

QUESTIONING FEMINIST MATERIALISMS: METHODS, CONCEPTS AND CONTROVERSIES



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Guests : Prof. Stine Willum Adrian (Aalborg University, DK) and
Emeritus Prof. Danielle Juteau (University of Montreal, CA)
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MATTERS AT HAND

In the history of feminist thought, the term “materialism” was first associated with Marxist or socialist theorizing on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1970s. Drawing a dual analogy between class-based and sex-based inequality on the one hand, and production and reproduction on the other, authors associated with this broadly defined tradition have examined how the sexual division of work, and patriarchy more generally, undergirds relations of power and access to material and symbolic resources. While the debates about the definition and theoretical assumptions underlying the concept of (historical) materialism were vigorous, most authors agreed that a commitment to the “material” meant a commitment against an understanding of female oppression as “merely ideological”, independent or disconnected from the economic structures of society.

During the later part of the last century, other conceptual frameworks (notably those of poststructuralist theory, science and technology studies (STS) and performance studies) replaced these debates with new questions, reviving feminist engagements with questions of materiality and materialism. The field of feminist STS in particular has recently brought materiality back to the fore. Its representatives invite feminist researchers to take into account the materiality of the bodies, objects and technologies that constitute our relations to our socionatural worlds. The understanding of matter and materiality they convey both converge with and challenge those of earlier feminist thought and practice, raising lively and fruitful controversy.

In order to unpack the notion of “materialism” and to mine this opposition between ‘old’ and ‘new’ feminist materialisms for its theoretical pay-off, we will analyze the principle concepts, methods and research objects of these different approaches, paying special attention to their circulation, re-appropriation of and, at times, mutual indifference to each other. This two-day workshop will combine close readings of key texts, keynote conferences by our invited experts and presentations by doctoral students in relation to their on-going work.

OBJECTIVES

- to unpack the notions of materiality, materialism and matter in the field of gender studies, and to explore their relevance for particular themes or field sites;
- to explore the socio-historical contexts underlying the production and circulation of feminist conceptions of materiality;
- to situate controversies around these concepts within feminism in historical and theoretical perspective;
- to reflect on how questions of materiality (in all of their theoretical, epistemological and feminist dimensions) can shed new light (or not!) on the on-going work of doctoral students attending this module.

PROGRAM

Day 1

- 9h *Introduction:* Ellen Hertz & Nolwenn Bühler
- 9h30-10h30 *Group activity n° 1:* close reading of a representative text of the “old materialism”
- Jackson, Stevi. 2001. “Why a Materialist Feminism is (Still) Possible – and Necessary”, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 24(3): 283–293.
- 11h-12h *Plenary session:* Keynote conference by Prof. Danielle Juteau,
- “Thinking Anew French Materialist Feminism”
- 13h30-15h30 First series of presentations by doctoral students
- 16h-17h Personal feedback on doctoral students’ texts by the keynotes and the organizers

Day 2

- 9h-10h *Group activity n° 2:* close reading of a representative text of the “new materialism”
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”. *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575–99.
- 10h30-12h *Plenary session:* Keynote conference by Prof. Stine Willum Adrian,
- “Thinking with agential realism, doing ethnographic work on reproductive technologies”
- 13.30-15h30 Second series of presentations by doctoral students
- 16h-17h Summing up and final discussion: how to relate theory and empirical case studies?

INSTRUCTIONS

Group activity

In this module, we would like to put a special emphasis on the close, respectful and careful reading of theoretical texts, an activity that is widely taken for granted in graduate studies, but rarely “taught”. We will thus reserve time specifically for collective reading and discussion of two representative texts, respectively from the “old” and “new” materialist traditions. Neither of these texts is particularly clear, nor easy to understand. It is also not clear exactly what links or differentiates them – figuring this out will be part of our collective task.

Students should come to these discussions having read the texts, with questions and not answers. These sessions are meant to free all of us from the oppressive feeling that comes with the sense that we ought to understand difficult texts, and the frequent feelings of shame and anxiety that go along with the sense that we do not. The reasons we often do not understand difficult texts are not in us, but in the texts. The very least we can expect feminist thought to do is liberate us from these oppressive super-ego taskmasters. This workshop is thus an invitation to put “old” and “new” theoretical reflections on materialism to the test of our empirical studies and of our own situated knowledge and perspectives.

We have also included below a series of suggested readings for both the “old” and “new” materialisms. These texts will of course further your understanding of the main texts under discussion, but they are for your reference and not obligatory.

Student Presentations

The two-day workshop also provides a great opportunity to present your work and to think of it through the prism of materiality. We encourage you to share your questions, difficulties and ideas about the relations between theory, concepts, methodology and empirical work, about what you understand and don't understand in “old”/“new” materialism, and more generally about the intricacies of doing research in gender studies.

Those who opt to present will prepare a 20 minutes presentation of their work. We expect you to show us what your work is about and to raise questions/empirical data/reflections you have in relation to “old”/“new” materialism, materiality or matter. Here are some questions that might help you to orient your presentation, but please feel free to develop your own:

- What kind of materialities do I encounter in my fieldwork? (biological, technological, economic, infrastructural, etc)?
- How do I take them into account and what can I say about them?
- Does my conceptual framework engage with the notion of materiality? If yes, in which sense? Do I find it convincing or not?
- Would it be interesting to decenter my perspective to look at the object of my inquiry through the lens of the various materialities I encounter? If yes/no to which extent?
- What/where is power in my fieldwork? What/where is the body? How do I observe these concepts concretely? How do I conceptualize them?
- What kind of work can I observe in my research? What does it teach me about gender relations?

Written texts

Finally, this workshop is a great opportunity to receive feedback on written texts from the keynotes and/or the organizers. Texts should not be more than 15 pages and can reflect any stage of the research you find yourself at. If you wish to benefit from feedback, please submit your papers to the organizers by **October 10th**.

SUGGESTED READINGS

« Old materialisms »

Cole, Sally. 2016. “‘With a Fine-Toothed Comb’: Nicole-Claude Mathieu and the Work of French Feminist Materialist Anthropology”, *Anthropologica* 58(1): 15-30.

Delphy, Christine and Diana Leonard. 1980. “A Materialist Feminism Is Possible”. *Feminist Review* 4(1): 79–105.

- Delphy, Christine. 2016 [1984]. "The Main Enemy", in *Close to Home*, pp. 57-77. London: Verso.
- Guillaumin, Colette. 1995 [1977]. "Race and Nature: the system of marks", in *Racism, sexism, power and ideology*, pp. 133-152. London: Routledge.
- 1995 [1978]. "The practice of power and belief in Nature. Part I: The appropriation of women", and "The practice of power and belief in Nature. Part II: The naturalist discourse", in *Racism, sexism, power and ideology*, pp. 176-238. London: Routledge.
- 1995 [1981]. "Nature, history and 'materialism'", in *Racism, sexism, power and ideology*, pp. 274-283. London: Routledge.
- Hartmann, Heidi. 1981. "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union", in (L. Sargent, ed.), *Women and Revolution: The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, pp. 1-41. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Juteau, Danielle. 1995. "Introduction: (Re)constructing the categories of 'race' and 'sex': the work of a precursor", in *Racism, sexism, power and ideology*, pp. 1-26. London: Routledge.
- Lykke Nina. "Rethinking socialist and Marxist legacies in feminist imaginaries of protest from postsocialist perspectives", *Social Identities* 24(2): 173-188.
- Rahman, Momin and Anne Witz. 2003. "What Really Matters?: The Elusive Quality of the Material in Feminist Thought", *Feminist Theory* 4(3): 243-61.

« **New materialisms** »

- Adrian, Stine Willum. 2015. "Psychological IVF: Conceptualizing Emotional Choreography in a Fertility Clinic". *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 16(3): 302-17.
- 2019. 'Rethinking Reproductive Selection: Traveling Transnationally for Sperm'. *BioSocieties*.
- Barad, Karen. 2003. "Posthumanist Performativity: Towards an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28(3): 801-831.
- Colls, Rachel. 2007. "Materialising Bodily Matter: Intra-Action and the Embodiment of 'Fat'", *Geoforum* 38(2): 353-65.
- Damsholt, Tine. 2012. "How Towels Came to Matter – on Discursive-Material Reconfigurings of Gender in Academia", *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* (1-2).
- Fraser, Mariam. 2002. "What is the Matter of Feminist Criticism?", *Economy and Society* 31(4): 606-625.
- Hird, Myra J. 2003. "New Feminist Sociological Directions", *Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 28(4): 447-462.
- Johnson, Ericka. 2008. 'Simulating Medical Patients and Practices: Bodies and the Construction of Valid Medical Simulators'. *Body & Society* 14(3): 105-28.
- der Tuin, Iris van. 2011. "'New Feminist Materialisms'", *Women's Studies International Forum* 34(4): 271-77.
- Washick, Bonnie, Elizabeth Wingrove, Kathy E. Ferguson, and Jane Bennett. 2015. "Politics That Matter: Thinking about Power and Justice with the New Materialists", *Contemporary Political Theory* 14(1): 63-89.