

GENDER THEORY

Course Description

Contemporary feminist and gender theory is characterized by deep ambivalence towards its fundamental analytic categories (“gender” and “women”). This ambivalence points to the central problem associated with a certain practice of theorizing itself, namely the craving for generality and the neglect of the particular case. But what is theory if it is not the practice of subsuming particulars under a general category or rule (e.g. “women”)? Indeed the political consequences of the tendency to create false universals in feminist theory has led to a virtual crisis of theory, that is, to the conclusion that theory always and necessarily ignores differences or, worse, obliterates differences by assimilating them to the general case. Attempts to overcome the problem of false universals led feminism to emphasize the “differences among women.” But this attempt to attend to the particular led in turn to another sense of crisis, namely particularism in politics and in critical thought, which seems to leave no way of mediating among various political constituencies or of creating theory anew. In this course we examine the nature of the crisis in theory and explore alternative ways of thinking about the practice of theorizing. We develop the idea of theory as the imaginative mode of critical thinking that puts into question the given through the “positing of new forms/figures of the thinkable” (Castoriadis).

Course Requirements

Attendance is mandatory. Class participation will count for 25% of your grade. Assignments include a mid-term essay (7-10 pages, due Nov. 5), a final essay (12-15 pages, due Dec 2), and one class presentation. All written assignments must be typed and double-spaced, using standard font. In addition to your class presentation on one week of reading, you will briefly present your final essay on the last day of class.

Course Materials

There is a READER.

I. Feminist/Gender Theory and Its Discontents

II. What Counts as Theory?

Sara Ahmed, “Whose Counting?”

Bronwyn Winter, “Who counts (or doesn’t count) what as feminist theory?,”

Katie King, “What Counts as Theory?”

Immanuel Kant, “On the Common Saying: >This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice.”

Cornelius Castoriadis, “Theory and the Revolutionary Project” in *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, pp.71-79.

III. The Craving for Generality

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, pp. 17-20; *Philosophical Investigations*, ' 66-67

Kirstie McClure, “The Issue of Foundations”

Elizabeth Spelman, “Woman: The One and the Many,” *Inessential Woman*

Sandra Harding, “”The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory”

IV. Social Construction and the Reification of Difference

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses"

Ian Hacking, "Why ask What?"

V. The View From Nowhere

Mary Hawkesworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and the Claims of Truth"

Susan Hekman, "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited," and Replies, *Signs*, vol. 22, no. 21 (1977):341-402.

Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective"

VI. The View from Somewhere

Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart,"

Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?"

VII. An Enlarged Manner of Thinking

Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture"

Lisa Disch, "Please Sit Down But Don't Make Yourself at Home: Arendtian Visiting and the Prefigurative Politics of Consciousness Raising"

Susan Bickford, "In the Presence of Others: Arendt and Anzaldúa on the Paradox of Public Appearance"

VIII. Retheorizing the Universal

Ernesto Laclau, "Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity"

Judith Butler, "Competing Universalities," pp. 159-181.

Linda Zerilli, "This Universalism Which is Not One"

IX. Theory, Imagination, and New Forms/Figures of the Thinkable

Lisa Disch, "More Truth than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt"

Cornelius Castoriadis, "Logic, Imagination, Reflection" in *The World in Fragments*

X. Final Class

Presentation of Term Papers