Week Eleven:
Fourth Wave Feminism and Sexualities

Monday, November 5

Wednesday, November 7

Friday, November 9: Discussion Groups

**Readings for this Week**

Available on WyoCourse as:


You may consult related sources online in open access format by consulting the “Additional Resources” section of this document.

**Context and Relevance**

Conflicting beliefs about sexualities, sexual expression, and sexual freedom are staples of debate in both dominant culture and all four waves of feminism. These debates continue in the fourth wave. Feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon, who was most active in the second and third wave but continues to have profound influence today, famously argued that “sexuality is the lynchpin of gender inequality” and that the sex industry exemplifies women’s oppression. On one end of the spectrum of debates, some feminists agree with MacKinnon that the sexual exploitation of women and girls in the sex industry and everyday aspects of dominant culture, such as in sexualized forms of advertising that use parts of women’s bodies to sell products, is just one aspect of the social, economic, and cultural forms of oppression women face. On the other end of the spectrum, other feminists argue that women can use their sexuality as a form of empowerment and that doing so demonstrates ownership over their own bodies in a society that routinely shames women who do not fit ideals for body type and sexual behavior.
Fourth wave feminism brought concepts such as “fat-shaming” and “slut-shaming” into dominant culture as part of feminism’s long history of critical engagement with violence against women, body image, and the sexual double standard. Some fourth wave feminists argue that these forms of shaming are demeaning to women because they stem from entrenched cultural beliefs that women should be passive, sexually subservient to men, and demonstrate sometimes extreme forms of dieting and exercise to achieve a slender body type. This week we read three articles that directly engage with the belief systems that underlie these forms of shaming. All three examine opposing sides of the debates before drawing conclusions based on independent research about how women’s bodies and sexualities continue to be a cultural battleground.

Crystal Jackson is a sociologist and sex worker rights activist who co-authored a wide-read book on Nevada’s legal brothels with sociologists Barbara Brents and Kathryn Hausbeck. In the article we read for this week, Jackson analyzes how sex workers respond to the two polarizing extremes of “rights” and “victims” that characterize debates about prostitution and the sex industry. Jackson found that sex workers resist being universally labeled as victims of trafficking who need to be rescued because they are/have been abused by men. Sex workers and their advocates often argue that prostitution and the sex industry are just symptoms of the socioeconomic structures of society that disadvantage women, and that targeting sex workers for arrest or rescue reinforces sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression. Yet, as Jackson notes, statistics are often mobilized to support such actions and often have great power because they are often presented in mass media or other influential venues without information on how evidence to support them was collected and analyzed.

Alison Phipps presents further analysis of the binary Jackson discusses in her article by focusing on the debates that ensued following Amnesty International’s 2016 policy recommending that prostitution be decriminalized in order to help end violence, discrimination, and other harms against sex workers. Decriminalization involves the removal of all laws against prostitution, rather than subjecting it to government regulation as occurs when prostitution is legalized or criminalized. Phipps’ analysis introduces the concept of a “rhetorical economy”, which she defines on page 307 as “an emotionally loaded (and adversarial) field which is characterized by calculated discursive maneuvers.” In other words, Phipps contends that those who depict sex workers as universally oppressed, victimized, and in need of rescue construct a circular argument that dismisses sex worker rights as a fallacy because women cannot have rights within a system that degrades them. “In a rhetorical economy such as this,” she writes on page 314, “sex workers themselves have very little value and almost no space in which to discuss and heal from difficult experiences. Indeed, these experiences are often hidden lest they become ‘investment capital’ in the feminist politics against the industry.” Sex workers, Phipps argues, are accordingly silenced lest their words be used against them.

Sociologist Theresa O’Keefe critically engages with fourth wave feminist forms of protest in which women march or otherwise present themselves in public while semi-nude or dressed in a manner dominant culture considers sexually provocative. O’Keefe, on page five, is concerned that such “protests embrace heteronormative, hegemonically masculine ideals of women and sexuality through performance in an attempt to challenge societal norms.” The intention of such protests—which are often referred to as post-feminist or femmenist—is the re-appropriation of women’s sexualization to advocate for women’s rights to sexual autonomy and freedom from violence. Critics contend that such protests exclude women of color as well as all women who
do not fit conventional standards of beauty, while supporters argue that these protests celebrate women’s sexuality, beauty, and independence. Yet media coverage of such protests typically focus on the women’s bodies; on page 10 O’Keefe quotes one of FEMEN’s founders telling the media, “we might seem like girls from *Playboy* but we stand for something very different.”

**Reading Questions**

1. Drawing on examples from texts we read this week, assess whether you agree with Catherine MacKinnon’s argument that “sexuality is the lynchpin of gender inequality.” How would the authors of the texts we read this week variously respond to her argument?

2. Poet Audre Lorde famously wrote that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”, meaning that ending oppression requires fundamental socio-political changes. How might we apply this idea to Jackson’s analysis of the ways in which sex workers interpret rights vs. rescue, the two major ideological frames available to them in their activism? Could it be argued that neither frame goes far enough in representing the realities of their lives, and that sex workers and their advocates need to develop new language and concepts to advance their rights?

3. Phipps and Jackson both present analyses of the ideological binaries that characterize debates about prostitution and the sex industry. In terms of thinking about academic research and activism as part of a conversation on important social issues, what unique perspectives do we gain by reading these texts together?

4. We see many references to work we have read and discussed throughout the semester in texts we read this week, including Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, Judith Butler’s work on the body, and many others. After eleven weeks of engaging with material from leading Gender & Women’s Studies scholars, how are we reading texts like Phipps’ differently than we would have at the beginning? How does noticing this difference help us move from being consumers of knowledge to producers of knowledge?

5. Phipps describes the dominance of debates on prostitution and the sex industry by an ideological frame that regards both as a form of violence against women. She argues that this frame discourages sex worker rights activists from speaking out about violence because doing so only bolsters this claim and undermines their activism. Have we encountered similar examples of this kind of silencing in our other readings this semester?

6. Protest groups and events like FEMEN and SlutWalk are relatively recent developments that draw on a long history of feminist activism, yet they are controversial because of the way that they rely on conventional standards of beauty and sexuality. In your view, do the critiques of such protests represent a generational divide between third and fourth wave feminists?
Additional Resources

1. Alison Phipps’ professional website: https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/staff/alisonphipps/

2. Crystal Jackson moderating a panel on PBS: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/point-taken/watch/dr-crystal-jackson/

3. Theresa O'Keefe’s professional website: http://research.ucc.ie/profiles/A024/theresa.okeefe@ucc.ie

4. FEMEN’s website: https://femen.org/

5. Website of the Network of Sex Work Projects, a sex worker rights organization: http://www.nswp.org

Fourth wave feminism and sexualities

Week Eleven

Sexualities: Debates

- Conflicting beliefs about sexualities, sexual expression, and sexual freedoms
- All are staples of debate in dominant culture
- Debates continue in the fourth wave of feminism
Catherine MacKinnon, second/third wave feminist legal scholar

Argues that the sex industry exemplifies women's oppression

Prostitution and the sex industry are symbols of gender oppression writ large

Opposing beliefs

Commoditization of women's sexuality is oppressive
  - Sexual exploitation of women and girls in the sex industry
  - Sexualized advertising and mass media harm women
  - Part of women's totalizing socioeconomic oppression

Women own their sexuality and can use it as they like
  - Women can use their sexuality as a form of empowerment
  - Sexuality is empowering because it demonstrates ownership over the body
  - Powerful in a society that shames women who do not fit ideals for body type and sexual behavior
Fourth wave feminism opposes shaming related to bodies and sexualities

- Part of feminism’s long history of critical and activist engagement with:
  - Violence against women
  - Body image
  - The sexual double standard
- Fat-shaming and slut-shaming stem from deeply entrenched cultural beliefs that women should be:
  - Passive
  - Sexually subservient to men
  - Slender, sometimes through extreme diet and exercise at the expense of health and well-being

Crystal Jackson, *Framing sex worker rights* (2016)

- Sociologist and sex worker rights activist
- Co-authored study on legal Nevada brothels
- Analyzes how sex workers respond to two polarizing extremes characterizing debates on prostitution
  - Rights: argument that prostitution is work like any other and should be treated as such
  - Victims: all women in the sex industry have faced violence and other forms of abuse
Jackson finds that sex workers resist being universally labeled as victims of trafficking in need of rescue.

Concerned with “statistics” that uncritically depict sex workers as victims.

Advocates argue that
- The sex industry is just a symptom of deeply rooted inequalities
- Targeting sex workers for arrest or rescue reinforces sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression.

“Revisit” refers to the renewed debates about the sex industry that reflect debates in the 1980s/90s.

Builds on rights/rescue binary Jackson discusses.

Amnesty International 2016 policy on decriminalization.

Decriminalization involves
- Removal of all laws related to prostitution
- Does not subject prostitution to government regulation
- Differs from criminalization and legalization
- Regards the exchange of sex for money between consenting adults as outside the purview of government control.
“Rhetorical economy” (p. 307)

Surrounding debates about the sex industry

- “an emotionally loaded (and adversarial) field which is characterized by calculated discursive maneuvers” (p. 307)
- Phipps identifies a circular argument:
  - Sex workers are universally oppressed
  - Require rescue to escape their victimization
  - Cannot have rights within a system that degrades them

Page 314: "In a rhetorical economy such as this, sex workers have very little value and almost no space in which to discuss and heal from difficult experiences. Indeed, these experiences are often hidden lest they become ‘investment capital’ in the feminist politics against the industry."

- Consider discourse in social movements
  - Crenshaw on politics of what is/is not said
  - Ideological splits surrounding particular issues
  - Power of language to construct/reflect the social world
O’Keefe, *My body is my manifesto* (2014)

- Sociologist Theresa O’Keefe
- Critically engages with fourth wave feminist forms of body protest
- Women marching or otherwise presenting themselves in public while semi-nude
- Or dressed in ways dominant culture considers sexually provocative

Re-appropriation?

- Intention, according to supporters
  - Celebrates women’s beauty, sexuality, & independence
  - Use women’s sexuality to advocate for feminist causes
  - Rights, sexual autonomy, freedom from violence
- Effect, according to critics:
  - Exclude women of color
  - Excludes women who are not ‘beautiful’ according to dominant cultural standards
O’Keefe’s critique of post-feminist/femmenist protest

- O’Keefe is concerned that “such protests embrace heteronormative, hegemonically masculine ideals of women and sexuality through performance in an attempt to challenge societal norms” (p. 5)
- Media coverage typically focuses on the display of women’s semi-dressed bodies
- One of FEMEN's original members says, “We might seem like girls from Playboy but we stand for something very different” (p. 10)

Drawing on examples from texts we read this week, assess whether you agree with Catherine MacKinnon’s argument that “sexuality is the lynchpin of gender inequality.” How would the authors of the texts we read this week variously respond to her argument?

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