Course Description/ Goals:
This course is an introduction to feminist political theory. Although this course will be interdisciplinary and cross-cultural, we will focus primarily on feminist interventions in Western political thought and practice. In this class you are expected to become familiar with a wide range of feminist theories, and you will also “do theory” yourself. Central course goals:

1) Learn the ways in which various different feminist theorists analyze social problems and conditions through the lens of gender
2) Develop the skills necessary to a) question the assumptions and expectations of contemporary feminist theories of oppression and agency, and b) think through the implications of their theories for political practice in variety of contexts
3) Understand political theory itself as a form of political practice and develop the ability to apply theoretical tools to achieve alternative social practices
4) Think of yourself as an authoritative knower and engage confidently in the process of collective theorizing with others

Required Texts:
Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought, Third Edition
Catherine MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State
Articles on Blackboard (BB)

ALWAYS bring your reading to class since you will need them for reference during class sessions. Print hardcopies -- no laptops in class.

Course Requirements:

1) Written Assignments

Autobiography/ Feminism Paper: In a brief essay (1½ to 2 pages, single-spaced, with a blank line between paragraphs, standard margins and font) write a short autobiography of yourself. Trace events in your past that have influenced your views of “feminism” and “feminists.” What about your life may have led you to this class? Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?

Microthemes: Instead of quizzes (although I certainly reserve the right to institute quizzes if I get the sense that students are not reading the course material), you will write several microthemes over the course of the semester.
Essays: You will also write two 5-page essay assignments. I will distribute the prompt and instructions for each essay at least a week in advance.

2) Class participation/ Attendance

This course requires a considerable amount of active and sustained participation. Your work for this class will involve both autonomous and collaborative learning. The idea of autonomy stresses your personal responsibility for your own learning. This requires you to “do the reading”—read the text carefully, think through the underlying assumptions and implications of the arguments made, and apply a note-taking system which will allow you to quickly consult the readings during class discussions. The idea of collaboration stresses your responsibility for teaching and learning from one another. It is my responsibility as the teacher to secure the necessary conditions in which both types of learning can occur, and to engage in analytic thinking with you. So this class is not like a theater, where you come and watch me perform for you. Instead, it is best thought of as a lab, where you come in to work with, examine, and enhance the knowledge gained from the readings and from your own experiences.

I have a broad notion of what counts as participation. It includes: attentive listening, asking questions of one another, reading relevant passages aloud, explaining why you agree or disagree with what someone else has said, taking detailed notes, and engaging in and facilitating discussion. Your participation grade will be evaluated on both subjective and objective measures. Subjective measures include my evaluation of your labor in the classroom, including group work and other in class activities. Subjective measures include attendance, possession of readings, and the quality of group reports (see Attachment A).

In general, I will request that you take a mindful approach in my class. A mindful approach to learning is defined by three central characteristics: “The continuous creation of new categories, openness to new information, and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective” (Langer 199: 4).

Your attendance in each section is required. However, I understand that life is not fully in our control so I allow for two “free” absences. Every subsequent absence will result in a full letter-grade deduction of your overall participation score. Absences will only be excused if: 1) you have a family or medical emergency, and 2) you meet with me or another student to replicate the material and participation you missed during your excused university absence. Two tardies will be counted as an absence.

Grading: Your final course grade will be based on the following assignments:

Microthemes and Autobiography/ Feminism paper 20%
Class participation (including group projects) 20%
First essay assignment: 30%
Final essay assignment: 30%

Honor and Honesty: All work done in this class must be carried out within the letter and spirit of the Honor Code (http://honor.unc.edu/honor/index.html). You are also responsible for consulting with me if you are unclear about the meaning of academic dishonesty, plagiarism, or adverse conduct, or about whether any particular act on your part constitutes such a violation of the University’s honor code.

Disability Services: Any student with a learning disability should notify me in order to make necessary arrangements.
I) Defining Feminism and Doing Theory

Feminism(s) is a highly contested term with multiple meanings across various socio-historical contexts. Feminism(s) encapsulates a wide variety of ideological perspectives and political positions, and the concept remains open to contestation and revision. Theory helps us better understand what feminism(s) is. Thus, in this section we will explore what exactly “theory” is. What do we mean when we talk about something being “abstract”? The authors consider the issue of who decides what counts as theory, and where and by whom it can legitimately be produced. Why is it important to contest narrow definitions of theory and why is this fundamentally the work of feminist theorists? What is theory good for, and, more importantly, why is it necessary for feminism(s)?


Wed., August 27  bell hooks, Feminism is for Everybody, Intro and Chapter 1 (BB) 
bell hooks, “Feminist Theory: A Radical Agenda” (BB)

Fri., August 29  Michael Kimmel, “Who is Afraid of Men Doing Feminism?” (BB)

Mon., September 1  NO CLASS- Labor Day!

Wed., September 3  Charlotte Bunch, “Not By Degrees” (BB)

Fri., September 5  Deborah Rhode, “The No Problem Problem” (BB)

Mon., September 8  Deborah Rhode, “The Ideology and Biology of Gender Difference” (BB)
*Autobiography/ Feminism Paper Due*

II) The “Maleness of Political Theory”

Feminist political theory is comprised of several related intellectual projects. One focus has been on critiquing and expanding mainstream political thought. Feminists working in this area began by analyzing the misogyny and sexism in the traditional historical texts of political theory. Now they also focus on examining concepts and thinkers not generally part of mainstream political theory, and on rethinking important political concepts in light of feminist perspectives (concepts like justice, power, knowledge). Essentially, they help us to rethink “the political.” The first focuses on 1) knowledge and epistemology, 2) the public/private dichotomy that has been so central for Western thought, and 3) identity and the political subject.

Knowledge and experience: When we ask how we “know” things, for instance, how we know that oppression and inequality exist, we’re asking how we comprehend reality, how we decide what counts as true or what something means. Such discussions are central to doing theory since part of what theory does is redescribe, analyze, and explain “the real world.” Feminist theories have often challenged male accounts of that world by arguing for a different way of knowing, one that places “experience” in a central role. We will learn about feminist theories of knowledge and how they differ from traditional theories of knowledge, and evaluate what problems and possibilities arise from using these feminist theories.

Wed., September 10  MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, Chapter 5
Fri., September 12  MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, Chapter 6

Mon., September 15  Collins, Black Feminist Thought, Chapter 2
*Microtheme 1 Due*

Wed., September 17  Collins, Black Feminist Thought, Chapter 11

Public/ Private: Non-feminist social and political theory has made (or assumed) a sharp distinction between the private (as a realm of family, domesticity, and loving relationships) and the public (as a realm of politics, work, and the state). We will examine feminist challenges to this distinction and feminist arguments about the significance of recognizing the variety of connections between public and private, and the politics of drawing boundaries between the two.

Fri., September 19  Susan Okin, “Gender, the Public, and the Private,” pp. 116-125, 130-137 (BB)

Mon., September 22  MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, Chapter 10


Identity and (Re)Theorizing the Political Subject: In addition to revising key concepts in traditional political thought, feminist theorists have also sought to revise the political subject of political theory, which was thought to be universal, essential, and singular. Feminist theorists have pluralized the political subject and asked us to think about the intersection of gender with other aspects of our identity. This has meant revising earlier feminist theories as well. These readings will touch on the danger of silencing the voices at the margins and different methods of bringing those voices to the center, an issue we will return to several times over the course of this semester.

Fri., September 26  CLASS CANCELLED

Mon., September 29  Trina Grillo, “Anti-essentialism and Intersectionality” (BB)
*Microtheme 2 Due*

III)  Understanding Oppression: Theoretical Perspectives and Political Strategies

In this section, we will use the knowledge we gained about feminist epistemologies and methodologies to help us as we explore a diverse group of feminist theorists and investigate the way they analyze specific issues and problems (e.g. sexual violence, oppression, identity, etc.). We will take up dominance as a key analytical concept through which we understand women’s oppression. At the same time, we will be examining theorists’ treatment of difference among women, and the political/theoretical meanings of these differences. We will also tease out the implicit or explicit strategies of change these theorists offer.

The Law and Culture of Gender Domination: rape and sexual violence

In what ways is oppression closely related to dominance? These readings will help us to think about and struggle with the particular legal and political structures and systems in place that serve to perpetuate sexual/gender dominance. Specifically, how is one’s identity shaped by, or implicated in the production of, relationships of domination and oppression? What are the disconnects between our conceptions of domination and the realities of sexual violence, and what accounts for such disconnects? Further, how do we
distinguish what is “real” when it comes to domination and what is not? What is the difference between sex and rape, for example, and how do we arrive at such a distinction? What is the relationship between consciousness, experience, and law?

Wed., October 1 MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, Chapter 9


Mon., October 6 Sharon Marcus, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention” (BB)

Wed., October 8 Guest Lecture
*First Paper Due in Class*

Multiplicity in identity and experience: When feminist theorists revised feminist theory to complicate and expand the political subject, new emphasis was placed on difference among women and the political relevance of such differences. These readings will continue our exploration of the structural, interlocking character of oppression, as it relates to both gender and other identities, and will allow us to look at the political and theoretical differences among women as itself a major issue in feminist political theory. Why does identity matter, and in what ways does identity matter for these particular theorists? What is gained and what is lost when we focus on difference rather than domination as conceived by MacKinnon and earlier feminist theorists? Is there a way to do both? What are the implications of theoretical and political differences among women for the future of feminist political theory?

Fri., October 10 Kimberle Crenshaw, “Intersectionality and Identity Politics: Learning from Violence against Women of Color” (BB)

Mon., October 13 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, Chapter 3

Wed., October 15 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, Chapter 4

Fri., October 17 Gloria Anzaldúa, “La Conciencia de la Mestiza” (BB)

Mon., October 20 NO CLASS- Enjoy Fall Break!

Wed., October 22 Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (BB)

Fri., October 24 Iris Marion Young, “Gender as Seriality: Thinking About Women as a Social Collective” (BB)

IV) Women, Sexuality, and Bodies: Sources of Oppression and Sites of Resistance

This section will consider two fundamental issues in feminist political theory: sexuality and the body. We will consider a multiplicity of perspectives on each topic, some of which view sexuality and the body as a source of oppression, while others view them as a potentially positive force in “women’s” lives. (Note: I put women in quotation marks to emphasize the idea that some of the theorists we will cover view women as the product of powerful discourses and forces that create women’s sexuality and particular kinds of bodies.) Most of these theorists, however, do not see sexuality and bodies in either/or terms, but instead complicate
traditional notions of both. Finally, we will read and think about the ways in which sexuality and the body intersect and “act on” one another.

(Hetero)sexuality and Power: These readings consider the power of sex and sexuality—each conceived in a variety of ways by this group of authors—as both sources of oppression and agency. What IS sexuality and how is it best conceived, as a choice or as an essential part of one’s identity? Is there a way to maintain both simultaneously? What IS queer theory, or is it many things? What perceived theoretical and political need(s) are “queer theorists” responding to? What opposing perspectives? What sort of politics result from a queer theoretical perspective?

Mon., October 27 Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality” (BB)

Wed., October 29 Suzanne Pharr, “Homophobia as a Weapon of Sexism” (BB)
*Microtheme 3 due*

Fri., October 31 Judith Butler, excerpts from Gender Trouble (BB)

Mon., November 3 Judith Butler, excerpts from Gender Trouble (BB)
Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes” (BB)

Wed., November 5 Christine Overall, “Heterosexuality and Choice” (BB)
*Second Paper Due in Class*

(De)Constructing Gendered Bodies: These readings frame a diverse yet interrelated set of questions about bodies, oppression, and agency. Feminists view the body in a variety of ways, including conceptualizing it as a natural given that is prior to the social construction of gender, a site of cultural inscriptions acted upon by dominating discourses of power, a potential site of empowerment and resistance, a cultural text, and the site of particular practices we engage in. What forces act upon the body to shape our identity? How can we understand the body as a site of resistance? What are the theoretical and political implications of viewing the (sexed) body as artificiality? As a (sometimes playful) choice?

Power, Discipline, and Agency

Fri., November 7 Sandra Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” (BB)

Mon., November 10 Kathy Davis, “Cultural Dopes and She-Devils: Cosmetic Surgery as Ideological Dilemma,” (BB)


Fri., November 14 Movie: Codes of Gender

Pornography/ Objectifying Bodies

Mon., November 17 MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, Chapter 11
Wed., November 19  Ariel Levy, excerpts from *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (BB)
*Microtheme 4 Due*

The Politics of Reproduction

Fri., November 21  Dorothy Roberts, “The Future of Reproductive Choice for Poor Women and Women of Color” (BB)

Mon., November 24  Katha Pollitt “Fetal Rights: A New Assault on Feminism” (BB)

**Where to go from here: future choices/ making change**

Wed., November 26  NO CLASS- Enjoy Thanksgiving!

Fri., November 28  NO CLASS- Enjoy Thanksgiving!

Mon., December 1  E.J. Graff “The Opt Out Myth” (BB)

Wed., December 3  Amy Richards and Jennifer Baumgardner, “Rebels with Causes” in *Grassroots* (BB)

**Hand out Final Essay Prompt**

Fri., December 5  Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” (BB)

Mon., December 8  Penny Weiss, “I’m not a Feminist, but…” (BB)
Amy Richards and Jennifer Baumgardner, “A Day with Feminism” (BB)

**Take-home final exam: Due on December 12, at noon**