

# Queer Theory: An Annotated Syllabus

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Consider three familiar categories that structure so much of life: sex, gender, and desire. Standardly, we assume that sex is the biological fact that determines our gender, and our gender, in turn, determines our sexual desires. In this course, we analyze this “sex/gender/desire” conception of the self, with a special focus on the efforts societies make in creating and enforcing conditions that are supposed by those societies to be “natural.” We will frame the issue by looking at Michel Foucault’s landmark *Discipline and Punish*, which highlights the extent to which we are the product of disciplinary institutions as well the way those institutions attempt to pass themselves off as natural and inevitable rather than as the historical accidents that they are. We will then make a first go of analyzing the gendering project by examining the ways in which both men and women are the product of robustly normative systems. Subsequently, we’ll examine the specific role that sexuality plays in the gendering process, highlighting the normative privilege that heterosexual identity brings with it. In the final sections of the class, we will consider how the lives of trans and intersex persons complicate theories of gender and sexuality as well as what might constitute the proper moral and political responses to deeply ingrained practices based upon compulsory heterosexuality. Due to the subject matter of the course, we will be considering—in addition to philosophical texts—work in biology, sociology, history, and psychology. Additionally, we will be drawing on the resources of mass culture, including television and film, as source materials for inquiry and discussion.

## Required Texts

There are two required books for the course:

1. Michel Foucault—*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*
2. Judith Butler—*Gender Trouble*

## Topics and Readings

### *Social Institutions and the Internalization of Norms*

- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

### *A first go a gender*

- Marilyn Frye, “Sexism”
- Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, chapter 5. (“Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization Power of Patriarchal Power”)
- William Pollack, *Real Boys*, Chapter 2 (“Stories of shame and the haunting trauma of separation: how we can connect with boys and change the ‘boy code’ ”)

■ *Discipline and Punish* describes the internalization of norms by examining the operations of “discipline” on “docile bodies” in institutions throughout post-Enlightenment culture.

■ There is much to say about gender, but here we focus on how gender is the embodiment of norms. This introduces the distinction between sex and gender, which later sections will problematize various ways of drawing that distinction.

- Pat Califia, “Manliness”
- **Media:** “Boys will be girls” and “Girls will be boys,” Harvard Sailing Team <http://harvardsailingteam.com/>
- **Media:** *The Simpsons: Homer’s Phobia* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer%27s\\_Phobia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer%27s_Phobia)

### *The Trouble with “Gender”*

- Jay, “The Lavender Menace.” *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation*. 1999. 137-146
- Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience”

### *Butler, Sex/Gender/Desire, and the “Subject” of Feminism*

- Butler, *Gender Trouble*
- Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody.” *The New Republic*, 1999-02-22

### *Sex/Gender/Desire and Science*

- Birke, “Unusual Fingers: Scientific Studies of Sexual Orientation”
- Ingraham, “Heterosexuality: Its Just Not Natural!”
- Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes” and “The Five Sexes, Revisited”
- Fine, *Delusions of Gender* (excerpts)

### *The Medicalization of Gender*

- Spade, “Mutilating Gender”
- Rubin, “The Logic of Treatment”

### *Histories of Western Heterosexism*

- Engel, “Making a Minority: Understanding the Formation of the Gay and Lesbian Movement in the United States”
- Hall, “A Brief, Slanted History of ‘Homosexual’ Activity”

### *Theoretical Perspectives on Heterosexism and Cissexism*

- Sedgwick, “Epistemology of the Closet”
- Edelman, “Tearrooms and Sympathy or The Epistemology of the Water Closet”

■ The tendency for people in privileged social positions to think of a “universal subject” that has roughly the contours of their particular lives comes to the fore in the history of feminism. Here, the authors critique the conception that “women’s” liberation could be pursued independent of seeking justice for non-heterosexuals.

■ Butler’s *Gender Trouble* examines the failure of attempts by feminists to give an account of its subject—namely, “woman.” I assign the Nussbaum as an companion piece because it allows for some debriefing after completing Butler.

■ The previous section is highly theoretical, so I turn to the applications to help students better understand the cash value of undercutting the Sex/Gender/Desire triad. This section examines the implications for scientific inquiry into sex, gender, and sexuality.

■ This section brings together several themes from Foucault and Butler by examining the medicalization of gender in the case of sex reassignment surgery.

■ This section continues the trend of turning to the concrete—here, accounts of the history of (some) lesbians and gays in the (largely Anglophone parts of the) West.

■ The final section brings together the theoretical framework of the first part of the course and the lessons learned from the second part to examine how heterosexism and cissexism are practiced.

- Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion"
- Namaste, "Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space"