

Evening Lecture
Prof. Londa Schiebinger (Stanford University)



Abortifacients and Agnotology: The Gender Politics of Plants in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World

November 22, 2011

19.15-21.00, Clausiusstr. 59 RZ, F 21 8092 Zürich

This talk presents the story not of a great man or a great woman, but of a great plant—a plant identified sometimes and in some places as the peacock flower, Barbados Pride, the *tsjétti mandáru*, and the *Poinciana pulcherrima*. Historians rarely recognize the importance of plants to human societies and politics on a global scale. Plants seldom figure in the grand narratives of war, peace, or even everyday life in proportion to their actual importance to humans. Yet they are significant natural and cultural artifacts, and often at the center of high intrigue.

This talk tells the story of eighteenth-century naturalists who traveled to the Caribbean in search of “green gold”—potentially valuable plants. In particular, we investigate plants used as abortifacients and whether these were considered valuable drugs to be taken back to Europe. Finally, we consider a new methodological tool, “agnotology,” the study of culturally-induced ignorances. Agnotology refocuses questions about “how we know” to include questions about what we do *not* know, and why not.

Biography:

Londa Schiebinger is the John L. Hinds Professor of History of Science, Stanford University, and Director of the EU/US Gendered Innovations in Science, Health & Medicine, and Engineering Project. Professor Schiebinger received her Ph.D. from Harvard University and is a leading international authority on gender and science. From 2004-2010, Schiebinger served as Director of Stanford's Clayman Institute for Gender Research.

Over the past twenty-five years, Schiebinger's work has been devoted to teasing apart three analytically distinct but interlocking pieces of the gender and science puzzle: the history of women's participation in science; gender in scientific institutions; and gender in research.

In 2010, Schiebinger presented the keynote address and wrote the conceptual background paper for the United Nations' Expert Group Meeting on “Gender, Science, and Technology” in Paris, and presented the finding at the United Nations in New York in 2011. The UN Resolutions of March 2011 call for “gender-based analysis ... in science and technology” and for the integrations of a “gender perspective in science and technology curricula.”

Professor Schiebinger has received numerous prizes and awards, including the prestigious Alexander von Humboldt Research Prize, the Technische Universität München Distinguished Affiliated Professorship, and the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. She has also served as a Senior Research Fellow at the Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Berlin.

She is author of *The Mind Has No Sex?* (1989); the prize-winning *Nature's Body* (1993; 2004); *Has Feminism Changed Science?* (1999); and the multi-prize-winning *Plants and Empire* (2004); with Andrea Henderson and Shannon Gilmartin, *Dual-Career Academic Couples* (2008); and with Shannon Gilmartin, “Housework is an Academic Issue,” with Shannon Gilmartin, *Academe* (Jan/Feb. 2010): 39- 44. She has edited *Gendered Innovations in Science and Engineering* (2008); with Robert N. Proctor, *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (2008). Her work has been translated into thirteen languages.