

What is Feminism (and why do we have to talk about it so much)?

by Dr. Mary Klages, University of Colorado, 1997

Why is feminism talked about so much? Why does it seem to be an important--sometimes the most important, and sometimes the only--factor to look at? Why does it come in virtually all English classes? And does it have to?

My answer has something to do with "feminism", and even more to do with the history of ideas about gender. I'll start with the latter. Historically, thinking about gender happens in cultures where gender configurations--the social meaning systems that encode sexual difference--undergo changes or shifts. The same is true with thinking about race (that race as a construct becomes apparent when ideas of race are shifting) or economics, or politics, etc.: all of these concepts are reevaluated when social practice (i.e. what people do) shifts. So gender, or masculine and feminine qualities, or male/female social roles, comes up as area for analysis whenever gender roles are shifting. You can trace this back to medieval times (Chaucer's Wife of Bath is certainly an example of questioning gender configurations--note too that questions of gender roles not limited solely to women thinkers and writers). And because gender roles seem to shift in just about every time period, in relation to all kinds of factors (war, for instance, or economics, or notions of morality), gender is often a major focus of thought and writing, in popular culture and in theory.

Certainly in the nineteenth century (my field of expertise), in Britain and the United States, gender was a matter for much public discussion and debate. "The Woman Question," as it was called, focused on whether gender should be a factor in granting or limiting rights, like voting rights; it also focused attention on men and male social roles, asking questions about the nature and function of gender. Is gender innate and biological? Is it the product of socialization and environment? Is the family structure (one father, one mother, and kids) eternal, universal, divinely-ordained, natural--or socially constructed and thus variable? These were--and are--central questions, not only for politics and economics, but for anthropology, psychology, and all of what we now call the social sciences.

So. Why is gender important? The simplest answer is because it's there. "Gender," meaning the differentiation, usually on the basis of sex, between social roles and functions labeled as "masculine" and "feminine," is universal: all societies known to us in all time periods make some sort of gender distinctions. As a central feature of all cultures, gender seems worth some attention.

But perhaps the question is not about universality, but about the prominence of gender studies in the university today, where you encounter gender as a topic (if not a preoccupation) in all courses, and particularly in all English courses.

Gender is so ubiquitous as a topic of study in part because of our capacity, in the twentieth century, to "deconstruct" gender categories, to defamiliarize what has previously been seen as

natural (men are naturally masculine, women are naturally feminine). At some point (or at several points) what Derrida would call a "rupture" occurred: a moment (or moments) when it became possible to think about gender as a construct, not as a natural or eternal category. Thus our thought systems, philosophies, and world views had to think of gender as a variable system, as something created and alterable, not as a given. And, as Derrida tells us, when our culture is able to think of constructs, to foreground as construction what previously was kept in the background as "natural", as assumed--we do.

But perhaps the question of why we have to talk about gender so much comes from a different place. Perhaps the real question is, I'm afraid when we talk about gender we're going to end up talking about feminism, not gender, and that we're going to end up saying women are good, men are bad, and it's going to be an excuse to trash men and talk about how white men are horrible oppressors. And then the real question is, why do we have to talk about all this political stuff, all this stuff about who oppresses whom? It just makes me feel guilty. And I don't want to change the world or march in the streets--all I want to do is read novels and poetry and learn something about how to do that in a better and more sophisticated way. So why the hell do we have to talk about *feminism* anyway?

Let me begin to answer this by talking about the word "feminism" and "feminist" (as in "feminist theory"). What does it make you think of? Angry bra-burning women, man-hating lesbians, political protesters who just make trouble; images that conjure up anger, dissatisfaction, the desire to change, and more specifically, to change me (especially if I'm a man); images of people who aren't tolerant, rational, reasonable, or willing to accept that maybe I'm a person (male or female) doing the best I can, but I can't help having been raised in a culture where I learned to be masculine or feminine in ways that these feminists see as harmful, evil, and bad.

There's some validity to this view, though I'd argue that that negativity is often a creation of the media's view of feminism.

My definition of feminism would be in three parts.

- 1). A "feminist" is someone who is interested in studying and understanding gender as a system of cultural signs or meanings assigned (by various social mechanisms) to sexually-dimorphic bodies, and who sees these cultural signs which constitute gender as having a direct effect on how we live our individual lives and how our social institutions operate.
- 2). Secondly, a "feminist" is someone who sees the gender systems currently in operation (in our culture and in other cultures) as structured by a basic binary opposition--masculine/feminine--in which one term, masculine, is always privileged over the other term, and that this privileging has had the direct effect of enabling men to occupy positions of social power more often than women. (Note: not all men eligible to occupy these positions of power; other binary oppositions are always also at work, such as old/young, or rich/poor, which will mitigate the effect of gender alone; hence a rich old woman might have more forms of social power that a poor young man. Obviously, too, this formulation depends on the kinds of social power one is discussing. Similarly, some

women hold these positions, again dependent on other forms/positions of empowerment (race, class, education, age, physical ability, etc.). But the basic idea is, if you focus only on the male/female distinction, more men will wield social power (historically and cross-culturally) than women.

3). A "feminist" thinks this (points 1 & 2) is wrong, and should be changed.

This definition makes feminism into a kind of academic pursuit, where feminists just sit around studying gender relations. And this is an important part of feminism, the idea that one CAN study gender relations, that gender exists as a signifying system, as sets of cultural signs that can be, and are, manipulated just as any set of signs is.

But there's also a political side to feminism, the side that says let's not just study and analyze these systems, but change them. And that, I suspect, is where most of our disagreements would come, over whether or not this system should be changed, and if so, how it should be changed. And, more to the point, what my particular individual stake is in having this system change or remain the same. Why do we have to have this *political* dimension? All I want to do is read novels, I don't want to change my mind or my behavior or the world.

This political dimension depends in part on your definition of politics. Like "feminism," it's a loaded-coded word. It could mean party politics, democrats and republicans and elections and caucuses and initiatives and stuff like that--but that's not how "feminism" is "political," and not, I suspect, where the objections to the intersection of politics and academic study come from.

There has been, and still is, a feeling (or an ideology) within the university that academic subjects should be just that: academic, as in "it's academic," meaning it's moot, it's kind of useless, it has no practical application, it has nothing to do with the real world, it's an abstraction or a philosophical ideal that isn't related to how people actually live their lives. Studying Aristotle or Rousseau or Derrida is something you do in college because you have four years of leisure to become this vague thing called an educated person, not because somehow you're going to go out into the real world and "live" the ideas you learned from Aristotle.

In the sciences, and to some extent in the social sciences, you can apply what you learn, but in English?? How does learning the various meanings of the scarlet letter, or giving a good interpretation of Hamlet translate into a skill for living in the real world? There's lots of humanist rhetoric about how lit. makes you a better person, how it teaches you moral values, how it teaches you about how to understand psychological differences, human dilemmas, timeless universal human truths, is a window to other worlds--and to some extent these platitudes have some validity. But the profession of literature studies these days is caught in a bind. We're expected to have a purely academic (i.e. leisurely/humanist) pursuit of knowledge uncontaminated by applications or tainted by demands of real world; supposedly professors have been given, or earned, a privileged position, and a pretty cushy job that allows us to sit around contemplating poetry, because we are preserving our literary heritage and humanist knowledge. BUT regents, parents, and students are demanding that, even in English, you get your money's worth, you learn something worth knowing, something that will have application to real world, something that goes beyond the abstract contemplation of literary beauty or meaning. As with

the sciences, English majors have to learn marketable skills, produce something that will sell outside academy, and have some benefit to the community.

But before I go too far into the economic dilemmas of the English major, let me insist that one answer to the problem of the abstract thought possible only within the ivory tower is to see that reading literary texts or studying philosophy is not really so abstract and ivory-tower an activity. Maybe reading Aristotle and Rousseau does tell you something about "the real world". Derrida certainly invites us to think that philosophical systems are worth thinking about--and Derrida, like Lacan, and like the Anglo and French feminists think all this abstract stuff is worth studying, not for some intrinsic "academic" value of its own, but because these philosophical systems determine the conditions, the terms and premises and concepts, on which our daily lives as individuals, and our social institutions, are based. These systems are not so abstract, not so academic, as we once thought--for instance, Rousseau's philosophy (and Plato's, for that matter, and the entire platonic tradition) make possible the concept of individual rights and freedom--and those abstract ideas started revolutions, here and in France, and helped construct the democratic society we now live in every day.

My point here is that these ideas that seem so abstract, such as conceptions of signifying systems as structure, or gender as linguistic system, are ways of investigating the fundamental assumptions which form the basis for how we make decisions, how we understand ourselves, how we act (and are acted on) every day, in the real world. A literary text, like a philosophical text, and like tv and film, helps produce me as a subject, gives me the vocabulary and the ideas with which I understand myself, my world, my social relations--in fact, cultural texts supply all the cultural categories that make my individual thoughts possible. I can't think of anything that's not already somewhere in my culture's repertoire of possibilities (one can't think outside of one's own cultural constructs--another version of Derrida's pronouncement that we have no destructive philosophical premises that are outside that which they hope to destroy).

So, what I call "politics" is the understanding of how cultural texts--be they literary, philosophical, or physical (in the sense that gender codes are "texts" written on our bodies and in our psyches)--shape our everyday lives. And an understanding of how reading texts, and writing texts, and interpreting texts, can be a means of changing (or reaffirming) the ways in which we understand our world and make decisions about our lives. Politics, in this form, is an inherent and inescapable aspect of every branch of academic study--one can choose either to be conscious and articulate about the "politics" of one's discipline, i.e. how the ideas and concepts and objects of study of one's discipline do shape the categories through which we understand the real world, or one can choose to remain ignorant of that dimension, or not to concern oneself with that--in which case study will remain "academic," abstract, in the ivory tower.

What this impassioned speech of mine is leading to is the idea that we talk so much about gender, feminism, and politics because ultimately we think we're talking, not about abstractions, anger, or revolution, but about the ways we are able to think about our own lives, how we understand and make sense of the world around us and what happens to us. Politics is about change, but first it's about seeing (what Althusser calls) our ideological relations, or the ways we represent (and therefore comprehend) our relations to the material world and to material practices.

