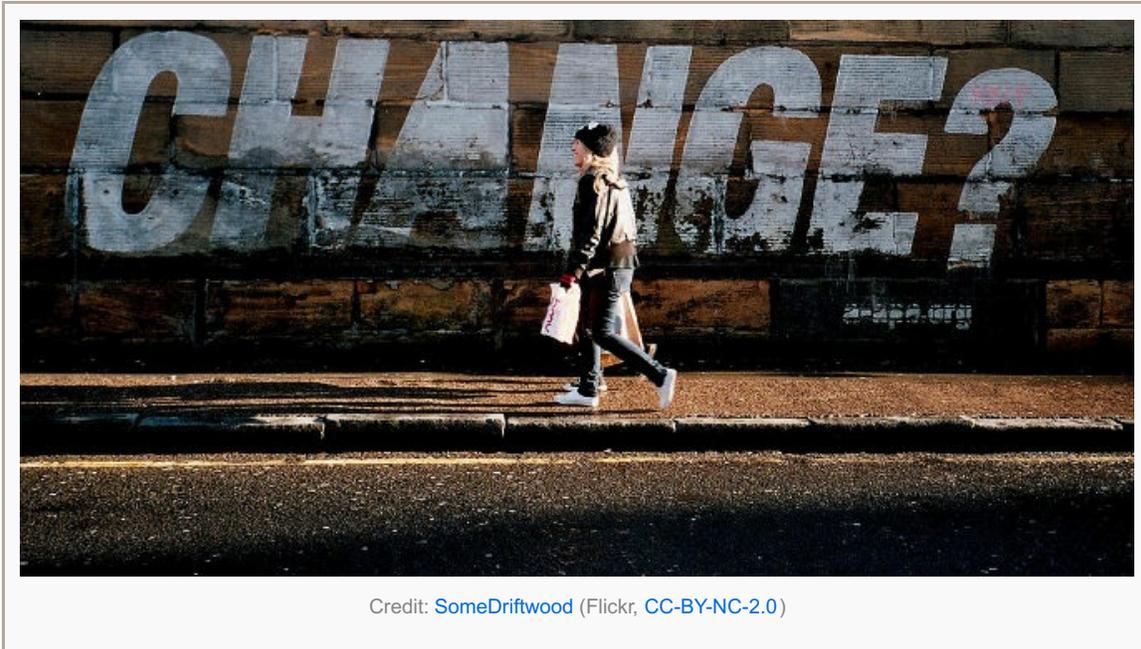
Dewey saw change as a 'requirement for the amelioration of dissatisfactory conditions'; feminism itself requires that change take place (Fischer aptly uses Audre Lorde's quote 'the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house' to illustrate her point). As the feminist movement in general has emancipatory goals which require large-scale social and cultural paradigm shifts, it comes as no surprise to Fischer that feminist pragmatism and Dewey's pragmatism have much in common; both question the 'dominant philosophical assumptions concerning the self, the world we live in, the knowledge we have access to, political structures we are part of...' and so on.

Using Dewey's pragmatism and its ontological and epistemological links with different philosophical schools of thought, Fischer seeks to address the questions that remain unanswered in feminist calls for social transformation; is the world changing or static? Are we agents of change? These questions, to name but two, are posed bearing in mind Dewey's warning that inquiries into human identity and the nitty-gritty of human nature run the risk of serving 'the agenda of a conservative status quo.' In other words, one must be careful not to essentialise diverse human experiences. Fischer also considers the work of Parmenides, Iris Young, and Jane Addams, alongside Dewey and Aristotle.

The focus of the book lies in its attempts to establish a feminist-pragmatist self. The author notes that an in-depth discussion of feminism's all-important 'intersectionality' is beyond the remit of the text. However, Fischer does reflect upon different communities, and how our standing within them affects the type of people we become. Ultimately, Fischer's journey is a personal one and, as she states, she cannot necessarily speak for anyone else.



The text itself comprises of two main parts. Part I, *Genealogical Reflections on Change*, covers the birth of philosophy, and the relationship between Dewey and Aristotle's respective metaphysics and conception of self. In this section, Fischer discusses the Greek philosopher Parmenides, and attempts to illustrate the problematic treatment of women in regard to change and transformation, thus tracing the development of philosophy itself. The author believes that women's omission from the traditional canon of philosophy has placed them in somewhat of a paradoxical position when it comes to how male philosophers view change. To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir; men are allowed to transcend, women remain immanent.



Fischer discusses Parmenides' "On Nature" and the contention that surrounds the issue at hand. This contentiousness, argues the author, can indeed be traced back to the birth of Western philosophy. Women were routinely written out of philosophy, effectively silenced and denied their agency as political agents. The 'negative value' that women are assigned was, and still is, inherently gendered.

Part II, *The Feminist-Pragmatist Self*, focuses on the feminist-pragmatist self, and democracy and change as social transactions. Fischer follows on from her discussion of women's gendered (im) mutability in philosophy. When women are conflated with change, it is often seen as a process which is inherently threatening and destabilising to a traditional status quo. In this chapter, the author specifically broaches the 'radical' process of 'coming to feminist consciousness.' Fischer is particularly concerned with how a raised consciousness can take hold in selves, and explores how such changes can impact transformative processes. Resultantly, any theory of selfhood must represent selves which are neither too fluid, nor too essentialised.

Fischer finds that the four most prominent feminist theories (radical, social constructivist, liberal, and post structural) are problematic in their depiction of self, primarily because they do not allow for change in their theoretical remit. Thus the construction of a feminist-pragmatist self would better incorporate the possibility of change. Throughout the rest of the chapter, Fischer shows that the exposition of Dewey's self 'strikes the right balance between structure and dynamism, and therefore avoids the pitfalls of theories prohibiting agency.'

As the author states, *Gendered Readings of Change* is a normative, critical inquiry 'spurred by the feminist pragmatist belief in the moral imperative to instantiate change.' Fischer takes the reader on a comprehensive academic journey from the birth of Western philosophy, through to Dewey et al, ending at contemporary feminist thought and how the philosophy of change can be applied to modern life. The text includes an extensive bibliography, which would prove extremely useful for those seeking further reading on the topic.

It certainly is interesting to see how diverse philosophical canons are linked, and Fischer's work gives feminist

philosophising the clout it sadly needs to be taken seriously as a methodological approach within academia. Feminism itself is extremely philosophical, and requires us to change our understandings of the world around us so that we can see that life, invariably, holds different experiences for different people.

Katherine Williams graduated from Swansea University in 2011 with a BA in German and Politics, and is currently studying for a MA in International Security and Development. Her academic interests include the de/construction of gender in IR, conflict-driven sexual violence, and memory and reconciliation politics. You can follow her on Twitter [@polygluttony](#). [Read more reviews by Katherine](#).

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