Political Theory, Feminist Theory: an Interview with Mary G. Dietz

The political theorist Mary G. Dietz arrived at Northwestern this fall as a joint faculty appointment in Gender Studies and Political Science. Dietz, who holds the Board of Lady Managers of the Columbian Exposition Chair, earned her Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley. She comes to Northwestern from the Political Science department at the University of Minnesota, where she was also affiliated with the Women's Studies Department and the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies. To introduce some of the issues she is interested in, we asked Professor Dietz to talk about her scholarship and teaching, past, current, and future.

You’ve written two books on the thought of particular women in political theory—Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt. Did you set out to tell a story about women and twentieth-century political thought?

MGD: Not at all—that is far too demanding and grand a narrative task for me. My interest in Weil grew out of a graduate seminar at Berkeley. Weil grew out of a graduate seminar at Berkeley and grand a narrative task for me. My interest in MGD: Not at all!—that is far too demanding century political thought?

In the library I found about fourteen volumes of Weil’s writings: notebooks, essays, monographs, and one posthumously published “systematic” work that qualified as a single text: The Need for Roots. Weil was working in London, as a kind of administrative researcher for the organization of the Free French and was “tasked” to write a kind of policy brief concerning post-war reconstruction in France. But it turned into something quite other than that. Just a brief glance revealed the visceral, rhetorical power of the text as both a consolatio and a reinvigoration of life, and revealed its strangeness. The text is replete with spiritual and bodily invocations of belonging to country, of war and the violence of uprooting (dénudement), and of the ethical and political requirements for sustaining earthly community.

So The Need for Roots became the object of the seminar paper, and my curiosity only intensified. I decided to write a dissertation on the complexities, ambivalences, and tensions in Weil’s thinking, especially in relation to politics. Early on it became clear to me that Weil presented some serious challenges for thinking “woman” in conventional terms—she persistently disrupted the female identity imposed upon her, repressed her sexuality, cross-dressed, and quite literally (and tragically in the end) ravaged her flesh and eviscerated her body.

So assessing her as a “woman” was problematic from the start—no doubt this is also when I began to suspect that gender was a far more complicated category of interpretation than the heteronormative male/female binary allowed.

continued on page 2
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And Arndt?

MGD: Again my graduate studies at Berkeley were definitive. My interest emerged out of seminars with Hanna Picksen and centered upon Arendt's peculiar mode of theorizing politics and power. Not as domination, mastery or control over another, but rather as the pluralism of different selves in relation with others and as "speech and action in context."

Only much later did I become interested in Arendt's significance in relation to feminism and started to think about both the "woman question in Arendt" and the "Arendt question in feminism."

Both Will and Arndt are compelling, powerful diagnostics of modernity. It would be interesting to explore their significant differences with students in a seminar, something I've not yet done.

How would you describe your approach in the Will and Arndt books?

MGD: Well, the books are in some respects quite different. My scholarship (like the field of political theory itself) tends to be rather eclectic in its approach and takes significant contributions from a range of fields (political theory itself) tends to be rather eclectic in its approach and takes significant contributions from a range of fields—includi

But of course what I've just said already begins to construct "and certain feminist political theory. But all I mean to say, speaking only for myself, is that feminist political theory may be at its best when it directs its attention to imaginative projects of emancipatory critique, rather than to systematic efforts to posit universal norms or principles (whether essential or experiential) in the name of "women" or "matriarchal" or a quasi-tribal ideal that the term "feminism" is then made to represent.

You mentioned your work on feminism and citizenship—what would you say are the most important contemporary issues there?

MGD: Feminism and citizenship is for me a continuing project. One of the most important contemporary issues—or dilemmas of citizenship—is the question of whether political theory needs to engage...
Faculty News, Honors, and Achievements

Peter J. Carroll (History) spoke on “The Place of Propa- ganda in Early 20th-Century Spain” at conferences in Talavera, Seville, and Chongqing, China. This fall saw the 11th annual Faculty Year Abroad in Mexico, which was well attended and present work on urban preservation and development at the American Studies Association in 2008.

Harrison, a Feminist/Asian and Gender Studies and English PhD candidate, completed two new essays, one on Dorothy Arzner’s “Brokeback Mountain.”

Giles Dellano (Anthropology) co-edited and contributed to an anthology entitled New Land- mark Essays on the History and Culture of Democracy in America which will be released this winter. The book includes work by and features articles with Northwestern colleagues Nancy MacLean (History) and Dorothy Roberts (Law).

Lynne Pfeffer (History) was honored as the recipient of the Weinberg Community Building Award at the 2007 WOSA teaching awards luncheon. The award recognizes faculty who have a sincere concern for the community both inside and outside the classroom.

Nancy MacLean (History) and Dorothy Roberts (Law). In addition, Roberts was co-chair of Northwestern’s Modern Language Association volume of Democracy in America that was recently published by Northwestern University Press.

Professor Michael Sherry (History) co-edited and contributes to a book entitled New Land- mark Essays on the History and Culture of Democracy in America which will be released this winter. The book includes work by and features articles with Northwestern colleagues Nancy MacLean (History) and Dorothy Roberts (Law).

Visiting Researcher Stipend from the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

In October, she spoke at a conference on “Public Engagement and the Status of Graduate Students in the Profes- sion” at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Temple University. She also gave an invited lecture at the University of Chicago in November.

Ms. Mesle was also the keynote speaker at the “I’ll Stand for Her” conference on women and crime in March.

Carol Simpson Sterne (American Studies and English) gave a presentation on “All My Sons: American Literature in the Twenty-First Century” at the American Literature Association National Conference in May.

The Truth About Women Becomes Louder, a book essay co-authored with Linda Carl about the challenges women face (and often overcome) in planning and executing an academic career.

In August, a new issue of the Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies was published.

Professor Sherry (History) co-edited and contributes to a book entitled New Land- mark Essays on the History and Culture of Democracy in America which will be released this winter. The book includes work by and features articles with Northwestern colleagues Nancy MacLean (History) and Dorothy Roberts (Law).

Graduate Student Updates

Katy Childs (English) was awarded a Mellon Founda- tion Survey Grant for Research in the Humanities for the Humanities for Fall 2007 Quarter. Her project, “Becoming Colostomist: In Wonder and Western’s Early Americanism: In the Marquis de Sade’s ‘Phallic Women’ and ‘Feminism’ is still often assumed to be a radical or marginal position. If as scholars we cannot build the bridge between these two languages, we cannot hope for our public audience to do it for us.

Graduate students must also remember that learning to speak to the public is not separate from learning to be professors. Undergraduates come to our classrooms with ideas about gender developed through their own lived experiences. Through specifically discussing the points at which mainstream and academic ideas of gender converge and diverge, we can help students articulate their own ideas and hopes about the way gender influences their lives.

This is the point that I originally hoped to make when conceiving this talk that if graduate students target both the public speaking and teaching as teachers, we would become both better speakers and better teachers. But and this is the key, the mode of teach- ing that is most successful—constructive ped- agogy—emphasizes the teacher’s role as a student. It is dangerous to assume that the goals of our pedagogical relation to the pub- lic would always be to teach, never to learn ourselves. So, as a practical conclusion.

How can we connect our dialogue with the public dialect in which ‘feminism’ is still often assumed to be a radical or marginal position?

Students do this inevitably, regardless of whether or not teachers tell them to, and regardless of whether or not they the ideas they put together cohere. So to ensure that they don’t construct dissonances or contradic- tions, educators are responsible for learning about students’ prior information, what it means to them, and how it will be relevant to these ideas. If graduate students were to apply this idea to our public engagements, I think we could enable more successful communica- tion between our ideas (of politics, social formation, language arts, etc.) and public experiences of those concepts. If we hope for academic ideas to be useful to public dialogue, we cannot simply dismiss the content of public speech.

Instead, we must learn to understand the ideas that undergird the public political arena. We must remember that too are part of that dialogue, and that we must find a way to connect our dialect in which, for example, being a “feminist” is almost a given, and the public dialect in which “Feminism” is still often assumed to be a radical or marginal position. If as scholars we cannot build the bridge between these two languages, we cannot hope for our public audience to do it for us.

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“Constructive” theories of pedagogy teach us that we must understand how our students “know” in order to help them build new ideas successfully. Students do not compartmentalize what they learn, but rather graft new ideas onto their prior knowledge, thereby building their own
**Faculty Sabbatical Research**

**Toward a Democratic Theory of Judgment**

by Prof. Linda Zerilli

A s a 2006-07 Marita Sutton Weeks Fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center, I worked on my current project, Toward a Democratic Theory of Judgment. This book examines the problems of political judgment in the face of the widespread value pluralism that defines modernity. I am interested in the question of what the standards of judgment can possibly be in the context of multicultural and multiracial societies like the United States and, increasingly, Western Europe. In light of recent political events and the so-called “clash of civilizations,” we find ourselves increasingly called upon to judge matters of practice and cultures not our own, judgments that require, among other things, an ability and willingness to imagine how the world looks to people whose standpoint we do not necessarily share. The temptation here is to adopt the position of the outsider and employ our own concepts as universal rules or standards with which to judge foreign practices and cultures. But then the question arises as to whether we have in fact engaged in the act of critical judgment—or have we, rather, applied the rules of “our” culture to the particulars of “theirs,” all the better to confirm what we already know and claim to be true.

With this question arises another temptation, namely, if we reject such a rule-governed practice of judgment as, say, uncritical and ethnocentric, then perhaps we have little choice but to adopt the position of the relativist. As radically divergent views can be equally valid depending on one’s standpoint and membership in any particular culture, so the relativist holds, it is best not to judge at all. For who are we—outsiders—to judge? I try to show the problems associated with both approaches to the problem of judgment and to suggest alternatives. I have completed three chapters of the manuscript, one of which, “Truth and Politi-
cics,” was published in *Theory and Event* and another of which, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Judgment,” is forthcoming in 2008 in *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*.

We will feature Prof. Ann Shola Orloff’s de-
scription of her 2006-07 sabbatical research in the Spring issue of gender dynamic.

**continued from page 5**

**Going Public: Pedagogy and Politics**

from my own campaign experience, I believe everyone is better served when we enter the public sphere as specialists in the exchange of knowledge—as expert learners—rather than as repositories of special knowledge itself. It’s my claim that we hope for a more successful engagement with the public, we must reward graduate students not only for specialized acts of criticism but also for the ability to meaningfully exchange ideas with a wider audience. The necessary pre-condition for this, I think, is that we come to view the “student” part of our grad school experience under a new light. Instead of moving as quickly as possible towards an authoritative voice, we should respect and encourage our need to ask honest and open-ended questions.

Is this a valuable goal? I hope yes. I suspect I am not the only one who found the election results of 2004 devastating, who realizes that the gains of the 2006 election happened almost in spite of a lack of articulate new leadership on the left, who feels a pressing need for a new articulation of the debates about sexual and reproductive freedoms, who is outraged by the misinformation spread by government-funded sex-ed programs and the suppression of information about women’s economic status, who believes that the 18- to 22-year-olds in Iraq need our engagement as much as the 18- to 22-year-olds in our classrooms do, and who, in the wake of these social imperatives, has become willing to learn a different way of speaking as an intellectual.

We are in a moment of crisis, when our voices and our skills are needed. By cultivating our ability to engage with the public, the new pre-conditions I hope to learn to participate in meaningful social change. One of these changes, I hope, will be a shift in the social culture of our own professional world.

**continued from page 3**

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MGD: One of the great practical chal-
lenge for feminism as a liberatory (not just a partisan political) movement in the United States is how to negotiate the pos-
sible tension between two positions. First, a politics that rightly values and fights for the equality and rights of “women” (and on these grounds systematically supports female candidates for higher office). And second, a politics of democratic freedom and equality that may find itself seriously at odds with such candidates, especially those who con-
sider the “projection of force” a crucial ele-
motion of foreign policy, and use the discourse of the “war on terror” to legitimate govern-
ment surveillance, violations of civil rights, invasions of privacy, unlawful detentions, and the suspension of habeas corpus, among other acts of violation of constitutional and democratic citizenship.

Your work has engaged with the full range of Western political theory—Aristotle, Machia-
velli, and into the twentieth century (just to name some greatest hits). Recently you’ve been thinking about “Women’s Hobbes,” Leviathan 1651.

MGD: Yes—this work is in the early stages, so this is just a preliminary note.

Moving beyond the feminist critique of the “social contract” in Hobbes, I am thinking about Hobbes’ famous “laws of nature” in Part One of Leviathan, and how they appear to privilege a code of behavior or a complex of virtues (gratitude, mutual-
ity, modesty, the capacity to pardon, seeking of peace) that are at some distance from the “manly” virtues lauded by classical Roman republicans and later Italian Renaissance humanists, including Machiavelli.

Whether or not we can characterize Hob-
nes’ laws as “virginous fandom,” I want to suggest that, at the very least, they function to feminize and marginalize (“activate” according to classical republicans do) males as citizens of the commonwealth. My interpretation of the gender dynamics of the commonwealth will challenge the idea that Leviathan simply grants “freedom” to men and assigns women to subservience. In my reading of the com-
monwealth, things are far more complicated than that. If not necessarily more liberated.

In the Winter Quarter, you’re teaching a new undergraduate seminar, “Feminist Interven-
tions in Western Political Thought.”

MGD: Yes—we will be bringing a variety of feminist theories to bear upon Flato, Aes-
tole, Maciavello, Locke; John Stuart Mill, and Nietzsche.

My interest here is both in feminist cri-
tiques of these thinkers and texts and in ways that feminist theories have appropriated them for other projects and purposes in po-
litical theory, philosophy, literature, cultural studies, and so on.

For more on Prof. Dietz’ work see Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil (Rowman and Littlefield); Turning Operations: Feminism, Aesthetics, and Politics (Rutledge); and Cur-
rent Controversies in Feminist Theory (Annu-
al Review of Political Science).

“Autonomy and Solidarity”: Fall Quarter with the Undergraduate Board

By Marissa Faustini ’09

The 2007-2008 Gender Studies Undergraduate Board had an exciting fall quarter. We planned three events unified by the theme of “Autonomy and Solidarity.”

In November, we hosted a presenta-
tion by Rachel Bethel, the Alter-
native Economy Coordinator for the Mexican Solidar-
ity Network. The Alternative Economy Program works in partnership with a Zapatasta women’s weaving cooperative in Chiapas to distribute the crafts they make in the U.S. at a fair trade price. Rachel discussed the use of crafts to start dialogues about Zapatalismo, the role of women within the Zapatalista movement, and viable alternatives to neo-liberal economic policies and development strategies.

In addition to this event, the board hosted two “teaching days” for graduate students, men, women, and Zapatalismo. At the second, we read and discussed recent work by Professor Angela Davis, who spoke on November 29.

The Gender Studies Undergraduate Board provides a great opportunity for majors, minors, and other interested students to participate in guiding Gender Studies events throughout the year. For more information about our board, or to get involved, contact the Gender Studies office at gender@northwestern.edu.

**Alumna/i Updates**

Shelmo Koury-McBride (’80) is working to have a short film made into a film in collaboration with two other Northwestern alums (Julie English and Oyenike Williams). Write her at Shelmo or ship her at cutout.

Jeffrey McCoy (Graduate Certificate, 2007) is now an Assistant Professor in Psychology and American Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park.

**Lillian Ferguson** (2002) is the new Director of Edu-
cational Programming at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum at Northwestern.

Christina Sarac (2002) received an MA in sociol-
y in Culture and Conservation from the University of Virginia and is now undertaking doctoral research on post-9/11 police organizations.

Mireia Wang (2007) is the new Coordinator of the Duke University Center for the Study of African American History and Culture. In the coming year, she will serve as chief liaison-oversight membership participa-
tion in all Museum programming, including the breakthrough “Out at CHAM” series on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender history. Part of this “Out at CHAM” events have included panel discussions with historians John D’Emilio, presentations on the early history of AIDS activism, and a seminar on the con-
ink of twenty-first century gay and lesbian art.
identities

Gender:dynamic is published twice annually by the Gender Studies Program at Northwestern University. Copies may be obtained at the Program Office, Kresge Hall 2-360; 1880 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208-2211.

Gender Studies at Northwestern is an interdisciplinary program, with faculty affiliates drawn from more than twenty-five departments across four of the University’s schools.

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Gender Studies faculty, staff, and class of 2007 seniors at the annual spring awards banquet. (Photo: Kristina Ogilvie)