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SP.601J / 17.006J / 17.007J / 24.237J Feminist Theory
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Discussion 6: Gender and Sexuality

Refer to archive New York Times articles regarding past Gov. Eliot Spitzer's relationship with prostitutes:

- How have "morality" and "sexuality" intersected in this case?
- What is "bad" versus "good" sexuality? Does Spitzer represent "bad" sexuality?
- Why does American society worry about people's private lives? Does Spitzer's job as a public individual make him more vulnerable?
- What position has Spitzer's wife taken? Why are the wives of politicians who commit transgressions like this so much in the spotlight? Are there benefits for the wife if she stays?

Sexuality:

- What is sexuality?
- How can one explain the irony of our society that is hyper-sexualized yet hyper-moralized?
- Why is sexuality "hidden" in society? Is the "hidden" nature of sexuality what makes it so attractive?
- Do those that speak against something fear it?
- Do our institutions promote sex negativity? If so, why? What might they fear? What power does it unleash?

Refer to Gayle Rubin's article, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality":

- Should there be divisions between what is sexually acceptable and unacceptable? Why/Why not?
- Should feminism be attempting to theorize sexuality and sexism as critical to the feminist movement? Does this serve the movement?
- How does Rubin untangle sexual expression from feminism?
- How does one define sexual consent? Is a twelve year-old girl or boy's consent credible? Why/Why not?
- Refer to Rubin's arguments regarding S/M on page 536. How is the circular logic of consent inescapable, if society argues, "a normal person in full possession of his mental faculties does not freely consent to the use, upon himself, of force likely to produce great bodily injury"?
- What six theories does Rubin speak of on pages 528-529? How do they operate?

Sex Essentialism:

- Does our society perceive sex drive to be "natural"? What does that mean?
- According to Foucault, does society's attempt to repress sexuality actually promote it?
- Does desire naturally exist? Do institutions encourage it?
- Is our society in a constant state of perversion?

Sex Negativity:

- How does our society label sex as bad? Through what mediums do we express this negativity?
- What kind of “mixed messages” does an adolescent get in school? (I.e. A child is going through puberty, feeling sexual urges perhaps for the first time, and does not know how to constructively acknowledge these feelings, save for society’s message that sex is private, and performed in a certain way)
- How is fear of sexuality expressed?
- Does our society suggest that people who have sex outside of marriage “deserve” to become infected with Sexually Transmitted Diseases?

Fallacy of Misplaced Scale:

- What is sexually acceptable/not acceptable?
- Does our society misplace significance to “good” sexual acts versus “bad” sexual acts? How? Why?

Hierarchical Valuation of Sex Acts:

- How is this theory similar to the fallacy of misplaced scale?

Domino Theory:

- Why does one fear that if a child masturbates in a corner, he is on a path to sexual perversion?
- Do people irrationally jump to outlandish conclusions regarding sex? Why?

Lack of Concept of Benign Sexual Variance:

- Does this theory differ from the domino theory? Why/Why not?
- Does our society accept and embrace different sexual cultures? How can we work to accept the spectrum of sexual expression?

Refer to Lisa Dodson’s novel, “Don’t Call Us Out Of Name”:

- What did you find intriguing in the “Boyfriends, Love, and Sex” chapter?
- Is sex an escape for these young women? How? What might they be trying to forget? Are they trying to find compassion?
- Why are these women encouraged to protect their virginity?
- Why do they feel a need to “keep” their man?
- Why do guys need to “score,” and girls need to be “pure”?
- Does this mean that what type of girl a guy sleeps with does not matter as much as him being able to sleep with a girl?
- What fears do these young women have (such as being used in a sexual relationship)? Is this a legitimate fear?
- What kind of “rules” make one feel bound to have sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend?
- What kinds of stigmatizations perpetuate fear? For example, getting pregnant? Having a long-term boyfriend?

Refer to Audre Lorde’s article, “Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”:

- How is the erotic power?
- In what ways does Lorde liberate herself from a repressed state in her piece?
- Is pornography about the erotic? Violence? Power? How? What?

Refer to Evelyn Hammonds article, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality":

- How are black women's images divided? (E.g. The image of the sexy black body, and the struggling single mother)
- What is silencing?
- How is silencing a mode of protection? Is it beneficial? How can one be liberated from it?

Refer to Marilyn Frye's article, "Willful Virgin or Do You Have to be a Lesbian to be a Feminist?":

- Is Frye's response narrow-minded? If you think so, how?
- Does she consider all the different bodied experiences a heterosexual and lesbian woman could have?
- How does she fail to separate the political spectrum from lived sexuality?
- Does she discount heterosexuality in the way it exists in the context of patriarchy? If so, how?
- Does she define what she means by "radical" and "radical lesbian"?
- Is female non-compliance feminism? Is it lesbianism?
- What is a "willful virgin"? Is this a stereotype?
- How has Frye taken the sexuality out of heterosexuality?
- What other types of sexuality does Frye ignore?
- Is marriage propagating patriarchy? What societal benefits does one receive from being in a heterosexual relationship?

Refer to Catharine Mackinnon's article, "Desire and Power":

- What does Mackinnon say about the role of domination in heterosexuality?
- How is Mackinnon's article similar to Frye's regarding male dominance?
- Do you agree with the argument, "sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism"?
- Can feminism be deconstructed so easily to make sexuality its fundamental core? How does this differ from Rubin's piece?

General Discussion:

- How can male heterosexuality exist outside of the patriarchal structure?
- Do women and men look for different things in a sexual life cycle? (E.g. a playmate versus a life partner)
- Do men and women negotiate sex in the same way that they negotiate house chores? Should sexuality be negotiated, agreed upon?