

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

SP.601J / 17.006J / 17.007J / 24.237J Feminist Theory  
Spring 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

**Discussion 2: What is Feminist Theory?**

---

Introductions: What brings you to this course?

**Preliminary Questions: Connections between readings**

- What common themes can we extrapolate from the readings?
- Why take a feminist class? What prompts you to read and discuss gender issues?

**Essentialism, the "Natural," Curiosity, Silencing, the Political, Types of Feminisms, Intersectionality, Tolerance**

What is the critique of the "*natural*"? The normal vs. the deviant?

- Refer to John Stuart Mill's article, "The Subjection of Women" (TF, 97-112). Why is it assumed that men dominate? How does he answer this question? Does he?
- Is the gender debate about feeling or reason? What does Mill think?

How are the authors from today's readings *curious*? What is examined vs. unexamined?

- Does theory elevate the importance of feminism?
- What do we take for granted? How do we change that?
- Can we change our society if we don't understand it?
- What is multiple consciousness?
- How we adapt ourselves to our environment? Are we curious about this? Do we question it?
- How do we let go of guilt?
- According to Cynthia Enloe in "The Curious Feminist," (Intro, chps. 1, 5), with what is under-examined in our society? What is valued, not valued?

How does *silencing* work? How is it expressed?

- Is the personal political?
- What is respectable? Do women in some contexts feel silenced because an interaction would make them "unrespectable" in the eyes of the public?
- How do things become trivialized by silencing?

What is the *political*?

- What do people take for granted? How is gender socially constructed?
- According to Nancy Fraser, something is political once it is contested amongst different public communities. Is what we eat political? Is gender political? Has it always been political?

Types of *feminisms*:

- Sameness: If there is a minor difference between men and women, should we nonetheless be the same before the law? What would a feminist argue who believes in the sameness theory?

- Differences: If women and men both have different, valuable qualities, should they both be equal before the law? What would a feminist argue who believes in the difference theory?
- Refer to Catharine MacKinnon's piece, "Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination" (TF, p. 244-55). Why are women and men in different positions? Are men or women considered to be the norm? Which sex needs to be explained, justified? Who is the traded if men are the traders? Why is female defined in relationship to male? How does MacKinnon's arguments on the male/female paradigm differ from the "sameness" and "difference" theories?

What is *intersectionality*?

- In which readings was intersectionality discussed?
- Refer to Audre Lorde's article, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (TF, p. 292-7). Can society "split" people by race and gender? Does the feminist movement seek to be homogenous, present one type of "woman"? Should it? What does the movement neglect to recognize if it does this? How does Lorde approach sexism within the black community? Is it there? Are black lesbians accepted or a threat?
- Lorde writes, "for the masters' tools will not dismantle the master's house" (TF, p. 297). What does this mean? How does one think outside the power structure?
- Refer to Trina Grillo's article, "Anti-essentialism and Intersectionality: Tools to Dismantle the Master's House" (TF, p. 30-40). How does she respond to intersectionality? Is it related to anti-essentialism?

What is *tolerated* in our society?

- Refer to Gloria Anzaldua's article, "La conciencia de la mestiza," (TF, 422-430). What is a mixed person? Where do they fit in our society? Who are we? Are we all everything? What does that mean, to be everything? How does a society internalize positions like "machismo"?

### **"7 Truths Men Wish You Knew About Men," by Scott Haltzman**

- What is wrong with this article?
- Is there a male reference point? Are women demonized?
- How is the nature of man expressed? What are the women's responsibilities, versus the men's? Is the work equally shared in his examples? Or is it unreciprocated?
- Does Haltzman create essentialisms or anti-essentialisms?
- Does he provide factual evidence?