

Reading Guide Week 2

Thinking Historically about Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

Gender, sex, and sexuality are important areas of research for scholars across the humanities and social sciences, as well as many scientific fields, including medicine. Historians have played a crucial role in changing the way we understand these topics. The readings for this week have been selected to introduce you to some of the ways historians approach and analyze gender, sex, and sexuality, and also to help you begin thinking historically yourself.

Required Texts:

- Nancy Cott, “What is Gender History?” Speech delivered at the American Historical Association Conference (January 2005) 1-5.
- Jeffrey Weeks, “The Social Construction of Sexuality,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, Peiss, ed. (2002) 2-9.
- John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Abelove et al eds. (1993) 467-476.
- Jack Halberstam, “Trans*: What’s in a Name,” in *Trans** (2018) 1-21.

Questions to Consider:

Nancy Cott is a preeminent historian of gender and women’s history. What distinctions does she make in her short speech between the history of gender and the history of women? According to Cott, in what ways has thinking about gender contributed to and changed the way we understand US history? How might using the lens of gender help us understand other historical topics Cott doesn’t mention?

In classic essays penned in the 1980s, both Weeks and D’Emilio argue that sexual identities are “constructed” under particular social and historical contexts. D’Emilio, for example, claims that homosexuality and heterosexuality, as categories of identity, were “invented” only recently. Do you find this argument compelling? Why or why not? What historical contexts or forces have shaped sexuality and sexual identities in the United States, according to these authors?

Jack Halberstam is a professor of Gender Studies and English at Columbia University. In the first chapter of their book *Trans** they address the question of language and naming as it relates to trans identity and experience. In what ways do the terms we use to name and identify sexual and gender identities matter? Halberstam also makes distinctions between trans history and lesbian and gay history. How does trans history differ from LGB history or from the history of gender? What role does science and medicine play in trans history, for example?

Bonus Questions:

Many historians of gender, sex, and sexuality are activists as well as scholars. Consider as you read this week the ways in which history can contribute to social movements. Can simply writing the history of lesbians, transpeople, or gender identities be considered a form of activism? Why or why not?

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