

# Gender and Cultural Studies

## [\*The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory\*](#)

Theoretical approaches that seek to understand the role played by gender in culture and society are an important element of the field of cultural studies. Gender theory in the modern sense is typically considered to have begun in the late nineteenth century with the arrival of the first wave of feminism. However, to the extent that gender theory involves the study of constructions and representations of gender in Western literature, society, and thought, an exhaustive survey would necessarily reach back at least to Homer and Sappho and include a myriad of iconic writers, philosophers, and leaders from the past several centuries to the present day. Nevertheless, as gender theory is generally agreed to have begun with feminist theory, it is useful to begin chronologically with the rise of modern feminism and to examine how other gender theories then arose to offer new visions and revisions to feminist thought.

## **FEMINIST THEORY**

### **First-Wave Feminism**

The so-called “first wave” of feminism began in the mid-nineteenth century with very clear goals and under the leadership of such revolutionary figures as Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Stanton in particular provided a forum for the concerns of women and a focal point for the movement by organizing a women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, during which women leaders laid out several specific objections to the treatment of women in the United States. For example, women were expected to pay property taxes and to submit to laws without any representation in the levying of taxes or the formation of such laws. In fact, women's legal rights were virtually nonexistent; married women had no property rights, and their husbands were allowed to imprison them or use corporal punishment as they deemed necessary.

Further, women who chose to divorce their husbands could expect no help from the legal system, which nearly always gave custody of any children to the father. Perhaps such rulings were rationalized by the fact that women had very few options for employment, and any jobs they could obtain paid only a fraction of what men earned doing the same work.

The movement was slow to gain acceptance, and its leaders faced ridicule and sometimes violence in response to their demands for women's rights, but Stanton, Anthony, and others persevered. In 1890, the strong-willed and articulate Stanton became the first president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, an organization that continued to lead the charge for women's rights, finally securing women in the United States the right to vote in 1920. Similar suffrage movements were active in other Western countries at about the same time. Women had gained the right to vote in the UK in 1918, though women's voting rights there did not fully equal those of men until 1928. Spain followed suit and granted women suffrage in 1931, but France, despite the efforts of indefatigable feminist leaders, did not extend the vote to women until 1944.

### **Second-Wave Feminism**

Feminism and other forms of political activism experienced a lull during World War II; during this time of crisis, women often left their homes to join the workforce. Popular images of Rosie the Riveter represented the female presence in factories and women's determination to support their nation at home while their husbands, fathers, and sons did so in Europe. After World War II, however, women

returned to their homes, where many of them felt dissatisfied. Having been a part of a team in the workforce, many women now found the relative isolation of home frustrating. This widespread discontent, coupled with the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, led to the women's liberation movement and the second wave of feminism.

While the first-wave feminists strove to obtain some measure of rights under the law, second-wave feminists sought *equality* with men in education, the workplace, and under the law. These scholars and activists worked to change the way people thought about the role of the American woman and to broaden immensely the opportunities open to women. Second-wave feminism was informed, among other things, by an increased attention to the examination of literary and cultural texts. Significantly, second-wave feminism arose at about the same time as cultural studies itself, and the two were informed by a similar desire to move beyond the elitist orientation of conventional literary studies.

The second wave of feminism is sometimes broken down into several distinct categories, indicating that this wave is not, in fact, one unified voice but rather constitutes many different priorities and philosophies. One such category is radical feminism, which focuses on concerns about the violence that often characterizes the relationships between men and women. Liberal feminism is concerned with negative stereotyping of women, the so-called glass ceiling in many workplaces, and discrimination against women in general. Cultural feminism, unlike many feminist theories, argues that men and women are essentially different and occupy different subcultures, positing that the woman's subculture is undervalued. Another category is socialist feminism, an approach that attacks class inequalities whereby men have opportunities that allow them to rise to a higher status than women can achieve except through marriage to such men. One marginalized theory, even within the marginalized feminist movement, is critical race theory, represented by the work of Kimberle Crenshaw and Angela Harris who argue that women of color are doubly disadvantaged in the United States.

Some have argued that the second wave of feminism failed because of the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982; on the contrary, second-wave feminists won several legal victories - the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 - and many social victories as well, for example the opening up of many men-only venues like the military and military academies, NASA, and traditionally all-male universities. The National Organization for Women was also founded during the second wave by feminist leaders including Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (2001[1963]). In 1971, Friedan partnered with Gloria Steinem and other feminist leaders to found the National Women's Political Caucus. By this time, Steinem was well on her way to becoming a feminist icon and was instrumental in forcing the feminist cause into the public sphere and applying feminist ideology to popular culture. Steinem founded *New York* and later *Ms.* magazines and publicly attacked the exploitation of women in *Playboy* publications. By the late 1970s, Steinem was the public face of feminism.

Despite the progress made by the second wave and the many voices contributing to its political and social successes, detractors have rightly pointed out that the movement and theory developed during this time reflected a rather limited view - that of the middle-class white woman. Race theorists like Crenshaw, Harris, and Audre Lorde went largely unappreciated until the third wave of feminism.

### **Third-Wave Feminism**

The third wave of feminism, generally agreed to have begun in the 1990s, responds to the limitations

of the second wave by including voices of various cultures and ethnicities. For example, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Carla Trujillo have added African American and Chicana perspectives to feminist theory, bell hooks, whose greatest influence was abolitionist and first-wave feminist Sojourner Truth, has made a particular effort to extend feminist theory to new audiences. One of her most recent books, *Feminism Is for Everybody* (2000), employs informal language rather than academic jargon and explains feminism in a way that a general audience can easily understand. Trujillo, author and editor of numerous publications on identity, sexuality, and Chicana feminism, has contributed to queer theory as well as feminist theory. Also worthy of note is *This Bridge Called My Back* (1988 [1981]), a collection of essays, poetry, and artwork edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. This powerful book amplifies the voices of black and Chicana feminists within the US. As its preface explains, the collection seeks to expand what is typically meant as feminism and to explore the existence of "Third World feminism" in the US.

While the diversity of feminism's third wave is certainly commendable, the multiplicity of concerns and perspectives causes this stage of feminism to be even more fragmented than the second wave. As we have seen, feminism's second wave was a cacophony of voices, but the movement nevertheless was consistent in its goals of equality between the sexes even though equality may have meant something different to different theorists and activists. The third wave, however, is less unified and less interested in activism than it is in individuals. The major concerns of the third wave are the construction of individual identity, including gender and sexuality. In this sense, the third wave can be seen as the inverse of the second: instead of changing society for the betterment of women, the third wave seeks to change women for the betterment of society.

Third-wave feminists both question and celebrate the term "woman" and embrace, at least in theory, the diversity of female identities, from tomboy to cheerleader, lesbian to housewife. Seeking to correct the second wave's tendency to view society from only the middle-class white woman's perspective, third-wave feminists consider the differences inherent in culture and ethnicity. Since the focus of much of the third wave's theory is on the social construction of gender, these theorists are more apt to consider how various societies construct and perform gender.

One of the most prominent and influential third-wave feminists is Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004). Butler argues that while our sex is biologically determined, *gender* is overtly and covertly constructed. As soon as we hear "It's a girl!" or "It's a boy!" we begin treating the baby according to its gender, typically decorating in pink for girls and in blue for boys, buying dresses and Barbie dolls for girls and trucks and action figures for boys, and so forth. However, Butler contends that we learn the culturally constructed norm for our gender less through instruction than through observation of adult performances of that gender. The notion of *performativity* is central to Butler's theory; she asserts that we begin to mimic and practice gender-appropriate behavior at an early age.

Elaine Showalter is another feminist theorist associated with the third wave. In one of her early articles, "Toward a feminist poetics" (1979), Showalter outlined a history of feminist theory which she broke down into three periods. The first of these is the feminine phase, from the mid to the late nineteenth century, in which women first began attempting to compete with men intellectually. Showalter asserts that at this time, women accepted male judgments concerning art and literature and focused on meeting those expectations. Next is the feminist phase, which extends from the late nineteenth century to 1920, the end of the suffrage movement. This period is characterized by the

fight for equal rights, particularly the right to vote. Last is the female phase, which Showalter describes as a period of searching for a female identity separate from the male. Instead of internalizing male values, women develop their values and their own criteria for art and literature.

Though Showalter is now highly regarded as a feminist, literary, and cultural theorist, she was once criticized for her willingness to engage in debates about popular culture. At a time when popular culture was not considered worthy of academic study, Showalter was publishing pieces in *Vogue* and *People* magazines. At least two of her books deal with representations of women in popular culture: *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997) and *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (2005).

Other third-wave feminists grapple with psychoanalytic theory. While some feminists feel Freudian theory has little to offer the cause of feminism, others, like Juliet Mitchell, have argued that Freudian analysis can be adapted to feminist theory. In her book *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women* (1974), Mitchell seeks to reconcile Freudian theory and feminism. Likewise, Hélène Cixous employs the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan when discussing the need for the child to begin to see itself as a separate being from the mother. Cixous asserts that this transition marks the child's movement into the world of the symbolic, the world of language. Thus, by Cixous's theory, the mother's body is not part of the symbolic order; it is unrepresentable by what Cixous refers to as the phallogocentric symbolic language. Cixous then applies this notion to women in general, not just the bodies of mothers.

## French Feminism

Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Simone de Beauvoir, and others form a mode of thought collectively known as French feminism or French feminist theory. Influenced heavily by poststructuralist theory, French feminism, particularly in the work of Cixous and Irigaray, is built around the notion of hierarchical binaries - light/dark, emotion/reason, mind/body - which these feminists see as dominating patriarchal Western thought. Therefore, set in opposition to “man,” “woman” becomes marginalized. As the lesser half of the binary, women's thought and bodies become repressed and seek expression in ways other than symbolic - phallogocentric - language. In addition to Cixous, Kristeva has contributed significantly to the field of semiotics, which is the study of what is *not* spoken - the pauses, inflections, and body language that color our communication. Like Cixous, Kristeva builds on the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan, whose revision of Freud's theories have greatly influenced French feminism. Kristeva also focuses on the child's creation of identity and entrance into the symbolic world as a significant moment of development and as movement away from the maternal. She uses this moment in which the child rejects the mother as an analogy for the way in which patriarchal societies reject and exclude feminine thought. Simone de Beauvoir famously took up the notion of binaries in her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* (1974[1949]), in which she postulates that men have repressed women by defining them as “other” in relation to men. Thus, men take on the role of the subject, the actor, while women are relegated to the position of object and are acted upon. Further, de Beauvoir, in agreement with most other French feminists, sees this binary as socially, not naturally, constructed. De Beauvoir's theory is one on which Judith Butler would later build when composing *Gender Trouble*.

## Postfeminism and Postmodern Feminism

The definition of “postfeminism” is ambiguous. Some use the term to mean that the goals of feminism have been achieved and therefore the need for feminist theory has been overcome. For others,

postfeminism is a backlash to feminism; they assert that feminism has become as rigid and exclusive as its founders believed the patriarchy to be. These critics claim that feminism prevents women from following traditional roles of femininity and is a divisive force in society. The term “postmodern feminism” is equally nebulous, incorporating the interrogatory nature of poststructuralist theory with the feminist concern for the representation of women. One example is Donna Haraway's “Cyborg manifesto” (1991), an essay that responds to one of Butler's arguments that the source of the patriarchal power structure could theoretically be sought out and changed. Haraway disagrees with the idea that any starting point for societal problems could be located. Her “manifesto” seeks to disrupt such theories and to challenge accepted binaries like animal/human and human/machine.

## **Feminism's Contribution to Cultural Theory**

Despite postfeminist detractors, feminism remains a powerful force in literary and cultural theory. Since most feminists see gender as a social construct, they naturally analyze the cultural influences that contribute to the female identity. To employ Butler's theory of performativity, popular media figures create gender performances that are received, likely mimicked, and thus perpetuated by young women. The television series *Ally McBeal* has been a popular text for feminist analysis and debate since the late 1990s. While some find the titular character annoying, immature, and demeaning to professional women, others observe that McBeal is aware of and in control of her own sexuality, displays agency in her own life, and provides a witty, successful model for young women. Similar observations have been made about *Sex and the City*, a more recent television series that frankly depicts the sexual lives of modern, 30-something women.

Perhaps feminism's greatest contribution to cultural theory is the development of feminist film theory, an area of criticism and research introduced by British cultural theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema” (1989 [1975]). In this influential work, Mulvey explains the significance of what she refers to as the “male gaze” in film. Male characters, she posits, tend to be subjects, often looking with intensity at their objects, which tend to be feminine or emasculated. The male gaze then becomes a kind of penetration that serves to subordinate other characters. Mulvey neatly extends this gaze to the realm of science and science fiction, noting that the telescope and microscope are extensions of the male eye, constructing the source of its inquiry as “object” or “other” and thus feminine.

Angela McRobbie, a British feminist and cultural theorist, is also well respected for her analyses of popular culture. McRobbie began in the 1980s by considering the presentation of women in popular magazines and the reception of those magazines by young women. McRobbie argues that while many feminists consider depictions in young women's magazines to be limiting to young women, the younger generation's priorities simply differ from those of second- and third-wave feminists; therefore, feminists need to understand the younger generation's attraction to these publications in order to carry on the feminist conversation. Since the 1980s, McRobbie has expanded her research to include popular music, dance, and fashion. Her most recent work, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2008), examines contemporary film and television and considers questions posed by postfeminists: In an age in which women are encouraged to get an education, seek a career, and practice sexual independence, is feminism no longer necessary? Is the emphasis on the rather limited experience of middle-class white women (in series like *Sex and the City* and films like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, for example) undermining feminism as a whole? McRobbie concludes that feminism has not outlived its usefulness, but that it must continue to evolve



to meet our culture's changing dynamics.

## QUEER THEORY

Though the terms are clearly related and the concerns overlap, queer theory is not synonymous with gay theory or lesbian theory. While gay and lesbian theories focus on the unique concerns of gay men and women respectively and the various manifestations of sexual desire and intimacy, queer theory is more inclusive, taking into consideration the unique identities of transsexuals and transgendered individuals as well as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight identities and sexualities. Queer theory draws much of its foundation from feminism, particularly its interest in the social construction of gender and identity and Butler's theory of performativity. Queer theory argues that society "norms" certain behaviors and marginalizes others. Theorists often use the word "heteronorming" to describe the way in which cultural artifacts reinforce a given society's strong preference for heterosexuality. "Queering," by contrast, has come to mean the act of transgressing "normal" expectations and destabilizing traditional paradigms of sexuality.

Much queer theory is built upon the work of French theorist Michael Foucault. Foucault argues against the notions that a person has an essence, an unchanging center of identity, and that if the best questions are asked and tests performed, the core of that person can be unearthed and we can learn who that person really *is*. Rather, according to Foucault, identity is informed by one's observations of and discourse with others and is never fixed; identity is fluid and is shaped and reshaped over a person's lifetime. Similarly, Foucault sees sexuality as the result of discourse. He argues that Western culture's tendency to repress sexual desire has made the sexual act seem unnatural, prompting a need to confess sexual urges, thereby creating a discourse about sexuality. This discourse, Foucault says, shapes our notions of "normal" sexuality. These ideas have clear implications for queer theory, since Foucault seems to suggest that sexual norms are norms not because they are natural but because society has normalized them. Further, Foucault postulates that power is also fluid: it is not a gift inherent to certain classes, races, or individuals but is instead a behavior. Power is not an attribute according to Foucault; it is an exercise. Such a claim is naturally liberating to traditionally marginalized groups like women and homosexuals.

Two theorists who are indispensable to any discussion of queer theory are Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Butler's theories of gender constructions, as already discussed, build upon Foucault's notion of an unstable, changeable identity. Sedgwick, on the other hand, is less interested in the formation of identity (though that is part of her work) than she is in the dynamics between same-sex individuals. In her *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), a seminal work for queer and gay theory, Sedgwick posits that the same male relationships that are essential for society to exist - male business partnerships, cooperation in government, and particularly familial relationships, which are transacted through women - often also conceal latent homoerotic desire. Thus, the homoerotic is ever present, even within conservative patriarchal structures. This theory led Sedgwick to one of her more controversial insights - that a "minoritizing view" of homosexuality and a "universalizing view" coexist in our society. The minoritizing view is the idea that because only a small segment of the population is gay, attitudes and legislation that have an impact on homosexuality affect relatively few people. This view of homosexuality seems to favor a fixed notion of sexuality - those who are straight will always be straight, and those who are gay will always be gay - and conceives of little gray area. The universalizing view, on the other hand, is the idea that sexuality is fluid, or perhaps contagious, and that homosexuality is therefore a threat to the

heterosexual norm. This latter view can also be expressed more positively as an understanding that everyone is in some way influenced by same-sex relationships, whether they be homosexual or homosocial. Queer theory is often applied to pop culture texts as well as literary texts as theorists evaluate the presentation of queer characters or consider the way in which a given text transgresses or queers the heterosexual hegemony. One popular example is Alexander Doty's book *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993), in which Doty examines the presentation and reception of gay characters and scenes in popular film and television.

Gay theory and lesbian theory have both emerged out of feminism and queer theory in recent years to become separate areas of inquiry. Both theories predictably rely upon Foucault and Butler for their foundations, but the two areas have slightly different concerns. One notable gay male theorist is Guy Hocquenghem who, in his work *Homosexual Desire* (1978), applies Marxist theory to explain the marginalization of homosexuality. In short, he posits that our culture rejects homosexuality because it does not contribute to the reproductive goals of American capitalist society. Hocquenghem believes, as Sedgwick's universalizing theory suggests, that sexual desire is multifaceted and homoeroticism is an ever-present component of human desire; however, since it is not considered productive, it is isolated and minoritized. Another important work in gay male theory is Dennis Altman's *The Homosexualization of America* (1982), which examines the development of the so-called gay community in America.

Lesbian theory, as a separate mode of cultural and literary analysis, is often difficult to separate from feminism. Cixous, for example, proclaims in her essay "The laugh of the Medusa" (1976) that all women are lesbians, by which she means all women should be concerned about the welfare of other women, but naturally lesbian theory is also concerned with the cultural and literary presentations and receptions of same-sex relationships. One of the most powerful voices in lesbian theory is Adrienne Rich, whose essay "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence" (1980) argues that female relationships, from friendships to sexual partnerships, typically involve some level of lesbian desire, but since society assumes heterosexuality as natural and inevitable, this desire is usually repressed, distorted, or erased entirely. Rich upholds lesbianism as both a genuine and natural bond between women and a welcome disruption to traditional patriarchy.

## **MASCULINIST THEORY**

Masculinist theory's development is roughly contemporary with that of third-wave feminism and queer theory and owes much to those theories' investigation of the origins and legitimacy of basic terms like "man," "woman," "heterosexual," "sexuality," etc. and of socially constructed notions of normalcy. Increased focus by theorists like Butler on the construction of the female gender naturally led to an analogous focus on male gender. Furthermore, since male authorship and audience identity have been the de facto focus in literature in the West, it was never a separate study until the emergence of feminism and queer theory created a need. The terms "masculinist," "masculist," "masculinism," and "masculism" are used interchangeably across disciplines, some giving "masculinist" preference as the first of these terms and the most common. One prominent masculinist is Warren Farrell, author of several popular and scholarly texts about male and female societal roles. Once an elected board member of the National Organization for Women, Farrell now writes and speaks about discrimination against men. In his book *The Myth of Male Power* (2001), Farrell provides startling evidence of such discriminatory practices - violence against men, discrimination in child custody cases, a lack of male advocacy in abortion issues, typically higher insurance rates for men, much higher suicide rates for

men, the lack of paternal leave in most companies, the abundance of social programs for women and the corresponding dearth of such programs for men, and the societal awareness of breast cancer and support for breast cancer research funding compared to the relative ignorance about prostate cancer (according to Farrell, breast cancer research receives 660 percent more funding per year than does prostate cancer research). Because of his advocacy for men's welfare, the *Chicago Tribune* labeled Farrell "the Gloria Steinem of men's liberation." On his own website, however, Farrell is quick to point out that the objective of his work is not to create a backlash against feminism or to raise masculinism to the forefront of societal concern; instead, Farrell intends to promote awareness of the need for balance and equality between genders.

R. W. Connell, author of *Masculinities* (1996) and *The Men and the Boys* (2000), is another prominent theorist who envisions gender as a set of attitudes, behaviors, gestures, and appearances that a given society has chosen to code as "male" or "female." Like Farrell, Connell explains that a focus on feminist studies has destabilized masculine identity, but unlike Farrell, Connell is less interested in established equality between the sexes and more interested in the evolution of masculinity. A professor of education at the University of Sydney, Australia, Connell is naturally interested in masculinity beyond the gender controversies in the United States; not only does he consider various nationalities and ethnic groups, but queer theorists have applauded his most recent book because he considers the effects of societal bias and gender constructs on both gay and straight men.

Some feminists are uncomfortable with the growing popularity of masculine theory. As Lynne Segal explains in "Back to the boys: Temptations of the good gender theorist" (2001), many feminists watch warily as feminist studies has become gender studies and the focus widens to include the constructs of the male gender identity as well as female. Other feminists, like Segal, embrace the newest gender theory as an opportunity to continue to investigate gender constructs.

In her article, Segal expectedly discusses archetypal images of women in our culture - the hag, the witch, the mother - but also embraces masculinist theory as just another way of keeping the gender discussion open in an interdisciplinary arena.

SEE ALSO: [Butler, Judith](#); [Cixous, Hélène](#); [Feminism](#); [Foucault, Michel](#); [Gender Theory](#); [Haraway, Donna](#); [Kristeva, Julia](#); [McRobbie, Angela](#); [Mulvey, Laura](#); [Phallus/Phallocentrism](#); [Queer Theory](#); [Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky](#); [Showalter, Elaine](#)

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