

**Contextualizing Gender**  
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**Lecture - 17**  
**Sex/Gender System in Gayle Rubin**


Good morning, dear friends and welcome to this module. In the previous module, we had discussed some of the key concepts and terms associated with the queer theory. In this module we will look at the contribution of Gayle Rubin. She is a cultural anthropologist and theorist of the politics of gender and sexuality whose writings have helped shape the trajectory of gender studies since the 1970s.

We shall discuss two major essays written by her the first is her 1975 essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” and the second is her 1984 essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality”. We will discuss both essays thoroughly in two modules.


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### Gayle Rubin

- Gayle S. Rubin (1949– ) has written on a wide range of subjects, ranging from her ethnographic and historic research on gay male leather fetishists as a part of her Ph.D. dissertation to the politics of homosexuality, pornography, and *BDSM*, which she considers as a valid form of expression for female sexuality; instead as woman-hating violence like some other feminists (viz., Andrea Dworkin and Susan Griffin).
  - *BDSM* as a term originated in early 1990s. It is interpreted as a combination of the abbreviations B/D (Bondage and Discipline), D/s (Dominance and submission), and S/M (Sadism and Masochism).
  - *BDSM* is now used as a catch-all phrase covering a wide range of activities, forms of interpersonal relationships and distinct subcultures.



Gayle Rubin  
Source: Gerard Koskovich



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Gayle Rubin has written on a wide range of subjects, ranging from her ethnographic and historic research on gay male leather fetishists as a part of her PhD dissertation, to the politics of homosexuality, pornography, and *BDSM*, which she considers as a valid form of expression for female sexuality; instead as woman hating violence like some other feminists for example, Andrea Dworkin and Susan Griffin. *BDSM* as a term originated

in early 1990s it is interpreted as a combination of the abbreviations BD that is Bondage and Discipline, DS that is Dominance and Submission and SM is Sadism and Masochism.

BDSM is now used as a catch-all phrase covering a wide range of activities, forms of interpersonal relationships and distinct subcultures. In addition to her academic work, Rubin has been an important figure in social activism. In 1978 she co-founded Samois the world's first lesbian SM organization, SM stands for Sexual Minority and remained with the group until it was disbanded in 1983.

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- She first gained fame with her essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex"(1975).
- Several years later, Rubin published another ground breaking essay entitled "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality"(1984).
- Rubin completed her Ph.D. in 1994, in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Michigan. Her dissertation entitled *The valley of kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960–1990* is hailed as the most authoritative history of gay men's leather in San Francisco.
  - It discusses prominent figures, events, and subcultural trends in the heyday of San Francisco men's leather.
  - She has been conducting research on leather culture and history since the late 1970s, and has been deeply involved in the preservation of leather archives and artifacts.



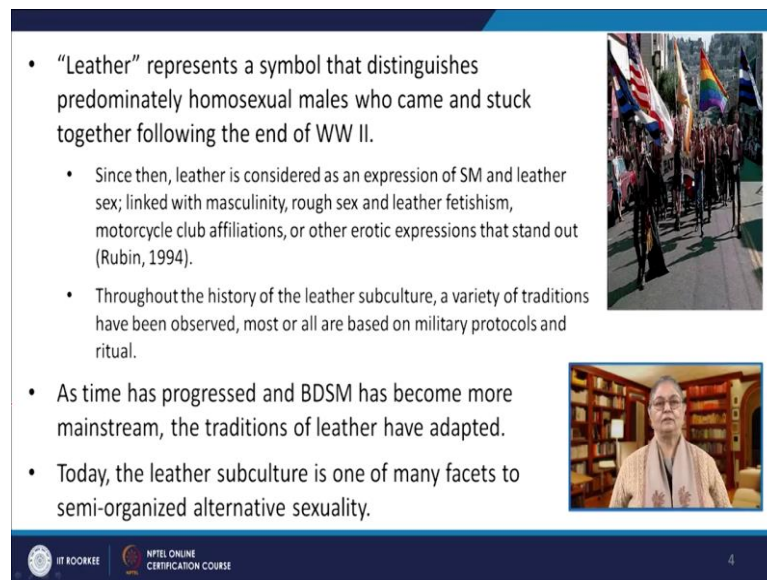
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Rubin had completed her PhD in 1994 in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Michigan. Her dissertation entitled 'The Valley of Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960-1990' is hailed as the most authoritative history of gay men's leather in San Francisco. Rubin had been conducting research on leather culture and history since the late 1970s and has been deeply involved in the preservation of leather archives and artifacts.

Her dissertation discusses prominent figures, events, and sub cultural trends in the heyday of San Francisco men's leather. Leather subculture denotes practices and styles of dress organized around sexual activities. Wearing leather garments is one way that participants in this culture, self-consciously distinguish themselves from mainstream sexual cultures.

Many participants associate leather culture with BDSM practices and its many subcultures. For some it is an erotic fashion that expresses heightened masculinity or the appropriation of sexual power, love of motorcycles and independence and or engagement in sexual king or leather fetishism.

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- “Leather” represents a symbol that distinguishes predominately homosexual males who came and stuck together following the end of WW II.
  - Since then, leather is considered as an expression of SM and leather sex; linked with masculinity, rough sex and leather fetishism, motorcycle club affiliations, or other erotic expressions that stand out (Rubin, 1994).
  - Throughout the history of the leather subculture, a variety of traditions have been observed, most or all are based on military protocols and ritual.
- As time has progressed and BDSM has become more mainstream, the traditions of leather have adapted.
- Today, the leather subculture is one of many facets to semi-organized alternative sexuality.

Leather represents a symbol that distinguishes predominantly homosexual white males who came and stuck together following the end of the Second World War. Since then, it is considered as an expression of SM and leather sex linked with masculinity rough sex and leather fetishism.




Throughout the history of the leather subculture a variety of traditions have been observed most or all are based on military protocols and rituals. As time has progressed and BDSM has become more mainstream, the traditions of leather have adapted. Today, the leather subculture is one of the many facets to semi organized alternative sexuality.

Though the leather community residents are primarily gay white males, it is a pansexual community that includes lesbians, bisexuals and transgender individuals. Ethnic minorities and heterosexuals have also been physically or socially involved, but their presence is smaller in number.

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- Leathermen blended obvious homosexual habits and work clothing with explicitly masculine behaviour.
- Within leather communities and subculture, gay bars became a central meeting place - an important institution - where leatherfolk, like their gay and lesbian counterparts, can socialize and interact.
- Texts and maps were essential in Gayle Rubin's analysis of Leathermen bars.
  - More genteel gay men gathered at "sweater" bars; lesbians met in feminist bookstores.
- Rubin's maps reveal that San Francisco subcultures used specific places to affirm sexual orientation. She found leather bars were located in working-class enclaves, near the docks, or where maritime trades gravitated.\*

\*Whelehan, P., & Bolin, A. (2015). *The international encyclopedia of human sexuality*.




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Leathermen had blended obvious homosexual habits and over clothing with explicitly masculine behavior. Within leather communities and subcultures, gay bars became a central meeting place, an important institution, where leatherfolk, like their gay and lesbian counterparts could socialize and interact.


In Gayle Rubin's analysis of leathermen bars texts and maps over equally essential. More genteel gay men gathered at sweater bars, lesbians met in feminist book stores. Rubin's maps reveal that San Francisco subcultures used specific places to affirm sexual orientation. She found that leather bars were located in working-class enclaves near the docks, or where maritime trades gravitated.

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- The symbolism of black leather has changed over the course of decades since post World War II.
- This is exemplified in Joseph Bean's work *Leathersex* where he states, "Wearing leather in 1959 was to be considered an outsider of a relatively extreme sort. This was less the case in 1969, hardly relevant in 1979, and not true to any stigmatizing extent in 1989" (Bean, 1994, 158).
- It was the constant redefining of leather symbols, and the attitudes and clothing styles of dress that made the leather community socially acceptable within the gay community and outside in the larger general society.



Source: Daedalus Publishing Company

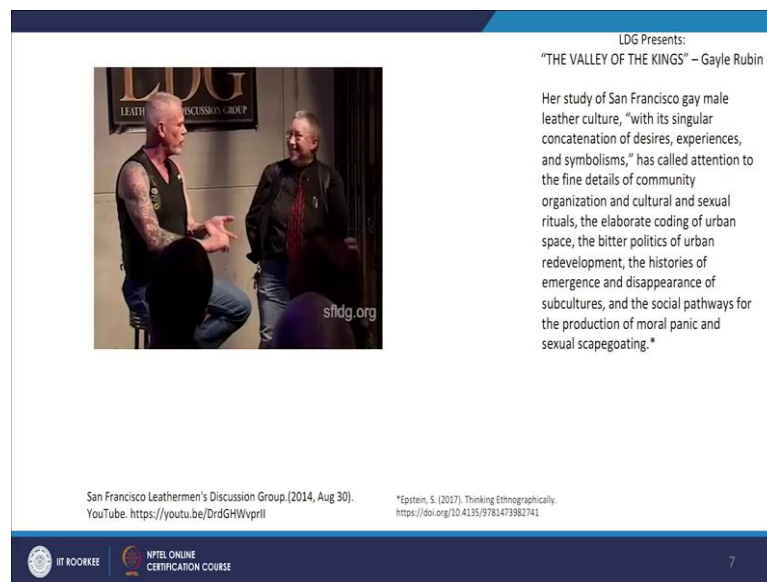


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The idea that the symbolism of black leather has consistently changed over the course of decades since the Second World War is showcased best by Joseph Bean who remarks that "wearing leather in 1959 was to be considered an outsider of a relatively extreme sort, but this was less the case in 1969, it was hardly relevant in 1979 and not true to any stigmatized extent in 1989".

And it was this constant redefining of leather symbols and the attitudes and clothing styles of dress that made the leather community socially acceptable within the gay community and outside also in the larger general heteronormative society. In the next slide we have a rare interview of Gayle Rubin, where she talks about the rise and fall of leather community.

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LDG Presents:  
"THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS" – Gayle Rubin

Her study of San Francisco gay male leather culture, "with its singular concatenation of desires, experiences, and symbolisms," has called attention to the fine details of community organization and cultural and sexual rituals, the elaborate coding of urban space, the bitter politics of urban redevelopment, the histories of emergence and disappearance of subcultures, and the social pathways for the production of moral panic and sexual scapegoating.\*

San Francisco Leathermen's Discussion Group. (2014, Aug 30).  
YouTube. <https://youtu.be/DrdGHVvprll>

\*Epstein, S. (2017). Thinking Ethnographically.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473982741>

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what would a healthy leather scene locally need is capital, quality control and I think it was its real estate yeah yes.

Space yeah and real estate is been absolutely in the top priority maybe I should just do the talk.

[Laughter]

But actually, the other big process that I oft say this at the end of the talk is there south of market used to be one of the cheapest neighborhoods in the city. This was to use the monopoly, the monopoly board this was essentially Baltic Avenue [Laughter] and a Baltic Avenue was turning into park place and the kinds of spaces that leather has managed to use to thrive.

In major cities has been mostly the Baltic avenues it is been industrial they have abandoned industrial neighborhoods like this one, the in New York it was the dock strip, which was really along the old crumbling piers of a New York. These were cheap places and as they become replaced by these really massive capital-intensive developments they go away.

And that really began the big issue that let us start with example market situated region and (Refer Time: 08:50) neighborhood. I think started in year 1978 when the (Refer Time: 08:54) from the Moscone center.

Waw.

Moscone center then opened in 1981, which was the same year that people started to well it was a same year that Tony Tavarosi suddenly died of pneumocystis. And was one of the first HIV; HIV deaths in the group of people that I knew at the time who were involved in leather, he had been involved in the leather community for decades.


So, it was sort of a perfect storm because aids and HIV here right around the same time that this wave of real estate (Refer Time: 09:26) started to (Refer Time: 09:28). This video explores the impact of de industrialization on queer urban location through the case of San Francisco's gay male leather population.



Five decades of relentless urban renewal and large-scale redevelopment transformed this formerly industrial and working-class residential neighborhood into areas of luxury housing and capital-intensive commerce making it increasingly precarious for gay and leather presence. Rubin became a prominent figure in the sex walls of the late 1970s and 1980s, as a sex positive activist advocating greater permissiveness of sexual variation and also a more nuanced analysis of the ways gender, sexuality and power, work together.

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### Gayle Rubin and Queer Theory

- Various writers associated with the queer theory have put forward arguments for theorising sexuality independently from gender.
- Gayle Rubin's work has been influential in the development of such arguments.
- In the early 1980s, Rubin argued that, although connected, gender and sexuality are not synonymous with each other. (Rubin, 1984)
- Opposed to the view that sexuality can be adequately understood as causing gender, Rubin offered instead an account of what she termed as a 'sex/gender system' in which she separates sexuality and gender.
- She challenged the basic assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality, including the oppositions between heterosexual and homosexual, biological sex and culturally determined gender, and man and woman.



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Various writers associated with the queer theory have put forward arguments for theorizing sexuality independently from gender. Gayle Rubin's work has been influential

in the development of such arguments. In the early 1980s she argued that although connected, gender and sexuality are not synonymous with each other. Opposed to the view that sexuality can be adequately understood as causing gender, Rubin offered instead an account of what she termed as a sex/gender system in which she separates sexuality and gender.

She challenged the basic assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality, including the oppositions between heterosexual and homosexual, biological sex and culturally determined gender, and man and women. Feminist also found it useful to distinguish sex and gender. This enabled them to argue that many differences between women and men were socially produced and therefore, changeable.

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- Rubin argued that gender was not the inevitable outcome of biological sex differences, and that sexuality is not a consequence of gender, as Euro-American thinking had supposed.
- Instead, she suggested that sexuality is constructed through a system of sexual stratification in which forms of sexuality are differently valued.
- This differential evaluation creates a hierarchy legitimating some expressions of sexuality such as married heterosexuality while persecuting others, such as homosexuality, transsexualism, fetishism, and sadomasochism.
- Rubin argues that this sex/gender valuation system is encoded in law enforced by the state and policed by medical professionals and popular ideas about appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour.



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medical professionals and popular ideas about appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior.

Now, we shall discuss Rubin's first major essay entitled "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" which was published in 1975. This essay introduced the concept of historically and geographically varying sex/gender systems. It is grounded in Rubin's innovative combination of insights from anthropology and psychoanalysis. The success of the essay catapulted Rubin into the academic limelight at a time when she was a graduate student in anthropology, still at the University of Michigan.

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"The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex"\* (1975)

- To explain the foundations of the oppression of women in capitalist societies, Rubin brings together the following analytic frameworks:
  - Marxist historical materialism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Lévi- Straussian structuralism
- In this process, she introduces the concept of the "sex/gender system". She locates the structural oppression of women in the kinship systems that create gender division and compulsory heterosexuality.
- She begins the essay with the big question that second wave feminists had been trying to resolve in the 1970s: how do we account for women's oppression and social subordination?



\*In Rayna R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Monthly Review Press. pp. 157-210 (1975).

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In order to explain the foundations of the operations of women in capitalist societies, Rubin brings together the analytical frameworks of Marxist historical materialism, Freudian psychoanalysis and Levi Straussian structuralism. In this process, she introduces the concept of the sex/gender system. She locates the structural operation of women in the kinship systems that create gender division and compulsory heterosexuality.

She begins the essay with a big question that second wave feminists had been trying to resolve in the 1970s. How do we account for women's operation and social subordination? The essay has had a pervasive impact and continues to influence new generations of feminist thinkers even today. Rubin rejected biologically essentialist

sexuality in favor of the social organization of sexuality imagining a utopian elimination of obligatory heterosexuality.

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- She questions:  
"What is a domesticated woman? A female of the species. The one explanation is as good as the other. A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human Dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money... and so on. What, then, are these relationships by which a female becomes an oppressed woman?" (158)
- In order to answer this question she analyses the works of Freud and Lévi-Strauss, and offers a detailed account of how systematic social mechanism shapes domesticated women.




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And she questions and I quote from her “What is a domesticated woman? A female of this species. The one explanation is as good as the other. A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human Dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money and so on. What, then, are these relationships by which a female becomes an oppressed woman?” In order to answer this question, she analyzes the works of Freud and Levi Strauss, and offers a detailed account of how systematic social mechanism shapes domesticated women.

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- She tries to find the genesis of sexual inequality in order to form a sexually egalitarian society in future.
- Freud and Lévi-Strauss, Rubin argues, offer conceptual frameworks for explaining the social structures which allow for the discrimination of women, structures which Rubin calls the “sex/gender system”.
- Rubin employed this system to articulate that “part of social life which is the locus of the oppression of women” (159), describing gender as the “socially imposed division of the sexes” (179).
- She validates the need for such a concept by discussing the failure of Marxism to fully explain sexual oppression. She believes that “Marxism, as a theory of social life, is relatively unconcerned with sex”(160).



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She tries to find the genesis of sexual inequality in order to form a sexually egalitarian society in future. Freud and Levi Strauss, as Rubin has argued offer conceptual frameworks for explaining the social structures which allow for the discrimination of women, structures which have been termed by Rubin as the sex/gender system.

She has employed this system to articulate that “part of social life which is the locus of the operation of women describing gender as the socially imposed division of the sexes”. She validates the need for such a concept by discussing the failure of Marxism to fully explain sexual operation.


She believes that Marxism as a theory of social life is relatively unconcerned with sex. Unlike Marx Freud and Levi Strauss provide a deep understanding of sexuality and emphasize on the profound differences between the social experiences of different genders. The essay follows a strictly social constructionist line and her model of sexual constructivism has instituted paradigms that would come to constitute queer theory’s critique of feminism.

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- Marxism locates the oppression of women within the capitalist dynamics – by pointing to the relationship between housework and the reproduction of labour.
  - She argues that the reproduction of labor power depends upon women's housework to transform commodities into sustenance for the worker. The system of capitalism cannot generate surplus without women, yet society does not grant women access to the resulting capital.
- Rubin argues that explaining why women are essential for capitalism does not account for why they are oppressed by it, noting that women are oppressed in various forms of societies which are not necessarily capitalist.
- Rubin notes that “it is precisely at this point that the analysis of capitalism ceases to explain very much about women and the oppression of women”(163).



Karl Marx  
Source: John Jabez Edwin Mayal



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Let us look at Rubin’s critique of Marxism. Marxism locates the operation of women within the capitalist dynamics by pointing to the relationship between housework and the reproduction of labor. Rubin argues that the reproduction of labor power depends on women’s housework to transform commodities into sustenance for the worker.

The system of capitalism cannot generate surplus without women, yet society does not grant women access to the resulting capital. Rubin argues that explaining why women are essential for capitalism does not account for why they are oppressed by it, noting that women are oppressed in various forms of societies capitalist as well as those societies, which are not necessarily capitalist. She notes that it is precisely at this point that the analysis of capitalism ceases to explain very much about women and their oppression.

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- Analysing the reproduction of labour power does not explain why women have to take the responsibility of domestic chores instead of men.
- She emphasizes on the “historical and moral element”(164), which enabled capitalism to present a cultural heritage of divided labour and sexual oppression.
- Rubin stresses on the exploitation of women even before capitalism came to exist in Europe.
- Although Marxism acknowledges the oppression of women with the presentation of “females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products,” its argument is that the oppression of women lies entirely within society’s capitalist structure (28).
- Thus, Rubin argues, if this were the case, a socialist revolution would eliminate the oppression of women.



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She also says that analyzing the reproduction of labor power does not explain, why women have to take the responsibility of domestic chores instead of men; and emphasizes on the “historical and moral element”, which enabled capitalism to present a cultural heritage of divided labor and sexual oppression. She stresses on the exploitation of women even before capitalism came to exist in Europe.

Although Marxism acknowledges the operation of women with the presentation of females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products, its argument is that the operation of women lies entirely within society’s capitalist structure. Thus, Rubin argues, if this were the case, a socialist revolution would eliminate the oppression of women.


But herein lays the key to Rubin’s push for a feminist revolution as opposed to a socialist one. The root of the operation of women cannot be condensed to merely women’s usefulness to the capitalist surplus value. Women oppressed by capitalism are a product of the oppression of women as a whole and not the origin of it.

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- Rubin refers to the argument presented by Friedrich Engels, that societies do not only have to meet their immediate material needs, but also the needs of reproducing themselves.
- Any satisfaction of material needs is achieved by means of a socio-cultural formation which includes the sex/gender system which is different for every society.\*
- According to Rubin, Engels sees “sex oppression as part of capitalism's heritage from prior social forms”(164). He integrates “sex and sexuality into his theory of society”(164).
- Rubin finds his book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) unsatisfying, despite certain insights.



Friedrich Engels  
Source: George Lester



\*Cultural Reader: “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex” by Gayle Rubin



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Rubin also refers to the argument which has been presented by Frederich Engels, that societies do not only have to meet their immediate material needs, but also the needs of reproducing themselves. Any satisfaction of material needs is achieved by means of a socio-cultural formation, which includes the sex/gender system which is different for every society.


Driven comments that Engle see sex oppression is part of capitalisms heritage from prior social forms and he integrates sex and sexuality into his theory of society. Rubin finds his book ‘The Origin of the Family’ rather unsatisfying even though she acknowledges that it provides certain insights.

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- Engels emphasizes on the idea that "relations of sexuality" can be distinguished from the "relations of production" .
- Each society according to both Marx and Engels has needs of sexuality and procreation that must be satisfied as much as the need to eat.
- As a result each society has a sex/gender system defined as "a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human and social intervention; and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be"(165).
- This system assists in discrimination, oppression and trafficking of women.



Source: Penguin Classics



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Engels has emphasized on the idea that relations of sexuality can be distinguished from the relations of production. Each society according to both Marx and Engels has needs of sexuality and procreation; as a result, each society has a sex/gender system defined as a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human and social intervention.

And satisfied in a conventional manner no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be. The system assists in discrimination oppression and trafficking of women. According to Rubin gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy and also the concepts of childhood are all social products.

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- All societies have their own ways of dealing with sex, gender and children; and they insist on fulfilling their desires of procreation.
- Rubin also clarifies that sex/gender system goes by several alternate names including “mode of reproduction” and “patriarchy” (167).
- Unlike most other radical feminists of the time, though, Rubin is wary of the term ‘patriarchy.’
- The term was introduced by feminists to ‘distinguish the forces for maintaining sexism from other social forces, such as capitalism’ (167).



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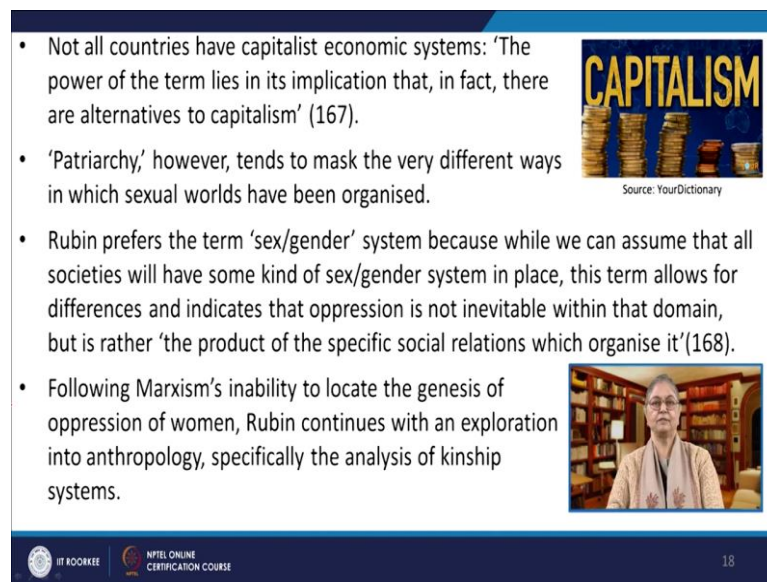
All societies have their own ways of dealing with sex, gender and children and they insist on fulfilling their desires of procreation. Rubin also clarifies that sex/gender system goes by several alternate names including “mode of reproduction” and “patriarchy”. Unlike most other radical feminists of the time, though, Rubin is rather wary of the term patriarchy.

The term was introduced by feminists to ‘distinguish the forces for maintaining sexism from other social forces, such as capitalism’. Rubin observes that the term capitalism is useful precisely because it distinguishes between different systems of political economy.



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- Not all countries have capitalist economic systems: 'The power of the term lies in its implication that, in fact, there are alternatives to capitalism' (167).
- 'Patriarchy,' however, tends to mask the very different ways in which sexual worlds have been organised.
- Rubin prefers the term 'sex/gender' system because while we can assume that all societies will have some kind of sex/gender system in place, this term allows for differences and indicates that oppression is not inevitable within that domain, but is rather 'the product of the specific social relations which organise it'(168).
- Following Marxism's inability to locate the genesis of oppression of women, Rubin continues with an exploration into anthropology, specifically the analysis of kinship systems.



Rubin also notes that not all countries have capitalist economic systems and she says that 'the power of the term lies in its implication that, in fact, there are alternatives to capitalism'. 'Patriarchy' however, tends to mask the very different ways in which sexual worlds have been organized.

And Rubin prefers the term 'sex/ gender' system because while we can assume that all societies will have some kind of sex/gender system in place, this term allows for differences and indicates that oppression is not inevitable within that domain, but is rather 'the product of the specific social relations which organizes it'.

Following Marxism's inability to locate the genesis of oppression of women, Rubin continues with an exploration into anthropology, specifically the analysis of kinship systems. The system of capitalism cannot generate surplus without women, yet women are not granted any access to the resulting capital. Rubin argues that historical patterns of female oppression have constructed this role for women in capitalist societies.


And she attempts to analyze these historical patterns by considering the sex/gender system. In order to describe the working of a sex/gender system, she moves to examine the working of kinship systems, which also serve to reproduce concrete forms of socially organized sexuality. At this point Rubin refers to Levi Strauss and his analysis of how kinship is the cultural organization of biological reproduction she refers to his work 'The Elementary Structure of Kinship' which was published in 1949.

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### Kinship and the Traffic in Women

- In kinship systems lie a key to understanding what Rubin calls the “sex/gender system.”
- First, Rubin makes clear that kinship systems are not formulated out of biology or genetics, and borrows the idea from Lévi-Strauss that they are, rather, socio-cultural categories and statuses. \*
- She further applies Lévi-Strauss’ understanding of the emergence of the “incest taboo” and his concept of “gift” to explain the exchange of women in societies.
- These concepts are employed in order to understand how kinship is related to gender inequality.

\*On Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women" | by Bethie | Medium



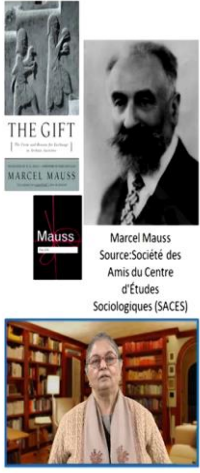
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In kinship systems lie a key to understanding what Rubin calls the “sex/gender system”. She makes it clear that kinship systems are not formulated out of biology or genetics, and borrows this idea from Levi Strauss that they are, rather socio-cultural categories and statuses. She further applies Levi Strauss understanding of the emergence of the “incest taboo” and his concept of gift to explain the exchange of women in societies.

These concepts are employed in order to understand how kinship is related to gender inequality. Levi Strauss had borrowed these ideas from a 1925 essay of the French sociologist Marcel Mauss. The title of this essay is “The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies”. It was Mauss, who first theorized the significance of one of the most striking features of primitive societies that is the extent to which giving receiving and reciprocating gifts dominate social intercourse.

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- Marcel Mauss theorizes that gift-giving and gift-receiving is the dominating force in social intercourse: “it expresses, affirms, or creates a social link between the partners of an exchange” (35).
- Rubin then adds Lévi-Strauss’ understanding of the “incest taboo” to this idea, and states that in a culture in which gift-giving is fundamental to social relationships, marriage can be seen as a critical form of gift exchange.
- In these exchanges, it is women who are the gifts, and men who do the exchange.



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Marcel Mauss has theorized that gift giving and gift receiving is the dominating force in social intercourse, “it expresses affirms or creates a social link between the partners of an exchange”. Rubin then adds Levi Strauss’ understanding of the incest taboo in this idea and he states that in a culture in which gift giving is fundamental to social relationships marriage can be seen as a critical form of gift exchange.


In these exchanges, it is women who are the gifts and men who do the exchange. Referencing Marcel Mauss, she argues that women are born biologically female but they only become gendered when the distinction between male giver and female gift is made within this exchange.

For men giving the gift of a daughter, or a sister to another man for the purpose of matrimony allows for the formation of kinship ties between two men. Although both Mauss and Levi Strauss emphasize the solitary aspects of gift exchange, the other purposes served by gift giving only strength to the point that it is a pervasive and universal means of social commerce.


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### Claude Lévi Strauss (1908-2009)

- A gift is a basic form for establishing special relations between individuals, families, clans etc.
- Marriage, Lévi-Strauss argues, is one of the basic forms of gift exchange.
- He claims that the taboo on incest is the mechanism which insures that such trade relation will be performed between families or other units as a means of grounding alliances.
- The alliances are between men, with women serving as the means for establishing them.



Claude Lévi Strauss  
Source: Pascal Pavan



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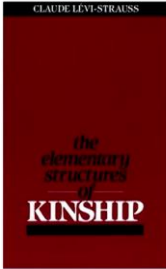
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Levi Strauss had also suggested that a gift is a basic form for establishing special relations between individual families and clans etc. Marriages in his opinion are one of the basic forms of gift exchange and he claims that the taboo on incest is the mechanism, which ensures that such trade relation will be performed between families or other units as a means of grounding alliances.


The alliances are between men with women serving as the means for establishing them. If one were to marry the women in his family there would be no gift to exchange, it is this exchange that Rubin refers to as the traffic of women. Women are the gifts that are transferred from one group to the next and thus are the ones who allow the men, the exchangers to receive social power.

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- Rubin notes that the concept of the exchange of women situates their oppression in the realm of society, not biology.
- She argues that kinship systems do not exchange just women, but also sexual access, genealogical statuses, dynasty names, rights and people – men, women and children.
- The kinship system, which is tied with the sex/gender system, allocates certain rights to men and others to women, thus denying women the right to choose their own destiny.
- Women's oppression is not the source of social organization, but the product of it.



Source: Beacon Press




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Rubin notes that the concept of the exchange of women situates their oppression in the realm of society and not biology. She argues that kinship systems do not exchange just women, but also sexual access, genealogical statuses, dynasty names, rights and people, men, women and children.

The kinship system which is tied with the sex/gender system allocates certain rights to men and others to women and it also denies women the right to choose their own destiny. Women's oppression is not the source of social organization, but the product of it.

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- If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men -- who give and take them – who benefit from the social exchange.
- In such a system women cannot have full rights to themselves. "A gift of a woman is more profound than the result of other gift transactions because the relationship thus established is not just one of reciprocity but one of kinship" (173).
- "Exchange of women" expresses that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin." (178)
- According to Rubin the social system of kinship therefore necessitates the creation of gender division and the institution of compulsory heterosexuality.



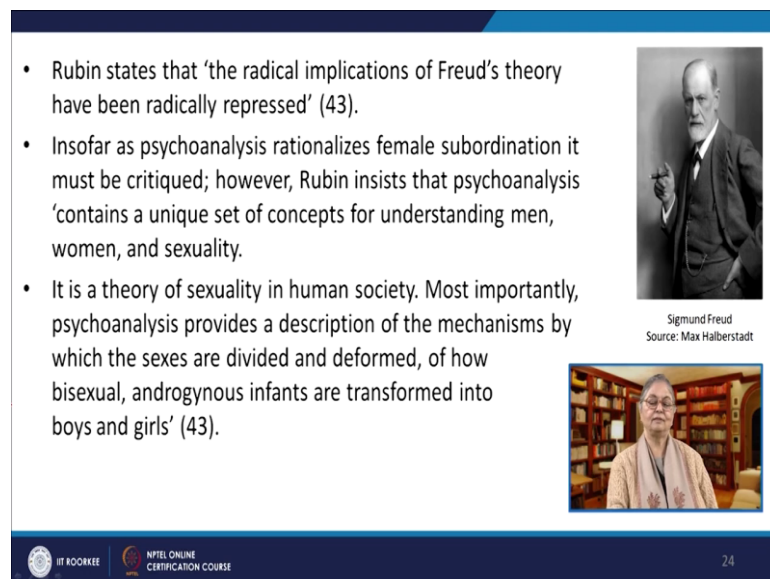
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If it is the women who are being transacted then it is the men who give and take them, who benefit from the social exchange. In such a system women cannot have full rights to themselves. “A gift of a woman is more profound than the result of other gift transactions because the relationship thus established is not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship”.

“Exchange of women” expresses that the social relations of a kinship system is specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights, either to themselves or to their male kin. According to Rubin the social system of kinship therefore, necessitates the creation of gender division and the institution of compulsory heterosexuality.

It should be made clear that sex/gender systems themselves are not inherently good or bad rather it is the formation of the current sex/gender system that should be critiqued and changed to have a new sex/gender system. To examine the formation of sex and gender, Rubin also approaches the theories of psychoanalysis and specifically she refers to the oedipal complex. Rubin attempts to rehabilitate Sigmund Freud’s understanding of psychoanalysis despite women’s and gay movements rejecting them.

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- Rubin states that ‘the radical implications of Freud’s theory have been radically repressed’ (43).
- Insofar as psychoanalysis rationalizes female subordination it must be critiqued; however, Rubin insists that psychoanalysis ‘contains a unique set of concepts for understanding men, women, and sexuality.
- It is a theory of sexuality in human society. Most importantly, psychoanalysis provides a description of the mechanisms by which the sexes are divided and deformed, of how bisexual, androgynous infants are transformed into boys and girls’ (43).

Sigmund Freud  
Source: Max Halberstadt

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Rubin feels that the implications of Freudian theory have been radically repressed. In so, far as psychoanalysis rationalizes female subordination it must be critiqued. However, Rubin insists that psychoanalysis contains a unique set of concepts for understanding

men, women, and sexuality. It is a theory of sexuality in human society. Most importantly, psychoanalysis provides a description of the mechanisms by which the sexes are divided and deformed of how bisexual androgynous infants are transformed into boys and girls.


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**The Oedipus Hex**

- Freud's theorization of the "Electra" complex was built on the assumption that children were biologically heterosexual, and that a child's masculinity and femininity is innate to his/her corresponding sex; the girl's Electra was meant to be the counterpart to the boy's Oedipal.
- However, with the discovery of the pre-Oedipal phase, it was found that "children of both sexes were psychically indistinguishable, which meant that their differentiation into masculine and feminine children had to be explained, rather than assumed" (44).



Source:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tg3\\_5uLa34I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tg3_5uLa34I)



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Freud's theorization of the Electra complex was built on the assumption that children were biologically heterosexual and that a child's masculinity and femininity is innate to his or her corresponding sex. The girl's Electra was meant to be the counterpart to the boy's Oedipal.

However, with the discovery of the pre-oedipal phase, it was found the children of both sexes were psychically indistinguishable which meant that their differentiation into masculine and feminine children had to be explained rather than assumed. Thus, Rubin feels that in the discussions of Freud, gender presentation and sexual preference were not inherited rather formed in early childhood.


Because the mother is the primary caretaker, both young girls and boys see the mother as the object of sexual desire. Rubin argues that Freud was not the biological determinist some people believed him to be. Instead, Freud's theory was about language and the cultural meanings imposed upon anatomy.

Penis envy stems not from the desire to possess the genitalia itself but the social and cultural meanings applied to the penis. Freud's explanation of the "Electra complex" can also be understood through non biological means. Without forced heterosexuality the girl would never have felt that she is less equipped to satisfy the mother.


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**Jacques Lacan (1901-1981)**

- Lacan sees kinship as the mediating system through which biological sexuality is transformed in the process of entering the cultural order.
- Through kinship systems the child learns his place and the world and his allowed objects of desire.
- Lacan takes the idea of the phallus, and uses it to add to the Oedipal complex theory with the castration complex: the possession of the phallus evokes differences in status for men and women, for it asserts male dominance.



Jacques Lacan  
Source: The Australian National University




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Rubin then turns to Lacan to support her arguments about Freud. Lacan sees kinship as the mediating system through which biological sexuality is transformed in the process of entering the cultural order. Through kinship systems, the child learns his place and the world and his allowed objects of desire. Lacan takes the idea of the phallus, and uses it to add to the oedipal complex theory with the castration complex. The possession of the phallus evokes differences in status for men and women for it asserts male dominance.




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- In the pre-oedipal stage, the child is without a defined sexuality; but after resolving his Oedipal complex his gender identity is in line with his culture's conventions.
- Lacan offers a theory of the workings of kinship terms which serves to define the role of each agent or object in the Oedipal drama, with symbolic features assigned to objects such as the phallus .
- The phallus, with its symbolic meanings, distinguishes men from women and bears the meaning of male domination.
- The boy desires his mother, but gives her up in exchange for the phallus, passed on to him from his father.



A Roman winged-lion phallus tintinabulum, the chains supporting small bells to function as a wind chime and intended to bring good fortune.  
Source: The Trustees of the British Museum




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In the pre-oedipal stage, the child is without a defined sexuality, but after resolving his oedipal complex his gender identity is in line with the cultural conventions. Lacan offers a theory of the workings of kinship terms which serve to define the role of each agent or object in the oedipal drama, with symbolic features assigned to objects such as the phallus.

The phallus, with its symbolic meanings distinguishes men from women and bears the meaning of male dominance. The boy desires his mother, but gives her up in exchange for the phallus passed on to him from his father. The girl; however, realizes the importance of the phallus and denies herself from desiring her mother or any other woman because she sees that only those who possess the phallus have a right to do so.

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- Because of this, she turns her desires to her father, who she hopes will give her the phallus... he never does, however, and she realizes the only way she can receive it is through intercourse or a child — both given to her by a man — and that her “castration” is a pre-requisite to attaining the phallus.
- When she recognizes and accedes to this idea, she has been interpellated into a “phallic exchange network” (49).
- Freud according to Rubin asserts that femininity, heterosexuality, and desire for motherhood are not innate in women, but the result of psychological elements that form in early childhood.



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She turns therefore, her desires to her father who she hopes will give her the phallus, he never does and she realizes that the only way she can receive it is through intercourse or a child. Both are given to her by a man and that her castration is a prerequisite to attaining the phallus. When she recognizes and exceeds to this idea, she has been interpolated into a phallic exchange network.

Freud according to Rubin asserts that femininity, heterosexuality and desire for motherhood are not innate in women. But the result of psychological elements that form in early childhood. Rubin thinks that both Freud and Lacan address the way cultural stereotypes have been mapped onto the genitals, she also notes that psychoanalysts see the creation of femininity in women as an act of psychic brutality based largely on pain and humiliation.

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### The Political Economy of Sex

- Rubin seeks the development of a "political economy" of sexuality systems, that is, to investigate the mechanism which creates and preserves sexual conventions in society.
- Lévi-Strauss' notions about the family are an additional step, being the manifestation of an artificial division of labour aimed at insuring heterosexual marriage.
- Gender for Gayle Rubin is a coerced social distinction between sexes. It is the product of sexual social relations.
- She contends that "kinship and marriage are always parts of total social systems and are tied into economic and political arrangements"(207).



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Rubin seeks the development of a “political economy” of sexuality systems that is to investigate the mechanism which creates and preserves sexual conventions in society. The notions of Levi Strauss about the family are an additional step being the manifestation of an artificial division of labour aimed at ensuring heterosexual marriage.

Gender for Gayle Rubin is a coerced social distinction between sexes, it is the product of sexual social relations. She contains that kinship and marriage are always parts of total social systems and are tied into economic and political arrangements. Kinship relations are based on marriage and they therefore, turn males and females into men and women, each an incomplete half that can only be completed by uniting with the other stressing difference and suppressing resemblance.



Rubin concludes the essay by emphasizing the mutual interdependence of sexuality, economics and politics. We can say that the essay central impulse is to ask the questions of the connections between sex and politics and to learn something about the nature of gender theory itself. In the next module we will look at the second essay of Gayle Rubin ‘Thinking Sex’ in detail.

Thank you.

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