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Title

Q & A with Lisa Duggan

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4vb586rd>

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Publication Date

2008-05-01



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Lisa Duggan

CHAIR OF THE THINKING GENDER 2008 PLENARY SESSION TALKS ABOUT HER TEACHING, RESEARCH, AND FIRST EXPERIENCES OF POLITICAL ORGANIZING

Lisa Duggan is a Professor in American Studies at New York University. She was chair of this year's plenary session, which was entitled "Lesbian, Counter, and Queer: New Directions in the Study of Femininity." She is author of *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity*, which won the John Boswell Prize of the American Historical Association in 2001. Her new book, *The End of Marriage: The War over the Future of State Sponsored Love*, will be published by University of California Press.

Much of your recent research is interested in investigating the collision between political discourse and issues of gender and sexuality. What forces (biographical, educational, cultural) do you see as having shaped this research agenda?

When I was 15, the principal of my high school weirdly chose me to participate in a program sponsored by the Richmond, Virginia Junior League during 1970—a program designed to train peer counselors for young people with drug problems. The Junior League made what was for them a heinous error, but for me a crucial opening to the larger world of politics. They brought in an organization of Maoist community organizers, called Rubicon, to train the working class public high school students in their peer counseling program! Those organizers introduced us to the city we lived in, its institutions and neighborhoods, and to the forms of widespread

racial and economic inequality that marked that time and place. I was absolutely shocked by what I learned, but also absolutely thrilled by the ways of thinking and organizing that I was exposed to then. The Rubicon guys didn't have much to say about gender and sexual inequalities. But as I learned more about the nascent feminist and gay liberation movements during high school and college, I always understood them within political economic context. I had learned from my time with the Rubicon organizers that inequalities are interrelated, embedded in historical institutions, and subject to political contest and change.

How do you see issues of gender and sexuality playing out in the political season currently underway? Do you find yourself and/or your students following the national and local campaigns with acute interest or marked wariness?

Obsessed. That's the only word to describe my relationship to this election season! Riveted and horrified. Race and gender are at the center, with reverence for signs of increasing equality expressed alongside racist and sexist assumptions on a daily basis. A virtual lesson plan in the limits and perils of neoliberal multiculturalism played out in real time.

How have your research interests influenced your pedagogical concerns? Are conversations about the interrelation between sex and politics crucial to the undergraduate classroom? How have your classroom experiences affected your research aims?

My favorite undergraduate class to teach is "Intersections: Race, Gender and Sexuality in U.S. History." It's basically a course in the history of U.S. imperialism, and the ways that political and economic forces operate in the regulation of the social formations of race, gender, class and sexuality. It's a big introductory lecture class in American Studies, but I assign a book a week at the same level as in my graduate seminars. I don't grade the students on their written work, just on their attendance, participation, and on-time delivery of weekly response papers. So they don't need to

worry about what knowledge and skills they walk in the door with, about whether they agree with the authors or the instructor and TAs, nor whether they fully grasp each book they read. They need only grapple with some difficult but provocative ideas. They surprise themselves. By the end of the semester most have stopped complaining about the reading load and are deeply engaged in analyzing how race, gender, class, and sexuality are inter-related historically, in thinking about why there is so much inequality, and in pondering the impact of collective action. I take all my own questions into the classroom, and every year that class has as significant an impact on my own thinking and writing as it does on the students'.

A term that seems to undergird your writing is the concept of "neoliberal multiculturalism." Can you elaborate about what it means in the context of your work?

"Neoliberal multiculturalism" describes a ruse of inclusion, which allows for representation without redistributive justice. The most obviously tokenistic versions have been on display by Republican Party—the many races on the convention stage or in the Bush administration. This "representation" does not alter the overall distribution of material and cultural resources. But even more "well-meaning" liberal versions of neoliberal multiculturalism—the Clinton cabinet that "looks like America" or the Benetton marketing strategy—also substitute nonredistributive inclusion for substantive justice.

Sometimes left critiques of "identity politics" are directed toward this kind of narrow call for inclusion. But more often, all feminist, antiracist and queer politics are misrepresented by being reduced to neoliberal multiculturalism. Left attacks on "identity politics" can then be a way of dismissing all consideration of inequalities shaped by race, gender, and sexuality. It is therefore very important to be clear about the differences—to insist on justice, as material and cultural redistributions of resources and power, and critique both the ruse of neoliberal multiculturalism and the left dismissal of anything that can be called identity politics.

What broader connections will the plenary session's topic allow us to see? Why is it important for our current cultural moment?

I was deeply impressed by the line-up of papers on the plenary session on queer femininity. They showed, one after the other, how performances of gender are played out within the broader political economy, shaped by the history of colonialism and imperialism. New scholarship like that on the plenary is showing us that "femininity" is a fully contextual sign, always marked with histories of race, class and "family" forms, and given meaning by processes of mediation—aesthetics, arts institutions, mass entertainment, and so on.