FEMINIST SOLIDARITY

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Coming into an institution like Mount Holyoke College as a feminist, I was somewhat surprised not to find a fierce feminist environment. Instead, I encountered many instances of woman-hating, intense competition among students, and an apparently old rivalry with Smith College. This caused me to think about hindrances to the bonding among women, and feminist solidarity.

As my thesis is under the Department of Philosophy, I am more concerned with theoretical approaches to the concept of solidarity and feminism (rather than an empirical study). Key questions include: Why do people form groups? What is solidarity? Which models of power facilitate thinking about collective agency and resistance? How can women as a group fight the sources of oppression? How can groups be formed based on non-essential values, goals, and identities? How do political and social categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality fit into these concepts, groups, and models?

This project is divided into three parts: in part 1, I use three philosophers of the modern period to analyze how societies are formed, and what motivates people to maintain these societies. Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Adam Smith all share a similar notion of the structure of power in society (namely a structural, top-down model), but offer different views on the cognitive and psychological motivations and behaviors people exhibit in society. In part 2, I present Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s notions of how power works. Their accounts offer an idea of power as multi-directional, in contrast to the thinkers of the modern period. The purpose of this part is to offer a different understanding of how power works when societies have already been formed, and possible ways of resisting dominant power structures. Finally in part 3, I turn to three accounts of solidarity given by Chandra Mohanty, bell hooks, and Sandra Bartky. While Mohanty argues for a coalitional solidarity, hooks posits a kind of sisterhood solidarity (different from the understanding of “sisterhood” during the Second Wave of feminism), and Bartky suggests sympathy as an emotive motivation for bonding among women. All three theorists take into account difficulties of differences in race, class, and sexuality between women.

It is my goal to achieve a notion of solidarity that can account for the differences in interests, values, and goals of all women. This notion of solidarity aims to dismantle sources of oppression, must be practically realizable, and should encourage the bonding of women across boundaries of race, class, and sexuality.