Feminism and Masculinity
4 credits
2015-16 Winter Term

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Course Description:

The course is designed to introduce students to the scholarly investigations of the social and cultural construction of masculinity from a feminist perspective. That is, our aim is to explore what feminist men’s studies has to say about what it means to be a man from the 1980s to date when the scholarly field first emerged. The course is informed by the intention to advance a productive dialogue between men’s studies and feminist theory. It explores the major debates in some classic essays that theorize and reflect on masculine hegemony and its subordinate others. Apart from their critical stance on hegemonic masculinity, the essays also suggest possible ways of its reconfiguration. The works range from the early years of men’s studies focusing on the concrete social and historical institutions of male chauvinism to contemporary criticism of various attempts at revalidating a reactionary hegemonic male identity in various anxieties about ‘demasculinization’ of men that is routinely attributed to feminism. As it is a four credit course, the second class in each week is expected to work as a discussion of students’ choice of a phenomenon or event in their own social/cultural context corresponding with the weekly readings – based on some actual data/lived experience brought into class. Distribution of students’ topics to be finalized in the first class.

Learning Outcome:
Successful students will become familiar with the different issues, approaches raised during the two phases in the history of men’s studies to date. They will be introduced to the contribution of feminist scholarship to the formation of the scholarship. Students will become familiar with the initial conceptualization of the central concept of the scholarship, i.e. hegemonic masculinity and the (reasons for its) subsequent changes to it since its first introduction in the late 1980s. They will gain a clear understanding of the critique of a model that is based on “traits”. They will also learn how to apply the concept and test its relevance in their own social/cultural context.

Assignment and Assessment:

1. Students are requested to choose an event/phenomenon for the topic of the week and bring along questions for peer discussion of their choice.
2. A take-home paper: It is a semi-guided discussion of extracts chosen by the instructor where students may makes use of the texts we have discussed in the term.
3. Participation in classroom discussion – of set readings as well as students’ choice of materials – may put students’ performance in the exam essay one notch up or down on the grading scale.
4. Non-delivery policy: Absence from the seminar where students are responsible for choosing the event/phenomenon so that we can apply the weekly readings to must be negotiated as soon as the (justified) reason should arise. Negligence to do so will reduce the final grade by one notch automatically.

Syllabus on a weekly basis:

1. Introduction
We are going to explore the connotations of the title of the course. Can men critique masculinity without drawing on feminism? Given feminism’s subversion of phallocentric masculinist theories, are male theorists ready to draw on these feminist theories? What are the hopes for a men’s politics? How to challenge the different myths of masculinity, such as the holy virility, physical toughness, risk taking, or self-sufficient autonomy? Does masculinity imply the study of “men” only?

With the help of Connell’s groundbreaking work, we shall review the major theories explaining the psychology of gender in the context of the emerging understanding of the importance of sexual politics from the 1960s onward. In the centre of his attempt to produce a synthesis lies the shared interest of women and gay men in the subversion of their oppression through the sexual ideology of hegemonic masculinity, the success of which he understands to be a matter of agency.

The authors provide a useful review of the first period of masculinity studies, which they refer to as ‘Book on Men’ in men’s movement. In their view the central characteristic feature of this period is the lack of any engagement with gay men’s liberation in men’s movement, that is, masculinity as a form of homophobia. In its stead they propose an insightful and controversial concept of masculine hegemony.

In response to Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure* article, the journal *Screen* provided the space for the early discussions about masculinity. The central questions in these two pioneering works are (1) the conditions under which the male body can be eroticized for the female gaze – with a focus on the significant differences of their visibility, and (2) the relationship between the representation of images of men and discourses of sexism and racism.

The reading materials chosen for weeks 5 and 6, the two chapters in Kimmel’s work that is considered to be the first cultural history of men in America, will provide a historical perspective on the social and cultural construction of masculinity that he sees as the key driving force in men throughout history. The two chapters explore the moment of its ‘birth’ around the Declaration of Independence and contrast it with the emerging discourses of its “crisis” from the 1980s onwards. We shall particularly be interested in exploring the vested interests of the ensuing angry attacks on feminisms in so called men’s rights groups today. His criticism also points toward a redefinition of manhood based on accountability, compassion and egalitarianism. The key driving force in men throughout history has been to prove their masculinity. He examines how this phenomenon has changed over time along with the masculine ideal and other transfigurations that must coexist with it. Holding up the model of the "self-made man"


For description see Week 5 above.


Bordo is revisiting the dangers of the “new science of the brain” that has been busy reestablishing that (sexual) differences between men and women are ‘hard-wired’. She exposes this new form of biologophilia in diverse fields of contemporary US social existence, from popular culture, through pop-science, to state power. Her aim is to argue for the possibility of admiring male athletes’ muscles without construing them as ‘top-ranking males of some primal tribes’ that should be the corollary of regarding women as an alien species, scrutinized with anxiety and bafflement triggered by the achievements of second wave feminism. However, we need to ask, is this double-bind similar to that of women’s as the logic of Bordo’s naming should imply?


The article revisits the possibilities and limits pro-feminist men’s movements are faced with when negotiating new ways of manhood against hegemonic masculinity. At the same time, it highlights the multiplicity of masculinity within a single movement through the analysis of the straight edge (sXe) movement that emerged on the East Coast in the US in the early 1980s. It also allows us to see the potential dangers of a descriptive approach to one’s actual field/data of analysis.


Through discussing Nagel’s text, we shall explore the ways in which hegemonic sexuality define what counts as socially approved men’s and women’s bodies and their corresponding approved sorts of sexual practices. The focus is on the intersection of...
ethnicity and sexuality in war, sex tourism, and globalization in order to see how masculinity and male sexuality comes to reflect the practices of white middle-class men.


Based on Richard Dyer work, we shall explore the representation of whiteness in Western visual culture – perceived as if not a color. The particular representations of whiteness will include muscle-man action cinema, Italian ‘peplum’ movies, and the Tarzan and Rambo series in order to expose the white color of hegemonic masculinity (academic or otherwise).


In the course of discussing Halberstam’s chapter, we shall address the imbalance in studies in favor of drag queens over drag kings when discussing gender instability. She redresses this absence and provides some (academic) space to challenge the exclusive right of men to claiming “masculinity”, arguing for the public recognition of female masculinity through the analysis of the sub-cultural phenomenon of drag king culture in the 1990s in the US.


Connell is revisiting in this journal article his groundbreaking concept of hegemonic masculinity some two decades after its publication and engages in a dialogue concerning the major lines of criticism. They include an emphasis on women’s agency; the importance of recognizing the particular geography of masculinities; ways of recognizing embodiment in terms of power relations; recognition of internal contradictions as a source of dynamics, changes to (the meaning of) hegemonic masculinity.

13. Claire Duncanson: “Hegemonic Masculinity and the Possibility of Change in Gender Relations” Men and Masculinities 2015, Vol. 18(2) 231-248.

Duncanson tries to revisit hegemonic masculinity by focusing on how to theorize its change. She argues for the importance of rethinking the process through which ‘hegemony may fail’. The data for her analysis is her own empirical material on military masculinities.